

COMMITMENT ISSUES:
TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S
SOCIAL MEDIA CHOICES IN THE MULTI-PLATFORM ERA

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ABSTRACT

Social network sites (SNSs) have become a common part of everyday life for billions of people worldwide. Not everyone uses the same sites, nor are sites functionally equivalent in the eyes of users. Both established platforms and new upstarts may provide novel features or access to new audiences, yet users tend to remain on a few dominant platforms, especially Facebook, the world's reigning social network site. The goal of the present study is to understand why people are committed to specific social network sites, given that no site encompasses either all of a person's social connections or all possible gratifications available from online participation. Further, individuals do not always wish to have a single real-name identity for all online interactions, thus implying the necessary use of multiple accounts or sites. To understand SNS commitment, this study employs a mixed-methods research design by combining findings from a survey of 800 respondents with 50 semi-structured interviews. The research focuses on young adults in the UK and their use of four popular SNSs: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Findings indicate that network size has only a marginal effect on commitment, whereas the effect of identity performance is more pronounced, albeit in different ways on different sites. Social and informational gratifications have the strongest effect across all four SNSs, suggesting that commitment is primarily driven by repeated habit-forming experiences. To further help explain SNS commitment, this thesis employs a typology of social media users based on attitudes towards digital technology. It is evident that attitudes explain more variation in commitment than either demographic factors or personality. Qualitative analysis reinforces this finding by showing how users employ specific gratification-based repertoires to determine which sites to use and when. These findings help advance research on affordances, self-presentation and SNS use, while also making practical recommendations for social media platforms.

Keywords: social network sites, social media choice, affordances, uses and gratifications

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
API	Application Programming Interface
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
DAU	Daily Active User
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
GIF	Graphics Interchange Format
HCI	Human-Computer Interaction
ICT	Internet and Communication Technology
IP	Internet Protocol
IPO	Initial Public Offering
IM	Instant Messaging
IT	Information Technology
FoMO	Fear of Missing Out
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
M	Mean
MAU	Monthly Active User
PC	Personal Computer
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares
ONS	Office of National Statistics
OS	Operating System
OxIS	Oxford Internet Surveys
RQ	Research Question
SNS	Social Network Site
SMS	Short Message Service
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model
U&G	Uses and Gratifications
UX	User Experience
VoIP	Voice over IP
WWW	World Wide Web

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

“It was the peculiar artifice of Habit not to suffer her power to be felt at first. Those whom she led, she had the address of appearing only to attend, but was continually doubling her chains upon her companions; which were so slender in themselves, and so silently fastened, that while the attention was engaged by other objects, they were not easily perceived. Each link grew tighter as it had been longer worn, and when, by continual additions, they became so heavy as to be felt, they were very frequently too strong to be broken.”

– Samuel Johnson (1748)

1. 1. Introduction

Social media has come to play a central role in the daily lives of billions of people – and it is difficult to imagine sites like Facebook ever going away. Social network sites (SNSs), as some of the most prominent examples of social media, have continued to attract users from the broadest range of socio-demographic and cultural backgrounds. As of June 2017, over 2 billion people use Facebook to connect with friends, acquaintances, family members, work colleagues and passing strangers. Meanwhile, Instagram has rapidly grown to over 700 million monthly active users in the span of only a few years (Facebook 2016). As SNSs become less novel and more intuitive, they are also becoming more integrated into everyday life.

The pervasiveness and widespread use of SNSs has precipitated a new stream of research on the various effects and facets of SNS use. At the time of this writing, one of the first papers defining the genre of SNSs by boyd and Ellison (2007) was cited over 10,000 times. Scholarly enthusiasm for the social implications of SNSs has remained vibrant for the past decade, encouraging contemporary discussions of the fundamental changes in sociality that we might expect from the advent of social media. Communications scholars, in particular, have pursued a line of research that has focused on the attributes, behaviours and networks of individual SNS users (Hogan & Wellman 2014). Research has examined the many relationship practices supported by SNSs (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011; West et al. 2009), users' mediated identity practices (DiMicco & Millen 2007; Marwick & boyd 2011) and mechanisms of social capital provision associated with SNSs (Brooks et al. 2014; Burke et al. 2011; Steinfield et al. 2008).

Today, people can choose from a variety of different SNSs, which are typically freely available online. However, it remains unclear how and on what grounds people choose to use specific SNSs over other sites, and more importantly, why they keep using these sites despite a wealth of alternative communication channels. There is a growing body of literature that speaks to this question, producing a range of competing explanations for people's social media choices. For example, Lin and Lu (2011) apply the network externalities framework to this problem, identifying that it is the number of peers using the site that explains why people join SNSs. Their findings also show that enjoyment and perceived usefulness of the site are critical factors in people's adoption decisions. Haythornthwaite's (2005) media multiplexity hypothesis proposes that the number of different media used in a dyadic relationship increases with the level of closeness of that relationship. By contrast, Ross and colleagues (2009) find that users'

personality factors drive their motivations for Facebook use. Tosun (2012) finds that continued Facebook use can be explained by users' tendency to express their 'true self' on the site. In a similar vein, Seidman (2013) finds that more frequent Facebook use is motivated by the need for self-presentation and relational belonging. Joinson (2008) applies the uses and gratifications approach to examine how users' socio-psychological needs, such as the need for social connection and the need for shared identities, can motivate people's Facebook use. Examples of similar studies abound in the field.

Broadly speaking, these explanations can be grouped into three conceptual categories: motivations related to networks, identities and gratifications derived from the site. The first category encompasses mostly audience-based factors such as the number of peers using the site or the size of one's SNS friendship network. The second category entails factors related to users' self-presentation, self-disclosures and identity information found in SNS profiles. The third category includes socio-psychological gratifications obtained from the uses of SNSs, e.g. for relationship maintenance, information-seeking or professional networking. It is plausible to suggest that users will consider different factors and negotiate potential benefits and risks when making decisions about SNS use (Vitak & Ellison 2012). Nonetheless, differentiating between the different factors, and understanding which factors are driving people's continuous engagement with SNSs, represents an under-theorised area of the literature.

However, explaining people's usage intentions and engagement with only a single SNS is often not enough. The reason for this is that, instead of relying on a single SNS in their day-to-day communications, people increasingly use multiple SNSs in concert. In fact, the diversity and number of available social media channels have only increased over the last years. Research finds that people make use of more than one SNS in their everyday lives (Stoycheff et al. 2017;

X. Zhao et al. 2016). Paraphrasing Walt Whitman's poem '*Song of Myself*', the social media analyst Ben Thomson explains, for example, that "*to be social is to be human, and to be human is, as Whitman wrote, to contain multitudes; multitudes of apps, in my case*" (2013 p. 1). Recent studies by the Pew Research Centre (2015) find that the proportion of people actively maintaining multiple SNS accounts on a range of different social media platforms has increased from year to year, especially among younger people in the US. Grant and Dubois (2017) find that the average number of SNS accounts used by 18-34 year olds in a multi-country study surveying users in the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain was 4.8. Some industry reports even estimate that the average number of SNS accounts for the younger age group of 16-24 year olds may be as high as 7.5 accounts per person globally (Mander 2015). As time goes by, more and more applications for social networking become available to users, which cater to different age cohorts, interest-groups, cultural communities and distinct social contexts.

While this may be indicative of a multi-networking trend toward an ever-greater number of social media platforms, the puzzling observation is that a majority of people still consistently use only a few sites. New SNSs spring up on a regular basis, but it seems that many people are gravitating toward only a handful of selected sites that have already cultivated substantial user engagement. Facebook in the US, VKontakte in Russia and WeChat in China – these are but a few examples of sites that have become deeply ingrained in the culture and social lives of their users. Consequently, this gives rise to an interesting theoretical puzzle: how is it that each person is committed to a selective number of SNSs, while the rapid pace of the digital media industry continuously innovates and produces an abundance of new applications that may provide superior gratifications and experiences compared to any currently existing platforms?

Research shows that people's uses of social media can be deeply idiosyncratic. People tend to use SNSs in very personal ways and for very personal reasons (McAndrew & Jeong 2012; Papacharissi 2009). But what I have always found fascinating is how there are certain patterns in people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviours that can be observed across many individual cases, which makes the study of social media use a stimulating area of inquiry.

Considering my own social media habits, I draw on a wide range of SNSs for different personal and work-related purposes. For example, I use sites like *Facebook* to keep in touch with friends and family, *LinkedIn* to maintain professional contacts, *Twitter* to connect with wider public networks and *Instagram* to occasionally share photographs I've taken during my travels. But why can't I just use one platform for all these things? In particular, if all my friends are on Facebook anyway, why do I even need to seek out other platforms? Like most people, I consider that different media have different functions, different norms and different sets of network audiences. Some of my SNSs tend to amplify each other while others, essentially, fulfil the same quotidian needs and, as such, can be used interchangeably. And yet, despite the functional similarities of some of these sites, I continually find myself drawn to a particular set of SNSs.

The CMC literature suggests that people's social media choices are based on inter-subjective perceptions of SNSs and their affordances. But why am I emotionally drawn to these particular sites and not an alternative combination of platforms? The answer to this question likely revolves around how I perceive these sites in relation to *each other* and what these sites represent for me, i.e. whether these SNSs work in substitutive or complementary ways. In fact, there appears to be an internal logic to the way how SNSs can work together, or at cross purposes with each other, that has been under-theorised in current scholarly research.

This represents an interesting gap in the literature that this thesis attempts to address by characterising people's social media choices in such a way that it explains the persistence of their usage patterns of each individual platform. Hence, this sets up a series of questions about the mechanisms underlying people's social media choices: How do people make sense of the wide range of available SNSs? How do they choose a combination of particular SNSs over the many alternative sites? Above all, why are people committed to specific sites in the rapidly changing world of social media? Despite many studies on the uses and effects of SNSs, little consideration has been given to how considerations of networks, identities and gratifications are related to commitment to SNSs. Addressing this gap in the literature, the present study develops a model of the SNS commitment process in an attempt to consolidate in a single theoretical framework the shape of forces affecting people's social media choices in a multi-media context.

Popular accounts of social media choices have attempted to make sense of these complexities through various anecdotes and metaphors. By way of illustration, some have compared the choice of SNSs to windows in one's house through which one can let friends observe parts of one's everyday experiences. They can never see the full picture, but different windows are better suited for displaying different parts of one's life. This metaphor was expressed by technology reporter Josh Constine (2016a p. 4) in the following passage:

Social media creates a window through which your friends can watch your life (...). With all its text, Twitter is like peering through a crack in a fence. There are lots of cracks next to each other, but none let you see the full story. Facebook is mostly blank space. It's like a tiny jail-cell window surrounded by concrete. Instagram was the closest thing we had. Like a quaint living room window, you can only see the clean and pretty part they want you to see. Snapchat is the floor-to-ceiling window observation deck into someone's life.

But do people really want to always build the most crystal-clear portals into their lives? Several open questions remain regarding the plausibility of this metaphor, such as how do people choose which parts of their social lives to display through each of these windows? How do the relative differences between these venues work together as part of a larger communicative milieu? With so much freedom of choice about each window, new ways of connecting to and disconnecting from the social world outside, users would be expected to feel empowered. And yet popular accounts of SNS use keep stressing that many young people feel trapped in and constrained by social media (Turkle 2008, 2011). Consequently, public discourse on the effects of social media on society has frequently focused on the negative aspects of SNSs use, e.g. the risks of the public exposure of private information on Snapchat, the supposed superficiality of online conversations on Twitter and the potentially unrealistic lifestyles exhibited on Instagram. Despite this, industry reports find that societal concerns about the Internet have decreased in the UK in the past decade (Ofcom 2015 p. 40). And the question remains as to what factors drive people to continue using particular SNSs over time despite these potential risks.

1. 2. Theoretical framework

The literature offers a number of different approaches to the question investigated in this dissertation. Even though the mechanisms of social media choice have not yet been specifically investigated in terms of people's SNS commitment, there are two perspectives in the literature on computer-mediated communication (CMC) that could help to elucidate the phenomenon at hand. In particular, I conceptually focus on the *affordance perspective* and the *uses and gratifications* (U&G) approach to develop the main theoretical framework of this dissertation. These two perspectives are introduced in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively, and briefly summarised below:

First, the affordance perspective of social media explains how individuals perceive different SNSs and the types of activities they tend to represent (Ellison & Vitak 2015; Smock et al. 2011). For example, Facebook can be seen as affording the ability to articulate a network of known contacts through a series of friending decisions. By contrast, Snapchat can be seen as affording ephemeral communication with other users. This approach allows us to analytically deconstruct SNSs into bundles of affordances that can be inter-subjectively perceived and interpreted by individual users (Hayes et al. 2016; Hogan 2015a; Nagy & Neff 2015). One of the main premises of this approach is that users are capable of arranging and combining the affordances of SNSs in purposeful and distinctive ways. I theorise that perceptions of SNS affordances shape people's social media choices, as well as the socio-psychological outcomes of their use. This is due to the fact that social affordances are understood in relational terms in the context of all other media, allowing users to choose from a wide array of communicative opportunities. Therefore, the overall theoretical lens of this dissertation treats SNSs not as independent technical objects, but as part of a larger socio-technical media environment. This reinforces the main underlying narrative of this dissertation, which is concerned with why and how people turn to social media in their everyday communications with their personal networks.

Second, the uses & gratifications (U&G) approach is one of the most frequently employed frameworks in the study of SNSs and their uses (Quan-Haase & Young 2014; Ruggiero 2000; Wang et al. 2012). Broadly speaking, the approach seeks to explain people's media use in terms of the unique gratifications associated with each medium (E. Katz et al. 1973; Lichtenstein & Rosenfeld 1983; Rosengren 1974). Even though the approach originates from studies on traditional media choices of broadcast media, interest in U&G has surged with the advent of SNSs. In this new research context, the approach has contributed to a solid

understanding of people's social media uses by examining differences in gratifications sought and obtained (Chen 2011; Quan-Haase & Young 2010; Sundar & Limperos 2013). Prior studies have shown that this approach can be especially useful to analytically compare the gratifications of different SNS features and sites as a whole (Barak 2015; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008; Urista et al. 2009; Whiting & Williams 2013). Different users may also value different gratifications obtained from the same site, such as social support or entertainment content, which can be both accessed from a site like Facebook (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011). As such, this approach allows us to better articulate how differences in socio-psychological needs may be associated with distinct social media choices.

Chapters 2 and 3 seek to review this theoretical basis, expanding upon the potential for conceptual integration of U&G with SNS affordances. A number of studies combining these two perspectives have indicated the necessity to recognise that SNSs have different affordances that facilitate the gratifications of distinct needs (Quan-Haase & Young 2010; X. Zhao et al. 2016). This leads users to adopt different SNSs for different purposes. Some platforms may afford access to distinct network audiences, while others may afford the presentation of particular identities. Each platform may define mediated sociality and what it means to be 'social' in a different way (boyd & Ellison 2007; Papacharissi 2009). In this regard, research suggests that people's SNS uses may be frequently associated with the risk of context collapse, when distinct social contexts are flattened into a singular network audience (Binder et al. 2009; J. L. Davis & Jurgenson 2014; Marwick & boyd 2011; Sibona 2014). Furthermore, research finds that social heterogeneity in SNS networks may be associated with users' psychological, reputational and physical vulnerability, which may lead to increased social tensions and negative effects on wellbeing (Buglass et al. 2016).

In order to avoid social sanctioning, some users may thus be motivated to seek out alternative SNSs to separate their network audiences by social context. Of course, there are many other reasons why users may be tempted to delete their SNS accounts, ranging from higher privacy concerns to lack of trust in the platform, or an overall sceptical attitude towards social media (Lampe et al. 2013a; Portwood-Stacer 2013). For example, Stieger and colleagues (2013) find that ex-users of Facebook tend to be more concerned about their privacy, have higher levels of Internet addiction, have fewer friends and have a generally more conscientious personality compared to active Facebook users. Mainstream media also repeatedly reported that large segments of the Facebook user population are allegedly migrating to newer platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat (Karp 2013). However, the proposed massive “Facebook exodus” did not happen and a majority of Facebook users remained faithful to the site. According to Facebook’s recent financial reports (2017), the number of active users has, in fact, increased over the past few years, rising to over 2 billion monthly active users as of this writing. But can we conclude that users remain committed to Facebook, as a platform, because of its features or because of their friendship networks? Or is it about the user profile they have built over the years; or the reputational benefits they did not want to lose if they moved to a new site?

Taking these questions into consideration, this dissertation attempts to understand what keeps users attached to any given site – and what affordances of SNSs may magnify users’ preferences for the continued use of the site. In Chapter 3, I introduce the concept of *SNS commitment* as a way of addressing this problem and theorising the persistence of people’s social media choices. For example, some users may develop a strong sense of emotional attachment to a site, which makes them more invested in using it. I argue that this sense of socio-psychological investment, which I refer to as commitment to a site, is what keeps people using a particular

brand of SNSs, irrespective of any potentially available alternative sites. In this regard, SNS commitment is an attitudinal construct that can be related to particular user behaviours. Specifically, this notion is both highly applicable to my area of inquiry and conceptually aligned with the two theoretical perspectives outlined above. Examining users' commitment to individual SNSs is particularly useful with regard to the broader multi-media environment, which consists of a plethora of competing SNSs all vying for people's attention.

As questions of cost and access to new SNSs recede, and the adoption of new sites is only a few clicks away, how do people choose which sites they want to continue using? When new SNSs are launched they are typically examined in the context of existing communication platforms. However, from a theoretical point of view, the specific circumstances that lead users to commit to one site over another remain unclear. In fact, a theoretical discussion of SNS affordances and gratifications has not yet been systematically related to commitment. This approach may thus offer new insights into the questions of people's SNS choices in a multi-media context. Therefore, the general thesis goal can be expressed in the following overarching research question that aims to closely examine people's commitment to SNSs:

RQ: *What factors determine people's commitment to the social network sites they use?*

On a more granular analytical level, this exploratory question is broken down into three explanatory research questions that are addressed in three individual empirical chapters. Each sub-question is interpreted through the combined lens of U&G and affordance theory and is further explained and contextualised in Chapter 3 (see Section 3.5). In summary, this line of inquiry results in the following three questions to understanding people's approaches for selecting and jointly using multiple SNSs with their personal networks:

RQ₁: *To what extent do people's networks, uses and identities on individual SNSs affect the degree of their commitment to each site?*

RQ₂: *How can people be classified into meaningful categories of attitudes towards digital technology such that it explains variations in their commitment?*

RQ₃: *What are the mechanisms by which perceived gratification structures across multiple SNSs affect people's commitment to each site?*

Furthermore, the emphasis of this study is on young adults in the UK, because they represent an interesting population that has grown up with social media, yet was also old enough to make their own SNS choices. The detailed reasons for this case selection are explained in Chapter 4. In the UK, many young people were active users of MySpace and Bebo before migrating to Facebook (Livingstone 2008). According to the ONS (2015), 92% of people aged 16-24 used the Internet for social networking activities in Great Britain at the time of the study. 88% of people in this age group said they accessed SNSs every day or almost every day (ONS 2015). This age group is also more likely to use a greater number of SNS accounts in day-to-day life (Dutton & Blank 2013), which makes an investigation of their commitment decisions even more intriguing. Taken to the extreme, if there is evidence that young people easily shift from one social media platform to another, what does this lack of commitment to a specific brand of SNS mean for the future of social networking?

The focus of this research is on the individual user who is embedded in a relational network of peers who are all facing similar social media choices. My theoretical background frames SNS users as active agents; they use SNSs to construct digital identities; they make autonomous choices regarding their daily social media activities; and they selectively distribute their attention across different media and different parts of their personal network. This user-

centric focus is especially useful for the study of people's social media choices and commitment, as well as for our understanding of how users reconfigure their communicative opportunities in the context of multiple media. Hence, the academic disciplines to which this dissertation speaks most clearly are SNS scholarship and the computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature.

The present study employs an empirical mixed-methods research design that contributes to an understanding of both the individual and collective narratives of social media choice and commitment. The dissertation presents findings from a representative stratified sample of 800 survey-respondents and a purposive sample of 50 interview participants (ages 20 to 30). The main SNSs that are included in the survey are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, while the qualitative interviews included a broader selection of sites. The detailed justification for the selection of these SNSs is provided in Chapter 4. The survey sample is weighted to reflect the age and gender composition of the studied population, which is described in Chapter 5. For comparative purposes, the thesis builds on quantitative data from the Oxford Internet Surveys (Dutton & Blank 2013), as well as national statistics from the ONS (2015) and Ofcom (2015).

1. 3. Thesis structure

Chapter 2 begins to set the theoretical framework of the dissertation by asking how we can theorise SNSs without being dependent on constant technological change. It proposes a shift towards an affordance-based view of SNSs in order to study the long-term trajectories of social affordances with a focus on the individual user. Three key categories of social affordances are distilled from the existing CMC literature, which pertain to the affordances of networking, communication and self-presentation. The chapter explains how these affordances can help us not only understand what sites do, but also what they represent in the social world.

Chapter 3 continues to develop the theoretical framework by examining theories of media choice and positing the U&G approach as a useful perspective into people's socio-psychological motivations of media use. The chapter reviews the five key assumptions of U&G and explains how this approach can be conceptually integrated with the affordance-based view from Chapter 2. Moreover, this chapter introduces the concept of SNS commitment in order to ascertain why users might become psychologically invested in particular sites in spite of ostensibly available alternatives. Based on the discussion of SNS commitment, the chapter derives three key research questions that will be addressed in this thesis.

Chapter 4 provides additional information to set the research context of the dissertation. It offers a rationale for focusing my inquiry on the population of 20-30 year olds in the UK. Furthermore, it investigates the most popular SNSs in the studied population and explains the reasons for the case selection of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Finally, it reviews the historical origins of these four sites and briefly describes the evolution of their affordances and features. This helps to ground the present research in the historical context of SNSs.

Chapter 5 offers an overview of the chosen research methods, explaining how various methodological components and data sources in this thesis come together in a unified mixed-methods research design. For this purpose, the chapter reviews the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen methods and considers possible alternatives. The chapter also features a discussion of the ethical considerations of the employed methods and their limitations.

Chapter 6 examines the predictors of SNS commitment in a series of nested regression models. It uses empirical survey data to disentangle the relative effects of the three blocks of independent variables on commitment attitudes, which correspond to the three principal categories of SNS affordances from Chapter 2. The nested models test a number of hypotheses

drawn from the CMC literature about the predictors of commitment. The three groups of variables relate to the social affordances of networking, communication and self-presentation, investigating which factors have the largest effect on people's commitment to each site.

Chapter 7 constructs a typology of SNS users based on a quantitative clustering approach and interpretations from qualitative semi-structured interviews. Given that users display different attitudes towards digital technologies, this chapter asks how users could be classified in a meaningful typology that helps reduce complexity and establish a comparative basis for the analysis of SNS commitment. With these insights, the chapter describes systematic variations in platform-specific attitudes, activities and commitment between different groups of SNS users.

Chapter 8 investigates how user perceptions of affordances affect people's commitment to SNSs over time. This chapter is concerned with the conceptual relationship between affordances across multiple SNSs. Specifically, it adds an additional perspective to the question by examining not just individual perceptions of the affordances, but also how these perceptions might have changed with time. It uses qualitative interview data to examine how users make sense of converging gratifications and affordances across multiple jointly used sites. Thus, it postulates the notion of social media repertoires as a conceptual lens for studying how people make SNS choices and how they choose to remain committed to certain sites. Addressing these relatively under-theorised areas of the CMC literature extends existing research and helps us better understand what motivates people's continued use and commitment to multiple SNSs.

Chapter 9 represents the conclusion of the dissertation. It summarises all analytical steps undertaken to address the research questions at hand and presents all major research findings, emerging themes and notable contributions to the literature. Based on these results, it outlines the main limitations of the study and proposes promising directions for future research in the field.

1. 4. Outline of contributions

Questions pertaining to media choice, i.e. how and why people turn to different media, have engaged social science researchers since the advent of mass media in the early 20th century, such as television, radio and newspapers. Recent studies have enhanced our understanding of SNS use by examining the motivators and predictors of people's propensity to use individual sites. However, there is an interesting gap in the literature in the relationship between SNS affordances on the one hand, and SNS commitment on the other hand, when considering young people's social media choices in a multi-media environment. Therefore, this dissertation aims to extend existing research by accomplishing the following theoretical, methodological and practical contributions to the literature:

Theoretically, this thesis provides important contributions to academic scholarship on social affordances, media gratifications and multiple media use of contemporary Internet users. Using quantitative data from users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, as well as qualitative data from users of a wider range of platforms, the core argument of the thesis relates to how people navigate their social media environment and how they commit to the use of particular sites in everyday life. The analytical capacity of this research is further improved by focusing on the individual user, rather than a set of particular social media technologies.

In this thesis, I present a unified story about SNS commitment and how people's social media choices are shaped by the affordances of each platform and the perceived gratification structures that exist between them. This is reflected in the consistent use patterns of SNSs that reinforce people's commitment to each site. In addition to that, people's considerations of networks and SNS audiences are found to only have a marginal effect on their commitment.

While the perceived affordances of each site have different effects on the way people use them, the data indicate that a seismic shift has occurred in some people's relationship with SNSs: away from instrumental self-presentation towards the expression of their sincere self. This research problem is addressed from the theoretical perspectives of affordance theory and the U&G approach, which are conceptually integrated in the present research.

Further theoretical contributions are made by proposing and testing new theoretical mechanisms that help to explain the social and psychological processes underlying people's social media choices. Chapter 3 introduces the concept of *SNS commitment* as a novel theoretical lens that helps to conceptualise people's social media choices. Furthermore, Chapter 8 develops the concepts of *gratification structures* and *social media repertoires* from qualitative data to help understand how people make sense of the diversity of available SNSs. The thesis offers a typology of SNS users based on technology attitudes that help to contextualise these patterns. While some user groups adeptly navigate their SNS environment, there is evidence that other user groups may struggle with the constraints placed upon them by social media. There were significant differences in SNS accounts, networks, identities and activities between user types. In this regard, the dissertation helps to extend existing research on digitally-mediated identities, context collapse, SNS uses and social networking in the broader CMC literatures. It helps to refine our understandings of how people form emotional relationships with technology, while also highlighting how technology shapes their sociality in the blurred contexts of online and offline interactions. I believe this is an important direction for CMC research that helps us to understand not only the implications of individual media technologies, but also their interactive uses across the media landscape at large. Future research in this field will help us make strides towards a theory-driven understanding of human decision making with regards to social media.

Methodologically, this thesis builds on existing research in the CMC literature. It uses a mixed-methods approach to investigate people's social media choices and commitment. This allows me to combine broad insights into people's attitudes from a quantitative survey with more detailed personal narratives from rich qualitative interviews. For the purposes of the survey, I operationalise a number of novel theoretical concepts into measurable constructs, e.g. sincere self-presentation, SNS commitment and the perceived peer-rank index of SNSs (PPR index). This thesis also expands on existing research by measuring individual differences in networking styles and differences between people's emotional and personal self-disclosure on SNSs. By providing detailed descriptions of multiple media use in interview discussions, this dissertation complements ongoing "big data" research in related areas. This creates an important conceptual bridge between anthropological accounts of SNSs that focus on deep insights of individual users, and large-scale studies of traced data that focus on broad patterns of user activity.

Furthermore, most variables were measured independently for each of the four studied sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat). A contribution is thus made in that people's attitudes and self-reported behaviours were measured and compared across multiple jointly used SNS accounts. This enables us to test hypotheses not just about individual SNSs, but also about the relative differences in people's self-presentation, sharing behaviours and perceptions of audiences on multiple sites. Studying the perceptions and concurrent behaviours of users across multiple media platforms represents an important direction in SNS scholarship that helps to paint a broader picture of the inner workings of multiple media use and mediated communication. In this way, this thesis answers the call for multi-media research in the literature. Two thirds of SNS scholarship published between 1997 and 2013 have explicitly limited their inquiry on a single platform (Rains & Brunner 2014). Recent reviews of the SNS literature consistently point out

that Facebook, in particular, remains over-privileged when studies attempt to explain broader social media phenomena (Rains & Brunner 2014). In fact, more than half of all SNS scholarship to date are single-medium studies that look solely at Facebook (Stoycheff et al. 2017), despite the vast diversity of different SNSs and social applications that co-exist in today's social media ecosystem. This reflects a growing concern in academic circles that CMC research has slowly malformed into some form of "Facebook research". This may limit what can be learned about the relationships between multiple SNSs from the viewpoint of the individual user. More importantly, failing to consider the cross-media dynamics between multiple sites could limit the generalisability of research studies, or in the worst case, results in the tendency to equate the analysis of one media with analyses of all media.

Practically, after integrating and synthesising the research findings in this dissertation, there are important practical implications to be drawn for designing and managing social media platforms. This thesis argues that user arrival and departure could be integrally linked to people's perceptions of affordances and gratification structures across multiple sites. These perceptions drive users' commitment to SNSs, leading them to develop strong emotional bonds with selected platforms. Therefore, taking into account people's commitment decisions could help improving the strategies and tactics used by rising SNSs to gain new users, while also fostering more engaged and more committed user communities. Furthermore, the evidence in this thesis refutes conventional wisdom around network effects by demonstrating how an understanding of social affordances can be critical to the success or failure of new sites. The results show that social media analysts may be well-advised to emphasise SNS commitment over a mere assessment of total user numbers to accurately assess the "health" of any given social media platform. This is

important because purely relying on network effect arguments creates an incomplete picture of the state of a user community. For example, Facebook is increasingly gaining a greater amount of social and cultural salience with its 2 billion monthly active users (2017). As such, it might be tempting to believe that, due to its scale, it is safe from disruption from any new entrants. Yet the findings in this dissertation demonstrate that this may not be the case. An understanding of the intricate social dynamics of gratification structures among SNSs could help new entrants like Snapchat dislodge incumbent SNSs and succeed in the increasingly competitive marketplace for social media attention. Equally, as new SNS competitors emerge, established platforms like Facebook and Twitter could benefit from a better understanding of the affordances of SNS commitment to better guard themselves against potential disruption. The research evidence in this thesis thus offers a novel avenue for incorporating affordances and gratifications into practical SNS strategies, such as growth, engagement and platform design.

CHAPTER 2:

THE AFFORDANCES OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

2. 1. Introduction – Social networks in the 18th century

In 1747, the German Enlightenment poet Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim (1719–1803) moved into his new residence in the small provincial town of Halberstadt in Central Germany. Around this time, he began a new activity that was regarded as nothing less than peculiar by many of his contemporaries. Gleim started collecting painted portraits of all his friends and relatives he corresponded with in written letters, creating an extensive personal portrait gallery that he referred to as his *Tempel der Freundschaft* (“Temple of Friendship”).

He carefully thought about the arrangement of his portrait gallery: his own portrait was always at the centre of the gallery, while other portraits were positioned around it based on the level of intimacy between him and his friends, as well as the perceived closeness between each of his associates. From time to time, Gleim re-arranged the portraits on the walls to reflect any changes in his friendship relationships. Based on his letter archive, it appears that he had even added portraits of “virtual friends” to his gallery, i.e. distant associates he never met in person and only corresponded with in letters. As part of this ongoing activity, Gleim judiciously curated his portrait gallery to make sure that it accurately represented his circle of friends and associates at any point in time. If he considered a particular friendship to be over, he would then also remove the corresponding portraits from the gallery. Towards the end of his life, Gleim’s Temple of Friendship filled nearly all the available space on the walls of his house. Gleim himself

described this somewhat peculiar practice in his letters to his friends in the following way

(translated in Heinrich 2014 p. 7):

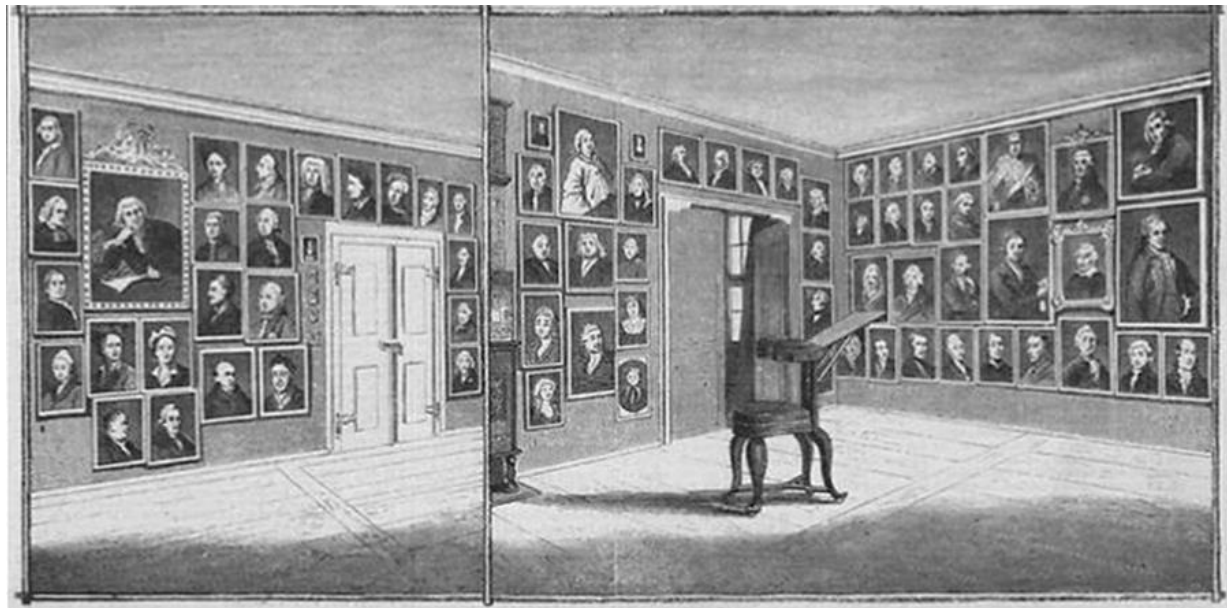
When will you keep your word and send me your portraits? There is a room ready, in which I want to hang the pictures of my friends around and around. How are the pictures of Bodmer, Breitingner, Waser supposed to delight me, if – as I am not able to talk to them in person – I could at least see them. I want to have them even more in my gallery, because I have almost lost hope that I will ever travel to them and meet them personally.

Gleim had been collecting portraits since the 1740s, but it was only in Halberstadt that he was able to express his full friendship network through his carefully curated portrait gallery in a visual way. All portraits followed strict rules based on an old portrait of his father (Heinrich 2014). In addition to that, Gleim commissioned a custom-made chair with an in-built table so that he could sit in front of any given portrait to face the person he was addressing in his letters as if the painting was the actual person. After receiving new letters, he would also use the chair to sit in front of the portrait of his correspondents, while reading their letters. According to his own accounts, this activity was meant to invoke a sense of co-presence in the absence of the person he was addressing. In this way, the Temple of Friendship helped Gleim to represent his network in the process of letter writing and reading. These perceptions of co-presence were described by Gleim to his fellow poet, Karl Wilhelm Ramler, in the following way: “*Now, as I write, I’m sitting across from you. I’m talking with you, I’m smiling at you, I flatter you, like Pygmalion did his statue*” (translated in Scholke 2000 p. 157).

At its core, what Gleim had accomplished with his portrait gallery was embracing the concept of the private *Album Amicorum* (“Book of Friends”), which was relatively common among intellectuals in Germany at the time, and extending it to a more visual, expressive and public representation of his friendship network.

There are a number of notable parallels between the Temple of Friendship and modern social network sites of the 21st century. For example, Gleim used his portrait gallery to symbolically delineate who was included in or excluded from his personal network – similar to how modern Internet users express a list of personal connections on sites like Facebook and Instagram. As illustrated above, Gleim’s portraits were arranged based on tie-strength, serving as visual cues and social references for writing and reading letters. As such, the letters exchanged between Gleim and his correspondents could be seen as a medium for the construction of identities as they were frequently conjuring up aspirational images of their narrators. As Heinrich (2014 p. 10) notes, these letters were “*spaces of negotiation to define, shift, confirm or reject conceptions of the self and the other. Just as in digital social networks, spheres of intimacy in eighteenth-century letter-writing have blurred boundaries that are constantly redrawn.*”

Figure 1: Historical painting of Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim’s Temple of Friendship



Notes: A wall of portraits in Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim’s house (Source: Heinrich 2014)

In a time where people's choices of communication channels were largely constrained by considerations of access and costs, Gleim used the portrait gallery as a medium to visualise his social network: his relationships with his friends and their relationships between each other. Thus, in the most peculiar way, is it possible to think of Gleim's Temple of Friendship as a historical predecessor of contemporary social network sites.

2. 2. Theorising social network sites

The conceptual distinctions of the genre of social network sites have received much scholarly attention over the past decade. When looking for a definition of social network sites, one needs to acknowledge that there is no one correct or universal definition of these terms. There has been neither a unified practice, nor a unified theoretical framework to study these technologies in past communication scholarship (Hayes & Carr 2015). Scholars have regularly portrayed SNSs as both a near autonomous technology that dictates how people perceive and construct their social reality, as well as merely an instrument that can be malleably used for any idiosyncratic purpose, e.g. to document ourselves or aspects of our social lives for specific audiences or the general public. In addition, since the academic nature of this research is inherently interdisciplinary, there is an important challenge to communicate research findings across fragmented literatures (Ellison & Boyd 2013; Herbig 2015).

Current CMC research appears to support the view that social network sites are indicative of a new genre of media technologies that provide interfaces for greater social presence and the representation of users' personal identities. This allows users to convey their sociality in information, shaping the way how they are perceived by others in the mediated experiences of everyday life. In more philosophical terms, SNSs have been described as deeply personalising

technologies, as extensions of the self and even as “*technologies of self-construction, significantly affecting who we are, who we think we are, who we might become, and who we think we might become*” (Floridi 2011 p. 550). Other CMC scholars have described SNSs as technologies that blur the boundaries between “*presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public, and virtual and real*” (Baym & boyd 2012, p.320).

Yet for a long period of time, there has been no clearly directed effort within the academic traditions of CMC research to delineate SNSs from other, oftentimes very similar, social media services. Nor has there been a homogeneously used term for the networked platforms that CMC scholars recognise today as SNSs. After all, the evolution of social media is complex and dynamic, and it can mean different things to different people at different times. Prevailing definitions emphasise specific functional attributes of SNSs, such as uniquely identifiable profiles, streams of user-generated content and the ability to view and traverse publicly articulated connections made by other users (Ellison & Boyd 2013). But in a world of ever-shifting technical realities, how can we theorise SNSs without being dependent on the constantly changing technical features and interfaces of the studied platforms?

This chapter attempts to build a theoretical foundation for the thesis by addressing these definitional issues and proposing a complementary framework for examining SNSs in a multi-media environment: by examining the fundamental *social affordances* of SNSs, alongside their technical architectures and features. Section 2.3 summarises current efforts to define the genre of SNSs, while section 2.4 aims to extend existing definitions of SNSs. Section 2.5 introduces the affordance-based view of SNSs and emphasises the usefulness of this perspective. Section 2.6 continues to derive three long-term trajectories of SNSs with a focus on the individual user from

extant literature. This approach focuses on a set of social affordances of SNSs, conceptualising SNSs as networked platforms that afford mediated self-presentation, condition patterns of communication and allow users to regulate their social accessibility with networked audiences.

2. 3. SNSs as technologies of mediated sociality

Broadly speaking, *social media* encapsulates a collection of Internet-enabled information technologies and services that mediate communication between people and facilitate interactive, collaborative and networked exchanges of information in various modes of participation, such as one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication. These services are frequently built on the ideological and technological foundations of the ‘Web 2.0’ (boyd 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). One of the most prominent sub-genres of social media technologies are *social network sites* (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+ and LinkedIn, which are, in fact, wide-ranging in their effects on sociality.

In an attempt to overcome any definitional concerns, myriad terms have been proposed and sporadically used in the literatures to describe this ostensibly new genre of social technologies (and in the process creating even more definitional ambiguities), e.g. *online social networks*, *social networking service*, *friend-networking sites* or *social networking websites*. Some communication scholars also frequently use the term ‘new media’ to describe the new wave of innovative ICTs that enable or facilitate interactivity between users (Manovich 2001), in spite of the definitional vagueness and temporal specificity of the term¹. Barnes (2006) uses a definition

¹ The concept of ‘new media’ has been frequently criticised for being overly inclusive. As Löwgren and Reimer point out, “*those media that we today consider to be old have also been new (...). Similarly, the media that we consider to be new will one day be considered old*” (2013 p. 15). Nevertheless, this concept has its own advantages, allowing scholars to refer to a larger set of relatively “new” digitally-mediated media technologies compared to what is currently established from the point of view of the study.

of the ‘commercial social networking website’ as a platform, which “*allows users to create web pages or profiles that provide information about themselves and are available to other users; and offers a mechanism for communication with other users, such as a forum, chat room, email or instant messenger*” (2006 p. 1). This definition emphasises the features of SNSs that enable profile-building and interpersonal communication. In the business marketing literature, the term ‘platform’ has also been frequently associated with social media technologies. This stems from the recognition that SNSs can be seen as spaces that enable and mediate interactions between multiple users and/or user groups (Bucher & Helmond 2017; Gillespie 2010).

What most of these definitions have in common is their heavy reliance on the word ‘social’. In public discourse, this term has been frequently used as a concept that evokes associations with the *Web 2.0* and digitally-enabled *many-to-many* communication on the Internet (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Löwgren & Reimer 2013; Shirky 2009; Wellman & Rainie 2012). Despite its widespread use, using ‘social’ as a term to delineate this category of media technologies is neither accurate nor meaningful. After all, any technology that mediates communication processes between multiple parties can be regarded as *social* by definition. If one follows this logic, *social* media technologies would also encompass other traditional services, such as telephone and mobile text-messaging services, alongside other Internet-enabled communication tools, e.g. e-mail, messaging apps, social marketplaces and social gaming.

Admittedly, this makes a clear theoretical distinction of SNSs from other media even more problematic. As an example of a broad definition of social media, consider the following passage by Hayes and colleagues (2016 p. 172), which attempts to cover a multitude of channels of mediated communication by defining social media as “*Internet-enabled, disentrained and*

persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content.”

However, there are also other more promising approaches to theorising SNSs. As a subset of social media platforms, the CMC literature proposes that what might be special about social network sites is that, instead of mediating instances of personal communication, they are capable of *mediating sociality* with various parts of one’s personal network (Hogan 2015a). In other words, when it comes to defining media as *social*, we need recognise that there is not just an increase in the amount of social activities. More fundamentally, there appears to be a qualitative difference in the variety and types of sociality that such media are capable of affording. This may entail both synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication, new forms of association with others and the potential for novel forms of mediated self-presentation.

2. 4. From a functionalist to an affordance-based view of SNSs

In what appears to be one of the first attempts to establish a conceptual definition of SNSs, boyd and Ellison (2007 p. 211) theorise that “*what makes [SNSs] unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks.*” They continue, in an updated version of their original definition, that the genre of SNSs consists of “*networked communication platforms in which participants (1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; (2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and (3) can consume, produce and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site*” (Ellison & Boyd 2013 p. 157). This has become the conventional definition of SNSs, which has received a lot of scholarly

attention. Furthermore, this definition has laid the conceptual foundations of SNS scholarship by linking the history of the genre of SNSs to its main functional features. This has allowed scholars to reach a common framework of what we actually mean when we investigate social network sites. As a result of that, we can now look back at a decade of SNS scholarship that has advanced our understanding of the functions of SNSs.

Some of these studies have begun to examine SNSs not only in terms of their technical features, but also in terms of what these sites represent, i.e. in terms of their affordances (Bucher & Helmond 2017; Ellison & Vitak 2015; Nagy & Neff 2015; Sutcliffe et al. 2011). As the next sub-section of this chapter explains, affordances can act as non-deterministic signals that make a difference by facilitating specific actions or interactions (Evans et al. 2017; Hogan 2009). My working definition, therefore, investigates affordances as a set of *intersubjective perceptual cues that can, but not necessarily, lead to possible socially-relevant interactions*. For example, a site like Facebook can be characterised by its core features, such as the Newsfeed, the friends list or the user timeline; but it can also be characterised by what these features represent in the social world, e.g. the possibility to discover new content, to develop relationships with others and to exhibit a digital identity to an audience of other users. This is why I propose to extend existing research by applying a more feature-agnostic approach that focuses on SNS affordances that drive the “*underlying long-term trajectories, persistent social practices and discernible cultural patterns*” (Hogan & Quan-Haase 2010 p. 309). This approach clearly focuses on what each site represents within the wider media environment.

We can always move back to the analysis of SNS features, because specific technical features are intricately linked to the more abstract notion of SNS affordances. Research has emphasised that a high-level understanding of affordances can, in fact, inform the analysis of

technical features and vice versa (Bucher & Helmond 2017; Hayes et al. 2016). Accordingly, this thesis adopts an affordance-based view of SNSs, because it is useful for my theoretical framework for the following four key reasons:

First, the affordance-based view allows us to better conceptualise and compare specific sites in relation to other available sites. Following this approach, it is now possible to deconstruct social media platforms into abstract bundles of affordances that can help us understand the relative differences and similarities between SNSs without using platform-specific language or terminology. For example, instead of comparing Facebook ‘likes’ with Instagram’s ‘hearts’ we can examine the extent to which both platforms provide the affordances of giving social cues of feedback to other people. Similarly, instead of comparing the specific technical features of ‘friending’ or ‘following’ we can examine how the social affordances of networking could facilitate relationship initiation and development. When people choose which SNSs to use, they typically draw from a broader spectrum of available affordances across different social media platforms. An affordance-based view is thus particularly well-suited to the study of social media choices, because it allows us to better compare different SNSs in a way that is not limited by platform-specific boundaries, features and language.

Second, the shift toward an affordance-based view of SNSs enables a more user-centric approach which asks what affordances make a difference in people’s continuous use of and emotional attachment to SNSs (see discussion of commitment in Chapter 3). This theoretical angle is useful because it puts the individual user in the foreground of the inquiry. Consequently, the analytical focus on affordances allows us to compare users across multiple sites and media

technologies. For example, in lieu of comparing Tumblr users to Snapchat users, or Pinterest users to Facebook users, I propose to look at the *individual*, who inter-subjectively perceives a range of available social affordances across sites. This helps us to examine the processes wherein individuals configure their mediated sociality through sequential choices of SNSs. In particular, it provides a theoretical basis for understanding how these choices might be related to users' perceptions and interpretations of a bevy of available SNS affordances. The same framework can help us examine how people might act upon these constructed perceptions and expectations to selectively distribute their attention and time across different SNSs or other communication channels both online and offline.

Third, the affordance-based analysis is not restricted to social media platforms that represent an exact match with a pre-defined set of technical features. Examining people's social media choices necessarily involves not only sites that can be traditionally conceived as SNSs, such as Facebook and Twitter, but also other hybrid-spaces with similar affordances, such as Instagram and Snapchat. In particular, this means that users might recognise a platform as an SNS, even if the platform itself may not have specific functional features, e.g. a Newsfeed or the technical feature of a user profile. The most notable example of this is Snapchat, which seems to have taken the equivalent place of an SNS in many people's social lives despite its ephemeral nature and the practical non-existence of a static user profile. Furthermore, friendship and follower lists on Snapchat cannot be traversed by other users. In spite of this, Snapchat has come to occupy a central role in the communication environments of many people, especially among younger users (Bayer et al. 2015; Piwek & Joinson 2016; Vaterlaus et al. 2016). In a similar vein, WeChat has taken a similar role as the primary space for mediated sociality among many

Internet users in China, even if it may not fit any presumed “Western” moulds of what a traditional social network site should look like (Lien & Cao 2014). By considering what the site represents, rather than what the site does, we can take into account a broader spectrum of platforms that may be relevant for the inquiry of social media choice and commitment.

Fourth, insights drawn from the affordance-based analysis of SNSs can be more resilient to technological change. Contemporary social media technologies, and especially SNSs, are in a state of constant flux, as their user interfaces, features, privacy policies and business models continue to evolve over time (Hayes & Carr 2015; Hogan & Quan-Haase 2010; Livingstone 2015; Lomborg 2015). After all, SNSs represent adaptive environments that change with their users (Nagy & Neff 2015 p. 5). As Baym (2010 p. 13) comments, “*trying to list specific types of digital media is frustrating at best. Between this writing and your reading there are bound to be new developments and things popular as I write will drop from vogue.*” In agreement with this, Frith (2015 p. 1) points out: “*whatever one writes will take long enough to complete and publish that many of the emerging media technologies analysed will have changed.*”

Having outlined some of the definitional concerns around SNSs earlier in this chapter, it is difficult to foresee which SNS features will persevere and which ones will change in the future. I assert, however, that while the interfaces and designs of today’s SNSs may change, the capabilities and social actions afforded by such SNSs, as well as the understandings of what an SNS represents in the social world, will likely remain consistent over time. I hope, therefore, that the shifting technical intricacies and the popularity cycles of SNSs will not considerably interfere with the conclusions drawn from this thesis.

2. 5. Defining affordances

In the original sense, environmental affordances have been defined as non-deterministic perceptual cues that make a difference by facilitating specific actions or interactions (Gibson 1986; Heft 1989; Norman 1988). In particular, Gibson's ecological psychology perspective (1979, p.127) suggests that affordances are relational properties that exist as complementarities between individuals [animals] and their contextual objective environment, e.g. a cave that affords shelter, while fire affords warmth. Many years later, Norman proposes a definition of affordances that is rooted in user design and the cognitive sciences, as "*the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used*" (Norman 1988 p. 9). This view assumes a higher-order design interest that is expressed in the architecture of a site. This design logic provides strong cues about how technologies ought to be used to improve what designers would understand as the "intended" user experience. However, the literature shows that many communications researchers have used the concept of affordances in ambiguous and inconsistent ways across a vast number of contexts, e.g. ranging from online blogging (Graves 2007) and physical objects (Fayard & Weeks 2007) to human-machine interface design (Lintern 2000). In this regard, Bucher and Helmond (2017 p. 13) emphasise that "*while all conceptualisations of affordance take Gibson's original framing of the term as a starting point, they differ in terms of where and when they see affordances materialising (i.e. features, artefacts, social structures) and what affordances are supposed to activate or limit (i.e. particular communicative practices, sociality, publics, perception).*"

For example, while early research on affordances has argued for the invariant nature of affordances (Gibson 1986), recent work has pointed out that affordances may be malleable and may change with the needs of the user (Hutchby 2001). It is also debatable whether affordances

are evident properties of technologies that are instantly perceptible (Norman 1990), or whether they depend on users' experiences with the technology, i.e. they need to be actively explored due to their hidden nature (Gaver 1991). Finally, do affordances have one effect on all users or many? Theoretical arguments pertaining to the notion of 'niche affordances' (Gibson 1986; Heft 1989), and the proposed complementarity of users and their acted-upon environment (Gaver 1991 p. 80), suggest that not all users might perceive affordances in the same unambiguous way. And there might be users who will not recognise some affordances at all.

In order to provide a precise and useful definition of a specific class of affordances that mediates sociality in the context of digital technologies, a more differentiated theory of *social affordances* has been proposed in the literature. To define social affordances, we can think of perceptible cues that represent possibilities for behaviour that arise from the interrelationship between individual agency and its relation with surrounding environmental conditions of the material world (Bradner 2001; Nippert-Eng 2010; Wellman 2001; Wellman et al. 2003). The wider CMC literatures describe social affordances as non-deterministic signals in the social world that indicate possibilities of action that are pre-given to individuals in any situation (Heft 2001; Hogan 2009). In mediated environments, they are typically stable and act as apparent signals "*from the social environment to imagine the community*" (boyd 2007 p. 131). Therefore, I conceive of social affordances as cues of sociality that are recursively and inter-subjectively perceived based on individuals' social locations and personal backgrounds. Technical features of sites place deterministic constraints on users; affordances can be perceived, learned and negotiated because of their inter-subjective nature. They are neither objective properties, nor fully subjective perceptions. As Schrock (2015 p. 1232) points out, social affordances "*are evaluated through communication and successively alter communicative practices.*" Social

affordances can thus be seen as interfaces between that which is in the world, and our intention of what to do in the world. Hutchby (2001) argues for both the constraining and enabling effects of the properties of technological artefacts on behaviour in affording sociality. He develops the term *communicative affordance*² from the discussion of the social affordance by upholding both its functional and relational aspects. In a similar vein, Hayes and colleagues (2016) develop the notion of the *paralinguistic digital affordance*, which represents a lightweight signal of sociability that only requires a single click without specific language associated with the message, e.g. ‘like’ on Facebook, ‘heart’ on Instagram or ‘upvote’ on Reddit.

The advent of social media has created many such new communication possibilities. In particular, following the notion that ‘behaviour affords behaviour’ (Gibson 1986), social media increasingly allows for the possibility of users acting upon perceptual cues that are generated from the activity of other users. This is especially relevant in the context of everyday social interactions, where people can be said to have shifted from “*a logic of networking based on specific space-time constraints to a logic based on access through affordances. That is, we are moving from a logic of shared norms about the right spaces at the right times, to individualised perceptions of social structure based on the affordances of the media one uses*” (Hogan 2009 pp. 14–5). On the one hand this shift implies that individual perceptions of affordances of each communication medium seem to be moving into the foreground of people’s networking decisions. On the other hand, this implies that people’s constructed perceptions of social

² The concept of *communicative affordances* is only more useful than the concept of social affordances when discussing the impact of communication media, such as the telephone, text-messaging and other mobile devices. The former notion emphasises the ability to observe affordances as they are activated by users in the course of individual actions (Hutchby 2001; Schrock 2015). However, given the use of the latter term in the literature, and given the role of SNSs in mediating sociality, rather than simply communication (Hogan 2015a), I will mostly focus on the *social affordances* of SNSs in this thesis.

accessibility of individual members of their personal network may be heavily influenced by the communication channels people choose to use with each other.

This line of thinking leads Nagy and Neff (2015) to conclude that social affordances are typically *imagined* by individual users who actively perceive and shape their social media environments and have agency over them. The scholars explicitly emphasise the material, mediated and emotional aspects of human-technology interaction (2015 p. 2). Furthermore, they explain that individuals act upon the perceived properties of the mediated environment that is proffered by media technologies, such as SNSs. This implies that imagined affordances result from a combination of users' constructed cognitive perceptions, attitudes and expectations, as the following passage suggests (Nagy & Neff 2015 p. 2):

By anchoring imagined affordances in a process that is simultaneously material and perceptual, we are looking for a term that helps scholars to reflect technological environments' material qualities that mediate affective experiences (...). Affordances have provided a kind of middle ground between technological determinism and social construction, a move that allowed researchers to point to the materiality or functions of technology while reminding their readers that these functions are always subsumed by users' actions.

This means that affordances are quite distinct from technological 'features' and material qualities of the system. Features are encoded in the technical capabilities and architectures of the platform. As such, they can place deterministic constraints on conversations and other socially-relevant interactions. A good example for this is Twitter's 140 character limit per tweet. By contrast, affordances can provide possibilities for social uses of technologies that transcend the underlying site architecture (Ellison & Vitak 2015; Hogan 2009; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym 2015). They provide perceived possibilities of actions within the confines of each SNS, but they do not dictate any specific interpretation. Some affordances may be missed, while other

affordances may be misinterpreted (Eslami et al. 2015). But regardless, we can assert the existence of such affordances without the need for the users to fully perceive or interpret them. Users may not be able to change the technical features of the platform, but they can re-appropriate and re-imagine the social affordances of sites. In other words, we can assert that imagined affordances contribute to the possibility of certain activities without necessitating their outcomes – providing users with a perceived range of options and constraints rather than pushing them towards predetermined designed outcomes, as Norman (1999) has argued. Given the experiential nature of SNSs, the key condition is, therefore, that affordances need to be explored and recognised as such. Then, they can take on a variety of meanings based on the individual person who perceives them and acts upon them in the social environment. As Evans and colleagues (2017) point out, any proposed notion of affordances implies necessary variability about the outcomes of SNS activities. In turn, this variability can influence different socially-relevant interactions that take place within the boundaries of each site (Evans et al. 2017 p. 45).

Social affordances shape the attributes and characteristics that people tend to associate with each SNS. This leads to user perceptions that, for example, Instagram is inherently visual, Snapchat is inherently ephemeral and Twitter is inherently succinct. Even the arrangement of friendship/follower ties on a site could afford certain patterns of connectivity (Hogan & Wellman 2014). In offline settings, social boundaries are typically symmetric. That is, two parties mutually acknowledge each other to participate in a conversation or a different kind of social interaction. This type of undirected relationships is the one that is predominantly emulated by some SNSs, such as Facebook or VKontakte. This implies that any friend request needs to be first approved by any given user before a dyadic connection can be established. But it is ultimately the user who makes decisions about how to interpret these perceptual cues.

Consequently, users learn to accept or reject friend requests based on their inter-subjective interpretations of what their personal network on Facebook should look like.

On the contrary, SNSs can also afford a different type of relationship that is asymmetric. For example, Twitter sets its default setting to directed following/follower relationships. This relational infrastructure is mostly designed for one-way directional flows of information. Unless tweets are “protected”, this allows people to follow other users without their explicit consent. A somewhat related logic of mixed connectivity has been implemented on Instagram and Tumblr. Instead of following standardised technical rules about who to follow, users now need to actively negotiate the boundaries of their social networks. There are, in fact, many mixed forms of connectivity that conflate both directed and undirected relationships on sites like Instagram and Tumblr. In this way, while platform design choices may enable certain norms of connectivity, users still have to explore the social affordances of SNSs to organise their personal networks. User perceptions of affordances could thus influence the way users communicate with each other, how they connect to their network audiences and how they construct their digital identities. Relatedly, Evans and colleagues (2017) explicate the concept of affordances by showing the importance of the relational structure of affordances that provides cues about how platform functions and features can be interpreted and used.

Bucher and Helmond (2017) review different theoretical perspectives on the social affordances of SNSs, emphasising a platform-sensitive approach to affordances. Each SNS provides a different socio-technological environment for individuals, and yet these sites are frequently engaged in conjunction with a variety of other social media services. Consequently, it is important to recognise that users tend to perceive SNS affordances across the boundaries of

specific platforms. McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015 p. 2) note that “*affordances are not experienced in isolation, but rather in relation to a complex ecology of other tools with other affordances.*” Accordingly, the relations between the affordances of different SNSs are yet unclear, especially when each SNS affords different things to different users.

Following this research, one might ask: how do users make sense of their social media environment? For example, the redesigned Facebook Reaction buttons, which have recently replaced the uniform ‘like’-buttons, may afford different actions to different users, since they “*produce not only meanings, but also effects of meaningfulness*” through cultural practices (Langlois 2014 p. 55). Meaning is thus constructed by what users *do* with the available affordances at hand. In this way, Facebook’s new reaction buttons are perceived by users through the affordances of communication, as well as the new possibilities of social signalling they might represent. A similar line of thinking can be applied to Twitter’s redesigned ‘favourite’-button from a star-shaped form into a standardised heart-symbol (Bucher & Helmond 2017). The change in the symbol brought about a change in the connotations of the afforded social action, which in turn depends on the meanings and imaginings Twitter users might derive from it. Being placed between the materiality of the platform and users’ agency, the social affordances of SNSs thus need to be measured in relation to the individual user and his or her constructed perceptions of the media environment (Nagy & Neff 2015). This suggests that media behaviour is intricately linked to the expectations, beliefs and interpretations of platform-sensitive *imagined* affordances as perceptual cues in the socio-technical environments of SNSs.

2. 6. Social affordances of SNSs

Having examined the main conceptual components of the affordance-based view within which SNSs can be studied, I derive three main narratives of social affordances that the literature has identified as characteristic to the genre of social network sites, namely the affordances of *networking*, *communication* and *self-presentation*. By identifying and developing these three types of social affordances, and their effects on mediated sociality, this thesis extends existing research and opens up new opportunities for examining which types of social affordances tend to inhibit or magnify people's commitment to SNSs (see Chapter 6).

2. 6. 1. Affordances of mediated networking

One of the main theoretical angles on social network sites in the CMC literature has been through the affordances of networking. This primarily relates to the arrangement of friendship relationships and the regulation of private-public boundaries of social accessibility – not the instrumental form of networking that is common in business relationships³. In studying these social affordances, I adopt Hogan's definition of social networking as the “*active process of building, maintaining and sustaining a specific set of mutually regarded relationships*” (Hogan 2009 p. 14). This definition views the practice of social networking as a social action that aims at the initiation and maintenance of relationships. The main premise of this approach is that social networking choices are embedded in a broader network structure of many other individuals.

SNSs can thus be said to be related to the practice of social networking, where users' mediated sociality manifests itself in their articulated networks (Bucher 2015). In support of this notion,

³ Theories of networking should be viewed in separation from the literature of ‘impression-management’, which examines the instrumental presentation of one's professional self for the purpose of increasing the usefulness of business relationships, advancing one's career or finding clients to increase sales (a view that has been presented in work by e.g. Jeffrey Gitomer, Mick Cope or Debra Fine).

research finds that SNSs tend to afford the construction of social relationships, groups and communities (Sutcliffe et al. 2011). Every click and every post can be situated in the broader context of social networking as an ongoing activity.

From the perspective of individual users, their articulated network on any given SNS can be seen as part of their overall *personal network*. An individual's personal network can be defined as a set of intertwined social relationships maintained by a person across many social contexts and situations both online and offline. Social network sites afford users to express and sustain partial online representations of their personal networks by enabling them to make a series of active networking choices. In other words, SNSs can act as interfaces for making oneself accessible to one's entire personal network, or a selected set of smaller private spheres.

As noted earlier in this chapter, different SNSs afford different forms of networking; each site defines connectivity and what it means to be social in a different way. On some SNSs, the mutual acknowledgement of a friendship tie is not a necessary condition for the initiation of a new relationship online. For example, this means that social networking on Facebook almost always implies reciprocated and mutually regarded relationships, while Twitter allows users to follow other accounts without their explicit permission or acknowledgement (Hogan & Wellman 2014). Comparing these within-platform networks to people's offline networks, research has repeatedly stressed that SNSs can reproduce only an imperfect picture of people's fluid real-world personal networks in the rigidly structured online setting of an SNS (X. Zhao et al. 2016).

Regardless of the specific technical configuration of each site, research finds that people tend to be motivated to build and maintain relationships on SNSs because they seek interpersonal contact, closeness and acceptance from others (Chen 2011; Nadkarni & Hofmann 2012; L. E. Park et al. 2010). For example, studies adopting the U&G approach found that SNS users

typically seek to gratify a need for connection by using SNSs (Chen 2011; Wang et al. 2012). In a similar way, Deters and Mehl (2013) offer experimental evidence for the causal link between social interactions around Facebook status updates and decreased feelings of loneliness.

To recapitulate, social accessibility is regulated through a series of networking choices (e.g. “who should be in my network? Who should have access to the content I post?”). What is more, these networking choices typically involve balancing the tensions between a desire for sociality and concerns about making personal disclosures to potentially unintended audiences (Binder et al. 2009; Marwick & boyd 2011). Some sites like Facebook offer users a range of sophisticated privacy settings, permitting them to regulate access to each individual piece of posted content. However, other sites like Instagram only offer users a binary option between accepting and rejecting a follower request from other users. Research finds that the use of these privacy tools is not straightforward, while the extent to which users make use of these privacy tools can predict important social capital outcomes (Stutzman et al. 2012).

In this regard, Baym and boyd (2012 p. 328) describe the practice of social networking as an *“ever-shifting process throughout which people juggle blurred boundaries, multi-layered audiences, individual attributes, the specifics of the systems they use and the contexts of their use.”* SNSs can thus be said to afford the regulation of access to profiles and posted content. Users can actively identify any number of friendship relations that, together, form a complex web of connections. This articulated network of connections delineates a personalised social space for future interactions. In summary, what distinguishes the genre of SNSs is, therefore, not only the technical feature of ‘friending’ or the ability to traverse sets of connections made by other users, but also the affordances of mediated networking, which allow users to regulate their social accessibility with regard to their personal network through a series of networking choices.

2. 6. 2. Affordances of mediated communication

The second class of social affordances of SNSs logically stems from the first category. In an abstract sense, the goal of most active networking choices is the initiation or maintenance of conversations with one's alters. Research has supported this conception, pointing out that the main purpose of social media is mediated communication (boyd 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). After all, this is what most media technologies, including the telephone, text-messaging and email, are all about. One could hardly image an SNS without any communicative features in place. Consequently, even though the affordances of mediated communication are neither distinctive nor unique, they are nonetheless essential to the genre of SNSs. They are a necessary, but not sufficient condition to delineate SNSs from other media technologies.

Given the above, SNSs can thus be seen as networked spaces that provide users with a variety of communicative opportunities, both synchronous and asynchronous, that are intertwined with the foundation of the articulated friendship network; they continuously shape and are shaped by users' networking choices. For example, Facebook users may add a new friend to start a new conversation. Alternatively, they could engage in a conversation with a stranger on the wall of a Facebook group or a page, only to add their new conversation partner to their immediate friendship network later. Within each SNS, social affordances act as cues that help users engage in socially-relevant mediated interactions. These affordances can be activated and can serve as points of departure for further social activities both online and offline. For example, the Twitter feed offers a rich variety of such interaction potentials that afford the initiation of new conversations based on a selection of algorithmically assorted tweets from other Twitter users. Likewise, one-on-one messaging on Facebook Messenger currently offers a range

of features that can augment conversations with various modalities of communication, e.g. emoji, animated text, GIFs, games, videos and music.

Communication mechanisms and interaction patterns vary greatly from one site to another (Papacharissi 2009). This is due to the fact that different social media platforms do not merely have different affordances, but different expectations of what a social media subject is supposed to be. They also differ based on what a typical communicative exchange on the SNS should look like, e.g. whether users are expected to display their given ‘real-name’ or whether archives of conversations are private or public by default (Hogan 2012). These social affordances shape distinctly differing styles of maintaining contact and communicating with each other. Facebook creates a walled garden where, by default, content is only available to users’ friends. A typical Facebook user in many parts of the world would have their ‘real-name’ and a visible picture of themselves displayed on the site. Users are encouraged to find their friends through Facebook’s ‘people you may know’ feature. Twitter on the other hand is public by default, but makes no claims that accounts are necessarily signified by ‘real-names’ or even distinct individuals. Instagram has been a Facebook property for several years and has some integration with the larger SNS. However, one does not need to integrate these two accounts or even link them. From a security perspective, Facebook Inc. can still discern which Instagram account belongs to which Facebook user, but from an ordinary user’s perspective this information is not always obvious. Finally, Snapchat does not require ‘real-names’ at all but merely a unique account name. Ephemeral messages on Snapchat are only ever available to one’s followers by design and have been described as more intimate ways of maintaining contact with friends.

Trying to list all available technical features of SNSs that afford communication between users would be an impossible task to achieve, given that social media companies are constantly

trying to innovate the ways in which users maintain contact through their platforms. This provides another rationale for my focus on individual users and how they might perceive and interpret the social affordances of SNSs.

2. 6. 3. Affordances of mediated self-presentation

The third category of affordances, which is salient with SNSs, relates to the affordances of self-presentation. Aspects of self-presentation have been researched extensively in offline contexts (Altheide 2000; Baumeister 1982; Friedlander 2011), but with the advent of the Internet, self-presentation has become a key aspect of computer-mediated communication. Past CMC scholarship has typically viewed SNS as spaces for the presentation of people's digital identities (Bargh et al. 2002; Seidman 2014; Weber & Mitchell 2008); or in the context of persistent and searchable content, as exhibitions of identities (Hogan 2010). The latter allow users to embrace a set of multifaceted personas that are stored in online profiles.

To illustrate this, one could think about how people assume diverse identities and social roles in their offline everyday lives. For example, they go to school and take on the persona of a lecturer, they come home and assume the persona of parent and they go to dancing classes to assume the persona of a salsa beginner. In a very similar manner, digital identities typically encompass people's dynamic online representations of their individual sense of self, as to who a person is or how a person would like to be perceived, i.e. a set of claims expressed by the user online about their personhood and their relational and/or contextual environments⁴. Digital identities can consist of multiple parts that are distributed across several SNS profiles and sites.

⁴ Scholars frequently use the term *digital identity* interchangeably with *digital self*. However, while the notion of *self* typically implies a unique, consistent, transparent and invariant personhood, people may project more than one digital identity across multiple SNS profiles and platforms. However, one cannot automatically assume consistency between such identities, platforms and their social contexts.

As such, they can be either directly or indirectly connected through common identity-markers, shared profile characteristics, posted content, embedded hyperlinks and/or third-party apps. In accordance with Walther's hyper-personal model (1996), these media choices can contribute to higher levels of interpersonal communication.

Early theoretical discussions of self-presentation on SNSs have followed the academic traditions of symbolic interactionism. Therefore, when scholars refer to *self-presentation as identity performance* they refer to a process in which an individual conveys an impression to an audience within a defined social situation of everyday interactions. The theoretical underpinnings of this notion can be situated within the logic of *everyday performances*, drawing on the dramaturgical metaphor that was pioneered by Erving Goffman in his seminal work on "*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*" (Goffman 1959). In offline environments, performances are typically accomplished using body movement, clothes, speech and facial expressions. In online social contexts, a crucial element of identity performances is self-disclosure. This is especially important in the context of SNSs, where people's self-presentation choices may have implications for their sociality. Digitally-mediated social cues are transmitted through text / image / voice / video-based messages and can thus be read by the receiving party synchronously or asynchronously. In the latter case, audiences can be both intended and unintended, as there may always be a hidden part of the audience that can see and evaluate a given piece of content at a later point in time (Hogan 2010).

According to Goffman, effective performers are "*aware of the impression they foster*" (1959 p. 144) and can thus manipulate their performances to appear in the most favourable light. To that end, the *back-stage* is typically used to prepare a performance. Consequently, the performance itself takes place on the *front-stage*, where an exhibited identity manifests through a

set of self-presentational means that are available to the performer. According to such a viewpoint, when performing impression-management on the front-stage, individuals necessarily select which details about themselves to disclose to others. However, this process is always partial as aspects of the self are both given, as well as unintentionally given off. For example, during a live-stream on the video-gaming streaming service Twitch, a user could accidentally reveal private details about themselves or their social environment. Similar things could happen during a live-chat on Facebook Messenger or a Snapchat conversation. Broadly speaking, this form of self-presentation can be defined as *situational* self-presentation, because the performance takes place within a given semi-synchronous social situation with its own rules and norms. Examples of these situations may include conversations in group chats on WhatsApp, a comment section on Instagram or a live-video broadcast on Facebook.

However, as researchers have noted, SNSs are not always characterized by situational self-presentation, but also *exhibitional* self-presentation (Hogan 2010). In asynchronous exhibitions of digital identities, there is always a third party that mediates users' self-presentation strategies in user profiles and streams of user-generated content. Facebook's Newsfeed has been perhaps the most frequently cited example of the algorithmic curation of identity – a series of largely hidden machine learning techniques that sort, prioritise and personalise the content that appears in the feeds of Facebook users. Other SNSs manage self-presentation through a bevy of affordances that shape the way users produce and perceive the digital collections of user-generated content. This can be directly related to the seminal research by Lombard and Ditton (1997), who have examined the role of mediated technologies in creating an illusion of presence.

Particularly in the context of exhibitions of identity, research on SNS self-presentation has largely viewed SNS profiles as reflections of users' offline identities in which they

selectively disclose facets of their selves. The logic behind this is that people like to be seen by others as they see themselves, and have aspects of their identity acknowledged by others. As a result, research on identity performances has assumed that SNS users generally want to convey their ‘true’ personality traits and attributes when performing impression-management on SNSs (Counts & Stecher 2009; Tosun 2012). However, it is evident that online identities cannot be “*exact reproductions of offline identity*” (K. Davis 2011 p. 637). After all, the offline self is corporeal and intrinsically bound to human physicality that determines how we are perceived in the social interactions of the offline world. Yet digital identities are by no means less ‘real’ than the embodied identities enacted offline. In fact, through the ubiquitous use of mobile phones, they are becoming increasingly integrated into people’s self-presentation practices offline with impacts on both online and offline behaviours. This is why SNSs can also afford greater identity play and experimentation, providing users with the opportunity to easily attend to multiple, oftentimes pseudonymous, digital identities in parallel. Scholars have repeatedly pointed out that affordances of computer-mediated spaces allow people to “*explore new forms of identity, shift identity or secure multi-identities with relative freedom*” (D. Miller 2012a p. 3). For example, some people may feel that sites like Facebook allow them to more easily express themselves online than in person (Mehdizadeh 2010; Seidman 2014). Moreover, when a ‘real-name’ is not required, selective anonymity could elicit different reactions and practices through different modes of self-presentation, which can be associated with positive outcomes (Ellison et al. 2016).

This logic is reinforced by research findings that suggest that different SNSs afford different forms and styles of self-presentation (S. Zhao et al. 2008). Therefore, I maintain that, when thinking about the defining characteristics of the genre of SNSs, we need to consider the

affordances of mediated self-presentation, which allow users to embrace a wide range of available forms of identity performances and exhibitions.

2. 7. Chapter conclusion

This chapter has begun to set the overall theoretical framework of this dissertation by discussing existing definitions of SNSs. It has reviewed the functionalist perspective of SNSs and, building on the existing CMC literature, has presented an affordance-based view of SNSs that opens up new opportunities to extend existing research (Ellison & Vitak 2015; Hayes et al. 2016; Hogan 2015a; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym 2015). This view focuses on the consistent, long-term narratives of social affordances that distinguish SNSs from other media technologies, rather than a set of specific technical features. For example, instead of examining the technical feature of “creating a user profile”, the field increasingly moves towards the affordance-based view, which would, in this case, recommend the inquiry of users’ perceptions of the social affordances of self-presentation on each SNS. As a result, new platforms like Snapchat (which do not allow users to construct user profiles, but still afford self-presentation through a bevy of alternative means) would not be excluded from this analysis.

The affordance-based approach introduced in this chapter focuses on three key social affordances of SNSs: the affordances of mediated networking, communication and self-presentation. This allows us to conceptualise SNSs as networked platforms that afford situational and exhibitional self-presentation, condition the patterns of mediated communication and allow users to regulate their social accessibility with networked audiences. This theoretical framework of SNSs as bundles of affordances helps to unravel the complex processes through which people choose different social media and in the process develop commitment to such sites.

I contend that this approach is more useful for this thesis, because it analytically liberates the concept of SNSs from any specific collections of technical features, interfaces and other technical intricacies that are largely subject to rapid technological change. Furthermore, given its independence from technical accounts, this approach is also highly applicable to other social technologies and applications that are similar to SNSs and display key SNS properties, yet do not appear to fit dominant definitions of SNSs. The chapter provided several examples where the affordance-based view of SNSs helps to identify long-term narratives of SNSs that are not limited by any particular features of currently existing platforms. As such, this discussion supports the overall shift in the literature towards affordance-based views of social media to produce analytical insights that are not lessened by the rapid pace of technological change.

Perhaps it makes sense to return now, even for a brief moment, to Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim and his *Temple of Friendship*. The question, of course, is whether modern social network sites represent just a new means to our perennial proclivity to organise our social networks around ourselves, or whether Gleim's portrait gallery can be described as a peculiar curiosity at best. Mark Zuckerberg probably did not know about the Temple of Friendship when he launched the first version of the Friendship Graph on Facebook; and Kevin Systrom probably never heard of the provincial German town of Halberstadt when he launched Instagram. But it is interesting to see the parallels between people's motives for using modern SNSs and Gleim's motivation to visually represent and document his entire personal network in a portrait gallery.

However, there is a key conceptual difference between Gleim's Temple of Friendship and the digitally-mediated actions taken by modern SNS users. Contemporary social media platforms afford the expression of emotions and communication of experiences, but users rarely

use SNSs for the digital documentation of their lives as an end in itself. For instance, the point of posting a Facebook status update is not to create a personal diary (even though, this might be the case for some people), but as a means to communicate something to one's friendship network (Jurgenson 2011). Similarly, following a person on Instagram is typically motivated by a desire to learn more about what that person might share in the future – in anticipation of future interaction, rather than in pursuit of building a comprehensive list of contacts as an end-goal in itself. Of course, there are always exceptions to this general tendency, but it is evident that there is a clear difference between considering SNSs as a *means to* or an *end of* social activities.

For Gleim, the visual representation of his social network was the primary objective of his portrait gallery. In other words, creating the Temple of Friendship was the end-goal in itself, while the visual cues for letter writing were only of secondary importance. This can be contrasted to the ephemeral content shared on Snapchat, where the act of sharing a snap is more important than the fact that the snap will disappear without leaving a digital trace on the recipients' devices. Since the message is not supposed to leave any persistent traces, it cannot be stored in a gallery or a timeline. In particular, when Snapchat users take a selfie, it is usually intended to communicate certain meanings with others or to better express their present state of mind – not to add a new photograph to a digital archive of selfies as an end state (though one typically does not exclude the other). Jurgenson (2011) refers to this as the shift in the means and the ends of mediated communication. Even if the object eventually disappears due to the inherent ephemerality of the platform, the communicated meaning of the shared photograph persists. Unlike a painted portrait in a gallery, the Snapchat selfie thus becomes a social cue within the context of a fast-paced, dynamic mediated conversation.

Therefore, in the same way how a Snapchat selfie cannot be seen as a direct extension of the painted self-portrait – or how the Facebook status update cannot be seen as a direct extension of personal diary writing – I maintain that SNSs cannot be understood as a direct conceptual continuation of the Temple of Friendship. The purpose of SNSs is not simply to exist; instead, people seem to be motivated to continue using SNSs for different reasons, e.g. to keep in touch with friends, to discover new information or to express new facets of their identity. SNS commitment can, therefore, never be a goal in-itself and users cannot be said to be pursuing a sense of psychological investment in a site just for the sake of feeling attached to a technological platform. Instead, when people exhibit commitment to an SNS, it is usually related to a set of gratifications sought from its continued use. The next chapters will focus on different motives for SNS use, and specifically examine the affordances of SNSs that could facilitate commitment.

CHAPTER 3:

THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

3. 1. Introduction – Daily social media choices

People increasingly rely on a greater number of different media to access information, share digital content and build relationships, but there is little consensus on the circumstances under which they might choose a particular media platform over another. The literature finds that digital media are typically employed with a range of other communication tools in everyday life (Quan-Haase & Young 2010). This is particularly true for the communicative opportunities that are afforded by SNSs, which are frequently realised in conjunction with a bundle of other cross-media channels that entail both online and offline social interactions (Baym et al. 2004; Madianou & Miller 2013; Quan-Haase 2008). Furthermore, when new SNSs emerge, they are frequently judged in the context of existing social media platforms (X. Zhao et al. 2016).

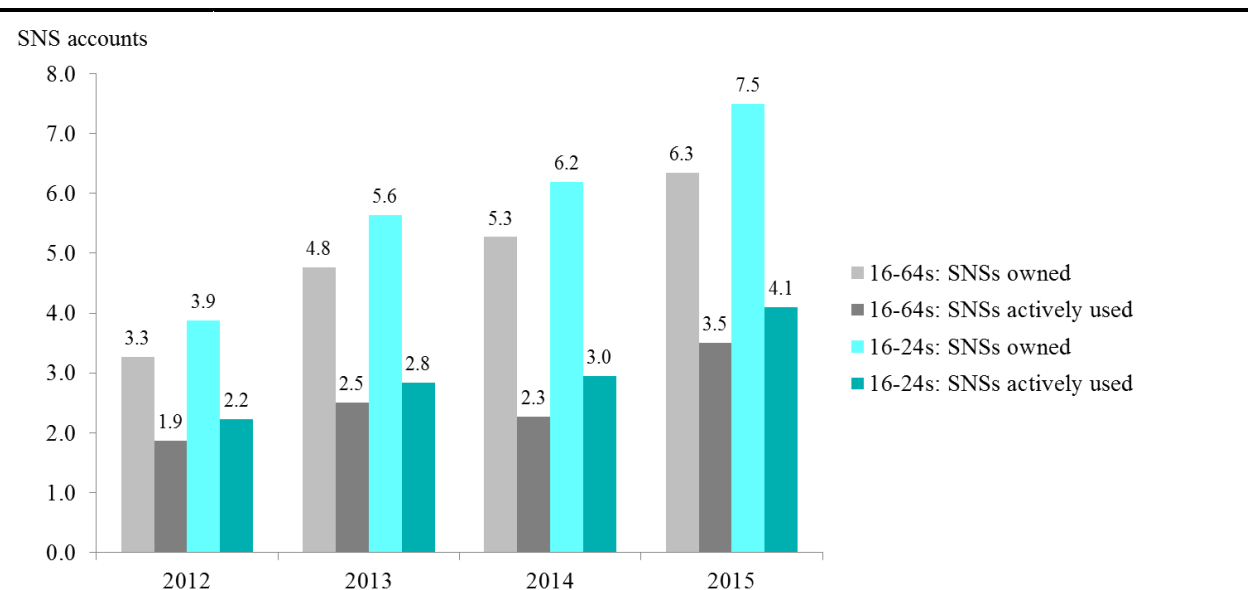
In 2015, the Pew Research Centre finds that 90% of 18-29 year old US Americans use at least one SNS (Perrin 2015). In the general US population, the Pew Centre also finds that 52% of Internet users actively use two or more SNSs⁵ (Duggan et al. 2015). Industry reports find that the use of multiple platforms is especially prevalent among young adults, as illustrated in Figure 2. Not only has the average number of actively used SNS accounts increased between 2012 and 2015, but the data also show that young people are actively engaging in networking activities on a greater number of sites (Mander 2015). For example, the same industry report finds that

⁵ This Pew report examined SNS use from the list of the following options: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and/or LinkedIn. The reported proportions would likely be higher if more SNSs were included.

Instagram users typically also have a Facebook account, while LinkedIn users also tend to maintain accounts on Google+ and YouTube, as Figure 3 shows.

These trends imply that everyday conversations are now carried across multiple social media platforms. Along similar lines, recent research studies have documented that people rely on multiple media platforms to access news, while their perceptions of news source credibility influence people's social media choices for news consumption (Yuan 2011). This research finds evidence for both complementary and converging media usage patterns. It becomes clear that if people jointly use a number of SNSs, each site appears to satisfy distinct needs (S. J. Kim 2014; Stoycheff et al. 2017). The various social and psychological needs gratified by SNSs have received much attention in CMC scholarship. Still, we know relatively little about why people choose which media and what keeps them committed to each platform.

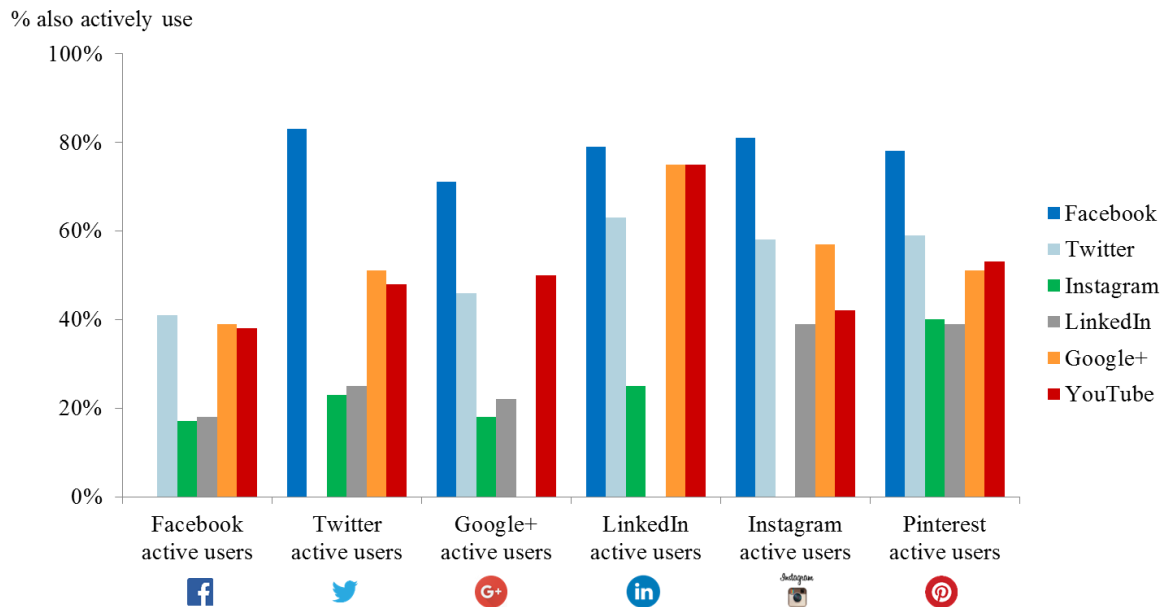
Figure 2: Average number of SNS accounts owned/actively used by Internet users globally



Notes: SNS membership implies having an account on the site, while SNS active use implies having used the site at least once in the past month. The corresponding survey questions were “On which of the following services do you have an account?” and “Which of the following services have you used or contributed to in the past month using any type of device?” The list of possible SNS choices excluded mobile messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, WeChat and Telegram (Data source: GWI 2012-2015).

With so many social media platforms and messaging applications all vying for people's attention, managing which media to use and what information to disclose becomes increasingly complex and multifaceted. Since social media choices are rarely constrained by considerations of access and costs, theories of interpersonal communication have shifted from questions of access to questions of choice, i.e. how and why are individuals making use of the different multi-media channels that are available to them. This echoes past research on media choice in traditional communication settings before the advent of social media (Perse & Dunn 1998).

To be sure, the main premise of this view is that people in the studied population are not bound to their social media choices by an external force. On the contrary, they are ostensibly free to choose between any possible combination of SNSs with any given person in their daily lives, without being subject to powerful external authorities that may mandate or prohibit the use of specific media. The other premise is that SNSs are embedded in a broader media environment of many available media technologies and traditional communication channels, including face-to-face meetings, emails, letters and other conventional telecommunications. In this diverse media framework, each platform represents a set of affordances that can be inter-subjectively and recursively perceived by individual users (Hayes et al. 2016; Nagy & Neff 2015), as detailed in Chapter 2. This opens up a range of opportunities for interaction and self-presentation across different platforms. What is more, it allows people to manage their mediated sociality through particular combinations of SNSs in a variety of new ways. For example, smartphones have been associated with user activity on a wider range of social media platform. Past research finds that smartphones have become important hubs for users' digitally-mediated activities. They facilitate frequent switching between multiple communicative channels (Frith 2015; Madianou 2014), while also intensifying the mixed flow of content across different SNSs (Jenkins 2006).

Figure 3: Industry statistics on multiple media use of popular SNSs

Notes: Percentage of active SNS users who also report to actively use other SNSs. For example, 41% of active Facebook users also actively use Twitter, while 82% of active Twitter users also actively use Facebook (Data source: GWI 2014).

3. 2. Theorising motives of SNS use

Considering the greater choice and flexibility in selecting and using multiple SNSs, it is evident that people will have different experiences with social media in their day-to-day lives. Regardless of platform choice, there are consistent personal reasons for actively using multiple SNSs (Ellison & Boyd 2013; Hart et al. 2015). The current CMC literature provides many examples of different motivations for using SNSs – both common and idiosyncratic. There is a wide array of studies that have provided various explanations to this conundrum (Archambault & Grudin 2012; Hughes et al. 2012; e.g. P. R. Johnson & Yang 2009; Leftheriotis & Giannakos 2014; Lynn et al. 2017). For example, Brandtzæg and Heim (2009) find that the most important reasons for using SNSs are getting in contact with new people, keeping in touch with friends and general socialising. Because there are so many variables that have been studied as predictors of

SNS use, I focus on common motivating factors that can be broadly grouped into three types of motives that correspond to the three categories of social affordances in Chapter 2. First, the *affordances of networking* relate to users' motivations to access particular audiences and the tendency to enlarge one's personal network. Second, the *affordances of communication* relate users' propensity to engage with other users through a multiplicity of within-platform interaction potentials, e.g. for social or professional purposes. Third, the *affordances of self-presentation* relate to users' situational and exhibitional presentations of identity through a series of active self-disclosures. In this way, the chapter draws upon the three theoretical threads from the previous chapter to combine them into a coherent theoretical framework that attempts to explain affordance-based motivations of continued SNS use and commitment.

The next question that emanates from this analytical point of view is whether people distinguish between these three categories of affordances, and if so how might they weight them? In the literature on media choice, one particularly prominent conceptual framework for this problem is the technology acceptance model (TAM). Research that has examined media choice through the lens of this paradigm has typically emphasised the relative usefulness and usability of various competing media technologies (Cheung et al. 2011; S. J. Kwon et al. 2014; Shin & Kim 2008; Sledgianowski & Kulviwat 2009). For example, this framework has been extended to study SNS adoption by matching individual motivators with the extrinsic qualities of sites (Shin & Kim 2008; Viswanath et al. 2009). In particular, these studies have treated SNSs like other technologies, such as personal computers (F. D. Davis et al. 1992; Dutton et al. 1987), where the perceived qualities of the medium were assessed as the main determinants of media choice. This means that, as the cost of access is decreasing, individual considerations of tastes, lifestyles and dispositions were becoming more important for the selection of media technologies.

This is based on how well the qualities of such media technologies are able to satisfy people's personal needs (Donohew et al. 1987; Johnsson-Smaragdi 2001; Swinyard & Smith 2003). Originating from the *theory of reasoned action* (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Madden et al. 1992), and its more advanced version, the *theory of planned behaviour* (Ajzen & Fishbein 2005; Armitage & Conner 2001; Terry et al. 1999), TAMs have been frequently utilised to study the adoption of functional ICT applications, IT systems and similar technological services. In this context, the research can be credited for contributing more granular insights into adopters' decision-making processes with regard to particular technologies. The main advantage of TAMs is that they tend to examine the effects of behavioural intentions on adoption decisions, which are related to the characteristics of specific technologies. According to Venkatesh (2000), the most important beliefs and attitudes are concerned with the 'perceived ease of use' and 'perceived usefulness' of the technology in question. On the one hand, perceived ease of use is defined as the degree to which the potential adopter considers the innovation to be free of effort. On the other hand, perceived usefulness is specified as the potential utility that could be derived from the adoption of the innovation.

Notwithstanding its prominence in the literature, a major shortcoming of the TAM method is its utilitarian focus on cognition and intentionality, rather than affect and emotions. While this may be useful for explaining SNS account creation, it is insufficient for explaining continuous SNS use and engagement. Furthermore, the framework assumes that all users have similar preferences for the same technical factors, such as usability. As such, this view tends to neglect that users may adapt SNSs for their own idiosyncratic purposes that could defy the original intentions of designers. As a case in point, Lu and Lin (2011) demonstrate that perceived enjoyment is a significant predictor of continued SNS use – even more so than other design-

based factors (perceived usefulness) and audience-based factors (number of peers using the site). In a related research context, Davis and colleagues (1992) find that perceived enjoyment fully mediates the effects of ease-of-use on people's intentions to use computers in the workplace. Therefore, we need a different theory that would allow us to take into account both design-based and emotional factors that go beyond a straightforward extrapolation of usability arguments.

3. 3. Theorising motives of multiple SNS use

In the present study, the issue under scrutiny is not just people's use of individual SNSs, but rather their systematic patterns of multiple SNS use. The literature abounds with studies that have examined why people use distinct SNSs, such as Facebook (Barker 2009; Joinson 2008; Nadkarni & Hofmann 2012; Ross et al. 2009), Twitter (Holton et al. 2014; Kwak et al. 2010; D. Zhao & Rosson 2009), LinkedIn (Utz 2015), Instagram (Eunji et al. 2015; Sheldon & Bryant 2016), Snapchat (Bayer et al. 2015; Piwek & Joinson 2016), Bebo (Dunne et al. 2010), Foursquare (Lindqvist et al. 2011) and many other sites. However, early studies (e.g. Barker 2009) have looked at SNSs as a single monolithic genre, conflating users of many different sites and failing to recognise how different SNSs could work together in diverse media environments.

Rains and Brunner (2014) note that 80% of the studies in SNS scholarship published between 1997 and 2013 focused on Facebook only. Other scholars have continued to criticise the over-reliance on Facebook in this field of research. A meta-review by Stoycheff and colleagues (2017 p. 9) points out that 559 (84.3%) of the reviewed publications were single-medium studies that examined one SNS in isolation. While this represents a burgeoning literature on the effects of Facebook use, we oftentimes forget to ask, why we are studying Facebook in the first place, despite the wealth of alternative available platforms. Single-platform often studies run the risk of

potentially omitting important distinctions between different SNSs in terms of their social affordances, audiences and uses. Furthermore, focusing on one particular SNS paints only a “*partial picture*” of how people use and are affected by social media (S. J. Kim 2014 p. 2). This may limit the generalisability of these studies due to implicit biases towards particular user groups, use patterns, platform policies and social affordances. Examining one social media platform in isolation, as opposed to being part of a larger social media environment, may thus inadvertently inhibit the reliability, generalisability and interpretation of findings.

Despite the wealth of studies on users’ motivations for joining individual SNSs, in addition to recent scholarly work on the gratifications obtained from each site (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011; Shao 2009; Whiting & Williams 2013), little comparative cross-media research has been carried out that attempts to understand the interrelationships between multiple jointly used SNSs. This is an important area of research that presents many theoretical challenges for SNS scholars. By way of illustration, for an ordinary person, the choice is seldom between using or not using Facebook. On the contrary, more often than not, the choice is between using or not using Facebook *at the expense of or in addition to* using or not using a range of other SNSs, such as LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter or Snapchat. After all, time and attention are scarce resources and people must choose whether they are going to send a particular message to their friends through one medium or another. The consideration of such alternatives may influence the formation of people’s perceptions of and beliefs about SNSs. These beliefs may guide people’s motives for using individual sites, but the consideration of multiple sites invites further scholarly attention on how people assess the relationships between multiple available platforms. I contend that research that examines one SNS at the time is unlikely to provide a holistic answer to the

relational dimension of people's social media choices. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen user-centric research that considers multiple jointly used platforms.

From the previous discussion of multiple SNS use, it is becoming evident that each media channel within the broader multi-media ecosystem can be associated with its own limitations, biases and rewards (Buccafurri et al. 2015; Urista et al. 2009). The literature on traditional media use and media ecology does, in fact, point in this direction (Innis 1951; McLuhan 1964; McLuhan & Powers 1993; Rosengren 1974). Viewed in this manner, one of the main reasons why people draw on multiple SNSs is because these SNSs are used for different distinct purposes and socio-psychological or design-based gratifications; what one SNS cannot offer can, in many cases, be provided by another complementary social media platform. When social media emphasise certain communicative traits, while minimising others, this can have an effect on the way how people choose media and interact with one another. The resulting networking patterns may emphasise certain forms of social connectivity over others.

The literature indicates that there are temporal regularities in the patterns of people's media use (Aledavood et al. 2015; Saramaki et al. 2014; Spencer & Pahl 2006). Communication scholars refer to these approaches as *strategies* for social action (e.g. Miritello et al. 2013; Papacharissi 2012; Stevenson & Greenberg 2000). Research shows that these strategies are typically related to the affordances that each platform can provide (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011; Quan-Haase & Young 2014; Shao 2009; Whiting & Williams 2013). For example, some people appear to be fully engaged with a large number of SNSs, oscillating their focus of attention between different profiles and audiences. Others may choose to maintain only a handful of SNS accounts to keep in touch with their close friends, while exhibiting a high degree of emotional attachment to the sites they use. Conversely, other individuals may place a greater

emphasis on usefulness, convenience and practicality, when considering their media choices. Yet others may be more indiscriminate in their approach to social media, casually hanging out on the social media platforms that their friends are using. In part, these possibilities could be related to people's different communicative and self-presentational goals, values and general dispositions toward digital technologies, which developed through past experiences with social media.

Moreover, if we return to the affordance-based view of SNSs espoused in Chapter 2, research in this area supports the view that people make communicative media choices based on the inter-subjective imagined affordances proffered by each platform. However, we know relatively little about how people selectively perceive SNS affordances in relation to other available affordances and how these perceptions affect people's SNS uses. In particular, there is insufficient research evidence that would allow us to draw any firm conclusions about the resulting patterns of continued use of multiple social media platforms. I believe that this is an area of research that is filled with stimulating theoretical puzzles.

For example, what happens when SNS affordances overlap, or when they are amplified by the perceived presence of other affordances on competing SNSs? How does this affect people's social media choices? Building on that point, how can we characterise people's approaches to social media in such a way that it takes into account variations in perceived affordances across multiple platforms? In order to answer these questions, we need a theory of media use that is (1) not concerned with any media technology in particular, but is rather (2) focused on the individual user, (3) who recursively and selectively perceives different communicative opportunities, (4) compares multiple SNSs in relation to one another by (5) judging and weighing their gratifications, and (6) makes subsequent media choices with their

personal networks in everyday life. Based on all these theoretical requirements, the most useful lens through which we can examine people's social media choices is the *uses and gratifications* approach, which is discussed in the next section.

3. 4. Uses and gratifications of SNSs

One of the most prominent perspectives to understanding media choice is the *uses and gratifications* (U&G) approach. It has emerged as a theoretically informed and empirically grounded framework to study individual factors that lead to differential uses of media technologies by satisfying users' social and psychological needs. In the most abstract sense, the underlying assumption of this approach is that people's media choices are ultimately related to the qualities of the medium itself and the way how people perceive and react to these qualities.

The origins of this line of thinking can be traced back to audience research from the 1940s onwards and the sum of media-effects theories in the 1950s. With the widespread adoption of mass media channels, U&G researchers began to reverse the hitherto established media-effects paradigm; Instead of asking what the media do to the people, U&G researchers were intrigued by what people would do with the media. This radical change in perspective resulted in a more balanced approach with the active member of the audience at its core, which was later formally synthesised and published by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973).

Even though the U&G approach cannot be regarded as a grand theory, it situates audience gratifications within an extended framework that is, in itself, coherent and applicable to a variety of media. According to this approach, media choice can be seen as a complex process by which an active, discriminating member of the audience takes the initiative of linking the gratification of certain psychological or social needs to the exposures to certain media qualities

in order to achieve some degree of satisfaction. To summarise, U&G research is primarily concerned with “(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (E. Katz et al. 1973 p. 510). The expected outcomes from the use of different media can thus be classified into the following four categories: seeking information about one’s environment (surveillance), identifying with the values and beliefs of media characters (personal identity), improving social interactions (social utility) and escaping from the stress of everyday life through entertainment (diversion). A clear distinction can be drawn between affordances and gratifications, insofar as gratifications are the benefits that users derive from selectively perceiving the affordances of social media. On this account, Lin (1996) argues that the main advantage of this approach is its empirical flexibility and its ability to examine “*mediated communication situations via a single or multiple sets of psychological needs, psychological motives, communication channels, communication content and psychological gratifications within a particular or cross-cultural context*” (1996 p. 574).

Opponents of U&G research have criticised the approach for its functionalist and sometimes overly descriptive perspective. Other aspects of this research that have been criticised are its reliance on self-reports, the overall focus on the individual rather than the interactive dynamics between audience members, and the alleged ignorance of the constraints of different media (McQuail 1984). For example, Stanford (1983) criticised the U&G approach for its alleged lack of internal consistency and its distorted operational definitions. Rubin (1981) also admitted that early U&G studies failed to recognise that gratifications may be manifest or latent.

Despite these limitations, the U&G body of research persevered and gradually evolved to capture a diversity of social and psychological variables for media consumption (Schramm et al. 1961; Wimmer & Dominick 1994), different lifestyle profiles (Donohew et al. 1987) and a variety of media contexts (e.g. Galloway 1981; Palmgreen & Rayburn 1979; Papacharissi & Mendelson 2007). Furthermore, a number of major theoretical contributions to U&G research were made by differentiating between gratifications *sought* and gratifications *obtained* (McLeod et al. 1982). Other studies have recognised that different cognitive affective states could involve distinct media behaviours (Blumler 1979; Bryant & Zillmann 1984; Palmgreen & Rayburn 1984). Based on U&G, Rubin (1981) developed the Television Affinity Scale to examine television viewing motivations and the extent to which people may be emotionally attached to television news programming. Next, Lull (1990) proposed ethnographic evidence for the new media gratifications of TV use, such as environmental background consumption, interpersonal communication, affiliation/avoidance, social learning, as well as informational competence/dominance. Equally, some of the abstract assumptions underlying the concept of the active and critical audience within the traditions of U&G have been repeatedly tested and theoretically refined (M. R. Levy & Windahl 1984).

More recently, a number of studies have been published that focus on the U&G of digital media technologies, attempting to reinvigorate U&G research in the 21st century (Sundar & Limperos 2013). This new wave of U&G studies has focused on the qualities of the new media environment, considering the different affordances and gratifications of the Internet and individual social media platforms. Ruggiero (2000) provides a broad overview of U&G research and how it can be applied and extended to the new media environment in response to the

perennial “*enigma for researchers in terms of how to decode the uses and gratifications of such communication experiences*” (C. A. Lin 1996 p. 578). Ruggiero proposes a more refined theoretical approach to U&G and how it can be revisited to be relevant for new ICTs. To Ruggiero, these new technologies are primarily characterised by the affordances of interactivity, demassification and asynchronicity. The affordance of interactivity, in particular, suggests that individual users are able to exercise control over the media they consume and generate content in response to traditional media sources. Ruggiero continues to explain that “*as new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis*” (2000 p. 14). In many ways, Ruggiero’s work provides an important stepping stone for subsequent U&G research focusing on motivations for social media use that are linked to the social affordances of such technologies.

Other CMC scholars followed this call and the study of SNS gratifications has become a particularly fertile ground for the application of the U&G approach. For example, Bumgarner (2007) and Joinson (2008) were among the first scholars to systematically apply U&G to Facebook use, noting the diversity of its gratifications and the interactive nature of SNSs. Shao (2009) continues this research by attempting to theoretically explicate the appeal of social media from the U&G perspective. Johnson and Young (2009) empirically investigate gratifications sought and obtained from Twitter use, finding a positive relationship between the informational and social motives to use Twitter and its actual use. Ancu and Cozma (2009) focus on the U&G of accessing political profiles on MySpace, finding that users prefer mediated social interaction with candidates over information-seeking and entertainment. Next, in a multimethod study by Quan-Haase and Young (2010), the scholars apply the U&G approach to SNSs and discover six

major dimensions of SNS-related gratifications: *pastime, affection, fashion, sharing problems, sociability* and *social information*. The authors conclude, therefore, that SNSs are typically used for accessing information about social activities within one's extended social circles, while instant messaging is typically used for the maintenance and development of dyadic relationships.

Next, Wang and colleagues (2012) offer longitudinal evidence for the role of emotional, cognitive, social and habitual needs in SNS use. In particular, they find that the use of social media may be driven by ungratified needs that are accumulated over time, while contextual factors from the social environment, e.g. solitude and interpersonal support, are found to moderate the effects of accumulated needs on social media use. Moreover, using factor analysis, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) contribute to this discussion, by categorising nine distinct SNS-related gratifications for Facebook that partially overlap with previous studies. In doing so, the scholars combine elements from U&G with social networks approaches to explicate patterns of social media use. Smock and colleagues (2011) employ a more granular U&G approach to match specific Facebook features, such as status updates and wall-posts, to gratifications sought from these features. Finally, another line of U&G research examines cross-cultural differences in people's motivations of SNS use (Grace-Farfaglia et al. 2006; Y. Kim et al. 2011). This research has extended previous U&G studies, because human needs may be critically shaped by culture "*not only in their formation but in how they are gratified*" (Ruggiero 2000 p. 27).

Given the numerous studies that have explored SNS use from the U&G perspective (Blank & Groselj 2014; Dunne et al. 2010; McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase 2016; Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011; Quan-Haase & Young 2014), the available evidence in the literature thus seems to suggest that U&G is particularly well-suited for examining people's social media

choices and use patterns. On the one hand, this approach allows us to assess why people use multiple SNSs instead of substituting one platform for another. On the other hand, it posits that different SNSs may respond to different needs, which facilitates comparative analyses of the social affordances of different SNSs. However, given some of the conceptual limitations of U&G, the extent to which this approach can be applied to SNS use first needs to be scrutinised.

3. 4. 1. Testing the assumptions of uses and gratifications

Previous studies have shown that the psychological communication perspective of U&G rests on five key built-in assumptions (Ancu & Cozma 2009; Blank & Lutz 2016; E. Katz et al. 1973; Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011; Rubin 1994; Ruggiero 2000). In the following section, these five assumptions are briefly discussed in the context of SNSs to assess their applicability and relevance to the research problem at hand.

First, U&G researchers conceive of users as active agents that make motivated and goal-oriented choices about their media uses. In agreement with this view, I subscribe to the agentic perspective that emphasises the capacity of individuals to act autonomously and make their own conscious choices about how, when and with whom to converse. With regard to the affordances of SNSs, users can thus be described as “*selectively perceiving agents of a multitude of designed, often functional, cues and not bundles of categories that somehow collide with our technology du jour*” (Hogan 2015a p. 2). Users are thus able to identify, modify and act upon different social affordances of SNSs – in the motivated pursuit of advancing one’s preconceived personal projects and goals by managing the constraints and leveraging opportunities that emerge from the social world around them (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Stevenson & Greenberg 2000). This echoes many of the assumptions of innovations research (Mahler & Rogers 1999; Woolgar 1990)

as well as theories of networked individualism (Wellman et al. 2003; Wellman & Rainie 2012) that conceive of users as active agents. In this regard, the present research does not necessitate any particular social media technology to ascertain the affordances of mediated sociality; it starts with the user itself, as an autonomous, purposeful and reasoning individual, who is capable of differentially choosing between different SNSs, as assemblages of social affordances, and able to distribute his or her time and attention accordingly.

Second, U&G is premised on the assumption that media selection fulfils a particular collection of needs, wants and interests. This core tenet of the U&G approach explains why gratifications sought from media use can motivate behaviour. In particular in the context of SNS use, this approach contributes to a better understanding of why users are drawn to specific affordances of SNSs. Since this thesis is interested in the concurrent use of multiple SNSs, this makes the U&G approach extremely useful. However, it is sometimes quite challenging to map explicit media gratifications onto specific SNS affordances due to the inherent multiplicity of media gratifications, as well as the variety of imagined affordances available for each medium. In fact, even the most basic SNS elements may entail different meanings and interpretations for each user (Bucher & Helmond 2017; Hayes et al. 2016). For instance, one might ask, is a Facebook ‘like’ interpreted in the same way by the person clicking on the ‘like’-button and the person receiving the notification on the other end? In the same vein, scholars have pointed out that, on Twitter, a “*retweet might indicate an expression of support for one user, while others may have ascribed different or even a fluctuating meaning to this or any of the other practices*” (Larsson 2015 p. 2). Admittedly, it would be methodologically very difficult to quantitatively measure audience gratifications under the assumption that media uses are associated with deeply personal meanings and idiosyncratic purposes. One way of reconciling these tensions at the

theoretical level is to apply the notion of imagined affordances to multiple media use (Nagy & Neff 2015), which allows for the possibility of associating multiple meanings and interpretations of SNS affordances in the minds of the users.

Third, the U&G approach is based on the theoretical premise of a rational and self-aware audience that makes choices that are targeted at the satisfaction of their needs and wants. Put differently, selective media use is seen to be functionally motivated by “*rational self-awareness of the individual’s own needs and an expectation that those needs will be satisfied by particular types of media and content*” (Ruggiero 2000 p. 18). This assumption has been frequently problematised by critics of U&G research. Users may not always be self-aware of all their psychological needs and wants. In fact, more often than not, they do not appear to have a clear understanding of which SNS affordances may provide the corresponding media gratifications. However, these gratifications can be learned over time. Similar to the Internet, social media can be seen as an *experience technology*, where the expectation of benefits and trust is intricately linked to experience with it (Dutton & Shepherd 2006).

What first starts as a hedonic experimentation with a new technology may later develop into a more purposeful media habit. Research supports this notion, finding that the adoption of media is frequently motivated by playful experimentation based on self-fulfilling, hedonic needs (Van der Heijden 2004; Sledgianowski & Kulviwat 2009; Wakefield & Whitten 2006). Equally, media choices may also be triggered by chance circumstances that do not bear any substantive meaning. By contrast, continued SNS use can be associated with more reasoned intentions, clear motivations and rational thinking. Still, while users’ rationality may play an important role in continued SNS use, we need to be cognizant of the fact that U&G may overestimate people’s

satisfaction-seeking behaviours, the self-awareness of their psychological needs and the purposefulness of activities they engage in to satisfy these needs.

Fourth, people's media choices and their expectations about media gratifications are influenced by social and environmental factors. While critics of this research have long denounced the U&G approach for its individualistic focus, several studies have incorporated the interpersonal factors and interactive possibilities between users that may affect their media choices (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase 2016; K. Quinn 2016). In other words, people's media choices may be subtly influenced by the media choices of their peers. By observing social media choices and use patterns of other users, people not only become aware of potential alternative SNSs, but they may also modify their expectations of media gratifications. This is related to the outlined logic of social affordances that are perceived in the media environment, i.e. 'behaviour affords behaviour'. The peer-network may have an effect on how, and to what extent, an individual believes that his or her needs have been satisfied by a particular type of media. After all, social media choice is not an isolated decision-making process that occurs in a social vacuum. Rather, it is the outcome of a series of recursive social interactions, interpersonal negotiations and inter-subjective interpretations that are taking place in a broader socio-technical environment. Research points to the concepts of social learning (Bandura 1977; Zajonc 1965) and social influence (Aral 2011; Cialdini & Goldstein 2004; Muchnik et al. 2013; Onnela & Reed-Tsochas 2010) as key mechanisms of how people's emotions, dispositions and behaviours may be affected by other people around them who engage in similar behaviours.

These aspects are related to subtle manifestations of power in social networks. On this account one might ask, are potential adopters of a relatively new site really free to choose any SNS if all their friends are on Facebook? Despite the first assumption of autonomous and active

agents in U&G research, users may still be invisibly influenced by the relational signals and structural constraints from the external environment in which they are embedded (Haythornthwaite 2005; Polonski 2013), especially with regard to the endogenous determinants of media choice (Webster 2007). This shows that it is important to take into account social and environmental factors related to multiple media choice in addition to individual factors.

Fifth, different media forms and content compete against each other for the attention of audience members and the satisfaction of their goals. As the cost of and barriers to accessing media technologies decreases, people make conscious choices about the type of media they want to use to communicate with others. Consequently, it is only natural for different SNSs to compete for people's attention, especially since the same media gratifications can be frequently fulfilled by multiple communicative channels. These media channels compete for selection, attention and use to fulfil felt needs and wants (Rubin 1994 p. 420). If two SNSs gratify the same needs they can be seen as "*functional alternatives*" (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2007). An example for this is the competition between the two mobile digital photography applications Hipstamatic and Instagram that had very similar sets of features in their early versions. Likewise, to leave a simple voice message for a friend, users now have the choice between Facebook Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, Skype, ICQ and many other alternatives (provided that both conversation partners use the same social media application).

Addressing this, recent empirical studies on the U&G of multiple SNSs suggests that different social media platforms tend to satisfy distinct needs due to differences in their social affordances (Archambault & Grudin 2012; S. J. Kwon et al. 2014; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008). Several studies have compared the uses and gratifications of MySpace and Facebook in particular (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008; Urista et al. 2009). This direction of research is

promising, because SNSs are embedded in a larger heterogeneous media environment, wherein the perceived existence of other affordances on alternative platforms may have an effect on people's social media choices. It should be noted, however, that even though SNSs appear to always compete for users' immediate attention (e.g. "which channel do I use for which communicative opportunities?"), they frequently complement each other from a broader media perspective. By way of illustration, Facebook users may use Tumblr, YouTube, and Instagram to interact with specific audiences outside the confines of their personal network on Facebook. Alternatively, they could use these sites to increase the strength of their existing Facebook relationships with richer content and more diverse self-presentational means using other apps, e.g. MSQRD, Dubsmash or Prisma. Hence, over the course of a day, multiple forms of media can be consumed without the necessary competition for users' attention. This is not only evidenced by the prevalence of multiple SNS use, but also by the existence of related phenomena, such as 'second-screen viewing' activities between SNS use and TV consumption.

This discussion of the basic premises of U&G research has demonstrated the usefulness of the U&G approach in examining individual orientations toward social media choices and cross-media use. In particular, there is a possibility of conceptual integration between the U&G approach and affordance theory: affordances in the social media environment provide cues about the potential uses and gratifications of SNSs. Driven by a range of ritualistic and instrumental motives, individuals purposively select a set of SNSs that ostensibly gratify their felt needs and desires. Social and psychological factors mediate people's origins of needs, their expectations of sought gratifications and their perceptions of affordances found on individual sites. While multiple SNSs compete for people's attention, users can organise the sought need gratifications

from these sites in complementary ways. Affordances thus act as a basis for the perception and interpretation of social media gratification mechanisms; they are both a lens through which individuals see the social media environment and a motivating driver for their media selection decisions. A combined perspective, examining the affordances and the U&G of social media platforms would thus provide the most suitable conceptual framework for the research problem at hand. It moves beyond the analysis of single aspects of social media use and considers the affordances of SNSs as a complementary theoretical approach to understand how people become committed to the uses of particular sites.

There is a strong academic tradition of empirical research that conceptually incorporates the notions of affordances into U&G research. Past studies that subscribe to this approach have produced substantial results on the effects of affordances and socio-psychological traits on SNS use (Hayes et al. 2016; Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011; e.g. Quan-Haase & Young 2010). This conceptual integration has opened up new opportunities for the CMC literature to advance our understanding of the factors driving SNS use and commitment.

Nevertheless, an important theoretical puzzle remains with regard to the effects of imagined affordances on the persistence of people's social media choices. In particular, the issue of how perceptions of affordances may relate to SNS usage decisions may be clouded by the fact that perceptions are transient. It is unclear how user perceptions translate into specific beliefs about the gratifications that each site affords and, consequently, how these beliefs form the basis for people's decisions about social media uses. Accordingly, I assert that the open questions associated with these socio-psychological processes still need to be addressed by future research. Built atop the affordance-based view of SNSs, I continue this chapter by theorising how the persistence of people's social media choices can be conceived as their SNS commitment.

3. 4. 2. Assessing commitment to SNSs

When a media platform repeatedly fulfils users' expected gratifications and social needs, it is likely that these gratifications will lead to persistent uses of the medium (Palmgreen & Rayburn 1979; Quan-Haase & Young 2010; I. Song et al. 2004). As a result of that, users may develop strong emotional attachment to the larger user community and/or specific individuals on the site. What is more, some users tend to express strong emotional affect to the site itself, which may be partly evoked by its affordances (Nagy & Neff 2015). This may be the reason why many users tend to see SNSs as significant social spaces in their quotidian lives. This may also be the reason why many users strongly respond to changes in the user interfaces and key affordances of their favourite SNSs. As examples for this emotional backlash, consider users' affective responses to the change of Twitter's 'favourite' icon from a star to a heart (Bucher & Helmond 2017). Another example concerns users' reactions to the introduction of algorithmic content curation in the social feeds of Facebook (Eslami et al. 2015) and Twitter (DeVito et al. 2017).

Accordingly, we need a way to theorise the extent to which users exhibit a sense of psychological investment in the affordances of an SNS, as well as the interpretations and meanings they might attribute to it. I propose that these attitudes can be reflected in the degree of *commitment* that users develop towards a social media platform. Commitment thus acts as a psychological and social force of persistence (Staw 1981). It is deeply reflected in the activities of the user on each platform and the subjective meanings the user attributes to these activities. The main assumption of this view is that individuals become committed to social media platforms *as a whole*, rather than to a selection of specific features⁶. Conceiving of SNS

⁶ Alternatively, it is possible to imagine that people do not become committed to particular sites, but rather to particular gratifications. With certain uses in mind, people's commitment to particular SNSs might vary. To study this, future research could explore experimental research designs in which people

commitment in this way helps to understand why some people appear to be emotionally attached to a particular brand of SNS and remain active users of that site, despite a wealth of other sites that may offer potentially superior experiences or simply better individual features.

In exploring people's motives of SNS use, researchers have not yet voiced a theoretical construct that would capture this emotional relationship that people tend to form with their media technologies. For instance, when committed Facebook users are faced with a new choice between Facebook and a range of alternative platforms, they would be more likely to continue actively using their existing Facebook accounts instead of migrating to any of the other available sites. Given this level of involvement and habitual use, committed users of Facebook would keep their focus of attention on the site in anticipation of future gratifications. It makes re-engaging with the site more likely and may even pre-empt the consideration, adoption and use of alternative platforms. Conversely, the concept of commitment could help to understand when the opposite occurs, e.g. when Facebook users do not engage with the site anymore, even though they still have a dormant Facebook profile. In this case, we could examine their apparent lack of commitment, because even though they have deactivated their participation, they have not yet deactivated their accounts. This is why I posit that the way in which people develop committed attitudes toward particular SNSs is an ongoing process. People do not become committed to a site overnight. On the contrary, this process consists of a series of consecutive choices that are contingent on previous events.

It is important to note, however, that people's SNS *use* and their degree of *commitment* to a site are related, yet independent constructs. Past CMC research finds that there is a strong link

are first primed to particular uses (e.g. political engagement or news consumption) and then asked to indicate their commitment through a series of follow-up questions. The present study, however, takes a more holistic approach to commitment under the premise that users tend to become emotionally invested in SNSs as a whole even though some gratifications may disproportionately drive commitment decisions.

between users' psychological attachment to a site and their intensity of SNS use (Ellison et al. 2007; Valenzuela et al. 2009). Cross-cultural evidence from Twitter shows that trust in a social media brand is found to be associated with people's intentions to continue using the platform (Pentina et al. 2013). In a similar vein, the marketing literature finds a direct positive relationship between product involvement and strong brand commitment, both on theoretical (Robertson 1976; Traylor 1981) and empirical grounds (Beatty & Kahle 1988; Mittal & Lee 1989; Warrington & Shim 2000). Being committed to a particular SNS can thus be associated with a certain degree of persistence in usage patterns, as well as strategies for networking, communication and self-presentation. However, it should be apparent from the foregoing review that higher SNS use does not automatically imply SNS commitment.

Commitment is a new term to the CMC literature, but there is a long-standing research tradition of measuring people's commitment to ideas, individuals and organisations in adjacent areas of the literature. Despite the apparent differences in context, the organisational behaviour literature can shed light on the conundrum of why people develop continued intentions to use certain media. With regard to organisational commitment, for example, Kanter (1968 p. 507) argues that commitment is a form of "*attachment of an individual's fund of affectivity and emotion to the group.*" More than a decade later, Mowday and colleagues (1979 p. 226) conceive of commitment as "*the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation*" leading to consistent and predictable behavioural outcomes. The seminal paper on organisational commitment by Meyer and Allen (1991) provides a more refined theoretical lens that can be applied to social media users. In particular, the researchers argue that commitment, as a psychological state, can be separated into three conceptual components that reflect a desire (affective commitment), a need (continuance commitment) and

an obligation (normative commitment) to continue employment in an organisation – or, in the case of social media use, to continue using a particular site. These dimensions of commitment have been consistently associated with both temporal stability (Kam et al. 2016) and other organisational outcomes, such as job-satisfaction (Markovits et al. 2007). However, there is also contrarian evidence: Wellman and Quan-Haase (2001) note that community commitment, as a strong attitude towards civic and political organisations indicating a “*motivated, responsible sense of belonging*” (2001 p. 437), cannot be predicted by Internet use and social contact alone.

Furthermore, research on IT adoption in organisational contexts points toward the importance of habits as a critical predictor of technology use (Venkatesh et al. 2012). But while habits are associated with automatic behaviours that are performed with little to no thought, the concept of commitment is underpinned by a somewhat more conscious decision-making process. Habit formation literature, therefore, offers little help in explaining how users may develop commitment to the technologies they use, especially vis-à-vis other available technologies. What the notions of habit and commitment have in common, however, is their dependence on prior use. In this regard, Kim and colleagues (2005) find that prior experience with a technology predicts future use, while the habitual use of technology can be seen as an expedited form of past conscious user decisions. This finding is plausible in the context of SNSs: when people seemingly automatically turn to Facebook as the default communication channel with their friends, this may be based on previous evaluations and deliberate intentions to use Facebook in the past, which have now been subconsciously reinforced and internalised. This logic may help to explain how users develop commitment as a post-adoption phenomenon that combines both conscious and habitual elements (S. S. Kim et al. 2005). Taking into account these factors may

add to our understanding of why people prefer to use specific SNSs in their everyday life, despite the plethora of alternative social media platforms available to them.

From the perspective of the social media service provider, the degree of commitment that users exhibit with regard to an SNS can be seen as an important predictor of their ongoing engagement with the site. Consequently, a committed user base could represent a safeguard against disruption⁷ from new entrants in the social media marketplace. Microeconomics papers frequently use the term *switching costs* in this context, describing barriers that users need to overcome to change their consumption choices. In the case of SNS switching, these switching costs are typically associated with learning costs, continuity costs and sunk costs (Zengyan et al. 2009). However, I contend that this approach overemphasises the economic loss aversion in human decision-making, assuming that SNS use can be primarily explained by people's desire to minimise the negative consequences of switching, rather than by the positive implications of being committed to a particular site. More importantly, the notion of switching costs typically implies a mutually exclusive relationship between competing SNSs. However, the recognition that SNSs are frequently employed in concert with other sites is at the very heart of the present research. Therefore, I assert that the adoption of a new SNS does not dictate the immediate desertion of one's previous SNS accounts. With this in mind, the interesting conundrum is how the use of multiple SNSs affects people's commitment with each individual site. Unravelling these dynamics could add to our understanding of individual commitment decisions and the broader social processes that drive the growth and decline of social media platforms.

⁷ An important assumption of this view is that the success or failure of an SNS is mainly user-driven, rather than due to any financial, legal or political conditions affecting the parent company of the SNS service. Naturally, it is conceivable that some of these factors may be interrelated, e.g. when external information about looming financial struggles of an SNS may compel users to move to new sites.

From the perspective of the individual user, we do not have a clear, empirically-grounded understanding of how individuals add emerging social media platforms to their personal mix of existing services. Along similar lines, there is little systematic research that explains the circumstances under which individuals adjust their communicative milieus if older SNSs are, indeed, to be replaced with newer platforms. To what extent does the use of such new SNSs diminish the relevance of and commitment to the older, more established platforms? Conversely, if multiple SNSs are jointly used by the same individual, with similar levels of commitment to each site, does this suggest that each platform serves a different purpose, being associated with distinct media gratifications sought from each site?

In this dissertation, therefore, I hope to put forward and test a set of claims about people's ability to exploit the differences within the composite structure of affordances and gratifications across multiple SNSs that renders their social media choices. To test these relationships, and unravel the dynamics of people's social media choices, the degree of commitment will be assessed using the SNS Commitment Scale, which is developed in Chapter 6. This scale encompasses not just people's emotional attachment to a site, but also their relational investment associated with the platform. Thus, my principal area of inquiry shifts from questions of how people come to create a new SNS account initially, towards the analytically incisive focus on how users come to develop a sense commitment to particular SNSs.

Before we move any further, it is important to recognise that these dynamics unfold in an environment that is constantly evolving, as new SNSs are launched to the market (Baym 2010; Hogan & Quan-Haase 2010; Livingstone 2015). Social media choice is thus not a discrete one-off phenomenon; it needs to be understood as a continuous process of gradually committing

one's social network, personal data, time investment, socialising habits and use preferences to a particular platform (or a set of platforms). Over time, users make a series of conscious choices that have an effect on their lived experiences within each respective SNS; people learn how to use emerging SNSs, discover new use cases and evaluate how new platforms could fit into an already existing multi-media environment of other available communication channels. Therefore, in order to make sense of these complexities, it is important to reach a common theoretical framework that takes into account the fact that social media platforms are embedded in a broader environment of mediated communication channels and affordances that offer users distinct means of communication and self-presentation to a range of addressable audiences.

Using a combination of affordance theory and the U&G approach, this study can closely examine cases of multiple SNS use and assess variations in people's commitment to each platform. Moreover, this approach adds to our understanding of different identity-practices across multiple social media platforms. For example, it potentially allows us to find evidence for the question of whether the use of 'real-names' on particular sites is associated with a greater degree of SNS commitment. Finally, this approach contributes to the goal of ascertaining the relationship between imagined affordances and commitment. This may be important to our understanding as to why certain SNSs are concurrently employed with other platforms; how some SNSs are able to retain their relevance, while other sites are gradually displaced by relatively new platforms. In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to unpack these areas of inquiry to derive a set of guiding research questions that will be addressed in the following empirical chapters of this dissertation.

3. 5. Research questions

The previous sections have demonstrated how the U&G approach can be applied to the research problem of SNS commitment. Anchoring this study in affordance theory from Chapter 2 further helps to explain how individuals avail themselves of multiple social media in the broader communicative environment. These choices stem from perceived differences in affordances and gratifications proffered by each site. Since people can navigate, re-appropriate and modify their communicative opportunities in this media environment, the goal of the thesis is thus to understand how different perceptions of affordances may impact people's degree of commitment to their social media choices. Having outlined these theoretical arguments and a range of practical observations and examples, this leads me to recapitulate the central research question of the dissertation, after it was already outlined in Chapter 1:

***RQ:** What factors determine people's commitment to the social network sites they use?*

In particular, I am interested in how perceptions of imagined affordances of SNSs are related to users' SNS commitment. Addressing this research question can contribute to our understanding of how people integrate different SNSs into a personalised social media framework to express their agency towards their network audiences across multiple sites. Exploring these issues is challenging and the literature offers little guidance in this regard. Nevertheless, I am confident that a more systematic analysis of the role of affordances and gratifications could benefit SNS scholarship. In order to develop a more explanatory approach to the overarching research question above, the use of multiple SNSs is further differentiated into three research questions that are addressed in three empirical chapters respectively. These three research questions are introduced below:

RQ₁: *To what extent do people's networks, uses and identities on individual SNSs affect the degree of their commitment to each site?*

This question examines the pathways of commitment as a function of the three categories of affordances from Chapter 2. It adopts a platform-specific focus for each of the four selected SNSs to enhance our understanding of the predictors of commitment to multiple sites. A set of hypotheses is drawn from the literature to address RQ₁ by investigating the relative effects of SNS network audiences, types of SNS uses and the sincerity of self-presentation on SNSs. In particular, the literature provides preliminary evidence that larger network audiences, social uses and a greater degree of self-disclosure may be positively related to continued SNS use and, potentially, commitment. The chapter addressing RQ₁ goes into more depth in each of the three categories of variables. First, network audiences are measured both as the number of total friends/followers on each SNS, as well as the self-reported number of 'actual' friends on each site (Ellison et al. 2011; Khan et al. 2014). An additional measure of the effects of social influence from one's closest peer-group will be included in the model. These differentiations will be further explained in Chapter 6. Second, types of uses are broken down into social, informational and professional gratifications. This will be also further explained in Chapter 6. Third, with regard to self-presentation, the chapter will differentiate between emotional and personal self-disclosure, the use of 'real-name' identities and sincere self-expression.

To the extent that there are differences in commitment between sites, I hypothesise whether these differences can be understood in terms of the distinct affordances of each SNS. This is interesting because SNS use may be conditioned through a bevy of platform-specific affordances governing socially-relevant interactions on each site. This may contribute to distinctly differing styles of maintaining contact, sharing emotional and social information and adhering to explicit or implicit standards of self-presentation, which are explored in Chapter 6.

RQ₂: *How can people be classified into meaningful categories of attitudes towards digital technology such that it explains variations in their commitment?*

The second research question investigates how a typology of users based on beliefs about and attitudes towards digital technology can help reduce complexity and establish a comparative basis for the analysis of SNS commitment. Given that people display vastly different levels of openness towards new media technologies, as well as individual preferences for particular SNSs, my analysis of commitment needs a conceptual framework that can help to organise findings. In particular, the present study can benefit from a typological analysis, which groups SNS users based on their similarities in attitudes (Dutton & Blank 2015; Heim & Brandtzæg 2011; G. M. Johnson & Kulpa 2007). This could help identify a more nuanced description of how different types of users tend to approach their social media choices. Therefore, the chapter addressing RQ₂ aims to introduce a clustering solution to this problem. Specifically, hierarchical clustering is used to construct a typology of SNS users based on overall similarities of beliefs about and attitudes towards digital technology. Following the methodological guidance in Dutton and Blank (2015), this typology helps to identify how any attitudinal clusters may relate to behavioural patterns of SNS uses as well as demographic factors.

Consequently, our understanding of social media choice can be facilitated through a quantitatively-derived user typology, which is interpreted on the basis of qualitative interview data. For example, the analysis assesses whether the identified clusters are in some respect related to socio-demographic user profiles, platform-sensitive attitudes or distinctive patterns of SNS use. In this way, the clustering solution does not only uncover the vast diversity of SNS users, but it also allows us to test further claims. It is this analytical approach that enables a discussion of how certain user types may distinguish themselves for their particular technology attitudes and how these patterns may be related to variations in SNS uses and commitment.

RQ₃: *What are the mechanisms by which perceived gratification structures across multiple SNSs affect people's commitment to each site?*

The last research question is concerned with the conceptual interrelationship of imagined affordances across multiple SNSs. It critically synthesises the insights from RQ₁ on commitment mechanisms on specific platforms with the findings from RQ₂ on SNS commitment among specific user groups. Furthermore, the research question places the broader issue pertaining to the affordances of SNS commitment within the paradigm of U&G research. If different SNSs are used to gratify different needs, what does this tell us about people's perceptions of gratifications that are available across sites? The chapter responds to this assertion by theorising that any perceived interdependencies and relationships between gratifications sought from different SNSs can be analysed in terms of their affordances. It is worth noting that this moves the focus of my analysis away from an inquiry of commitment of individual platforms to a user-centric analysis of commitment with regard to multiple sites. This analytical turn is important because media displacement effects are typically driven by perceptions of overlapping media gratifications that are perceived as functional alternatives (M. L. James et al. 1995; Perse & Dunn 1998).

Drawing on the U&G approach, it seems reasonable to think of the gratifications obtained from two competing SNSs as either complementary or substitutive. For example, when an emerging SNS enters the social lives of people, it can either add to the gratifications obtained from existing media platforms or attempt to undermine the incumbent media channels by providing similar gratifications. Following this argument, there are plenty of examples for both trajectories. Some emerging SNSs, such as LinkedIn, Spotify, Pinterest and Foursquare have found a way to co-exist and grow with the larger general-purpose SNSs, such as Facebook and VKontakte. This could be partly due to the specialised gratifications that can be accessed through the interest-based communities on sites like DeviantArt and LinkedIn. By contrast, other SNSs

like Snapchat and Instagram have seemingly begun to displace users' activity patterns on incumbent platforms. Media analysts have made several claims about this. Seeing how young people spend an increasing amount of time on Snapchat and Instagram at the expense of Facebook, has caused many analysts to believe that this is an indication of the next big wave of user migrations that may bring about the end of Facebook (Karp 2013). However, there has been little to no empirical evidence to back up this claim thus far. More pertinently, it seems that young people are, in fact, spending more time on Facebook alongside many new SNSs like Kik, WeChat and Strava, which underlines the complementarity of their gratifications.

Alongside the theoretical puzzles highlighted above, the chapter addressing RQ₃ adds an additional perspective to the question by examining not just individual perceptions of multiple jointly used sites, but also the path-dependent nature of such perceptions. It appears that there is a relatively strong effect of past SNS choices on present perceptions of imagined affordances. In thinking about the growth and decline of SNSs over time, this research question is particularly important to understanding how people's perceptions of the interdependence of SNSs could result in long-term patterns of SNS commitment. As users react to changes in their social media environments, they update their beliefs about how different SNSs could work together. Therefore, this section of the thesis could bear valuable practical implications for SNS providers. Using qualitative data to ascertain how SNS narratives, interpretations and perceptions might change over time was an important part of this analysis. Given the relatively under-theorised nature of user perceptions of cross-platform gratifications and their consequences for SNS commitment, I anticipate making theoretical contributions by addressing RQ₃ in Chapter 8.

Each of these research questions is addressed in an empirical chapter, where they guide a set of specific hypotheses and inform the analysis of empirical data. The chapter conclusions in

each chapter revisit the respective research questions to synthesise the main findings. Naturally, different methods were instrumental in examining people's social media commitment within the context of young Internet users aged 20-30 years in the UK. While RQ₁ and RQ₂ could be mostly answered with the gathered survey data, it was helpful to enrich the quantitative insights with additional qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. What is more, RQ₃ on user perceptions of substitutability or complementarity of SNS gratifications will benefit from rich qualitative interview data. Bearing in mind the criteria for credibility in qualitative research in the literature (Tracy 2010), I will selectively highlight quotes from interview participants to interpret the insights from the survey and illustrate its findings. Multivocality, thick description and attention to detail are all recommended practices in the mixed-methods literature that could help producing more contextually grounded findings that take into account personal narratives and experiences in addition to broad patterns of behaviour (Ayres et al. 2003; Eisenhardt 1989; Miles & Huberman 1994). In this regard, this dissertation offers the potential for novel theory-development by proposing the concept of SNS commitment and integrating concepts from the literatures on social affordances with the uses and gratifications approach.

3. 6. Scope conditions

It is important to emphasise that while I recognise the importance of considering all possible instances of social media choices, there are mechanisms and categories that remain out of the scope of this dissertation. In the following, I provide a brief overview of the two types of adoption processes that may occur in the context of SNSs, yet are *not* part of this inquiry:

First, competitive adoption – this concept is especially relevant in the literature on innovation diffusion in the workplace. Competitive adoption of innovation occurs after a

previous act of adoption by rivals or sufficiently similar agents, who are assumed to be able to gain a competitive advantage from the innovation (Hannan & McDowell 1987; Zhu et al. 2006). Jordan and Radner (1982) suggest that repeated observations of competitors' adoption behaviours may influence potential adopters' rational expectations about the future value of innovations, leading them to action. In a similar vein, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) theorise the isomorphic processes that lead institutions to adopt best-practices of organisational forms after monitoring competitors' behaviours in the marketplace. Several studies in this field have employed the U&G approach to examine people's media choices from an organisational perspective (Dobos 1992; M. L. James et al. 1995; Rice & Webster 2002). However, there are important differences in people's motivations, needs and contexts that may limit the transferability of findings about competitive adoption beyond the organisational setting.

Second, mandated adoption – at times the adoption of new innovations happens in an involuntary fashion by use of physical, political, legal, technical or economic force. In these cases, individuals are typically deprived of their agency and are influenced by an external source to act in a certain, oftentimes unfavourable, manner. This happens, for example, when employees have to sign up for a company-wide internal SNS, like Yammer or TopLink. Similarly, social media managers, journalists and community managers oftentimes need to create separate SNS accounts for work, because the nature of their profession demands it. The literature provides an ample discussion of the implications of authority-led top-down approaches to introducing innovations in the workplace (Parthasarathy & Sohi 1997; Ram & Jung 1991; Zhou 2008). A somewhat related phenomenon is automated adoption, which typically results from product bundling of digital services. For instance, by agreeing to use a specific digital service, users of that service are also forced to create an additional SNS account (or to use the service through

unavoidable SNS-like features). There are several examples of this phenomenon in the social media industry, e.g. the SNS features of Airbnb that members need to make use of to make a booking on the site. Similarly, for several years, users of the Russian email service Mail.ru were unwillingly led to sign up for Mail.ru Group's own SNS named MoiMir.ru, which was later integrated into the more popular SNS, Odnoklassniki.ru – with no possibility to opt out. Another example of bundling SNSs with alternative services comes from Google. For a long period of time, when opening a new Gmail account, users were instructed to create a matching Google+ profile, too. Though, users now have the choice of deleting this profile at a later point in time, a Google+ profile was made mandatory for all YouTube channels, as well as all users who wished to use YouTube's new commenting system in November 2013. This forced integration of Google+ with YouTube was seen by many users as a breach of trust between the company and its users. The resulting public outrage of YouTube's user community ultimately led Google to revert its policy changes and refrain from its aggressive promotion of Google+.

3. 7. Chapter conclusion

This chapter has continued to develop the main theoretical framework through which I intend to examine the research problem in this dissertation. Many studies have investigated people's motivations for using particular SNSs. However, there are relatively few studies that have looked at perceptions of interconnectedness between the affordances of such sites when it comes to people's social media choices. Having discussed the affordance perspective in Chapter 2, this chapter has presented the second part of my theoretical lens to anchor the study of people's social media choices in the uses and gratifications (U&G) paradigm. Taken together, this presents a possible area for conceptual integration between U&G and affordance theory, so

as to build a framework that explores individual orientations toward social media platforms in the relationship between affordances and gratifications. U&G, in particular, helps us to understand media choices as outcomes of expected gratifications and the satisfaction of users' socio-psychological needs. The chapter has shown that all five key assumptions of U&G are plausible with regard to the research phenomenon under investigation. As a point of departure for further theoretical analysis, this framework is thus both useful and conceptually aligned with the research problem at hand.

Above all, this chapter has presented the theoretical challenge of understanding users' *commitment* to particular social media platforms as the central variable of interest in this dissertation. I have argued that SNS commitment is associated with emotional rewards from the continuous use of a platform; it is a socio-psychological measure of the persistence of people's social media choices. This conceptualisation has allowed me to set the overall research agenda and develop the main research questions of this dissertation. The outlined research questions critically address the relationship between perceptions of SNS affordances and SNS commitment in everyday life. The gap in the literature is thus addressed through an empirical analysis of the effects of imagined affordances, cross-platform gratifications, attitudes and identity-practices on the degree of SNS commitment across multiple platforms. The next chapter will further explain the research setting of this dissertation, detailing the reasons for the focus of my inquiry on young adults in the UK. This will help to contextualise the research questions of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 4:

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

4. 1. Introduction – Bebo in Britain

Ten years ago, the Internet was a very different place. At the time, 4 million people in Great Britain were active users of Bebo, a social network site that was particularly popular with British teenagers: 54% of its users were under 18 years old (Livingstone 2008). Users could post photos to the site, share personal information and comment on each other's profiles. Research finds that the site was actively used for self-presentation and the gratification of various personal needs, such as peer-acceptance and relationship maintenance (Dunne et al. 2010). Industry reports indicated that British Bebo users were extremely engaged with the site. For example, in July 2007, the British user population generated 10.6 million unique page views with an average login session of 38 minutes (Hempel 2007). But in spite of this supreme user engagement, the site seems long forgotten today, after a majority of its users have migrated to Facebook. Were Bebo users simply not committed enough to the site, or were they reluctantly abandoning their accounts because all of their friends were already using Facebook? In retrospect, it is difficult to disentangle the social dynamics that motivated a majority of British users to move to Facebook. But it is likely that many current Facebook users in Great Britain have had their first social networking experiences on Bebo or other now-defunct sites like MySpace or Friendster.

This short excursion into the history of the SNS landscape in Great Britain serves as a starting point for a discussion of the research context of this dissertation. It demonstrates that

people's social media choices oftentimes depend on period and cohort effects that are driven by specific historical contexts and events. As such, the analysis of SNS commitment can benefit from an understanding of the historical context of SNSs, their affordances and user populations.

This chapter proceeds in six stages. First, section 4.2 explains the reasoning behind the focus on the age-range of 20-30 year olds in the UK. Section 4.3 further examines why the UK might offer a suitable research environment for my study. This section refers to data from the Oxford Internet Surveys (OxIS)⁸ to highlight the characteristics of the studied population. Next, section 4.4 describes the logic behind the selection of the main social media platforms in this dissertation, as the four most popular SNSs in the target population: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Based on these insights, section 4.5 focuses on the history of these four platforms and describes how their technological features and affordances have evolved over time. Finally, section 4.6 concludes the chapter by emphasising the theoretical question that stems from the historical discussion of SNSs: given the vast variety of available SNSs, why are people committed to the use of only a handful of sites that oftentimes share very similar features?

4. 2. Focusing on young adults

In order to gain insight into the outlined research questions, I focus primarily on young adults aged 20-30 in the UK, who constitute a stimulating and suitable population for my line of inquiry. This age group is oftentimes referred to as the 'millennial' generation ('digital natives', 'Net Generation' or 'Generation Y'). After the term was coined by Neil Howe and William Strauss in 1991, the 'millennial' generation has been further investigated by the marketing and communications literature (Bolton et al. 2013; Palfrey & Gasser 2013; Prensky 2001). Much of

⁸ While illustrative data-points from the Oxford Internet Surveys (Dutton & Blank 2013) are referenced throughout this chapter, the data-set and its methods are more elaboratively introduced in Chapter 5.2.

this work points toward the notion that “*in nearly all societies, the wealthier, the better educated, the more urban, and the younger adopt new technology earlier*” (Pearce 2015 p. 1). Furthermore, there is a questionable narrative in the media that millennials easily shift from one social media platform to another, showing an apparent lack of commitment to any specific brand of SNSs.

It is worth remembering that any generational grouping is arbitrary. Still, it appears that the mainstream media have embraced this concept, contributing to a variety of cultural myths about the so-called ‘millennial’ generation. Consequently, ‘millennials’ in the mainstream media are typically portrayed as young, educated, networked and technologically savvy. Numerous claims have also been made about their youthful exuberance, and the novel ways in which they use SNSs to digitally express themselves and form friendships online (Tapscott 2008).

However, scholars have taken a more critical stance towards this uniform notion. It is true that age has been found to be an important predictor of technology attitudes and SNS use patterns (Archambault & Grudin 2012; McAndrew & Jeong 2012; D. Quinn et al. 2011). However, there are several problems with the special status that is frequently bestowed upon ‘millennials’ or ‘digital natives’. Amidst the many common cultural myths about this group, there remains a lack of empirically-grounded research that addresses the drivers and outcomes of their social media use, media habits, attitudes toward new technology and their resulting SNS commitment. In this regard, the ‘digital natives’ hypothesis has been scrutinised and contested by several scholars (Campbell 2017; Kirschner & De Bruyckere 2017). For example, Helsper and Eynon (2010) evaluate the available evidence for this hypothesis, pointing out the importance of considering additional factors, such as breadth of Internet use, experience, gender and educational levels in predicting engagement with digital technologies. Furthermore, bearing in mind the vast diversity of SNS users, scholars pointed out several problems with the concept of a

‘generation’ itself, including problems with over-generalisation, informational reductionism, disagreement over age-boundaries and lack of analytical rigour.

Nevertheless, there are important insights to be gained from examining this particular age cohort for a number of reasons. The people in this age cohort were among the early adopters of SNSs like MySpace and Facebook in the UK. Many of them have grown up with social media and digital technologies from an early age. Research finds that this early and frequent exposure to social media may have profoundly influenced the way this age cohort lives and works, as well as how these people perceive their social environment through the lens of social media (Bennett et al. 2008; Bolton et al. 2013; Twenge 2010). Most studies investigating the effects of age on SNS account membership and use patterns tend to compare users across a wider age-range, e.g. from adolescents to elderly SNS users. Simultaneously, there is a growing literature that examines teenage SNS users aged 13-19 specifically (e.g. boyd 2014; Davies & Eynon 2013; Dunne et al. 2010; Livingstone 2008; Livingstone & Bovill 2001; Murumaa & Siibak 2012; Robards 2012; Xie & Kang 2015).

While the focus of this thesis is on the particular age group of people born between 1985 and 1995 (data collection in 2015), we need to bear in mind that there may be substantial heterogeneity within the selected age-range. For example, there may be considerable differences between people in their early 20s and late 20s in terms of their personal networks, socio-economic status and educational attainment. Some of these age effects may be part of a natural personal development of users, as they grow older and continue forming and dissolving any social, educational and professional relationships. Accordingly, people in this particular age cohort are typically at a time in their lives, where few identity-markers are inherently fixed, while their personal networks mature from a state of being in a constant flux to more a stable

arrangement of friendship ties. Other areas where intra-generational variance may arise are civic engagement, attitudes toward digital privacy and personal values. This may have important implications for the way how they manoeuvre between different SNSs to manage their self-presentation and negotiate the boundaries of their social accessibility.

Taking into account the changes in life circumstances and the personal development that goes with it, this could partially explain the seemingly contradictory findings in the literature that claim that members of the ‘millennial’ generation are, on the one hand, adeptly navigating online spaces while, on the other hand, also being more vulnerable to social media risks, such as context collapse and privacy violations. This allows me to examine any intra-generational differences in SNS use and commitment within the selected age-range.

4. 3. Research context in the UK

In the United Kingdom, SNSs have become an important part of the social lives of millions of young people. The Office of National Statistics (2015) reports that approximately 61.0% of adults in the UK use SNSs. This is an increase from 45.0% in 2011, indicating that the use of the Internet for various social networking activities has continued to grow. Furthermore, 92% of people aged 16-24 used the Internet for social networking activities in the UK. 88% of people in this age group said they accessed SNSs every day or almost every day (ONS 2015).

Following Dutton and Blank (2013), a majority of young people in the selected age group tend to participate in SNSs. 93.6% of people born 1985-1995 say they have at least one SNS account. 84.2% say they actively use the Internet to check or update SNSs. What is more, 50.2% say they check or update their SNSs daily or multiple times per day. In addition, 47.6% say that they use mostly SNSs to send messages, while 33.7% say they use both SNSs and email for this

purpose. That being said, the percentage of SNS users in the broader population in Great Britain has somewhat plateaued in recent years. In particular, the 2013 OxIS survey indicates that non-users are not simply unaware of such sites. Rather, it is plausible to suggest that there are personal choices about non-use and structural constraints of access that affect the overall proportion of British people who are (un)willing to participate in SNSs.

The 2013 OxIS data for the subset of people born between 1985 and 1995 demonstrate that 97.7% of respondents in this group are able to access the Internet from home. As in many other Western countries, the Internet and SNSs are increasingly accessed from mobile devices. According to OxIS (2013), 70.3% say they use apps on their phone, while 68.7% say they use their phone to browse or update SNSs specifically. On the whole, the target group in the 2013 OxIS dataset report to have an average of 4.5 ICTs at home and report an average of 8 years of Internet experience. This is partly related to the fact that Internet penetration among the target demographic is very high. According to the ONS (2015), Internet penetration among 16-64 year olds in the UK has reached 92%, and 99% among 20-30 year olds, while SNSs are primarily accessed through the mobile phone. This results in a total population of ~9.4 million Internet users aged 20-30 in the UK in 2015.

All things considered, the UK offers a suitable environment and media context for the theoretical pathways of social media commitment that will be explored in this dissertation. Since 62.3% of published research studies on SNSs are situated in the US context (Stoycheff et al. 2017), the geographic focus on the UK further supports the collective effort of CMC scholars to diversify and internationalise this branch of research (Rains & Brunner 2014).

4. 4. Selection of SNSs

The logic of case selection in this dissertation follows the most prominent SNSs in the studied population. Since popularity cycles of SNSs are constantly moving it is difficult say which SNSs are the right ones to study. The 2013 OxIS report shows that people born 1985-1995 use an average of 2.7 SNS accounts (92.4% say they have a Facebook account, 46.0% have a Google+ account and 50.0% have a Twitter account). While more recent OxIS data is not available, 2015 industry reports seem to indicate that the proportion of Instagram accounts in the UK may have gone up, while the proportion of Google+ accounts may have decreased (Ofcom 2015). Furthermore, comScore (Giorgio 2016) reports that the most popular social media platforms among 18-34 year old people in the UK are: Facebook (90.2% have an account), Instagram (60.0% have an account), Twitter (60.0% have an account), LinkedIn (58.0% have an account), Snapchat (37.0% have an account) and Google+ (35.0% have an account). These estimates may be slightly inflated, but are generally not surprising given the widespread proliferation of social media in contemporary British culture (D. Miller 2016) and the high rates of Internet penetration in the target demographic (ONS 2015).

Despite the overall increase in choice of available SNSs, Facebook still remains the largest social media platform in the UK in terms of total user numbers. According to Facebook Investors Relations (2017), the number of active Facebook users in the UK has increased from 27.2 million monthly active users (MAUs) in 2012 to 31.2 million MAUs in 2015. The second most popular site both in terms of web traffic and user numbers is Twitter with approximately 15 million MAUs. Next, Twitter is closely followed by Instagram as the third most popular social media platform in the UK with approximately 14 million MAUs at the time of the study. The

fourth most popular SNS in the UK is Snapchat with approximately 10 million MAUs, according to its parent company Snap's official statements (2016).

There are many conflicting estimates from various industry reports, but based on the available data at hand it is plausible to conclude that these four platforms are currently the most popular SNSs among young adults in the UK: *Facebook, Twitter, Instagram* and *Snapchat*. Since I am interested in understanding commitment to social media platforms, it makes sense from both a practical and theoretical standpoint to focus on these four sites in my quantitative analysis. Instead of sampling platform-specific users from each site, I take a user-centric approach which allows me to ask survey-respondents whether they have accounts on any of the selected sites or not, while also asking them about their perceived depth or kind of interactions on each site.

Even though these four SNSs have different affordances, they can be classified as *general-purpose* sites. The emphasis on general-purpose sites ensures a certain degree of comparability between the selected cases. By contrast, platforms that cater to a very specific niche audience, a special interest group or a particular geographic area could limit the comparability of findings. For instance, this is the reason why LinkedIn, a popular SNS for professional networking that attracted 15 million MAUs in the UK in 2017 was not included in the quantitative analysis of this dissertation.

It should be noted, however, that this dissertation is not constrained by the selection of only four sites in terms of the claims it can test about people's SNS commitment. As we have seen from the theoretical discussion in Chapter 3, no particular social media platform can be understood outside of the context of all other possible media and forms of communication, which that same person could make use of. Consistent with the call for studying user behaviours across multiple SNSs (Stoycheff et al. 2017; X. Zhao et al. 2016), the qualitatively-driven component of

the thesis adopts a more open-ended approach to SNS selection. It attempts to understand interviewees' overall social media ecology by integrating other relevant SNSs mentioned by research participants into the analytical framework. For illustrative purposes, Table 19 in the Appendix presents a general overview of some of the largest social media platforms that exist today. They are organised by sub-genres, which include, but are not limited to specialised sites used for professional networking, dating, blogging and anonymous messaging. Taking into account some of these SNSs was useful for the conclusions drawn from this analysis. Given that the semi-structured interviews were not constrained by a pre-determined set of questions, I was able to adjust interview questions based on earlier responses received from each participant. This helped me to elucidate the relationships and interdependencies between diverse SNSs that were mentioned during the interviews.

4. 5. Historical context of selected SNSs

Sometimes it helps to look back at the history of a phenomenon to remind ourselves how we actually got to where we are today. Of course, before people have learned to take SNSs like Facebook and Twitter for granted, there was a time when the Internet was a relatively new phenomenon. Fuelled by either utopian or dystopian visions, scholars were making many ambitious predictions about the transformative potential of the Internet for society (Howcroft 1999; Negroponte 1995). For example, many have argued that the Internet would become a 'virtual space' for social interactions and a catalyst for new information (Dicken-Garcia 1998; S. Kiesler 1997; Newhagen & Rafaeli 1996; Rheingold 1993). Accordingly, our contemporary understandings of SNSs as spaces of mediated sociality have been, in many ways, shaped by these early discussions and scholarly investigations.

This is why, in part, social media choices can be said to be both historically and culturally contingent. By way of illustration, when a person joins Facebook today, his or her experience on Facebook will be different from the experience of a user who joined the site 10 years ago. Not only is the site itself today different from the site 10 years ago; but it is also the person's perception of what the site does, and what it means to be on Facebook, that is different today. Evidently, the functions of the site change with the updates to its platform architecture and its user interfaces. After Facebook introduced the Newsfeed in 2006, the resulting change in the affordances of the site has altered some of its informational dynamics of how content is discovered. While content is now predominantly discovered through a stream of user-generated content (Ellison & Boyd 2013), it is plausible to suggest that this change has also increased the risk of contact collapse (J. L. Davis & Jurgenson 2014; Vitak 2012). In 2011, Facebook revamped the Newsfeed once again, moving from a chronological to an algorithmic timeline. While this subtle change received mixed feedback from users, there is evidence to suggest that many Facebook users may still be unaware of this important change (Eslami et al. 2015; Nagy & Neff 2015). For instance, users may misattribute the lack of feedback to a particular Facebook post as lack of interest, whereas the real reason for this may be due to the new 'invisible' aspects of adaptive algorithmic curation in the Facebook Newsfeed.

Furthermore, the historical perspective should also help us contextualise research findings and improve the interpretation of empirical data. For example, when an interview participant tells me she joined Twitter in 2006, this should immediately tell me something about the context of her adoption decision. In 2006, few people knew about Twitter so the interview participant was likely an early adopter of Twitter who first experienced an early version of the site that did not yet have any of the characteristic features that we might associate with Twitter

today. In particular, when Twitter officially pioneered the hashtag (#) in 2007, posted content suddenly became more findable across many Twitter communities, which led to the emergence of new social norms and etiquette rules on the site. These behavioural norms were not yet available when the hypothesised interviewee first joined Twitter. As such, empirical studies of specific SNSs in 2005 cannot be entirely consistent with studies of the same sites in 2015, because they are implicitly based on a different set of features and assumptions. Adopting a historical perspective, thus, allows us to be more cognizant of these changes in the broader social media environment and the particular contexts of people's social media decisions.

4. 5. 1. Overview of Facebook

Facebook was launched as *thefacebook.com* by Mark Zuckerberg and his college dorm roommates in room H33 at Harvard University Kirkland House on February 4th, 2004. After multiple prank websites and study tools, which have received mixed feedback from his fellow students, Zuckerberg coded up the first version of Facebook in two weeks during the examination preparation reading period of January 2004. Within 24 hours, over 1,200 students had signed up and within one month after its first release, over half of the undergraduate students at Harvard were already on the site (Ofcom 2015 p. 21). Facebook's origin story and early growth were retrospectively documented by scholarly studies (boyd 2006; Valkenburg et al. 2006; Zywicki & Danowski 2008) and popular articles (Cassidy 2006; Kirkpatrick 2010; Markoff 2007).

The site developed alongside a whole cohort of new SNSs in the early 2000s, but was the first to reach approximately 1 million MAUs by the end of its first year (Kirkpatrick 2010). In hindsight, scholars have pointed out that there was no “*inevitable trajectory that led towards the current dominance of Facebook*” (D. Miller 2012b p. 148). Rather, the historical development of

Facebook was related to a confluence of factors, where many essential parts of the site developed out of mere happenstance rather than deliberate strategy.

Facebook's first mission statement was "*to make the world more open and connected*" (Facebook 2016). But in its early years, there was much uncertainty about the very purpose of the site. Was Facebook a site for connecting with old friends or a site to find new friends? Was it a site just for university students or was there potential for a broader appeal? Facebook's first Wikipedia article reflects some of these ambiguities. The first Wikipedia entry was compiled by the pseudonymous Wikipedia contributor *Esrogs* on 30th April 2004 in which the writer references a student newspaper at Duke University to describe Facebook:

Thefacebook.com is a relatively new website based on older sites like Friendster and Orkut, and on the 'Facebooks' that colleges give to incoming freshmen depicting their classmates. Like other friendship-web sites, thefacebook.com allows users to search for people and select them as 'friends', but it is targeted towards college students. Browsing capabilities are limited between schools, but thefacebook.com offers an interesting advantage over other friendship-web sites in that it allows college students to browse through students taking the same classes that they are.

There are a number of noteworthy elements in this very first Wikipedia entry about the site, providing a unique historical insight into how Facebook was perceived during its early years of expansion to student networks outside Harvard University. First, it is interesting to note that the description derives Facebook's validity from other existing SNSs that were more popular at the time, such as Friendster and Orkut. Next, it emphasises the ability of users to connect to each other and express lists of personal contacts that form a friendship network. This echoes widely accepted scholarly definitions of SNSs that were formulated a couple of years later (boyd & Ellison 2007). Finally, the Wikipedia article points out that Facebook's strong focus on the social context of university-students may become a possible advantage in the future. For example, one of the early requirements for users to join thefacebook.com was having a valid harvard.edu email

address. In September 2005, the company rebranded as *Facebook* and, approximately one year later, opened up its site for anyone over the age of 13 to join.

In the following years, Facebook evolved as a platform and expanded its focus beyond universities to embrace a wider audience of potential adopters. It was not until 2009 that the ‘like’-button was introduced, which helped the site to establish itself as a “vertical” platform that accompanied users around the Web. In July 2010 Facebook reached 500 million users and surpassed Google for the first time in terms of page views, generating 7.1% of Web traffic in the USA. This was also the time, when Facebook crossed the chasm to becoming more attractive to users over the age of 30, who have constituted the fastest growing demographic group in 2010. Already as early as 2010, Facebook became the leading SNS in 115 out of 137 countries (Cosenza 2015) and has been reported by many scholars to be the most popular SNS globally. Figure 10 in the Appendix illustrates a timeline of Facebook’s expansion into three selected countries (Germany, Latvia and Brazil). It shows the relative changes in keyword search volume on Google for Facebook and its local competitors. This figure indicates the existence of turning points in the adoption of Facebook in specific countries, which have been hitherto dominated by localised social media platforms. Similar turning points can be derived from publicly-available Google search volume data in other countries.

In January 2011, Facebook gained an enormous amount of mass media attention after its new funding round, which was led by Goldman Sachs and Digital Sky Technologies. This round increased the financial valuation of the company to an unprecedented amount of \$50 billion, which was quite uncommon for digital media companies at the time. Soon after, Facebook filed for an initial public offering (IPO), which was meant to become the biggest IPO in the technology sector with a peak market capitalisation of over \$104 billion, raising in excess of \$16

billion. In October 2012, Facebook reached the next milestone of 1 billion MAUs and topped analysts' expectations by growing revenues and further reducing operational costs.

Upon its 10th anniversary in 2014, Facebook announced that it had hosted a total of 201.6 billion friendship-connections. It was also reported that Facebook had recorded a total of 3.4 trillion clicks on the 'like'-button over the course of its first decade. Going forward, Facebook launched several multi-purpose apps to complement Facebook's user experience with new products, such as Riff, Paper, Groups, Mentions, Strobe, Shout, Slingshot, Work and Rooms to name a few. In 2015, the company introduced a wide variety of additional apps for more creative communication and self-expression within the Messenger Platform. This move was aimed at turning the standalone *Facebook Messenger* application into an all-encompassing mobile communication channel, similar to what WeChat has done in China.

Facebook's recent user growth is illustrated in Figure 11 in the Appendix. It shows that there were approximately 1 billion users who visited Facebook on a daily basis at the end of 2015. There were also approximately 1.59 billion monthly active Facebook users. These users were connected by an average of 3.57 degrees worldwide and 3.46 degrees in the US alone (Edunov et al. 2016). The growth of Facebook's user base has thus contributed to a substantial increase in the interconnectivity of Facebook's social graph compared over the estimated average degree of separation provided by prior studies (Boldi & Vigna 2012; Ugander et al. 2011).

It was thus only natural for the site to attract scholarly attention. Much academic work in the CMC literature has focused on Facebook, examining a variety of topics related to e.g. personal networks, self-presentation and the implications of Facebook use. Wilson and colleagues (2012) conduct an extensive literature review of 412 peer-reviewed articles related to empirical Facebook research, identifying five major themes in the literature: "*descriptive*

analysis of users, motivations for using Facebook, identity presentation, the role of Facebook in social interactions, and privacy and information disclosure” (Wilson et al. 2012 p. 203).

Furthermore, the researchers find that the largest category of studies was primarily concerned with role of Facebook in social interactions and its implications (27% of the reviewed articles). This is hardly surprising given the nature of the data available and the broad leitmotifs of SNS scholarship in general (Ellison & Boyd 2013).

In the next few years, the number of published academic papers dedicated to Facebook grew almost exponentially (Wilson et al. 2012). For brevity, I will only highlight a few studies on Facebook-related phenomena, even though a much longer list could have easily been produced in this section. As of today, the extensive literature on Facebook contains a slew of empirical studies on identity performance and self-presentation (DiMicco & Millen 2007; Hogan 2010; Hogan & Wellman 2014; Mehdizadeh 2010; Scott 2014; Wilson et al. 2012), privacy and self-disclosure (Fox & Moreland 2015; Hargittai & boyd 2010; Livingstone 2008; Marwick & Boyd 2014; Tufekci 2008; Zimmer 2010), Facebook addiction (Andreassen et al. 2012; T. Ryan et al. 2014; I. Song et al. 2004), social capital and civic engagement (Brooks et al. 2014; Burke et al. 2011; Ellison et al. 2014; Valenzuela et al. 2009; Vitak et al. 2011; Vitak & Ellison 2012), social influence (Aral & Walker 2014; Bond et al. 2012) and the composition of friendship relationships (Bohn et al. 2014; West et al. 2009; Wohn et al. 2011).

New methodological approaches have emerged as Facebook matured, though the frequent updates to the design and structure of the platform have limited the comparability of research findings that have been published in the past decade. On this account, Facebook’s impact on social life has been subject to heated debates both in academia and popular culture. For example, Wilson and colleagues (2012 p. 203) assert that Facebook has become a

“spectacular success by creating a massive new domain in which millions of social interactions are played out every day.” In a similar vein, Lincoln and Robards (2014 p. 1048) argue that Facebook has “made its mark on contemporary society as a space for social, cultural and political interactions.” Other researchers are far less optimistic. A meta-analysis conducted by Song and colleagues (2014) documents an overall positive effect in the relationship between Facebook use and loneliness. Facebook activity has also been found to be positively related to a decrease in mood (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer 2014) and subjective well-being (Kross et al. 2013), while increasing social anxiety (Shaw et al. 2015). Yet the relationships that these studies have uncovered remain somewhat inconsistent, calling for further research in this area.

4. 5. 2. Overview of Instagram

In recent years, Instagram has become one of the most popular SNSs among young users. It was launched in 2010 as a mobile-first SNS aimed at facilitating visual communication around photographs. Instagram’s co-founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger wanted to create a mobile space for displaying visual content, where the photograph itself would be at the centre of sociality. In a recent press interview, Kevin Systrom explained that “*Instagram makes the world feel simultaneously large, in the sense that you can connect with anyone, and very small in the sense that you’re right there with them*” (Constine 2016b p. 3).

Instagram’s first version was released for the iPhone on 6th October 2010, reaching 1 million MAUs just over one month after its launch. However, Instagram was not the first mobile SNS that focused on photographs at the time. For example, the very similar *Hipstamatic* was launched in 2009. Similar to Instagram, it allowed users to upload a photograph, enhance it with a variety of filters and edits, add captions and share it with their friends. However, Instagram

managed to quickly overtake its competitors and rapidly grow its user base of passionate early adopters. On 9th December 2011, Apple named Instagram the “iPhone App of the Year”. On 9th April 2012, Instagram was acquired by Facebook for \$1 billion in cash and stock with plans to keep the app independent. This was an important milestone for both Instagram and Facebook, because it was the first time that Facebook made a large acquisition of another popular SNS. Soon after that, Instagram introduced more SNS-like features that expanded its technical capabilities and improved its user experience. For example, Instagram added direct messaging, photo tagging, support for videos, new filters and the integration of the platform in standard Web browsers. The *Explore* tab on its main app allowed users to interact with people outside their default personal network through shared interests and commonly used hashtags.

While photographs and short videos, the primary social objects on Instagram, are public by default, users can choose to restrict access to their profile so that only approved followers can interact with their shared content. Seen in this light, Instagram can be either used in a more public way to broadcast photographs and videos to the world and connect to strangers; or in a more private way to express more intimate relations and interact with friends and family members through shared content. Over the past year, Instagram has also been actively advancing its mobile advertising business so that the SNS is also increasingly used by brands.

In 2015, Instagram reached 500 million MAUs and 300 million DAUs (see Figure 12 in the Appendix). This rapid growth in the number of daily active users was seen by many as evidence that Instagram was not just becoming an SNS that people check occasionally; but that it was, evidently, becoming an integral part of day-to-day social life for at least 60% of its users. In fact, Instagram has exhibited remarkable user engagement from its early days. The Pew Institute finds that 57% of Instagram’s users visit the application at least once a day, while 35% are doing

so multiple times a day (Duggan & Smith 2013). Collectively, the Instagram community had reportedly shared approximately 40 billion photos between 2010 and 2015, with an average of 95 million photos and 4.2 billion ‘hearts’ distributed daily (Instagram 2016).

With the rise of Instagram, popular commentators and academics alike began to realise that online social interactions were becoming increasingly visual (Jurgenson 2011). From a scholarly perspective, Instagram could thus be seen as a microcosm of broader shifts in the communicative and self-presentational practices that take place around visual objects. Despite that, studies on the uses and effects of Instagram amount to less than 1% of all studies in SNS scholarship (Stoycheff et al. 2017). A small number of studies have provided early evidence by examining the different types of content and user profiles on Instagram (Hu et al. 2014), motivations of Instagram use (Eunji et al. 2015; McCune 2011; Sheldon & Bryant 2016), social network structures on Instagram (Ferrara et al. 2014), the cultural value of Instagram’s photo filters (Hochman & Manovich 2013; Silva et al. 2013) and the emotional context of Instagram-selfies (Lup et al. 2015; Retallack et al. 2016; Ridgway & Clayton 2016). Recent studies have also begun investigating people’s folk theories of how Instagram might fit into the broader social media environment (Trayor et al. 2016; Wilkes et al. 2015). Other than that, the literature on Instagram is still in its early stages.

Today, Instagram is continuously evolving as a platform and is regularly adding new features to its main application. After the data collection for this study was completed, Instagram introduced a range of new features to improve its user experience and increase engagement. Its most widely discussed new feature of 2016, Instagram *Stories*, was considered by some commentators as a blatant copy of Snapchat (Constine 2016b). This new feature enabled users to share ephemeral photos and short videos with their audiences (see Chapter 8 for a discussion of

the overlapping affordances of Instagram and Snapchat). Meanwhile, Instagram continued to grow internationally: in 2016, 80% of its users came from outside the US. According to Cosenza (2015), Instagram was the second most popular SNS in 23 countries after Facebook at the time of the study. In the UK, however, Instagram conceded the second place to Twitter, which appeared to be somewhat more popular among British Internet users.

4. 5. 3. Overview of Twitter

Twitter is a popular SNS that is seen by many as a real-time, public micro-blogging network. Founded in March 2006, Twitter evolved rapidly from a small and ambiguous SMS-based messaging service to a popular social network site with over 320 million MAUs globally (see Figure 13 in the Appendix). As of this writing, its iconic platform design limits each “tweet”, a semi-public message that can be shared and read by its members, to 140 characters. A recent journalistic account of Twitter describes its cultural status and impact on contemporary Internet culture in the following way (Lafrance & Meyer 2014 p. 4):

Twitter is the platform that led us into the mobile Internet age. It broke our habit of visiting individual news homepages first thing in the morning, and established behaviours built around real-time news consumption and production. It normalised mobile publishing power. It changed our expectations about how we congregate around shared events. Twitter has done for social publishing what AOL did for email. But nobody has AOL accounts anymore.

There were several milestones in Twitter’s history. The first tweet was sent out by Twitter’s co-founder Jack Dorsey on 21st March 2006. However, it wasn’t until the 2007 SXSW Interactive Conference when Twitter reached its first major milestone. Technology enthusiasts attending the 2007 conference were among Twitter’s early adopters, generating a total of over 60,000 tweets per day for a short while during and after the event (Twitter 2015). The next

milestone was reached with the introduction of the hashtag (#) in August 2007, which was suggested by regular user Chris Messina in a tweet that read: “*how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?*” In January 2009 the first major news story (US Airways plane crash in NYC’s Hudson River) broke on Twitter before traditional media had the opportunity to report it. This event boosted Twitter’s user growth and helped it to establish more credibility as a relatively young site. When Hollywood actor Ashton Kutcher overtook CNN as the most followed account on Twitter with over 1 million followers in April 2009⁹, people started to realise that the site had the potential to become not just a digital news medium, but also a social space to follow updates from individual users. Furthermore, the fact that it was possible for a single Twitter user to amass a following of over 1 million people was seen as an important signal to the public that Twitter was expanding its footprints and had to be taken seriously.

In 2011 Twitter announced that 100 million users have joined the site and were using it on a monthly basis, sending over 1 billion tweets per week. This was also the time when Twitter received an increasing amount of public media attention in the course of the “Arab Spring”. During a tumultuous time in the Middle-East, Twitter was repeatedly credited to have facilitated a series of political revolutions in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Libya. Given the apparent widespread use of Twitter for organising protests and spreading awareness, journalists have dubbed these movements as “Twitter revolutions” (Lotan et al. 2011; Starbird 2012). A lasting public debate ensued scrutinising the role of SNSs in civic activism and whether sites like Twitter may have expedited (or impeded) the democratisation of totalitarian regimes around the world (Howard & Hussain 2013; Morozov 2011; Tufekci & Wilson 2012).

⁹ Today, the most followed Twitter celebrities have significantly larger networks (e.g. Katy Perry with 95 million followers, Justin Bieber with 91 million followers and Taylor Swift with 83 million followers).

Over time, Twitter became a popular object of scientific inquiry, facilitating the exploration of a broad range of topics in the social sciences. The public nature of interaction on Twitter, alongside with the increasingly sophisticated tools of data analysis, have supported a new wave of “Twitter research”. Kwak and colleagues (2010) were among the first to inquire whether Twitter was a news medium or an SNS. Based on their analysis of the spread of information across 41.7 million user profiles on Twitter, the researchers conclude that Twitter resembles a medium of information sharing, rather than a medium for social connection at the time. Building upon this notion, research on Twitter has primarily examined the dynamics of social influence (Cha et al. 2010; González-Bailón et al. 2011) and information diffusion (Jansen et al. 2009; Lerman & Ghosh 2010; Romero et al. 2011; Yang & Counts 2010). Other areas of Twitter research have addressed issues of self-presentation (Gruzd et al. 2011; Marwick & boyd 2011), communicative affordances (Bucher & Helmond 2017), people’s motivations for Twitter use (Holton et al. 2014; Kwak et al. 2010; D. Zhao & Rosson 2009) and the use of Twitter hashtags as networked publics (Bruns & Burgess 2011; Chang 2010; Tsur & Rappoport 2012). Even though this list of studies is merely illustrative rather than exhaustive, one can see that the majority of studies have been anchored around a handful of key research areas.

While Twitter remains a popular platform in terms of the scholarly attention it receives, concerns have been raised about its future. In particular, as of this writing, Twitter’s growth appears to have stalled out at 320 million MAUs. Twitter’s investor reports (2016) also seem to indicate that users’ commitment to Twitter may have decreased. According to some commentators, the cultural status of Twitter is slowly fading. As a result of that, *“people are still using Twitter, but they’re not hanging out there. (...) Twitter feels closed off, choked, in a way that makes us want to explore somewhere else for a while”* (Lafrance & Meyer 2014 p. 3).

Viewed through this lens, the platform appears to be fraught with spam, automated content, toxic political debates and noisy self-promotion. It would thus come as no surprise to learn that many young Twitter users have migrated to newer SNSs like Instagram and Snapchat.

4. 5. 4. Overview of Snapchat

Snapchat is a mobile-only SNS focusing on visual ephemeral messaging that, as of this writing, is very popular with teenagers and young adults. Photos and videos shared through the application, called Snaps, disappear after a specified period of time – usually just a few seconds. The idea behind Snapchat allegedly originated from a conversation between its co-founders Evan Spiegel, Bobby Murphy and Reggie Brown in spring 2011. The latter is credited to have said: “*I wish these photos I am sending this girl would disappear*” (Crook & Esher 2015 p. 5). As a result of that, an early version of Snapchat was launched in 2011 under the name *Picaboo*. At the time, all three co-founders were undergraduate students at Stanford University and were exploring ideas for technology startups that could be based on new forms of visual texting.

Right from the start, the main premise of the application was related to the impermanent nature of shared content. The co-founders assumed that this form of sharing could minimise the inhibitions that users would typically associate with more persistent forms of communicating. In other words, Snapchat was meant to be as authentic as it was fleeting. The philosophy of ephemerality was also behind Snapchat’s ghostly mascot *Ghostface Chillah* on its logo; the self-destruction of Snaps afforded the rapid sharing of natural, and oftentimes very intimate, moments and socially-relevant interactions. Research finds that this form of sharing facilitated more authentic self-expression with little to no repercussions (Bayer et al. 2015; Sashittal et al. 2016). Technology commentators have also pointed out that Snapchat’s philosophy stands in

direct opposition to more established norms of persistent, archived and searchable content that are primarily embodied by Facebook and Google.

In terms of user growth, Snapchat has become one of the fastest growing SNSs for mobile phones. Snapchat's co-founders have repeatedly stressed their focus on usability, rather than marketing efforts to gain new users. This focus on functionality and connected presence is also clearly reflected in Snapchat's self-description on its main website: "*Snapchat lets you easily talk with friends, view Live Stories from around the world, and explore news in Discover. Life's more fun when you live in the moment*" (Snapchat 2016).

By the end of 2012, Snapchat had 10 million MAUs, who were sharing over 20 million pieces of content a day. In about three years, these metrics grew rapidly to over 100 million DAUs (see Figure 14 in the Appendix) and 400 million pieces of content a day. This early user growth earned Snapchat the title "Best Mobile App" at the 2013 Annual TechCrunch Awards. This is also the time when Snapchat reportedly rejected a \$3 billion acquisition offer from Facebook, making a bold statement vis-à-vis its incumbent competitor.

As of this writing, Snapchat's user base tends to be younger than the user base of other sites like Facebook and Twitter. According to recent Pew studies, 41% of teenagers in the US are active Snapchat users, and it appears that girls are more attracted to the SNS than boys (Lenhart & Page 2015). By contrast, Snapchat itself reports that 60% of 13-34 year olds in the US have Snapchat accounts, contributing to its total of 7 billion reported video views per day globally (Snapchat 2016). According to Snapchat's S-1 filing, its average daily user opens up the app 18 times a day and uses it for 25-30 minutes. 60% of Snapchat's DAUs produce user-generated content in its chat feature daily. Before its IPO, Snapchat received a total of \$2.63 billion across 8 rounds of funding from 24 investors. After the last financing round before going public,

Snapchat was valued at \$25 billion, making the company the most valuable privately held social network application at the time (and almost double the valuation of Twitter just before its own IPO). Today, many media analysts see Snapchat as the new challenger in the social media landscape with the potential to eventually displace Facebook. However, there is a lot of debate concerning its future, especially after Instagram's move into ephemeral messaging in 2016.

In order to cater to its highly engaged user base, Snapchat has recently launched a number of additional SNS features over the past few years, such as a daily feed of branded news content called *Discover*, as well as a GIF-based profile picture that allows users to compile five consecutive photographs of themselves into an animated profile picture. The latter feature could be said to be a way of affording more diverse and dynamic self-presentation on Snapchat in the absence of a fixed user profile. Another feature that is at the core of the Snapchat experience is *Stories*, which was launched in 2013. This feature allows users to share ephemeral updates with their entire personal network on Snapchat over a 24-hour period. It works like a visual status update that disappears after a while. In 2015, Snapchat rolled out a complete redesign of the application with additional SNS features and new search functionalities. This update was supported by the complementary introduction of *Snapcodes* and *Geofilters* to make profiles more findable by other users both locally and globally. The introduction of these features has encouraged users to broadcast transient content to their followers, contributing to the rapid growth of the app. In addition to that, as part of the *Chat 2.0* update in March 2016, Snapchat users were given the option to modify and personalise each piece of shared content with additional selfie lenses, filters and drawings.

Very few research studies exist today that examine the uses and effects of Snapchat. The most comprehensive reviews of SNS scholarship to-date even note that Snapchat was entirely

absent in the literature published between 2005 and 2014 (Stoycheff et al. 2017). Bayer and colleagues (2015) find evidence that ephemeral interactions on Snapchat are perceived as more enjoyable and associated with a positive mood. Overall, Snapchat was seen as a “*lightweight channel for sharing spontaneous experiences with trusted ties*” (Bayer et al. 2015 p. 1).

However, the researchers also find that Snapchat was associated with lower social support compared to other communication channels. More recent research in this area typically focuses on general use practices of Snapchat (Roesner et al. 2014), motivations of Snapchat use (Piwek & Joinson 2016), practices of ‘sexting’ (Hasinoff & Shepherd 2014; Poltash 2013), the uses of Snapchat selfies (Charteris et al. 2014; Christensen et al. 2015) and emotional reactions to content shared on the app (Utz et al. 2015). Thus, research in this area is slowly accumulating, but there remains a lack of empirical research which considers the factors that determine the patterns of Snapchat use and commitment in relation to other established sites like Facebook.

4. 6. Convergence of SNS affordances and features

Having reviewed the brief history of each of the four selected SNSs, the final section of this chapter examines the overarching trend related to the technological convergence of social media platforms in terms of their main social affordances and features.

The global SNS landscape has changed dramatically since the mid-1990s. Each of the four above-mentioned platforms has contributed something unique to the evolution of the genre of SNSs. As we have seen in this chapter, Facebook introduced the nearly ubiquitous ‘like’-button and pioneered the extensive algorithmic curation of content in its Newsfeed. Twitter introduced the world to hashtags and trending topics, which was subsequently copied by nearly all other SNSs. Twitter can also be credited for the invention of @username handles that are now

commonplace on many platforms, including Tumblr and Instagram. Next, Instagram made SNSs more visual and brought image filters to the forefront. Lastly, Snapchat pioneered ephemeral sharing and made dynamic video lenses a mainstream phenomenon for many SNS users.

However, over time, each of these SNSs has also become increasingly similar to the other sites in terms of their sharing features and technological architectures. For example, scholars have pointed out that the paralinguistic digital affordances of Facebook's 'like'-button are nearly identical to the affordances of the 'favourite'-button on Twitter or the '+1'-button on Google+ (Hayes et al. 2016; Wohn et al. 2016). In a similar vein, after the successful integration of GIFs in conversations on Facebook Messenger, other social apps like Slack, Viber and Tinder also began implementing GIF-support in private messages. Since the availability of GIFs affords a richer array of dynamic, communicative expressions, we have seen the widespread proliferation of GIFs across a multitude of sites. Similarly, live-video streaming has been added to a range of SNSs after the breakthrough successes of the livestreaming apps Meerkat and Periscope in 2015. For instance, Facebook's *Live-Video* feature now allows users to broadcast videos of themselves from their mobile phones to their personal networks and the wider public. Some press commentators pointedly noticed that "*Facebook offers what Periscope does, but with an added bonus — it's now exactly where the people are. There's no pitch, no need to download the next big app. It's on Facebook. You have Facebook. Why go anywhere else?*" (Amenabar 2016 p. 1). After Facebook's success with live-video streaming, Tumblr has also added live-video to its site. Every platform tries to adapt to the changing media environment and reinvent itself by adding features that have worked for other SNSs – a common tactic for competitive innovation that is consistent with the institutional isomorphism framework (DiMaggio & Powell 1983).

Finally, one of the most prominent examples of the technological convergence of SNSs is their rapid adoption of the hashtag (#). On the one hand, hashtags afford the categorisation of content with unique semantic tags, such as event-based tags (e.g. #oiisd17), topic-based tags (e.g. #bigdata) or action-based tags (e.g. #likeforlike). On the other hand, they afford novel ways of linguistic expressions that can be used in written text (e.g. #blessed #perfectday). This rapid technological convergence is further evidenced by the cross-platform compatibility of shared content across multiple SNSs, e.g. hashtags in the description of a photograph shared on Facebook will maintain the same within-platform functionality if shared on Instagram and vice-versa, which seems to facilitate the sharing of identical content across multiple platforms.

If the features and social affordances of SNSs are becoming more and more alike, how does this affect the way how people deliberately choose which social media platforms to use? Suppose all social media platforms would encompass exactly the same affordances and would be perceived in exactly the same ways by their users. Following a purely functional logic, a person in this hypothesised scenario would only require a single SNS for all of his or her social needs. However, many Internet users tend to make use of a variety of different SNSs in concert with other complementary social media services – notwithstanding any perceived similarities of affordances or features. Conversely, other users remain committed to the use of a single platform that centralises all of their communications with their friendship networks. These differences make an investigation of SNS commitment even more theoretically pertinent and intriguing.

4. 7. Chapter conclusion

This chapter has set the research context of the thesis by providing more information on the studied population. It has presented and discussed the main reasons for focusing my analysis

on the case of young adults aged 20-30 in the UK. Next, the chapter has identified the four most popular general-purpose SNSs in the target population at the time of the study, explaining the reasons for this case selection. Following on from this, the chapter has examined the historical context of social media with a particular focus on the global convergence of SNS affordances and features. The historical review in this chapter has particularly focused on the four largest and most frequently used SNSs in the studied population of young adults in the UK, which are considered in this thesis. The ground covered in this chapter was important, because individual decisions about SNS use and commitment are frequently conditioned by the decisions that have been made by other users in the past. Chapter 8 uses rich qualitative data to address questions regarding the potentially path-dependent nature of social media choices.

In their attitudes toward social media, younger users may not be very different from older generations (Campbell 2017; Kirschner & De Bruyckere 2017); but it is the context and the perception of available affordances of SNSs that is different today compared to when older generations joined their first SNSs or had their early experiences with social media. Accordingly, the historical discussion in this chapter was a necessary prelude to ascertaining the potentially path-dependent nature of social media choice. When the world was introduced to social media, people were free to choose any SNSs they liked; but now many people feel increasingly bound to their social media choices as they find themselves unable or unwilling to leave Facebook and Twitter to explore the affordances of newer platforms.

Instead of discontinuing their usage habits on older sites, some people seem to be continually adding new SNSs on top of their existing SNSs. By contrast, other people seem to move between sites quite easily and abandoning old sites without a second thought. Does this imply that the former group is too committed to their SNSs, while the latter group exhibits an

apparent lack of SNS commitment? Examining these differences could help us explain why some people might draw on a relatively diverse array of media technologies for different purposes, while others prefer to use one main SNS for all their personal uses.

Going forward, the next chapter will operationalise many of the concepts introduced in the previous chapters. It will also present the research methods that are developed to collect, analyse and interpret the evidence needed to answer the set research questions.

CHAPTER 5:

A MIXED METHODS RESEARCH DESIGN

5. 1. Introduction – Emphasising small data in a world of big data

In recent years, many scholars have become enamoured with computational methods in the CMC literature. The availability of digital traces of unprecedented form and scale has led many researchers to believe that we are entering a ‘golden age’ for data-driven social research (Anderson 2008; Pentland 2014; Watts 2012). A compelling case for the use of computational methods has been made, because of their ability to unobtrusively collect large volumes of traced data to study individual and collective behaviours that were previously difficult to measure at a large scale. While these methodologies offer novel opportunities and insights into complex questions of communications research, they are not without limitations (Golder & Macy 2014; Hargittai 2015). In particular, there are two main lines of critique of computational approaches that have guided the research design choices of this dissertation.

On the one hand, there are issues of accessing data. Given the focus of this thesis on how people commit to their social media choices, it is evident that for my inquiry to be effective, I need to look beyond a single SNS at a time, identifying users across multiple sites. However, this exercise becomes exceedingly difficult when people use a combination of several unconnected accounts across multiple SNSs (e.g. using pseudonymous or anonymous profiles to make their accounts untraceable or disassociated from one another). What is more, there is an additional level of complexity in the use of private messaging channels (e.g. on Snapchat, Telegram or

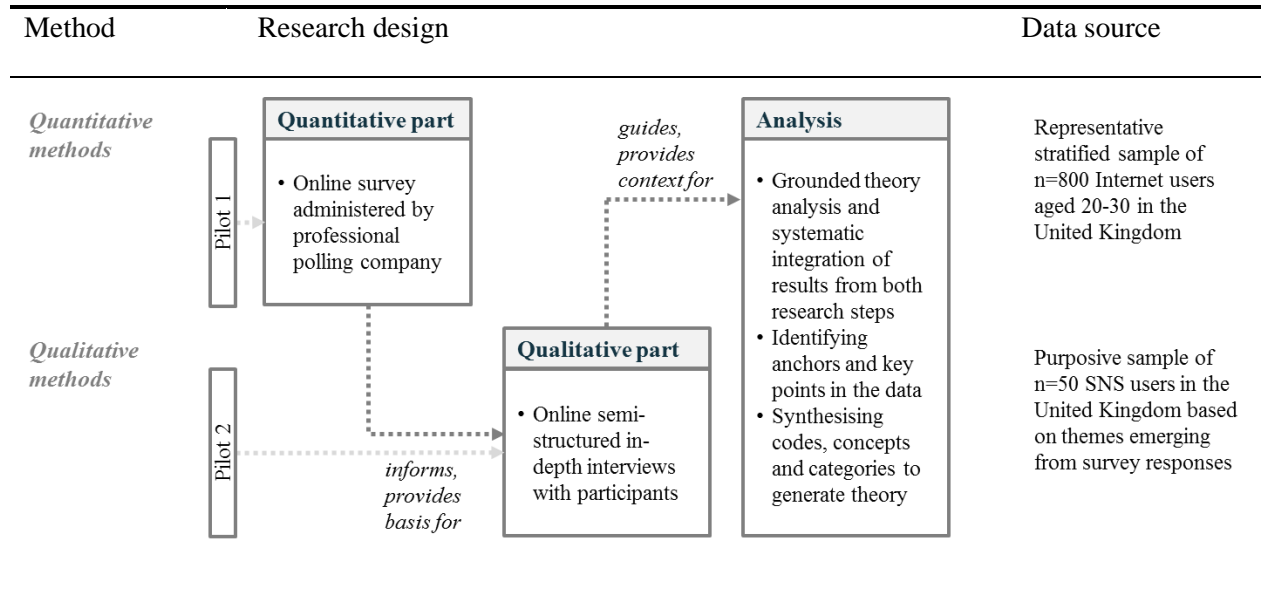
Facebook Messenger), which are typically inaccessible to academic investigators. Besides, while traced data can be used to make sense of broad patterns of user activity, this technique tends to miss important individual-level user characteristics, such as demographic profiles and attitudes.

On the other hand, there are issues of interpreting data. Traced data do not always allow us to fully understand the context of the measured behaviours, i.e. individual meanings, interpretations and emotions that people might associate with their social media activities (Brabham 2015; Tufekci 2014). The nuances of personal experiences are, however, critical to our understanding of social media commitment and mediated sociality. For example, while traced data can accurately record the time when a new SNS account was first created, they typically lack an understanding of the context and the personal circumstances under which he or she might have decided to sign up for the site. CMC research has repeatedly emphasised that only a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods “*can unearth the nuanced ways in which people navigate the environment of social and other media and how this is shaped by relational dynamics*” (Madianou 2015 p. 2). Therefore, by building personal trust with research participants and using qualitative methods, I seek to find answers to the questions of SNS commitment that cannot be addressed by computational methods alone. There is ample reason, therefore, to use both surveys and interviews as part of a mixed-methods research design.

Bearing this in mind, this chapter sets out the methodological approach of the thesis. The research design involves both quantitative and qualitative methods that are tailored to answering the main research questions from Chapter 3. To that end, this chapter first describes how the dissertation employs a sequential mixed-methods approach to examine the uses of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and/or Snapchat by young adults in the UK. Next, the chapter proceeds to

explain the sampling strategies and data collection methods, ethical considerations and coding procedures. Finally, the chapter concludes by summarising the main methodological choices made in the dissertation and addressing their main limitations.

Figure 4: Overview of sequential multi-methods research design



5. 2. Methods summary

This thesis sequentially employs both quantitative and qualitative methods in a mixed-methods approach described in Figure 4. It is guided by the theoretical frameworks espoused in Chapters 2 and 3. Both parts of my research design have equal priority in line with key research paradigms expressed by Creswell (2011); the survey informs the interviewing stage, which in turn contextualises and illustrates further quantitative analysis of survey data.

To summarise, the quantitative data entail a nationally representative stratified sample of n=800 young adults in the UK. The qualitative data stem from 50 semi-structured in-depth interviews that include additional observations of research participants’ social media activities.

The methodological literature in social science research posits that sequential mixed-methods approaches may lead to a more credible account of social processes as well as higher quality theory-development (Bryman 2012; George & Bennett 2005; Guba & Lincoln 1985). The literature, in particular, suggests that a qualitatively-driven approach to mixing methods offers “*enormous potential for generating new ways of understanding the complexities and contexts of social experience, and for enhancing our capacities for social explanation and generalisation*” (Mason 2006 p. 10). The methods employed in this thesis are rooted in the *grounded theory* approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Ralph et al. 2015), combining different academic traditions in a dynamic and iterative way. Since SNS commitment necessarily involves an account of individuals’ attitudes, emotions and experiences, the present research involves interpretivist aspects, arising from the phenomenological perspective. In this way, the employed methods complement one another by informing tools of analysis and the interpretation of findings from one stage to the next (Greene et al. 1989). In this way, both parts of the research can effectively inform and supplement each other, combining both positivist and interpretivist elements (Jankowski & Jensen 1991). They may also enable stronger inferences from balancing the merits and demerits of a range of methods (Brewer & Hunter 1989; Bryman 2008; Mason 2006). The overall purpose of this methodology is thus to implement a rigorous study grounded in empirical evidence from a survey while acknowledging the need for rich individual viewpoints. Therefore, this research design should allow me to systematically analyse different types of data and synthesise original theoretical contributions to the CMC literature.

In order to instrumentally refine these methods and limit potential biases, two pilots have been carried out prior to the main data collection, following recommendations in the methods

literature (Ivankova et al. 2006; Richards 2009). The first pilot was used to refine and adjust the wording and sequence of survey questions in accordance with the feedback received from n=20 pilot participants in face-to-face structured survey-taking sessions in London and Oxford in April 2015. Since unsupervised web-based surveys require a lot of guidance, several versions of survey-taking instructions were tested to obtain reliable and consistent responses. Furthermore, this pilot was used to pre-empt systematic discrepancies in survey-responses due to potential misunderstandings of the survey questions. The second pilot was carried out in January 2016 and involved n=5 individual semi-structured interviews. The insights from this pilot were used to further pre-test interview questions and produce an interview guide. To improve internal validity and the interpretation of research findings, the literature recommends additional self-reflexivity and transparency about the part played by the researcher (Silverman 2010; Tracy 2010). Using a personal research diary along the way has helped me to reflect on some of these issues and try to keep an impartial eye on the research process.

In addition to that, this dissertation draws on data from the 2013 Oxford Internet Survey (Dutton & Blank 2013), which encompasses a multi-stage national probability sample of 2,657 people in the United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland). The dataset stems from in-home, face-to-face, structured pen-and-paper interviews. It is worth noting that the OxIS sample is representative of the population of Great Britain aged 14+ and was collected between February and April 2013. The dataset offers in-depth insights into people's use of the Internet and SNSs in Great Britain, both in urban and rural areas. A sub-sample of OxIS respondents born between 1985 and 1995 (n=285) is used for comparative purposes throughout this thesis.

5. 3. Ethical considerations

The entire research process follows the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (2012) and the British Sociological Association (2002). Several textbooks and research papers on ethical standards in social science research were also consulted (Breiger 2005; Hoser & Nitschke 2010; Lingel 2012; Robson 2011; Smith et al. 1996). This study has received ethical approval from the Central Research Ethics Committee of Oxford University (approval code: OII C1A 14-022). Every research participant was asked to provide individual informed consent and agree to voluntarily participate in the study. For this purpose, before beginning the online survey questionnaire or participating in the qualitative interviews, research participants were instructed to read and sign a detailed form that explained the background, goals, risks and benefits of the study (see Attachments A and B in the Appendix).

With regard to the qualitative data collection process, a number of additional steps were taken to protect respondents' privacy. First, all research participants were made aware of the main purpose of the interviews, informing them that conversations will be recorded and that anonymised quotations from their responses may be used in further research and any ensuing publications. It was important to remind participants not to voice any personally identifiable information during the conversations to prevent future identification. At the same time, personal identifiers were removed from research notes and manuscript drafts by using numeric labels for all participants, as recommended in the literature on ethical social science research. My methods training helped to follow ethical standards during the interviews. In addition, pursuant to the EU Data Protection Reform (2012), participants were given the right to opt out of the study at any time, having their personal data deleted. To improve self-reflexivity and transparency, all encountered ethical challenges were documented in a personal research diary along the way. No

personally identifiable information was collected or stored during the research process to prevent unintended privacy violations. Additional meta-data, such as respondents' IP addresses that were automatically collected by the survey were also deleted. All project-related data files were kept in the strictest of confidences and deposited in a password-protected database. In doing so, utmost importance was ascribed to the anonymity of all participants, while the protection of sensitive data was assured at all stages of the research. In this way, this study responds to growing concerns expressed by researchers about the ethical boundaries of social science research on the Internet (Hutton & Henderson 2015; Zimmer 2010).

5. 4. Quantitative methods

The kinds of quantitative survey methods that were employed in this thesis can provide a snapshot of the general patterns, trends and relationships related to social phenomena (Dillman 1991; Krosnick 1999). In particular, the survey method is useful for capturing a cross-section subset of the studied population that encompasses a diversity of demographic backgrounds and different SNS use patterns. It is also a more cost-effective and practical approach. Since survey-respondents can privately consult the records at leisure to complete the questionnaire, this method can increase the disclosure of personal information and reduce any potential social desirability effects (Fricker & Schonlau 2002; Krosnick 1999). A tailored survey was designed to address the research questions at hand (see Appendix for an exhaustive list of survey questions).

5. 4. 1. Quantitative sampling strategy

Comparing the merits and demerits of a range of alternative sampling strategies, three main considerations were important for the present study to help produce accurate estimates and

rule out alternative explanations. *First*, the sample needed to be broadly representative of the studied population of young Internet users in the United Kingdom aged 20-30 years. *Second*, the sample needed to capture whether people are jointly using a combination of multiple social media platforms. *Third*, the studied sample had to include not only current SNS users, but also non-users of SNSs, who could epitomise a contrarian perspective. This was important to make sure that the study did not exclude individuals who were not active on social media.

Before continuing, a number of alternative sampling strategies were considered. An API-based sampling approach from individual platforms, such as the one proposed by recent SNS research (González-Bailón et al. 2014; Hu et al. 2014; Lomborg & Bechmann 2014), was ruled out for methodological reasons. This was primarily due to the difficulty to match users across different social media platforms and the inability of this approach to access information about non-users. On a more general note, sampling techniques that are integrally linked to particular sites may over-represent highly engaged users, under-represent passive users or even completely neglect non-users. This type of exclusion bias typically results in samples that are heavily confounded on SNS use and account membership. Depending on the theoretical rationale for the study, this may render the platform-specific sample unreliable, while the extent of this bias is typically unknown and undiscoverable (Hargittai 2015; Tufekci 2014). Next, a convenience sample was also ruled out, because of problems with non-response and selection biases, as well as the inability to generalise findings to the studied population (Babbie 2013; Bryman 2012).

Accordingly, a stratified sample based on population proportions was the best available sampling approach to achieve representability. Based on UK census data from the ONS, the studied population of 20-30 year-old people in the United Kingdom at the time of the study was

approximately N=9,494,761 (2015). Even though Internet penetration varies between urban and rural areas in the UK, the Internet penetration for the selected age group is extremely high. The ONS reports that 99% of people in this age demographic have used the Internet in the past year, resulting in approximately N=9,399,813 Internet users in the targeted age-range (based on birth years 1985-1995). Bearing in mind the practical difficulties of collecting a probability sample from the Internet so that every person in the population has an equal probability of selection (Schonlau et al. 2002; Van Selm & Jankowski 2006), a reputable and independent online polling firm, SurveyMonkey, was employed to securely and reliably collect a nationally representative probability sample based on stratified panels between June and August 2015.

The survey company recruits potential survey takers from an online panel across the UK and draws their sample from a sampling frame that represents a culturally, demographically and geographically diverse pool of potential survey takers that are broadly representative of the UK population. Specific stratification criteria and the size of the panels were not disclosed, but it appears that the polling company used subsets of the population based on geographic areas from which a number of subjects were chosen randomly to be invited to take the survey.

The average survey completion time was 00:24:15 and the completion rate was 75.5%. Assuming a confidence level of 95% (Z-score: 1.96), an accepted margin of error of +/-5% and a standard deviation of 0.5, the minimum recommended statistical sample size would thus have to be n=384 to satisfy the criterion of representativeness. This is based on statistical estimates that take into account the confidence interval above and values taken from the standard normal Z-distribution. The sample was specifically targeted at 20-30 year old people who “*have used the Internet in the last 12 months*” to achieve broad representability of the target population. With

this in mind, the collected sample consisted of $n=931$ complete responses from the stratified panels. Having implemented several consistency checks in the survey, the sample then needed to be cleaned to eliminate outliers and evidently inconsistent responses. In particular, testing for the presence of outliers was important to assess whether extreme observations could distort any regression models. The final sample thus consisted of $n=800$ viable cases of analysis with no missing values in their responses (margin of error of 4.55% at 99% confidence level).

To scrutinise the representability of the obtained sample, supplementary analyses compared the sample to national baseline estimates and key demographic variables from the ONS (2015) and Ofcom (2015). A table with comparison values was cut from this chapter for parsimony, but individual statistics are highlighted throughout the thesis when they are relevant. Overall, the sample appears to be broadly representative of the target population of 20-30 year olds in the UK. However, students (37.13%) and users from urban areas (39.63%) seem to be slightly over-represented in the sample. Because of the many students in the dataset, the sample also has an above-average level of educational attainment, with 47.88% of respondents having at least an undergraduate degree. In terms of SNS account membership, the sample is very close to population estimates provided by industry reports and scholarly studies (see Chapter 4.4).

Furthermore, there was no statistically significant difference between the first 100 respondents and the last 100 respondents in the sample on key demographic characteristics. This comparison suggests that the sample did not suffer from systematic non-response bias (Dillman 1991; Krosnick 1999). Lastly, the finite population correction was not applied to compute standard errors, because the sample represents less than 0.1% of the total population. It can thus be said that the collected sample is satisfactory for the purposes of this study and that I can be reasonably certain in drawing projected estimates about the studied population.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of demographic factors

Demographic factors	%	Demographic factors	%
<i>Age and gender:</i>		<i>Occupational status:</i>	
% 20-23 year olds	36.25%	% employed	47.00%
% 24-26 year olds	27.38%	% self-employed	10.00%
% 27-30 year olds	36.38%	% unemployed	12.13%
% female	50.25%	% student	37.13%
		% disabled	1.88%
<i>Highest educational level:</i>		<i>Location:</i>	
% graduate degree	14.25%	% urban (less sparse)	39.63%
% in graduate education	8.75%	% urban (sparse)	24.00%
% undergraduate degree	24.88%	% suburban (less sparse)	16.88%
% in undergraduate educ.	24.25%	% suburban (sparse)	13.25%
% completed high school	20.00%	% rural (less sparse)	3.88%
% basic qualifications	6.75%	% rural (sparse)	2.38%
% no qualifications	1.13%		

Notes: Percentages are based on n=800. Responses in the occupational status category may add up to more than 100% because multiple responses were permitted (e.g. survey-respondents who reported to be both students and self-employed).

5. 4. 2. Measures

This section reviews some of the key concepts measured in the survey. An exhaustive list of all survey questions can be found in the Appendix (see Attachment C). Most survey questions were measured for each of the four studied SNSs individually using a Likert-scale questionnaire, where respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with each of the provided statements on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Appendix

offers deeper insights into the distributions of all survey questions split into the four studied SNSs (see Figures 19-54). The breakdown of responses helps to better visualise differences in responses between users of different sites. In order to pre-empt response-set bias, the questions included both positive and negative items. The survey questions that asked users about the frequency of certain SNS-activities were measured on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*several times a day*). The distribution of responses for each survey question and each SNS is visualised in the Appendix, while the next subsections provide a brief overview of the main measures and constructs. Survey measures not presented below will be introduced in their respective empirical chapters, such as the *SNS Commitment Scale* in Chapter 6, and people's *technology attitudes*, which form the basis of the clustering analysis in Chapter 7.

Demographic factors

Demographic factors: Age

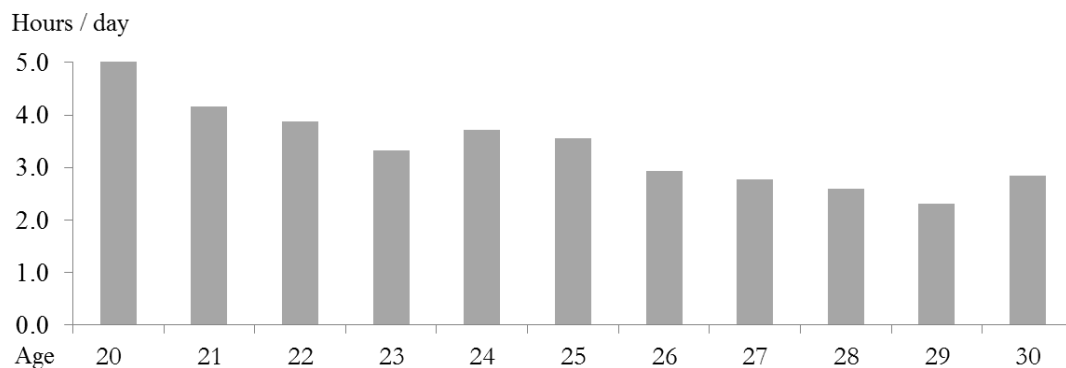
The analysis takes into account a number of standard demographic variables, such as age and gender, which have been shown by previous research to be important variables for media and technology adoption (Aral & Walker 2012; Gefen & Straub 1997; Hargittai 2007; Tufekci 2007), as well as Internet use (Christofides et al. 2012; Zillien & Hargittai 2009). In particular, age has been identified as a significant predictor of online activities, consistently indicating that younger people are more likely to be active on the Internet (Bonfadelli 2002; Dutton & Blank 2013; Lenhart & Madden 2008). As people grow older, there is evidence that this may have an effect on their technology uses. For example, a longitudinal survey among Microsoft employees between 2008 and 2011 finds age to be a significant predictor of Facebook and LinkedIn use (Archambault & Grudin 2012). Other studies find that younger individuals are able to reap

greater benefits from Internet services compared to elderly users (Van Deursen & Helsper 2015). In terms of networking preferences, studies have identified an inverse relationship between age and the size of one's SNS network (D. Quinn et al. 2011). At the same time, people also seem to use social media to predominantly connect to their own age cohort, as evidenced by their proclivity to associate with SNS friends of the same age (McAndrew & Jeong 2012).

To estimate their age, survey-respondents were directly asked to indicate their year of birth in the questionnaire. Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between age and time spent on SNSs per day in the sample, which hints at a negative correlation. That is, younger survey-respondents appear to spend on average more time on SNSs on a daily basis compared to older respondents. Furthermore, Figure 16 in the Appendix shows that younger survey-respondents are more likely to have accounts on Snapchat as well as Instagram. That being said, age is not related to the probability of using SNSs in general. For example, based on the collected data, the likelihood of maintaining a Facebook account does not seem to be related to age.

Figure 5: Distribution of average time spent on SNSs by age

QS5: "In a typical day, about how much time do you spend using social network sites?"



Notes: Table figures show average number of hours spent on all SNSs per day by age.

Demographic factors: Gender

Gender differences in the use of social media have been frequently subject to scholarly debates over the past few years. Even before the advent of SNSs, social scientists have identified significant gender differences in media use (Rosengren 1974) and daily communication patterns (Duck et al. 1991). In a similar vein, recent CMC studies have uncovered significant gender differences in mediated self-presentation (Whitty 2008), privacy concerns (Hoy & Milne 2010) and overall levels of self-disclosure on SNSs (Special & Li-Barber 2012). For example, there is some evidence that male users may be more engaged in information-disclosure, while female users may be more engaged in privacy controlling behaviours (Kuo et al. 2013). Research also finds that male users are more active in online content production, entertainment seeking, classic media and email use (Blank & Groselj 2014). In terms of Internet outcomes, men also appear to draw larger benefits from Internet use, but evidence for this relationship remains inconclusive in all domains except politics (Van Deursen & Helsper 2015).

Despite this wealth of empirical studies, gendered Internet use remains a subject of scholarly debate. In particular, there is opposing evidence that gender identity may only have a marginal impact on technology use. For instance, Workman (2014 p. 16) asserts that “*as modern societies are evolving to become more technologically literate, previous assumptions about age and gender, in terms of technology use, may have become anachronistic.*” In terms of Internet access, gender differences also appear to have been largely eradicated in some countries, including the UK (Dutton & Blank 2013). However, in many other countries gender continues to play an important role in digital divides and access to the Internet.

To capture people’s gender, respondents were offered a male/female gender choice to describe their gender-based sense of self. I am aware of the fact that this binary response option

may have excluded certain people who felt that they cannot or do not wish to express their gender identity in such binary terms. Nevertheless, it was decided to prioritise analytical viability over an inclusive range of gender choices in the survey questionnaire. In the obtained sample, gender was roughly equally distributed across all ages (50.25% female), even though some demographic groups were over-sampled while others were under-sampled. In particular, there were disproportionately fewer older female respondents and a disproportionately larger number of older male respondents. To correct for this bias, it was important to weight the sample based on target population proportions for age and gender provided by the ONS. For this purpose, probability weights were implemented to make slight adjustments for age and gender proportions through iterative proportional fitting (see Table 22 in the Appendix).

Demographic factors: Occupational status

The survey questionnaire further captured respondents' occupational status, resulting in the distribution of responses described in Table 1. This broadly reflects patterns in the studied population¹⁰, albeit students seem to be overrepresented in the collected sample (37.13%). In terms of educational attainment, the sample contained a variety of responses, ranging from people with no educational qualifications (1.13%) to respondents with higher-education graduate degrees (14.25%). Based on ONS data, this indicates that the sample contains a slightly more educated group of people than the population average for 20-30 year olds in the UK. However, in the interest of parsimony, most of the analytical models in this thesis exclude respondents' self-reported occupational status, because it had no significant effect on the dependent variables.

¹⁰ According to the ONS, the unemployment rate in the UK for people under 25 was 13.5% in September 2015, and 20% of these people were reported to have been unemployed for over 12 months. This is close to the unemployment rate of respondents in the research sample.

Demographic factors: Geographic location

Survey-respondents came from diverse regions of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. After the data were collected, respondents' geographic locations were coded from self-reported postcodes and the transmitted IP addresses into six broad categories based on the urban-rural definitions used by the ONS in the UK¹¹. This distinction was important, because users from rural areas could have different perspectives on new technologies compared to users from more urban areas. In addition, a separate classification scheme was applied to survey-respondents in Scotland, following the methodological best-practices used in OxIS (Dutton & Blank 2013). Over the past decade, the proportion of the UK population living in urban areas has increased to 82%. Even though SNS users from urban regions were slightly overrepresented in the sample, this reflects the broad patterns of SNS membership in the studied population.

Other measured factors

The survey also measured people's personality traits, using the short questionnaire of the Big-Five personality inventory (Rammstedt & John 2007). However, these variables were cut from the research models for parsimony (see Appendix for list of all survey questions). A final variable that could have also played a role in technology adoption and use was people's socio-economic status (Bolton et al. 2013; Brooks et al. 2011). For instance, Dutton and colleagues (1987) find evidence that income is a key factor that may be positively associated with the adoption of new technologies, such as personal computers (PCs). However, the final survey did

¹¹ The urbanisation scale used by the ONS organises respondents' geographic locations into the following six categories: (1). Urban – less sparse (Scotland: large urban); (2). Urban – sparse (Scotland: other urban); (3). Suburban town and fringe – less sparse (Scotland: accessible small town); (4). Suburban town and fringe – sparse (Scotland: remote small town); (5). Rural village, hamlet and isolated dwelling – less sparse (Scotland: accessible rural); (6). Rural village, hamlet and isolated dwelling – sparse (Scotland: very remote small towns, remote rural areas, very remote rural areas).

not measure people's socio-economic status, since most social media platforms and services that are studied in this thesis are typically freely accessible on the Internet and free to use.

Table 2: Reciprocity matrix of multiple SNS use

	Use	Use	Use	Use
Respondents	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat
% of Facebook users who...	-	64.07%	54.43%	49.77%
% of Twitter users who...	97.98%	-	68.08%	49.69%
% of Instagram users who...	97.86%	80.05%	-	69.12%
% of Snapchat users who...	97.98%	79.83%	83.86%	-

Notes: % shows users of each SNS who use another SNS in the sample. Total users of Facebook n=757, total users of Twitter n=495, total users of Instagram n=421, total users of Snapchat n=347 and total users with no accounts on any of the four studied SNSs n=30. Table design adapted from Pew Research Centre (Greenwood et al. 2016).

SNS account membership

The overarching narrative emerging from the sample shows that young adults in the UK increasingly turn to a combination of multiple SNSs in their day-to-day life, which reflects an important global trend toward cross-channel social networking. In the context of my research questions, an important challenge was how to identify the same person across multiple SNS accounts. The most reliable way to compare SNS use and sentiments across platforms was, therefore, to focus on the individual user as an autonomous agent and his or her perspective on the social phenomenon at hand. This is what the survey method was able to accomplish.

Out of the four studied SNSs, respondents reported to use on average 2.53 sites, with 75.88% of respondents reporting to use more than one SNSs. Overall, the sample contained




























n=757 Facebook users, n=495 Twitter users, n=421 Instagram users and n=347 Snapchat users (see Figure 6). The number of observed SNS account combinations between these four studied SNSs was vast. For example, 69.1% of Instagram users were also using Snapchat, while 64.1% of Facebook users were also using Twitter. By contrast, only 37.5% of Facebook users were simultaneously using both Snapchat and Instagram. There were also n=249 or 31.1% of all respondents who reported to have accounts on all four studied SNSs. Table 2 shows variations in multiple SNS account membership, illustrating the ‘reciprocity’ of SNS use in the sample.

However, despite the prevalence of multiple media use, there were still many respondents who reported to only use a single SNS. The largest group of such respondents with just one SNS account were users of Facebook (n=157). The largest group of people who reported to have an account on two of the four studied SNSs were joint users of Facebook and Twitter (n=132). Next, the largest group of people who reported to have accounts on three out of the four studied SNSs were users of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (n=82). Users of Instagram and Snapchat typically also indicated to have a Facebook account (see Figure 6).

This implies that Facebook appears to act like a starting point into the social media world for many users. There are many reasons for using emerging SNSs like Instagram and Snapchat, but these SNSs are almost always employed in concert with Facebook. In fact, there were no respondents in the sample who only had a Snapchat account with no other SNSs. From the perspective of the individual user, some of these SNSs may work together in complementary ways, while other sites may substitute each other. This is in line with the theoretical framework espoused in Chapter 3 and hints at the complex pathways to SNS commitment. At the other extreme, the sample also contained respondents who did not appear to participate in social media at all. 3.8% of survey-respondents (n=30) reported to have none of the four studied SNSs. This

could be either because they used alternative SNSs (e.g. WeChat, Tumblr or Strava) as the main communication channel with their personal networks, or because they made a conscious choice not to use SNSs altogether. This is a limitation of the survey that needs to be acknowledged.

Figure 6: Overview of multiple SNS account membership in the sample

Respondents	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Snapchat	Total accounts
n=249					4
n=157					1
n=132					2
n=82					3
n=46					2
n=35					3
n=34					2
n=30					0
n=22					3
n=6					3
n=4					1
n=2					1
n=1					2

Notes: n=800. SNS logos signify SNS account membership, e.g. n=132 respondents have at least accounts on Facebook and Twitter, while n=6 have accounts on Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Total users of Facebook n=757, total users of Twitter n=495, total users of Instagram n=421, total users of Snapchat n=347 and total users with no accounts on the four studied SNSs n=30.

5. 4. 3. Limitations of the survey method

While the survey method has produced reliable results that help answer my research questions, there are important methodological limitations that need to be acknowledged in this chapter. *First*, as in many other surveys, there are known problems with self-reported data. Respondents could always, intentionally or unintentionally, misrepresent their actual attitudes and behaviours. This limits the comparability of responses across the sample. On the one hand, social desirability bias remains an issue, even without direct contact with the researcher. On the other hand, people's understanding of survey questions may be affected by cognitive states and cultural framing (Heine et al. 2002; Hong et al. 2000). Furthermore, surveys have little direct introspective access to respondents' biases and higher order cognitive processes (Nisbett & Wilson 1977). For example, highly engaged SNS users may underestimate the time they spent online, while users who are very sensible to privacy issues may overestimate the time they spent on social media. In addition to that, self-reported data could be affected by systematic issues with respondents' memory. This is particularly the case for stylised recall questionnaires that intend to measure how much time users spend on certain activities (Kan & Pudney 2008). Equally, this could affect simple estimation exercises about the number of friends in one's Facebook network. This issue severely hinders the ability to compare users' time spent across SNSs and the size of their personal networks. Whenever possible, the survey thus avoided asking questions that could have been answered in ambiguous ways (e.g. estimations of minutes spent on specific SNSs).

Second, the inflexible design of the survey may have missed some data-points that could have helped us better understand the survey-responses. Most survey questions did not provide respondents with the additional space to elaborate on their answers or provide links and examples of their SNS activities. This drawback was addressed by carefully pre-testing all

survey questions during the pilot stage, as well as by emphasising rich narratives in the qualitative interviewing. Future research is encouraged to use more flexible and adaptive survey forms to allow users to better express their opinions and provide links to relevant examples of their SNS-related activities.

Third, since this one-time survey was collected at a single point in time, it is difficult to evaluate how people's attitudes towards specific social media platforms may have changed over time. Therefore, it is neither possible to explain changes in attitudes over time nor to infer causal effects from the data. For example, the survey asked several questions about users' motivations for joining particular SNSs. However, these motivations, alongside with people's perceptions of the affordances of SNSs, might have been updated at several points in time. External period effects, for example, could have included a public outrage about privacy breaches, the launch of alternative platforms or changes in user interfaces. Alternatively, any observed changes in attitudes and beliefs could also be related to aging effects and other changes in personal life circumstances, as SNS users grow older.

With regard to web-based surveys, it is also nearly impossible for the researcher to know what kinds of emotional states, stimuli or surroundings could have affected the responses in the gathered data (Rosenstein & Grant 1997; Ruggiero 2000). Consequently, it is conceivable that survey-responses about past events and motivations do not fully reflect respondents' state of mind at the time of the actual event. Instead, the obtained responses may be influenced by post-hoc rationalisation, affective states and other cognitive biases.

Bearing in mind these limitations and particularly the potential biases of self-reported data, a more qualitative approach to the research problem at hand is recommended. In this regard, I proceed to interpret the collected survey-responses in the light of qualitative interviews,

guided by the overall theoretical framework espoused in Chapters 2 and 3. This has helped to overcome some of the outlined shortcomings of the survey instrument, as well as to strengthen and contextualise my understanding of the collected quantitative data.

5. 5. Qualitative methods

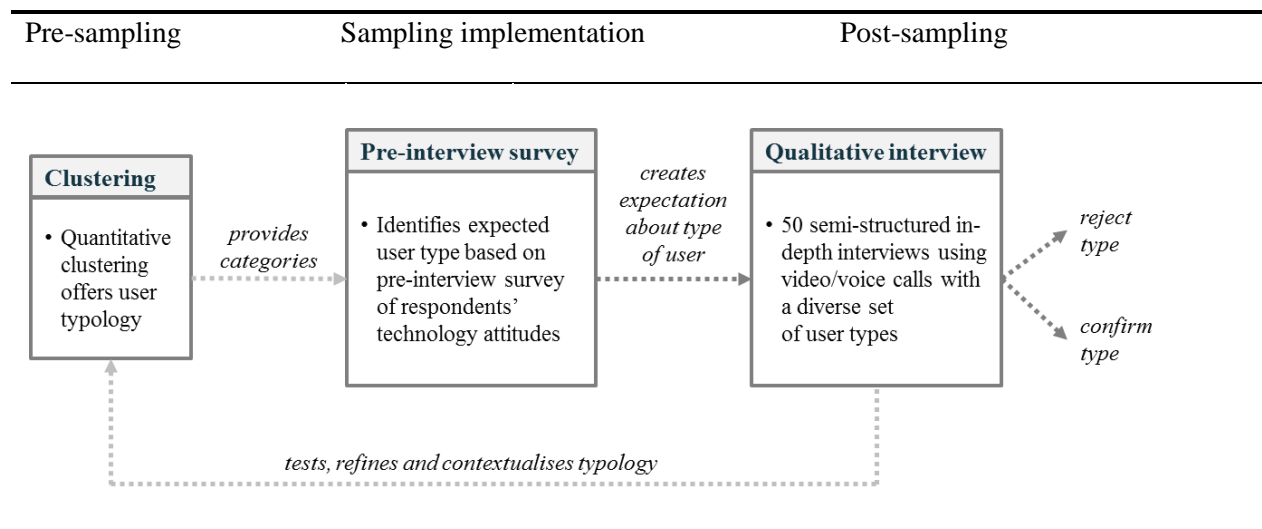
The goal of the qualitative component was to unpack and interpret the forces that influence people's commitment to SNSs, and understand the meanings behind these forces for the actors involved. While the survey method provided an aggregate picture of the social media choices of young adults in the UK, it was important to substantiate this analysis with more in-depth qualitative interview data. This approach has helped me to further explore the themes that emerged from the survey and ask additional questions that went beyond what I could realistically ask in a web-based questionnaire. In particular, the semi-structured interviews were instrumental to testing, refining and characterising the quantitative findings with regard to user typologies, motivations and individual descriptions of SNS commitment.

5. 5. 1. Qualitative sampling strategy

The goal of the qualitative sampling strategy was to explore a range of opinions through a diverse sample of interview participants. In order to focus on particular attitudes and behaviours that go beyond what the survey could provide, the technique of theoretical sampling was used. Theoretical sampling is a well-established non-probability sampling strategy that is commonly used in qualitatively-driven research (Mason 2006). It helps to illustrate extreme cases, as well as the characteristics of certain sub-groups of users in the population to purposefully find examples of a wide range of research participants (Bryman 2012; Teddlie & Yu 2007; Tracy 2010).

The specific categories for the theoretical sampling of participants were derived from quantitative clustering analysis in Chapter 7. This represents another example, where the quantitative and qualitative elements of this dissertation are both conceptually and practically intertwined. The clustering solution presented in Chapter 7 offers a typology of SNS users based on their beliefs about and attitudes toward digital technologies, i.e. technology optimism, technology anxiety and technology dependence. This approach has inductively resulted in four broad user types: *sceptical*, *moderate*, *enthusiastic* and *entangled* users. These types were not only used to collect a theoretically diverse group of interview participants, but they were also tested, refined and contextualised through the qualitative interviews (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Overview of qualitative sampling based on quantitative user typology



A short pre-interview online survey was circulated to potential interview participants to determine which of the four user categories they would most likely to fall into. This questionnaire consisted of an informed consent form and the 8 questions on technology attitudes from the original survey. After the completion of this short questionnaire, respondents were

invited to voluntarily provide their name, email address and city of residence to be approached by the researcher for a follow-up personal interview. Respondents below the age of 20 and above the age of 30 were automatically dismissed from the set of potential interview recruits. Next, individuals not residing in the UK were also eliminated. The remaining candidates were coded into four groups based on the clustering solution in Chapter 7. Between March 2016 and July 2016, I have continued to recruit potential interviewees from diverse information channels across different regions of the UK. These recruiting channels included various SNS groups and pages of universities, companies, local job forums, social groups and community organisations. This process was repeated until I had scheduled a sufficient number of interviews per hypothesised user type. Theoretical saturation was reached when at least 10 interviewees have been identified and successfully interviewed from each category. In total, there were $n=10$ sceptics, $n=13$ moderates, $n=14$ enthusiasts and $n=13$ entangled users in the sample of $n=50$ interview participants (50% female, 44% students). The average age of interview participants was just over 25 years old. Each interview participant was sent an additional informed consent form that explained the research background, context and purpose of the interview. Interviewees were instructed that they could withdraw from the study at any time by advising the researcher of their decision. Further reminders were sent out to all interview participants 24 hours before the scheduled interview times.

The pre-interview screening survey was helpful in diversifying the theoretical interview sample and recruiting a sufficient number of users from each hypothesised user type. All interviewees could be categorised into one of the presumed user type categories, but in four

individual cases the user type had to be revised and updated after the interview¹². In summary, the theoretical sampling approach resulted in a balanced and diverse sample of n=50 interview participants, while maximising the breadth of possible user types and personal backgrounds.

5. 5. 2. Interview implementation

Following the inductive principles of grounded theory (Glaser 1965; Glaser & Strauss 1967), I have used the time between the quantitative and qualitative data collection to review the findings, summarise ideas and concepts and identify themes that emerged from the survey. This exercise was repeated iteratively between the qualitative interviews to allow me to better conceptualise the collected interview data and further develop codes and interview questions before the interviewing process was over. This approach helped me to improve “*self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases and inclinations*” (Tracy 2010 p. 848). The interview guide was used to impose a semi-structured format on the interviews to enhance their reliability, coherence and comparability across cases, while maintaining flexibility (Miles & Huberman 1994). The full interview guide can be perused in the Appendix (see Attachment D). All interview questions were also pre-tested in n=5 face-to-face interviews during a qualitative pilot – in line with recommendations in the methods literature (Bryman 2008; Kvale 1996; Morse & Field 1995).

The interviews were conducted online using direct voice/video calls with the research participants (in one case, the interviewee had to type his responses in chat messages, due to poor Internet connectivity). The main benefit of using this form of digitally-mediated interviewing

¹² In these four cases, the pre-interview survey indicated a user type that was inconsistent with subsequent interview-responses, which is most likely due to social desirability bias in the pre-screening survey. For example, while the survey suggested that one respondent was an enthusiast, her interview responses actually indicated that she exhibited the typical characteristics of an entangled user. In this way, the expected user type from the pre-interview survey only acted as a starting point for each interview. In a similar way, other interpretations of themes that emerged from the survey-responses were tested, refined and validated as a result of the interviewing method.

over face-to-face meetings was their non-intrusive nature that created a trusted environment, where the research participant felt in control of the situation. The ability to record and archive video calls for later transcription was also beneficial. A video connection was not always available due to poor Internet signal or personal circumstances of the interviewees. However, whenever a video connection was possible, it helped me to better contextualise interview responses. Considerable insight could be gained not only from listening to what participants had to say, but also by paying attention to how they were saying it. For example, the particularities of “*nods, silences, humour and naughty nuances*” (Altheide & Johnson 1994 p. 492) provided valuable insights into some of the subtle assumptions and unarticulated emotional states of the interviewees. Further, the video connection helped me to use non-verbal cues and facial expressions to establish trust and encourage more personal disclosures. This is supported by the methodological literature on digital interviewing (Bertrand & Bourdeau 2010; Hay-Gibson 2009; N. James & Busher 2009; Patton 2005). Upon request, many interviewees have used screen-sharing features to share specific examples of their recent SNS activities with me. These additional observations amplified my understanding of interview responses. Besides the advantages mentioned above, this method was also more practical and cost-effective compared to face-to-face interviews, because it allowed me to conduct multiple interviews per day with geographically dispersed participants without the need to travel to remote areas of the country.

Since granular network data was not required for answering my research questions, the interviews could focus on the personal narratives of SNS choice and commitment. During the semi-structured interviews I was able to draw upon a number of validated interview techniques such as active listening, pause management and sensitivity to non-verbal cues (Kazmer & Xie 2008; Kvale 1996; Miles & Huberman 1994; Schmidt 2004). For instance, I have regularly

interrupted my sequence of questions and paused to allow the interviewees to elaborate on their previous responses. This allowed me to enrich my contextual understandings of the “*different voices, different perspectives and points of views*” (Denzin & Lincoln 1998 p. 5) of individual users. From a practical perspective, the questions were kept open-ended to allow interviewees to share their experiences, perspectives and personal uses of SNSs, without imposing any theory, academic terminology or predetermined labels on the interviewees. Thus, maintaining an open and neutral, yet critical approach to the interviewees was important. Alongside the questions from the interview guide, I asked interviewees to freely talk about their ordinary social media habits and practices, self-presentation, perceptions of network audiences, social contexts, and experiences of SNS adoption and use. An important part of the interview has also dealt with the way how interviewees were embedding SNSs into their day-to-day social interactions. In this regard, the interviews showed that people were generally aware of the main features of SNSs and what each site could represent for them individually. In fact, many interviewees paid close attention to the role of SNSs in their social lives, admitting that they had already personally reflected on some of these issues.

The semi-structured form of the interviews provided the needed flexibility to follow-up each response with a deeper question to better understand the context of each individual respondent. Next, I applied various person-centred interviewing techniques (R. I. Levy & Hollan 1998; G. W. Ryan & Russell 2009) by alternating between questions about general social media configurations and specific questions about personal behaviours. These techniques have been developed in the qualitative interviewing literature as a means to represent the subjective and intersubjective experiences from the point of view of the individual. In the few cases where nearly all questions from the interview guide were exhausted, I selectively introduced new

insights from the preceding quantitative survey as prompts in order to trigger new thoughts and ideas, and encourage interviewees to evaluate their own statements from an outsider's perspective. This has enriched the discussions and stimulated deeper reflections during the interviews. After the interview was over, the responses were anonymised, archived and coded as part of the qualitative analysis.

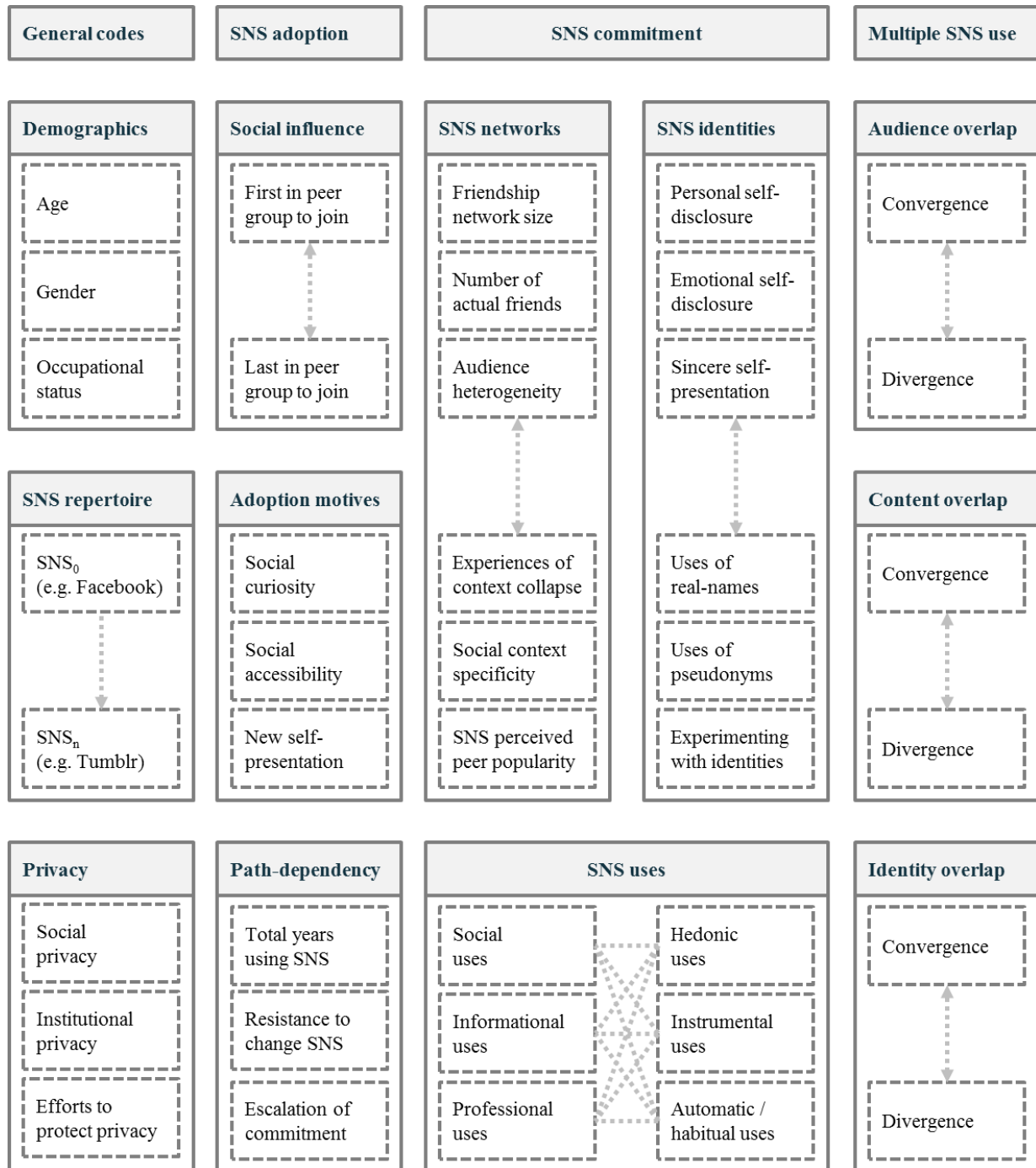
The first 25 interviews were on average 59 minutes long, while the last 25 interviews were shorter with an average of 21 minutes. During the first 25 interviews I have focused on in-depth descriptions of SNS commitment, taking into account the entirety of users' social media accounts and social contexts. The purpose of these interviews was to go as deep into people's experiences, use patterns and motivations as possible, thereby gaining an overall sense of their personal SNS experiences. In the second interviewing phase, I have conducted a series of 25 additional, shorter interviews that were primarily designed to explore specific themes that emerged from the lengthier interviews. The goal of this second group of interviews was, in particular, to test the plausibility, credibility and transferability of insights provided by the first 25 respondents. Hypothesised user types were roughly equally distributed between the two stages of interviewing. It is important to note that both interviewing phases were interlinked, because interviewees in phase 2 were answering different sub-sets of the main interview guide that was already deployed in phase 1. Overall, this approach helped assess whether information saturation has been reached (Guba & Lincoln 1985). Despite the empirically-grounded nature of the user typology, the qualitative interviews were instrumental in challenging, extending and refining the hypotheses from the survey data. With the thick descriptions from the interviews, the clustering solution could be substantiated with additional personal trajectories and narratives of events and experiences (see Chapter 8 for a synthesis of the typology and interview insights).

5. 5. 3. Coding process

Since the goal of this research stage was to provide thick descriptions of people's social media choices, I have iteratively analysed all interview data following the grounded theory approach (Fielding et al. 2008; Glaser 1965; Glaser & Strauss 1967). The ensuing coding process of the interviews was based on themes from both the quantitative and qualitative data, and followed the analytical process espoused by Miles and Huberman (1994 p. 308).

First, codes were developed from the transcripts. The data were repeatedly read to obtain a sense of the whole, as suggested in the qualitative methods literature (Guba & Lincoln 1985; Richards 2009; Tesch 1990). Focusing on the outlined research questions, the coding tree for the interview data was organised in a hierarchical way: general codes were adapted from the literature, whereas specific codes emerged from the interview data. During the coding process of the interviews, I attempted to move from descriptive categorisations to more analytical codes in order to assign "*units of meaning*" to information obtained from the interviewees (Miles & Huberman 1994 p. 56). Where possible, metaphors from the interviews were used as analytical tools to reduce data complexity, establish patterns and connect findings to theory. As such, the resulting coding scheme was a product of several inductive iterations, using category labels and tags from the interviews (see Figure 8). Next, codes were organised into concepts and later grouped into categories to make sense of the data from the lens of U&G and affordance theory. Lastly, all resulting concepts were re-organised using qualitative clustering techniques advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994 p. 248). Theme-extraction procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006 p. 87) were also used to establish principal categories and narratives that link the data from the quantitative and qualitative steps into theoretical collections.

Figure 8: Overview of coding scheme



Notes: Table highlights only top-level codes in each category. Each sub-code (e.g. institutional privacy) encompasses more detailed codes based on specific examples from the interviews (e.g. worries that governments or intelligence agencies could access or abuse personal data vs. worries that businesses could access or abuse personal data for advertising). The following extra layers of codes were added as meta-tags on top of each interview unit: SNS in question, SNS user type and mode of interview.

5. 5. 4. Limitations of the interviewing method

Even though this interview implantation strategy achieved its goal in obtaining and analysing a diversity of different SNS users in each category, it is still important to acknowledge some of its limitations. In particular, the following four points stand out:

First, it is clear that the gathered qualitative sample cannot be statistically representative, even if it is informationally representative (Sandelowski 1995 p. 181). *Second*, it is likely that the sampling strategy did not capture inactive users and users at the extreme ends of the demographic spectrum of society. *Third*, the employed qualitative sampling strategy did not diversify the sample based on respondents' educational attainment or socio-economic status. *Finally*, this approach can only offer a snapshot into users' perspectives and narratives of SNS commitment, even though people's SNS-related activities tend to change with time.

5. 6. Chapter conclusion

This chapter has introduced the two main methodological components of this dissertation. On the one hand, the quantitative component relied on survey data to identify and test patterns of attitudes and behaviour related to SNS commitment. On the other hand, the qualitative component featured in-depth semi-structured interviews that were designed to provide a thick description of relevant opinions, emotions and experiences of individual users. During the subsequent coding process, both data sources were integrated to establish principal themes and narratives that link the data from the quantitative and qualitative research steps together. This methodology is well aligned with the U&G perspective, which postulates an empirical approach to studying the social and psychological gratifications of individual users, while also acknowledging the need for rich qualitative narratives of people's social media choices.

Next, ethical considerations were reviewed, and a detailed account of the employed sampling strategies was given to show how the data was collected. To summarise, this thesis uses a stratified sample of $n=800$ survey-respondents and a theoretical sample of $n=50$ interview participants. A number of additional steps were undertaken that link the theoretical paradigms expressed in Chapters 2 and 3 with the analytical steps that follow this chapter. The macro-level trend toward multiple media use was found in the sample and detailed SNS account membership statistics were derived. Users' demographic characteristics were also measured and summarised in this chapter. Based on several population statistics, the survey sample was shown to be sufficiently representative on key demographic variables and was roughly even across both age and gender. Having undertaken these methodological steps, I can now begin to unravel some of the theoretical puzzles of SNS commitment in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6:

UNDERSTANDING COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

6. 1. Introduction – Acolytes of Facebook

Sometimes the academic inquiry of SNSs can benefit from looking at how our relationship with social media is typically portrayed in popular culture. For instance, an interesting narrative that seems to resonate with the general public compares people's relentless enthusiasm for social media to some form of a new religious cult. The idea of a religion built around Facebook likes has, indeed, attracted many artists and activists in recent years. For example, the Dutch artist Dadara invited participants of the 2013 Burning Man festival to worship a giant golden 'Like'-icon on an altar in the Nevada desert. Following the path of 'Enlikement', converts were encouraged to embrace their psychological dependence on social media. In a similar manner, Kevin Kelly, the founding editor of Wired Magazine, has frequently advocated a religious awakening of technology leading up to a "deified" Internet.

More recently, one of the most discussed exhibits at the 2015 Venice Art Biennale featured the massive art installation of the "Church of Facebook Religion" in the historic church of Saint Antonin. The unmistakable letter *F* from the Facebook logo was prominently affixed to the altar, eclipsing the crucifix. Next to the altar, the artists showcased their own version of the Tablet of the Covenant, which was inspired by an iPad tablet. The re-imagined Tablet thus showed a loading screen saying: "Ten commandments updating in progress. If you violate the letter or spirit of this statement, or otherwise create risk, we can stop providing Facebook to

you.” The sculptures and bas-reliefs on the walls of the church illustrated figures of ‘Neo-Apostles’ and pilgrims looking to download updates to their divine enlightenment through the Internet. The art piece depicted them holding up their mobile phones to the skies in search of a better Wifi signal. Instead of reaching for *Heaven*, Facebook worshippers were depicted as reaching for the *Cloud*. Everywhere in the church there were metaphorical links between Christian iconography and traces of modern digital life, such as infographics, ‘share’-buttons and various app-logos. These blatant parallels between social media and religion have caused quite a stir with both press and public alike. Many have applauded the artists for putting a digital twist on the archaic structures of the Catholic church; they argued that, much like religion, social media has re-configured perceptions of reality for its users. Yet others have criticised the artists for allegedly disrespecting Christian values, claiming that technology must never be equated to religious values or spirituality.

The art installation was part of the larger “*Conversion*” project created by artists Andrey Blokhin and Georgy Kuznetsov under the artistic label Recycle Art Group. At its core, the question raised by the art duo was whether our seemingly irresistible, totemic fascination with social media is just part of our zeitgeist, or a more fundamental shift in our values that can be compared to a new ‘opiate of the masses’. By extension, just as we might understand religious Christians by their devotion to the Bible, we might understand Facebook worshippers by their commitment to the site. But what explains this quasi-religious zeal and dedication to particular social media platforms, such as Facebook, which is becoming increasingly commonplace around the world? This dispute brings us back to the academic discussion of SNS commitment, which was first introduced as a concept in Chapter 3, encouraging us to narrow down the illustrative examples at the outset of this chapter to a more tractable research question.

The foregoing review of the literature in Chapters 2 and 3 should have made it clear that the inquiry of persistent SNS use and commitment has not yet been adequately addressed by CMC scholars. The dominant theoretical discourse has focused on predictors of SNS use and social capital provision on individual sites, instead of a wide-ranging discussion of social media choices in a broader multi-media environment. In my area of focus, therefore, I am interested in why people might continue to use particular SNSs, and become emotionally invested in such sites, when a range of alternative technological services are available to them.

So, what is it that drives SNS commitment? And what is the role of uses & gratifications in the way how people come to associate a deep psychological connection to a site? In these circumstances, one may refer to the scholarly debates in the marketing literature that describe how people develop psychological connections to products and brands (Beatty & Kahle 1988; Mittal & Lee 1989; Robertson 1976; Traylor 1981; Warrington & Shim 2000), but it is clear that these relationships are not yet fully understood in SNS scholarship. This is why Chapter 3 has posited the need for understanding the theoretical pathways and mechanisms involved in the way how people become committed to particular SNSs.

Given the above preamble, this chapter builds on the theoretical foundations established in Chapters 2 and 3 in order to fill some of these theoretical gaps. Explaining commitment is important for not only understanding people's continued use of SNSs, but also for measuring their commitment to specific platforms when alternative sites are available. Simply put, the primary question under discussion in this chapter is concerned with users' practices that could help us explain the predictors of SNS commitment. If we recall the three main groups of SNS affordances (networking, communication and self-presentation), we could extend this logic to

three groups of predictors of commitment. This abstract problem is then translated into the following research question that guides the quantitative analysis in this chapter:

RQ₁: *To what extent do people's networks, uses and identities on individual SNSs affect the degree of their commitment to each site?*

Using our understanding of the three categories of social affordances, this research question can be further broken down into the following sub-questions: **RQ_{1.1}:** *How does the size of people's SNS network audiences affect their commitment to each site?* **RQ_{1.2}:** *What are the associations between different types of SNS uses and people's commitment to each site?* **RQ_{1.3}:** *To what extent is there a relationship between the sincerity of people's self-presentation on SNSs and their commitment to each site?* **RQ_{1.4}:** *How are people's diverse offline networking styles reflected in their SNS commitment decisions?*

The plan of this chapter is thus to address these questions in five stages. The first section 6.2 is dedicated to the construction of the SNS Commitment Scale. Next, section 6.3 reviews the literature to discuss measures of variables and formulate hypotheses about the effects of SNS networks, uses and identities, as well as networking styles. Having presented the conjectured pathways to SNS commitment, the chapter tests these hypotheses in a series of nested regression models in section 6.4. These analytical steps allow me to better understand how people become individually invested in and committed to specific SNSs. Next, section 6.5 offers a theoretical discussion of the results. It reviews the findings from the four models, before concluding the chapter in section 6.6 with the main themes that emerged from the findings.

6. 2. Measuring SNS commitment

Chapter 3 introduced SNS commitment as the socio-psychological process by which people become emotionally invested in a particular brand of SNS instead of a range of alternative sites. Of course, people commit to the use of SNSs for different reasons, and the goal of this research is by no means to incorporate them all. Instead, my focus is merely on the attitudinal manifestations of SNS commitment. The goal of the following sub-section is thus to construct a *Commitment Scale* that can become a vehicle for the broader inquiry of commitment to various social media platforms. In light of the research questions above, platform-specific commitment is thus used as the main dependent variable in this chapter.

To operationalise this construct in a meaningful way, the scale builds on the attitudinal questions from the *Intensity of Facebook Use Scale* (Ellison et al. 2007; Valenzuela et al. 2009), which itself was inspired by the U&G-based *Television Affinity Scale* from the 1980s (Rubin 1981). The principal assumption of all these scales is, of course, that people's complex socio-psychological attitudes towards specific media technologies can be measured and succinctly expressed in a single numeric value that aggregates a number of individual survey-responses.

The original Intensity of Facebook Use Scale was first broken down into behavioural and attitudinal questions. This was important to avoid conflating conceptually distinct elements of amount, type and variety of SNS use (Blank & Groselj 2014). According to Meyer and Allen (1991 p. 68), commitment primarily represents an expression of a psychological state, which may also be associated with behavioural outcomes. This is why, by only focusing on attitudinal questions, the SNS Commitment Scale provides an estimate of three conceptual dimensions of commitment: the degree to which people are emotionally connected to a particular SNS, the extent of their relational investment in the site and the extent to which the SNS is integrated into

their daily activities. Therefore, the original self-reported measures of the size of people's SNS networks and the average time spent on SNSs were not included in the new scale. In this way, the SNS Commitment Scale extends the existing literature and develops a generalised measurement of SNS commitment as an insight into the personal relationships that people might form with specific media technologies.

Table 3: Principal components analysis items and factor loadings on SNS commitment

Factor	Item (agreement with statement)	Loadings			
		<i>Facebook</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>Instagram</i>	<i>Snapchat</i>
<i>Commitment</i>	“This SNS is part of my everyday activities.”	0.432	0.425	0.419	0.420
	“When I meet new people, we usually connect on this SNS.”	0.372	0.392	0.394	0.374
	“I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto this SNS for a while.”	0.408	0.408	0.412	0.410
	“I feel I am part of a larger community on this SNS.”	0.385	0.404	0.400	0.402
	“I would be sorry if this SNS were to shut down.”	0.407	0.395	0.394	0.412
	“I check this SNS as soon as I wake up in the morning.”	0.441	0.426	0.429	0.429
Eigenvalues:		3.411	4.314	4.178	4.205

Notes: Table shows summary of results from four separate weighted PCAs on each SNS. All six items for each of the SNS loaded only on one component with a high eigenvalue (>3.40). The second-largest component in each case was relatively small (<0.70). Furthermore, varimax rotation was applied to the PCA models to simplify the expressions obtained and make them more interpretable.

Another reason for only focusing on the attitudinal dimensions of SNS commitment was the high risk of measurement errors, e.g. in the self-reported number of minutes per day spent on each site. The pilot analysis indicated that “total minutes spent on SNSs” is an extremely inaccurate measure of SNS commitment. In part, this is due to the increasingly complex modern media environment, in which multiple sites are concurrently used. This makes the accounting of minutes spent on a single SNS per day a very challenging task for an ordinary user. The problem of self-reported time spent on SNSs is further exacerbated by habitual use patterns and irregular bursts of social media sessions. These bursts of activity are becoming increasingly common, especially because SNSs can be frequently accessed from a variety of digital devices, e.g. mobile phones, tablets, wearables, laptops and desktop devices.

To overcome these measurement challenges, the survey pilots have shown that users find it much easier to report an estimate of their overall aggregate hours spent on all SNS-related activities per day, instead of approximating the time spent on each SNS individually. This approach still does not provide an exact account of the variable of interest due to potential memory problems and differences in perceptions. However, it provides an important insight into users’ subjective perceptions of how much time they think they tend to dedicate to SNS-related activities on any given day. Therefore, in order to avoid any foreseeable measurement errors, the amount of time spent on SNSs was completely detached from the SNS Commitment Scale.

Table 3 shows the wording of each attitudinal question and the relevant factor loadings that stem from the factor analysis. The items were all measured using 5-point Likert scales and could thus be averaged to create an index of SNS commitment. All survey questions that constitute the scale were replicated for each of the four SNSs, if respondents indicated that they

had accounts on such sites. This means that there are four separate indexes in this analysis, which independently measure users' commitment attitudes to each of the four sites, i.e. Facebook commitment (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.85$), Twitter commitment (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.90$), Instagram commitment (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.91$) and Snapchat commitment (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.91$). In line with previous studies in the field, Cronbach's α was used as an estimate of the reliability of the scale, which is a function of the number of items in the scale, the average covariance between item-pairs and the variance of the total score. The high Cronbach's α coefficients for the Commitment Scale of each site indicate a high internal consistency, suggesting that the items on each scale are evidently measuring a single unidimensional latent construct. Furthermore, structural validity was tested using a series of factor analyses for each platform (see Table 3).

Next, I asked whether people who scored high on commitment to one site also scored high on commitment to the other jointly used SNSs. One way of testing this is to examine the subset of users who indicated to have accounts on all four studied SNSs ($n=249$). While this sub-sample is not representative of the whole survey sample, it is still useful to examine specifically those users who have indicated to have accounts on all four sites. For these users, the bivariate correlations between the four separate SNS commitment indexes ranged from 0.19 (between Facebook and Twitter) to 0.54 (between Instagram and Snapchat). Table 4 shows that there is, thus, some evidence for the positive relationship between commitment attitudes to various sites that are used in concert, but it appears that there is no general consistent pattern of commitment across the four studied SNSs. In other words, being committed to the use of Facebook does not automatically imply being committed to Twitter, etc.

Table 4: Bivariate correlations between SNS commitment variables

Item	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Facebook commitment				
2. Twitter commitment	0.189			
3. Instagram commitment	0.218	0.463		
4. Snapchat commitment	0.212	0.395	0.542	

Notes: Sub-sample of users who have accounts on all four SNSs (n=249). **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations ($p < 0.01$).

6. 3. Predictors of SNS commitment

In a nutshell, this chapter examines what it takes to be committed to an SNS. Specifically, there are three predictor categories of commitment towards SNSs that are critically examined in this chapter: SNS networks, uses and identities. A fourth factor complements this analysis by controlling for individual differences in networking styles and friending patterns.

6. 3. 1. SNS networks and audiences

SNS commitment can be, first and foremost, conceived of as being related to users' social networks. This view assumes that people will be more committed to using those SNSs where they can find a larger preferred audience, e.g. whichever platform is most commonly used by their friends. After all, social media adoption is often described as being driven by network effects. That is, the more users are available and findable on any given social media platform, the greater the utility of the platform to everyone involved. This logic is based on a straightforward extrapolation of network utility to social networks, which goes back to the concept of *network effects* in the economics literature (Arthur 1989; David 1975; M. L. Katz & Shapiro 1986). Thus,

network effects can be defined as “*the change in the benefit, or surplus, that an agent derives from a good when the number of other agents consuming the same kind of good changes*” (Liebowitz & Margolis 1995 p. 1). Some product innovations, therefore, require a minimum number of adopters to be useful (Mahler & Rogers 1999; Van Slyke et al. 2007).

Similar to services in the telecommunication sector, both direct and indirect network effects may be generated from increased connectivity between adopters (Allen 1988; Gruber 2001; Lim et al. 2003; Rohlfs 1974; Schoder 2000). On the one hand, direct network effects on the demand-side may imply a greater population of communication partners (Strader et al. 2007). On the other hand, indirect network effects on the supply-side produce a slightly more subtle impact, e.g. by nurturing the supporting infrastructure and the propagation of complementary products and services (M. L. Katz & Shapiro 1986; Schilling 1999; Schoder 2000). In the context of SNSs, this could entail additional third-party apps (e.g. Tinder or Happn), social games (e.g. Farmville or CandyCrash), wearable hardware (e.g. Snapchat’s Spectacles), etc.

Therefore, it appears that the utility of an SNS to its users depends on how many other users have already subscribed to the same platform or are planning to do so in the future. Past research has shown this to be an important factor for people’s intentions to adopt and use new technologies that exhibit network effects, such as groupware (Lou et al. 2000) and instant-messaging (Van Slyke et al. 2007). Hence, a frequently repeated argument is that the number of users on any given platform determines user engagement and, consequently, the success or failure of the platform as a whole. From the viewpoint of the user, a larger friendship network on a site implies a larger collection of individuals who are already using the SNS. Based on the network effects argument, this should create a positive feedback loop and reinforce any activity patterns on the site. A larger audience means that more users will be able to respond to one’s

posted content. Following this logic, users with a larger number of friends or followers on any given social media platform would be expected to have more reasons to continue using that platform. Accordingly, this line of research leads me to formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: (on size of SNS audiences): Individuals with larger friendship/follower networks on a given SNS will report a more committed attitude to each respective site.

Nonetheless, is having a large network audience really the most important pre-condition for developing commitment to a given site? Research evidence seems to be divided on this issue. In particular, the literature provides support for two seemingly divergent claims. On the one hand, people with larger networks are more likely to hear about new product launches and adopt new SNSs. This may be due to their potentially higher exposure to diverse information from weak ties (Burt 1992; Granovetter 1978). On the other hand, individuals with large networks on incumbent SNSs could also be less likely to adopt new SNSs, due to their high switching costs related to the migration of content and networks to a new platform (Zengyan et al. 2009). In other words, having a large network on a site may discourage users from investing time in the creation of a new SNS profile on another site. What is more, research finds that large personal networks may also contribute to people's emotional investment in the user community as a whole (Sassenberg 2002). This could make a potential migration to a new site even less likely because of users' emotional attachment to what the site could represent.

Of course, merely looking at the size of people's networks may be a comparatively crude measure of social influence, due to the potential effects that stem from the very structure of relationships within one's social network (Aral & Van Alstyne 2011; Merluzzi & Burt 2013). For instance, the specific location that an individual occupies within the relational structure of a

social group may affect his or her agency with regard to the prevailing group dynamics (Polonski 2013). In Chapter 8, I explore this idea further by testing whether the perceived functional likeness of two sites may limit people's willingness to engage with a new site. In this instance, users may not want to replicate all their user-generated content and their friendship networks to a new account, especially if they had already accrued a substantially large friendship network on the old site, and if the new SNS essentially fulfils the same needs as the old one.

As an initial proxy for friendship networks on each site, the survey measured both the *total network size of friends/followers* on each of the four SNSs, as well as the number of self-reported '*actual friends*' on each site. Differentiating between these two concepts was important to separate casual acquaintances from close friends with more meaningful social relationships, i.e. '*actual friends*' who can provide social support (Khan et al. 2014; Lampe et al. 2013a; Stutzman et al. 2012). For example, while one's total number of connections on Facebook can be seen as a reliable measure of users' overall level of connectivity, it does not accurately reflect the actual number of friendship relationships actively maintained by the user (Ellison et al. 2011). Furthermore, the distinction between network size and '*actual friends*' is important, because visible cues of friendship ties typically do not decay over time due to a lack of engagement or lack of interest. In other words, while little to no social capital may exist in an observed dyadic relationship, the ostensible trace of the tie would still persist on the site as an artefact of the platform. This leads some SNS users to accrue large numbers of contacts on sites like Facebook, regardless of their actual efforts to maintain these relationships (Dunbar 2012).

Conversely, longitudinal studies of social network composition (e.g. Suitor & Keeton 1997) show that offline relationships tend to fade with time, unless friendship ties are actively

cultivated by both parties involved in the relationship. With regard to the potential effects of having many self-reported 'actual friends' on SNSs, I articulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b: (on number of actual friends): *Individuals with a greater number of 'actual friends' in their friendship/follower networks on a given SNS will report a more committed attitude to each respective site.*

The reliance on self-reported network size is, of course, a limitation of this method. It can, therefore, only be a partial way of capturing the effects of audience considerations on people's social media choices. This is why a third variable called *Perceived Peer-Rank index* (PPR index) was added to the models to measure the perceived relative popularity of each SNS within respondents' peer-groups. As an estimate of the group dynamics in people's SNS choices, this construct measures which sites are perceived to be favoured by one's friends, while also providing an insight into the potential mechanisms of social influence affecting commitment. The emphasis is on users' cognitive perceptions of relative SNS popularity ratings, which might deviate from actual SNS popularity ratings in each peer-group, as well as ratings globally.

I theorise that more popular SNSs may command a greater share of attention from one's audiences and are, therefore, more likely to be associated with SNS commitment. For example, if Snapchat is the dominant channel of communication in a clique, it is plausible that in-group members will exhibit a higher level of commitment to the app. Contrariwise, if Facebook was the main space for interpersonal communication within that same group, members of the group would probably spend more time on Facebook, because that would be the best way to reach their friends. In future research, a more elaborate analysis of people's systematic cognitive biases in perceived homophily effects of attitudes may be needed (Goel et al. 2010), but in the context of this study, measuring perceived SNS popularity among peers was sufficient.

To construct the PPR index, respondents were asked to rank nine selected SNSs based on the perceived popularity of such sites among their closest social circles. The index was measured for all survey-respondents regardless of account membership on a scale from 1-9, ranging from 1 (most popular SNS in peer-group) to 9 (least popular SNS in peer-group). The PPR value used in the analyses is the one that refers to the SNS under scrutiny. Since respondents ranked all 9 sites based on their perceived status, the survey could identify the relative rank of each site within each respondents' peer-group. The nine SNSs were: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+, YikYak and LinkedIn. The selective focus on these nine SNSs, rather than an open-ended number of platforms was useful for two reasons. First, it allowed me to situate the PPR index of the four studied sites within a broader context of other available sites. This helped to reduce complexity, while retaining analytical insight of the key communication platforms in the studied population. Second, the focus on nine SNSs was also practical because it covered the most commonly used social media platforms among UK adolescents in 2015. These theoretical considerations relate to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1c: (on perceptions of SNS peer-popularity): *Individuals who perceive specific SNSs to be more popular among their peers will report a more committed attitude to these sites.*

6. 3. 2. Types of SNS uses and gratifications

SNS commitment could be a function of users' communication experiences and the types of uses they regularly associate with each site. Following the traditions of U&G research, this notion proposes that people's continued media use can be predicted from the gratifications they hope to gain from their uses (E. Katz et al. 1973; Rubin 1994; Ruggiero 2000). Of course, SNSs offer a wide range of uses. For the purpose of this research, however, an illuminating way to

study the uses of SNSs is to group them into three abstract categories of gratifications pertaining to (i) *social uses*, (ii) *informational uses* and (iii) *professional uses*. While the specific uses of SNSs may change over time, there are certain underlying themes that appear to remain stable in various platform iterations. For example, while social uses can be linked to ritualistic and habitual gratifications, professional uses are typically linked to instrumental gratifications. Informational uses can be linked to either category, depending on the motives of information-seeking, e.g. differentiating between the consumption of news content and entertainment. The U&G perspective is particularly useful in this regard, because it connects specific uses of SNSs to psychological needs and wants (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011). To summarise these distinct SNS uses, the data presented in Figure 53 in the Appendix visualises the differences in mean values between the three categories across SNSs. This provides the basis for the following descriptions and hypotheses about the three types of gratifications sought from SNSs and their likely effects on commitment attitudes. The three broad types of uses and gratifications are treated as conceptually independent dimensions below:

Social uses of SNSs mainly encompass interpersonal communication and socialising activities that help users to keep in touch with friends or meet new people. SNS scholars have repeatedly noted that interpersonal communication represents one of the main reasons why people are drawn to the use of such sites (Ellison & Boyd 2013; Hogan & Wellman 2014). This includes activities to directly maintain contact with specific alters, sharing content with one's personal network and using other features like events, groups and chat rooms. Recent studies have also associated these kinds of socialising activities with social support outcomes (Carr et al. 2016; Wohn et al. 2016) and higher life-satisfaction (Oh et al. 2014).

Hypothesis 2a: (on social SNS uses): *Individuals who use particular SNSs for social gratifications will report a more committed attitude to each respective site.*

Informational uses of SNSs summarise people's propensity to use SNSs to access news and discover new informational content. News consumption and information-seeking have been subject to several empirical investigations in the context of SNSs (Choi 2016; Lampe et al. 2012; Picone 2016; Yuan 2011). Clearly, each of the studied platforms affords different variants of information-seeking behaviours, so the nature of information accessed through the four sites is different. For example, while Twitter is well-known for up-to-date political news, Snapchat's recent rollout of *Stories* has allowed users to consume all their news and entertainment content from news partners like CNN, Vice and ESPN within the app without leaving Snapchat. Yuan (2011) finds evidence that people rely on multiple SNSs to access news information. Prior research also notes that information-seeking behaviours on the Internet are strongly related to demographic factors such as education (Blank & Groselj 2014). Finally, using SNSs in an informational capacity has also been linked to civic outcomes and greater social capital (Valenzuela et al. 2009; De Zúñiga et al. 2012). In the same vein, Ellison and colleagues (2011) find evidence that information-seeking behaviours on Facebook, in particular, contribute to perceptions of social capital.

Hypothesis 2b: (on informational SNS uses): *Individuals who use particular SNSs for informational gratifications will report a more committed attitude to each respective site.*

Professional uses of SNSs capture people's propensity to use SNSs for work-related practices, such as networking, marketing, sales, recruitment and customer support. The uses of SNSs for professional advancement have, indeed, become commonplace among many young

people in Western societies. For instance, past research has documented examples of media use for personalised networking practices at work, both before (Haythornthwaite & Wellman 1998) and after the advent of SNSs (DiMicco et al. 2008; Papacharissi 2009; Utz 2015). Furthermore, qualitative evidence also shows that SNSs may offer improved ways of keeping in touch with colleagues and allowing people to learn more about their new team members at work (DiMicco & Millen 2007 p. 386). In this research, young hires were shown to be especially prone to using SNSs at work to boost their chances of a successful career. At the same time, however, professional uses of SNSs have also been associated with negative outcomes, such as social tensions and the risk of context collapse. For example, Vitak and colleagues (2012) document how Facebook users frequently struggle to maintain the boundaries between their personal and professional lives on the site. With regard to SNS commitment, these theoretical considerations lead me to formulate the next hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 2c: (on professional SNS uses): *Individuals who use particular SNSs for professional gratifications will report a more committed attitude to each respective site.*

6. 3. 3. SNS identities and self-presentation

Research finds that patterns of SNS use are related to people's mediated identities and self-presentation practices (boyd & Ellison 2007; boyd & Heer 2006; Hogan & Wellman 2014). For example, when people join new SNSs, they sometimes do so to express themselves in new, creative or unconventional ways online. Past research suggests that platforms like Facebook specifically encourage increased amounts of self-disclosure (Van Gool et al. 2015; Hollenbaugh & Ferris 2014). The SNS literature points towards a consistent association between self-disclosure and SNS use. Tosun (2012) finds that people, who felt they could express their 'true

self' on Facebook, were more likely to use the site for establishing new social and romantic relationships. They were also more likely to see the Internet as a social facilitator and “*develop an obsessive passion for their Internet activities*” (Tosun 2012 p. 1511). Other researchers find that greater levels of self-disclosure on Facebook can be associated with higher levels of overall satisfaction with the site (Special & Li-Barber 2012), as well as positive psychological outcomes, such as better social connectedness and less stress (Grieve & Watkinson 2016).

Research finds that disclosures on Facebook are predicted by privacy attitudes and behaviours, such as the use of SNS privacy controls (Stutzman et al. 2012). For the purposes of this study, I distinguish between two qualitatively different types of self-disclosure: *emotional* and *personal* self-disclosure. The first category refers to the users' willingness to disclose intimate information about one's feelings and state of mind (e.g. “sharing how I feel”). For example, this may entail emotional confessions or publicly shared expressions of admiration, love, anger or frustration. The second category refers to deep disclosures about one's personal activities, social environments and interpersonal relationships (e.g. “sharing what I do”). For example, this may include detailed accounts from one's holidays, personal celebrations and details about one's dating life. These two lines of thinking can be summarised as follows:

Hypothesis 3a: (on personal SNS self-disclosure): Increased personal self-disclosure on a given site will be associated with greater SNS commitment.

Hypothesis 3b: (on emotional SNS self-disclosure): Increased emotional self-disclosure on a given site will be associated with greater SNS commitment.

However, it should be noted that scholars have been prone to conflating self-disclosure on SNSs with the use ‘real-name’ accounts, frequently assuming a direct link between the use of

‘real-name’ identity-markers and the amount of sincere personal information shared on social media. Instead of acting as a reference to one’s authentic self, the ‘real-name’ has become an indexical property that links an individual to one’s content across sites (Hogan 2012). For example, the ‘real-name’ can be used to link a number of SNS profiles (e.g. multiple accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, LinkedIn and Quora) into a unified self-presentation that indicates a single social media subject across several platforms.

This is contrasted with the use of pseudonymous SNS accounts, which have been conventionally associated with negative outcomes, such as cyberbullying, flaming, trolling, abusive and insulting messages, and other forms of uncivil behaviours, as previous authors and media pundits have repeatedly pointed out. The existing academic literature has supported this reasoning, finding strong evidence that the lack of ‘real-names’ undermines credibility, making conversations more impersonal and aggressive (Hiltz et al. 1986; Moore et al. 2012; Rains 2007). In particular, research finds that online anonymity leads to the increased risk of negative experiences and anti-normative behaviour in online communities (Cho et al. 2012). Conversely, the use of real-world identities in online communities has been associated with productive online exchanges and more positive conversations.

Using a pseudonym can be said to be a form of identity concealment, but contrary to popular belief, it can also be a vehicle for conveying one’s sincere emotions and representing one’s ‘true self’, irrespective of one’s given ‘real-name’ (Hogan 2012). This is why, I measure sincere self-expression on SNSs separately from the use of one’s ‘real-name’. The main rationale for this is the argument that ‘real-names’ may not necessarily be associated with high self-disclosure and sincere self-presentation on social media. In particular, this may be the case for SNS users who believe that a single digital identity cannot sufficiently encompass who they are

or who they aspire to be in specific online contexts. Whether an identity refers to humour, politics, sexual orientation, race or religion, content which might seem loaded, stereotypical or offensive in one context, may be a source of bonding in another. For example, consider a person who cultivates multiple, yet conflicting identities in different offline contexts. Now, this person wants to translate all these different offline identities into the online realm. It seems unlikely that this person would want to use their 'real-name' on Facebook. Instead, he or she would want to create multiple SNS accounts in such a way that each identity is disassociated from one another. I posit that, even if an online SNS profile is pseudonymous, it can be authentic in its own right, allowing its user to experiment with different facets of his or her identity and fostering a private space for creativity and self-actualisation. There is some evidence for this logic from studies investigating anonymous and pseudonymous identity practices and community expectations on social media (Ellison et al. 2016; Shelton et al. 2015). With this in mind, it may also be useful to include the extent of users' identity experimentation in the research model to act as an additional control variable alongside the use of 'real-names' and sincere self-expression. There is no separate hypothesis for identity experimentation, because it is used as a control in these models.

The use of 'real-names' versus pseudonyms, as well as their implications for commitment, remains an under-studied and under-theorised field in SNS scholarship. For instance, are individuals who use particular SNSs to sincerely express themselves also more committed to those sites? Sincere self-expression, in this case, may be linked to the use of 'real-name' accounts but it does not have to be. These arguments can be summarised as the following hypothesis, which I intend to test in my research model:

Hypothesis 3c: (on SNS identity-markers): *Individuals who employ 'real-name' identity-markers on a given SNS will report a more committed attitude to each respective site.*

6.3.4. Networking styles

People vary in their friending patterns that result in a vast diversity of socialising habits and personal networking styles, both online and offline (Pahl & Spencer 2004; Wellman 2001). By way of illustration, given their different arrangements of networking activities, some people may become highly networked media “omnivores”, while others may become isolated “hermits”. Likewise, some people may prefer to keep in touch with only a small group of friends, while others could have a proclivity for meeting people and regularly exploring new social settings.

Research has proposed two partial explanations to interpret people’s networking styles (Hogan 2009). On the one hand, the socially determined view conceives of networking styles as reactionary responses to social settings or particular situations. On the other hand, personal networking styles can also be seen as internally consistent inclinations to communicate in certain ways, which are typically stable over time. In line with the “social brain” hypothesis (Dunbar 1998), research finds that individuals do not distribute their time evenly across all their contacts (Aledavood et al. 2015; Miritello et al. 2013; Roberts & Dunbar 2011). Given that people have limited resources of time and attention, they tend to focus their communication on a set of particular alters. Over time, research finds that these distinct networking styles result in the characteristic skewedness of ties within personal ego-networks, with few ties being strong and a large proportion of ties being weak (Granovetter 1973; Wasserman & Faust 1994). For example, we know that strong ties typically encompass close friends and family members, while weak ties typically refer to casual acquaintances and co-members of large social groups.

In this vein, Hogan (2009) argues that networking styles are related to patterns of media use, which are governed by norms of social accessibility. This leads individuals to maintain contact with the most accessible alters rather than with their strongest ties. Miritello and

colleagues (2013) find evidence for different communication patterns and networking styles between people with large networks and people with smaller networks. Other scholars have used longitudinal traced data to assert that people's social activities follow persistent and channel-specific daily rhythms (Aledavood et al. 2015, 2016). This research also finds significant gender differences in observed networking styles. What is more, when individuals transition between social contexts and life-stages they appear to maintain their distinct networking styles. The empirical evidence for this stems from archived mobile phone communication records of students, who transitioned from high school to university or work (Saramaki et al. 2014).

Recent research on friending patterns suggests that people have a desire to arrange personal networks in accordance with their preferred friendship repertoires (Spencer & Pahl 2006; Sutcliffe et al. 2012). Spencer and Pahl (2006) categorise these friending patterns as 'narrow', 'focal', 'intense' or 'broad' based on the quality and quantity of relationships that people tend to maintain in their day-to-day life. This abstract sense of human relationships encompasses both people's social and professional relationships, as well as other alters who inhabit their micro-social worlds. For example, the 'narrow friendship repertoire' comprises only of simple, superficial friendships with limited emotional closeness. Friends do not typically play intimate or supportive roles and are not treated as confidants. By contrast, the 'intense friendship repertoire' includes a small number of complex friendships of strong ties that fulfil the roles of confidants or soul mates. People who fall into this category would typically put a great deal of emphasis on their inner social circle to discuss personal matters or to provide social support. People in this category also tend to make a "*sharp distinction between 'true friends' and other friendly relationships, such as acquaintances who are not considered sufficiently important to be on the map*" (Spencer & Pahl 2006 p. 78). Next, the 'focal friendship repertoire' relies on a small

social circle of strong ties, but people in this category usually engage with friends in varying social contexts, e.g. leisure activities, professional networking and distant family members. According to Spencer and Pahl, the last group of people with a wide range of both simple and complex friendships can be categorised into the ‘broad friendship repertoire’. The researchers explain that these people “*appreciate the particular qualities of different kinds of friendship*” (2006 p. 80). Consequently, they maintain a greater number of weak ties that result in larger personal networks. These networks are maintained through different communication channels. Although the researchers do not explicitly link friendship repertoires to media use, it is evident that dominant networking styles in the offline domain may have an effect on how people use digital media with each other. More broadly, people’s networking habits have typically developed and solidified through many years of offline interaction. Now, it is only natural for these habits to be carried over into the online domain of mediated communication on SNSs.

In the context of my research, this work clearly suggests that individual networking styles need to be accounted for. An analysis of SNS use and commitment would be, in fact, incomplete without considering people’s individual networking styles and preferences for social contact. To accomplish this, I suggest that the two main measures that could help to differentiate the various friending and networking styles encountered in the population are the following: First, the extent to which a person is prone to interact with his or her *strong ties* or *weak ties*. Second, the extent to which the person prefers to interact with primarily *known audiences* or primarily *unknown audiences* online (i.e. known friends or acquaintances, as opposed to unknown strangers).

Albeit some SNSs may predominantly afford one form of social connectivity over the other (e.g. Tinder affords social interactions with mostly strangers), the four studied SNSs in the present study typically afford all varieties of social contact. Therefore, it is interesting to further

disentangle their relative effects on people's commitment attitudes. In the survey, the constructs were obtained from a series of questions about people's preferred networking choices, which were measured independent of their use of any specific SNS (see Table 26 in the Appendix). This is why the focus of these variables is on the effects of general networking tendencies that are conjectured to have an effect on both online and offline social contact. Based on these different types of social networking and friending patterns, I should find that:

Hypothesis 4a: (on individual networking styles): Increased orientation towards networking with strong ties over weak ties will be associated with greater SNS commitment on each site.

Hypothesis 4b: (on individual networking styles): Increased orientation towards networking with friends over strangers will be associated with greater SNS commitment on each site.

Before proceeding to the analysis, it should be noted that my pilot analysis also included several other variables. At first, I have included additional controls for more socio-demographic variables, such as people's current occupational status (i.e. employed, unemployed, student or disabled). Furthermore, early models also included control variables for the year when respondents joined each SNS to prevent any potential confounding effects that could stem from people's total years of experience with any given site as measured by year of adoption. However, all of these variables were trimmed for parsimony since they had no substantial effect on SNS commitment. Similarly, the models did not find any evidence in the data for the impact of the Big-Five personality traits (i.e. openness-to-experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism) on commitment. The descriptive statistics for all independent variables used in the model are reported in Table 5. While the primary goal of this section was to introduce the main explanatory variables, the next section proceeds to the analysis of the data.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of main variables of analysis

Categories	Variables	<i>Facebook</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>Instagram</i>	<i>Snapchat</i>
		Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
<i>Demographics</i>	Age	25.02	24.84	24.33	23.86
	Gender (male)	1.48	1.51	1.48	1.50
	Education	15.57	15.62	15.48	15.25
	Region (rural)	2.22	2.07	2.02	1.98
<i>Networking styles</i>	Focus on strong ties	0.43	0.39	0.38	0.37
	Focus on weak ties	0.21	0.24	0.25	0.25
	Focus on strangers	0.17	0.21	0.22	0.22
	Focus on friends	0.77	0.83	0.85	0.86
<i>SNS networks</i>	Total friends	546.49	247.51	265.88	36.95
	Actual friends	113.09	36.61	59.80	21.30
	PPR index	2.15	3.43	2.58	3.45
<i>SNS uses</i>	Social uses	4.54	2.71	3.59	3.71
	Informational uses	3.90	4.06	2.79	1.97
	Professional uses	2.37	2.77	1.77	1.47
<i>SNS identities</i>	Emotional self-disclosure	2.85	2.13	2.71	3.01
	Personal self-disclosure	3.09	2.25	3.24	3.24
	Sincere self-expression	3.55	2.92	3.48	3.56
	Real-name use	4.64	3.93	3.91	3.82
	Identity experimentation	1.82	2.20	2.22	2.11
	% Real-name accounts	77.65%	50.91%	45.84%	42.94%
	% Partial real-name accnts.	15.74%	22.22%	27.55%	27.38%
	% Pseudonymous accounts	6.61%	26.87%	26.60%	29.68%
<i>SNS commitment</i>	Commitment	3.74	2.91	3.36	3.04
<i>Sample size</i>		n=757	n=495	n=421	n=347

Notes: Sub-samples of users are based on SNS account membership (Table 14). Measurement of demographic variables was explained in the methods chapter (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.2). Standard deviations are not displayed in this Table because of space constraints.

6. 4. Results

In terms of SNS networks and audiences, the collected survey data suggest that people's networks seem to be represented differently on each of the four sites. The data further shows that the proportion of 'actual friends' as a percentage of total friends varies greatly across platforms, but these variations are not surprising. The descriptive statistics for the size of respondents' SNS networks can be found in Table 5. Between-group significance tests between different SNSs were carried out as part of this analysis. For example, while Snapchat audiences are on average significantly smaller in size compared to the other SNSs ($M=36.95$), they feature a significantly higher number of 'actual friends' ($M=21.30$ or 57.58% 'actual friends'). By contrast, the average number of contacts in people's Facebook networks was $M=546.49$ with an average of 20.69% 'actual friends'. The correlation value between network size and number of 'actual friends' was significant on all four studied SNSs ($p<0.001$), ranging from 0.254 on Instagram to 0.634 on Snapchat. This is ideal, insofar as correlation values that are too low may indicate that variables are measuring different phenomena, while correlation values that are too high may indicate redundancy due to issues of multicollinearity. In terms of demographics, there were no significant gender differences in network size and the number of actual friends on any of the sites. There were also no gender differences in the PPR index (except for the rank of Pinterest). However, there were some age differences in perceptions of SNS popularity. Younger respondents tended to rank Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr and YikYak higher than older respondents. In opposition, older respondents indicated that LinkedIn and Google+ were perceptibly more popular within their peer-groups.

Next, the results suggest that SNS gratifications are differently distributed between the four sites. In particular, the available data show that mediated socialising activities are most

common among Facebook users ($M=4.54$) and least common among Twitter users ($M=2.71$).

This suggests that there are differences in the way how people integrate different SNSs into their everyday socialising routines. In terms of informational uses, Twitter users in the sample were among the most active in information-seeking behaviours ($M=4.06$), while Snapchat users were least active ($M=1.97$). Professional gratifications were more prevalent among Twitter users ($M=2.77$) and least common among Snapchat users ($M=1.47$) in the sample. This provides an early indication of the potential importance of professional networking for Twitter commitment.

Table 6: Bivariate correlations between types of SNS-related gratifications

Item	<i>Facebook</i>			<i>Twitter</i>		
	1.	2.	3.	1.	2.	3.
1. Social uses						
2. Informational uses	0.288			0.350		
3. Professional uses	0.022	0.244		0.203	0.270	
Item	<i>Instagram</i>			<i>Snapchat</i>		
	1.	2.	3.	1.	2.	3.
1. Social uses						
2. Informational uses	0.250			0.225		
3. Professional uses	0.166	0.282		0.121	0.428	

Notes: Sub-samples of users are based on SNS account membership. **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations ($p<0.000$). Full bivariate correlation tables are in the Appendix.

Finally, the distribution of ‘real-name’ accounts varies distinctly across the four studied SNSs. Respondents in the collected sample predominantly use their ostensible ‘real-names’ on Facebook (77.7%), but substantially less so on Twitter (50.9%), Instagram (45.8%) and Snapchat

(42.9%), as illustrated in Figure 52. Personal self-disclosure is, on average, highest among Instagram users ($M=3.24$) and Snapchat users ($M=3.24$). Snapchat users also score highest on emotional disclosure ($M=3.01$), followed by Facebook users ($M=2.85$). Twitter users are, on average, least inclined to share personal and emotional information on the site.

Examining the bivariate correlations between the explanatory variables produces a multitude of varied but strong relationships. Tables 27-30 in the Appendix offer a full map of bivariate correlations and VIF scores between the predictors across the four SNSs. As a subset of this data, Table 6 summarises only the bivariate correlations between the three categories of SNS gratifications for each site. These results suggest that informational uses appear to be strongly correlated with social uses. However, there is no significant correlation between professional uses and social uses for all sites except Twitter. Instead, professional uses seem to be consistently correlated with informational uses on all four SNSs. The use of ‘real-names’ is positively correlated with the social uses of all four SNSs, and additionally, it is correlated to professional uses of Twitter and informational uses of Facebook.

Furthermore, there appears to be a consistent correlation between the use of ‘real-names’ and the number of ‘actual friends’ on all four SNSs, but not the size of the total friendship network. The only exception to this trend is Facebook, where ‘real-names’ are associated with both overall numbers of friends and ‘actual friends’. In line with past research, this correlation supports the notion that ‘real-names’ may be associated with trust, cooperation and community-building through “*social norms of polite conversation*” (Millen & Patterson 2003 p. 720).

The PPR index is not correlated with any other variable except for the social uses of Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat and the informational uses of Twitter. For Instagram and

Snapchat users, the PPR index is also positively correlated with all measures of sincere self-expression and self-disclosure. This hints at the relationship between expressing one's authentic self on these SNSs, while being part of a group that values one's authentic contributions to these sites. If a peer-group constitutes an active audience on any given SNS, this could be linked to higher commitment attitudes to the site among all group members.

In summary, the bivariate analysis sheds light on the interrelationships between the different factors predicting SNS commitment: the variables are distinct, yet conceptually related. The correlation values between each independent variable and commitment provide preliminary evidence for the outlined hypotheses. Nevertheless, since all three sets of factors are to some extent correlated to measures of SNS commitment, it is not evident from this analysis, which specific attributes best contribute to a comprehensive explanation of variations in commitment.

Next, I proceed to the nested OLS regression models for each studied site to disentangle the relative effects of the independent variables on SNS commitment. The structure of the model allows us to sequentially add blocks of predictors to the regression models that are organised by category. This includes demographic variables and networking styles (block 1), audience-based variables (block 2), gratification-based variables (block 3) and identity-based variables (block 4). The sequence of blocks was determined based on theoretical considerations espoused in Chapters 2 and 3. The analyses allow for assessing the contribution of each new block of predictors while all other predictors are being controlled for. Each SNS-specific model starts with no variables at all, and the inclusion of each block is tested for the statistically significant improvement of the model fit. For this purpose, *F*-tests are conducted to compare how well each nested regression model fits the data. The stepwise regression results, *F*-statistics and changes in the adjusted R^2

between the corresponding blocks of predictors are reported in Table 7 to Table 10. For example, if some variable ceases to be significant, when a new block of variables is added, this means that the effect of this variable is subsumed under the new block of variables. Alternative variations of the nested regression models were tested, where the sequence of blocks was reversed, but not substantial changes to the overall story of the findings ensued. It should also be noted that only adjusted R^2 values are reported below, because the additional variables could interfere with the model and inflate the raw R-squared values. Furthermore, all reported coefficients were standardised to amplify comparative interpretation. Before conducting the nested OLS regression models, the regression assumptions were tested for the following:

Homoscedasticity by testing the independence of residuals and normality of residuals.

Due to heteroscedasticity in the data, Stata was instructed to use robust standard errors to prevent biased estimates of the coefficients and obtain reasonably accurate p -values.

Linearity by testing the linear relationship of the independent variables to the dependent variables in each model. The assumptions of linearity and independence were satisfied.

Presence of outliers by testing whether extreme observations may distort the regression. Outliers and inconsistent responses were removed from the dataset, as described in Chapter 5.4.1

Collinearity by testing the bivariate correlations between the independent variables, as well as *Multicollinearity* by testing the variance inflation factors (VIF). The literature suggests that $VIF > 10$ may adversely affect the estimation of regression statistics. The reported VIF results show that the standard errors were not inflated, as indicated by the mean $VIF = 1.30$ for Facebook, mean $VIF = 1.38$ for Twitter, mean $VIF = 1.40$ for Instagram and mean $VIF = 1.51$ for Snapchat (see Tables 27-30 in the Appendix for the range of all VIF values).

6. 4. 1. Facebook commitment

The first nested OLS regression model in Table 7 focuses on predictors of Facebook commitment for users of Facebook in the sample ($n=757$). The overall model is significant with a final adjusted $R^2=0.56$, while the series of F -statistics indicates that each successive step clearly improves the model fit ($p<0.000$). The only explanatory variable from the first block that retains its statistical significance in all models is users' propensity to talk to known audiences online, e.g. friends and family members ($\beta=0.139$, $p<0.000$). Since Facebook is primarily known as a platform for connecting with friends, it is unsurprising that this particular networking proclivity is discovered to be a significant predictor of Facebook commitment ($\beta=0.139$, $p<0.000$). Considering the other demographic variables, such as gender and age, there is not enough evidence to deduce how they might be related to Facebook commitment. In a roundabout way, this illustrates that strong commitment attitudes to Facebook do not depend on demographic factors. The PPR index also does not seem to have a significant effect on Facebook commitment. This finding underpins the popular argument that Facebook has become a "social utility" that will be used by individuals regardless of what their friends might think about its usefulness or perceived popularity (see Table 7).

Facebook's social uses and gratifications have the highest strength of association with users' degree of Facebook commitment ($\beta=0.219$, $p<0.000$), which is an evidentiary signal that supports hypotheses 2a and 2b. Informational uses of Facebook also appear to be strongly associated with Facebook commitment ($\beta=0.173$, $p<0.000$). However, even though professional uses of Facebook first appeared to be statistically significant in block 3, after introducing properties of the self to the model in block 4, this variable loses its significance. Together, gratification-related variables and identity-related variables constitute the greatest change in the

adj. R^2 of 0.17 for block 3 ($F=55.57$, $p<0.000$) and 0.16 for block 4 ($F=46.96$, $p<0.000$). This is a substantially larger increase in variance explained compared to the block of audience-related variables, which only marginally increases the R^2 of the model (change in adj. $R^2=0.05$, $F=19.37$, $p<0.000$). In part, this is due to the fact that all three audience-related explanatory variables in this batch do not retain their statistical significance after subsequent blocks of variables are added. This implies that there is not enough evidence for hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c in the data, specifically with regard to Facebook users.

By contrast, identity-related variables seem to have a relatively high strength of association with Facebook commitment. Both emotional disclosure ($\beta=0.162$, $p<0.000$) and personal disclosure ($\beta=0.204$, $p<0.000$) are highly significant, indicating that self-disclosure is positively related to higher levels of commitment to Facebook. This provides evidence to support hypotheses 3a and 3b, but not 3c. What is perhaps most striking is the positive effect of sincere self-expression on Facebook commitment compared to the negligible effect of using a ‘real-name’ as an identity-marker on the site. While sincere self-expression is statistically significant ($\beta=0.194$, $p<0.000$), the effect of using ‘real-names’ is not ($\beta=0.025$, $p<0.451$). In view of that, it appears that some Facebook users may feel that their authentic self is not best represented by their given ‘real-names’. This suggests that it is important to decouple the notion of a ‘real-name’ from sincere self-expression and self-disclosure. It remains to be seen whether this finding can be replicated for users of the other three studied SNSs.

6. 4. 2. Twitter commitment

The second nested OLS regression model in Table 8 is concerned with predicting users’ commitment to Twitter ($n=495$). The model fit is as high as in the Facebook model with an

adjusted $R^2=0.68$. In other words, approximately one third of the variance is still left to explain after taking into account the four blocks of variables. Compared to the previous model predicting Facebook commitment, the F -statistics tell an almost analogous story regarding the significance of each added block of variables ($p<0.000$). The main difference to the Facebook model is, however, that gratification-related variables in block 3 appear to be responsible for the greatest change in variance explained compared to the other blocks (change in adj. $R^2=0.29$, $F=123.40$, $p<0.000$). In support of hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c, this block encompasses the following highly significant explanatory variables: Twitter's social uses ($\beta=0.228$, $p<0.000$), informational uses ($\beta=0.195$, $p<0.000$), as well as professional uses ($\beta=0.097$, $p<0.003$). The statistical significance of professional uses needs to be pointed out, because there seems to be insufficient evidence in the other models to make such a claim. This data, by contrast, helps to identify the strength of association between work-related Twitter uses and commitment in support of hypothesis 2c.

Next, audience-related predictors in block 2 are eclipsed by the uses of Twitter. The total network size on Twitter is not related to people's Twitter commitment; nor is Twitter's perceived popularity among respondents' social circles. The only explanatory variable in this category that shows a moderate strength of association with regard to Twitter commitment is the number of 'actual friends' on the site ($\beta=0.059$, $p<0.036$). Thus, the continued use of Twitter does not necessarily depend on one's number of followers. Social context seems to matter more than just having a large audience of potentially unknown Twitter users. This is an important piece of evidence to reject hypothesis 1a about the role of network effects in Twitter commitment.

In response to hypotheses 3a, 3b and 3c, identity-related variables in block 4 are highly significant, but they seem to be relatively less important for users' commitment to Twitter. Collectively, the predictor variables in block 3 only add approximately 8.80% to the variance

explained by the model ($F=24.54$, $p<0.000$). Notwithstanding that, almost all identity-related variables in this block seem to have a significant positive effect on Twitter commitment.

Personal self-disclosure on Twitter has the biggest effect size ($\beta=0.212$, $p<0.000$), followed by emotional self-disclosure ($\beta=0.156$, $p<0.000$) and sincere self-expression ($\beta=0.131$, $p<0.002$).

Similar to the results in the Facebook model, the only exception to this trend is the use of ‘real-names’ on Twitter ($\beta=0.039$, $p<0.265$). These results support my initial conjecture and demonstrate that there is robust evidence for the argument that SNS commitment is strongly and consistently associated with the perception of SNSs as spaces for the expression of the authentic self, rather than an exclusive ‘real-name’ space. I assert that more research is needed in this area that could elucidate these platform-specific dynamics, as well as the complex interplay of mediated identities and sincere self-expression on Twitter in greater depth.

6. 4. 3. Instagram commitment

The third model in Table 9 predicting Instagram commitment further unravels the relationships ascertained in previous models with regard to Instagram users ($n=421$). It sheds light on a number of statistically significant effects, while explaining over two thirds of the variance in the data (adj. $R^2=0.70$). The sequence of F -statistics indicates that the difference between the models is statistically significant ($p<0.000$). The model tells a similar story to Facebook, inasmuch as the social uses of the SNS have the highest strength of association with Instagram commitment attitudes ($\beta=0.256$, $p<0.000$). There is evidence for the statistically significant effect of Instagram’s social gratifications on commitment attitudes. In the same batch of predictors, informational uses of Instagram also appear to be highly significant, despite a relatively smaller effect size ($\beta=0.132$, $p<0.000$). Accordingly, the greatest change in explained

variance stems from the predictors in block 3 (change in adj. $R^2=0.29$, $F=84.86$, $p<0.000$). This reinforces hypotheses 2a and 2b about the effects of SNS uses.

As evident in the beta coefficients, the other most significant predictors of Instagram commitment attitudes are added as part of block 4, namely personal self-disclosure ($\beta=0.256$, $p<0.000$) and emotional self-disclosure ($\beta=0.231$, $p<0.000$). Due to the reasonable improvement of the model fit (change in adj. $R^2=0.13$, $F=33.14$, $p<0.000$), this data shows support for hypotheses 3a and 3b, but not 3c. Again, users' willingness to share socially and emotionally intimate information is found to have a stronger effect on SNS commitment compared to merely using 'real-names' on the site. It is thus difficult to say whether the use of 'real-names' on Instagram might lead users to become more committed to the platform or not.

What is more telling, however, is the comparatively higher significance of some of the audience-related predictors among Instagram users. There is reasonable evidence that Instagram's PPR index ($\beta=0.070$, $p<0.031$) and the number of 'actual friends' on the platform ($\beta=0.059$, $p<0.011$) are significant and continue to be significant throughout the models, even after two more batches of explanatory variables are added. The change in adjusted R^2 of 11.5% ($F=20.24$, $p<0.000$) lends support to hypothesis 1c. Given that audience-related predictors generally had a relatively small effect on commitment in the other models, it is plausible that this difference can be explained by Instagram's affordances. This is shown, again, in the moderate significance of the two networking styles exemplified by Instagram users: the focus on weak ties ($\beta=0.058$, $p<0.043$) and the inclination to interact with strangers and unknown audiences online ($\beta=0.081$, $p<0.003$). However, as with Twitter commitment, there is no direct evidence for the association between the size of the total follower network and commitment.

6. 4. 4. Snapchat commitment

The last regression models presented in Table 10 attempts to analyse the relationship between the outlined explanatory variables and Snapchat commitment (n=347). The model is highly significant, exhibiting the highest model fit (adj. $R^2=0.74$) compared to the other three SNS-specific models. Each step of the nested OLS regression adds statistically significant predictors to the model, thereby improving the model fit with each batch of variables ($p<0.000$).

In line with the previous models, the variables related to the three types of gratifications of Snapchat contribute the most to the variance explained (change in adj. $R^2=0.27$, $F=97.96$, $p<0.000$), which supports hypotheses 2a and 2b. In particular, the positive effect is stronger and more significant for the social uses of Snapchat ($\beta=0.184$, $p<0.000$). Expressive information-seeking on Snapchat is also significant, even though the beta coefficient is lower ($\beta=0.139$, $p<0.000$). As expected, users who actively use Snapchat *Stories* to discover news and entertainment content are also more likely to be more psychologically invested in the SNS. The regular use of key Snapchat features thus appears to act as a catalyst for commitment attitudes.

Surprisingly, perhaps, one of the strongest predictors of Snapchat commitment emanates from the batch of identity-related explanatory variables (block 4). The results indicate that personal self-disclosure on Snapchat has the strongest association with commitment ($\beta=0.329$, $p<0.000$). This is noteworthy, because the app affords users with the possibility to share ephemeral moments from their everyday life. It is thus more suitable for posting daily updates about social activities and events rather than deep emotional moments ($\beta=0.105$, $p<0.018$). The affordances of the platform do not support elaborate self-presentation through filters and beautifying lenses (like in the case of Instagram). For Snapchat loyalists, the focus of self-disclosure thus seems to be on documenting one's life, rather than documenting oneself.

Nevertheless, the data indicates that both types of self-disclosure have a significant positive effect on Snapchat commitment. On the basis of this evidence, sincere self-expression also appears to be a highly significant predictor ($\beta=0.195$, $p<0.000$), even if the use of one's given 'real-name' on Snapchat is not. Unlike Facebook, Snapchat does not prescribe the use of 'real-names' on its platform. It is thus interesting to note that the model identifies variables pertaining to intimate sharing activities, rather than fixed identity-markers as significant predictors of Snapchat commitment. In support of hypotheses 3a and 3b, the variables in block 4 contribute an improvement in the model fit (change in adj. $R^2=0.15$, $F=33.33$, $p<0.000$). As in the other SNS-specific models, the data clearly suggests that high self-disclosure is linked to higher SNS commitment, regardless of one's use of 'real-names' or other identity-markers.

Lastly, on the basis of the evidence available specifically from Snapchat users, it seems plausible to suggest that hypotheses 1a, 1b and 1c need to be once again rejected. None of the audience-related variables seemed to have a significant effect on Snapchat commitment, even though the block of predictors as a whole is shown to be linked to a significant change in adj. R^2 of 15.8% ($F=22.17$, $p<0.000$). In part, Snapchat networks are, on average, much smaller than the friendship networks on Facebook or Twitter. Therefore, the pathways to Snapchat commitment are more likely to be related to the quality, rather than the quantity of relationships actively maintained through the app.

Table 7: Nested OLS regression models predicting Facebook commitment

	Facebook	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>	<i>Model C</i>	<i>Model D</i>
Blocks	Variables	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Block 1:	Age	-0.058	-0.051	-0.035	-0.034
<i>Demographics</i>	Gender (male)	-0.072*	-0.078*	-0.038	-0.042
	Education	0.113***	0.091*	0.003	0.007
	Region (rural)	-0.021	-0.023	-0.036	-0.005
<i>Networking styles</i>	Focus on strong ties	-0.065	-0.046	-0.002	0.028
	Focus on weak ties	0.021	0.022	0.039	0.040
	Focus on strangers	0.070	0.067	0.080*	0.050
	Focus on friends	0.371***	0.340***	0.271***	0.139***
Block 2:	Total friends		0.126**	0.073*	0.055
<i>SNS networks</i>	Actual friends		0.108**	0.065*	0.030
	PPR index		0.092**	0.043	0.042
Block 3:	Social uses			0.324***	0.219***
<i>SNS uses</i>	Informational uses			0.201***	0.173***
	Professional uses			0.081**	0.025
Block 4:	Emotional self-disclosure				0.162***
<i>SNS identities</i>	Personal self-disclosure				0.204***
	Sincere self-expression				0.194***
	Real-name use				0.025
	Identity experimentation				0.037
	Constant (Est.)	3.216***	3.225***	1.086***	0.539
	Adjusted R ²	0.18	0.23	0.40	0.56
	Change in adj. R ²	-	0.05	0.17	0.16
	<i>F</i>	16.60***	19.37***	55.57***	46.96***

Notes: n=757. Table shows summary of results from nested OLS regression model through forward selection. ***= p<0.001, **= p<0.01, *= p<0.05

Table 8: Nested OLS regression models predicting Twitter commitment

	Twitter	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>	<i>Model C</i>	<i>Model D</i>
Blocks	Variables	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Block 1:	Age	-0.085	-0.107*	-0.061	-0.010
<i>Demographics</i>	Gender (male)	0.094*	0.063	0.026	0.018
	Education	0.027	0.031	0.027	0.029
	Region (rural)	-0.138***	-0.126***	-0.070*	-0.056*
<i>Networking styles</i>	Focus on strong ties	-0.090*	-0.058	-0.002	0.013
	Focus on weak ties	0.031	0.040	0.021	0.004
	Focus on strangers	0.308***	0.204***	0.134***	0.102***
	Focus on friends	0.119***	0.110***	0.058	0.036
Block 2:	Total friends		0.152***	0.070	0.054
<i>SNS networks</i>	Actual friends		0.213***	0.090**	0.059*
	PPR index		0.113***	0.046	0.010
Block 3:	Social uses			0.458***	0.228***
<i>SNS uses</i>	Informational uses			0.224***	0.195***
	Professional uses			0.111***	0.097***
Block 4:	Emotional self-disclosure				0.156***
<i>SNS identities</i>	Personal self-disclosure				0.212***
	Sincere self-expression				0.131***
	Real-name use				0.039
	Identity experimentation				0.098***
	Constant (Est.)	3.059***	3.468***	0.975**	-0.303
	Adjusted R ²	0.18	0.29	0.59	0.68
	Change in adj. R ²	-	0.09	0.30	0.09
	<i>F</i>	16.92***	17.33***	123.40***	24.54***

Notes: n=495. Table shows summary of results from nested OLS regression model through forward selection. ***= p<0.001, **= p<0.01, *= p<0.05

Table 9: Nested OLS regression models predicting Instagram commitment

	Instagram	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>	<i>Model C</i>	<i>Model D</i>
Blocks	Variables	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Block 1:	Age	-0.134***	-0.077	-0.050	-0.005
<i>Demographics</i>	Gender (male)	0.000	-0.012	0.038	0.008
	Education	0.010	0.033	0.041	0.008
	Region (rural)	-0.129*	-0.112*	-0.083*	-0.086*
<i>Networking styles</i>	Focus on strong ties	-0.096	-0.052	0.014	0.029
	Focus on weak ties	0.131***	0.108*	0.055	0.058*
	Focus on strangers	0.206***	0.154***	0.126***	0.081***
	Focus on friends	0.103*	0.093*	0.059	0.025
Block 2:	Total friends		0.119***	0.046*	0.057
<i>SNS networks</i>	Actual friends		0.239***	0.136***	0.059**
	PPR index		0.185***	0.100***	0.070*
Block 3:	Social uses			0.527***	0.256***
<i>SNS uses</i>	Informational uses			0.165***	0.132***
	Professional uses			0.013	-0.028
Block 4:	Emotional self-disclosure				0.231***
<i>SNS identities</i>	Personal self-disclosure				0.256***
	Sincere self-expression				0.087
	Real-name use				0.059
	Identity experimentation				0.046
	Constant (Est.)	4.389***	3.830***	1.310***	0.553
	Adjusted R²	0.16	0.28	0.57	0.70
	Change in adj. R²	-	0.11	0.29	0.13
	F	10.96***	20.24***	84.86***	33.14***

Notes: n=421. Table shows summary of results from nested OLS regression model through forward selection. ***= p<0.001, **= p<0.01, *= p<0.05

Table 10: Nested OLS regression models predicting Snapchat commitment

	Snapchat	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>	<i>Model C</i>	<i>Model D</i>
Blocks	Variables	Beta	Beta	Beta	Beta
Block 1:	Age	-0.082	-0.036	-0.028	-0.013
<i>Demographics</i>	Gender (male)	0.061	0.047	0.064	0.062*
	Education	-0.138***	-0.067	-0.084*	-0.065*
	Region (rural)	-0.093	-0.060	-0.032	0.003
<i>Networking styles</i>	Focus on strong ties	-0.125*	-0.102*	-0.086*	-0.055
	Focus on weak ties	0.069	0.075	0.046	0.051
	Focus on strangers	0.256***	0.194***	0.107***	0.069*
	Focus on friends	0.068	0.044	-0.002	-0.035
Block 2:	Total friends		0.135*	0.054	0.055
<i>SNS networks</i>	Actual friends		0.159***	0.057	0.028
	PPR index		0.278***	0.160***	0.056
Block 3:	Social uses			0.498***	0.184***
<i>SNS uses</i>	Informational uses			0.181***	0.139***
	Professional uses			0.056	0.004
Block 4:	Emotional self-disclosure				0.105*
<i>SNS identities</i>	Personal self-disclosure				0.329***
	Sincere self-expression				0.195***
	Real-name use				0.055
	Identity experimentation				0.089*
	Constant (Est.)	4.452***	3.931***	1.870***	0.511
	Adjusted R ²	0.16	0.32	0.60	0.74
	Change in adj. R ²	-	0.16	0.27	0.15
	<i>F</i>	9.91***	22.17***	97.96***	33.33***

Notes: n=347. Table shows summary of results from nested OLS regression model through forward selection. ***= p<0.001, **= p<0.01, *= p<0.05

6. 5. Discussion

The goal of the four regression models was to help disentangle the predictors of SNS commitment attitudes to each of the studied sites independently. In response to the outlined hypotheses, four key topics have emerged from this analysis: the fallacy of network effects, the significance of SNS uses and gratifications, the dismantling of ‘real-names’ and the influence of networking styles. Therefore, in this section the discussion goes beyond individual platforms to organise the main findings from the regression models along these four key themes.

6. 5. 1. Impact of SNS networks and audiences

The notion that people’s media choices are driven by the media choices of their peer-group is prominent in the literature. In mass media, for instance, there is always a temptation to describe the success or failure of social media companies in terms of their user growth or the size of people’s overall user networks. This argument rests on the application of economic theories of network effects to the context of mediated communication. While this basic premise may appear theoretically sound when examining the *adoption* of social media, the findings from the above regression models point to a different conclusion. The data suggests that a straightforward extension of the network effects argument to SNS *commitment* is neither useful nor plausible.

There are many reasons why a fixation with user numbers and network size does not paint an accurate picture of how people develop long-term commitment to a site. For example, while there are many users with large SNS followings who are committed to the sites they use, there are plenty of examples of users with smaller, condensed networks of strong ties who are equally, if not more committed to their social network sites. For example, this is evidenced by the highly engaged user populations of Snapchat, Kik and Strava. By contrast, some users might

simply walk away from a site, leaving a large public following behind (for example, as vividly demonstrated by Essena O’Neil’s emotional departure from Instagram in October 2015).

In view of that, there is strong evidence that users’ level of psychological investment in an SNS does not hinge on the mere number of connections accrued on the site. This finding leads me to reject hypothesis 1a. In other words, the number of friends and followers on a social media platform is not sufficient to explain SNS commitment outcomes. Admittedly, this contradicts conventional wisdom, e.g. that Facebook users with large followings would never abandon the site by virtue of the size of their audiences or the number of their followers. By contrast, the evidence from Twitter and Instagram users seems to suggest that it is not the absolute size of the audience that predicts SNS commitment, but the number of self-reported ‘actual friends’ using the site, which provides partial support for hypothesis 1b in the case of some SNSs.

Furthermore, the audience-related explanatory variables seemed to have differential effects on commitment across the four studied SNSs. By way of illustration, the PPR index only had a significant effect on commitment for Instagram users. For Facebook users, however, none of the audience-related variables were related to users’ commitment to the site (see Table 7). Instead, Facebook commitment appeared to be a matter of gratifications sought and properties of the self. This was evident from the nested regression models of Facebook users in particular. The explanatory power of identity-related variables (change in adj. $R^2=0.16$) was roughly equal to the explanatory power of gratification-related variables (change in adj. $R^2=0.17$). Consequently, this shows that users’ psychological investment in Facebook seems to be a combination of both: it is significantly related to users’ gratifications and their self-presentation, but not their Facebook friendship network (change in adj. $R^2=0.05$). What is more, the data suggests that people who used Facebook for sincere self-expression, as well as high levels of personal and emotional self-

disclosure, were more committed to the site. This represents a form of intrinsic motivation to continue using Facebook (“because I want to share who I am and what I do”), as opposed to the extrinsic motivation that is merely predicated on SNS audiences (“because everyone I know is there”). Moving forward, this finding encourages further qualitative exploration focusing on users’ perceptions of audiences. Future research in this direction could examine why people might commit to the use of specific SNSs, as mediated social spaces, where they expect to find particular friends or social groups that they might be interested in interacting with.

In response to hypothesis 1c, the interesting finding from the OLS regression models is that perceptions of peer-popularity of specific sites matter more than others. An overwhelming majority of survey-respondents in the sample were committed to Facebook, regardless of how they might have judged the status of Facebook within their peer-groups. In a similar vein, for many Twitter users, their commitment was not motivated by factors that involved what their friends thought about Twitter. As the interviews in Chapter 8 show, these motivations for Twitter commitment can be oftentimes instrumental and, as such, do not depend on the perceived social acceptance of the site itself. By contrast, the findings show that there is an important link between Instagram commitment and the PPR index of Instagram, which supports hypothesis 1c. This suggests that Instagram users seem to care about how engaged their friends are with the platform, which is then also reflected in their own degree of commitment to the site. For Snapchat users, the findings are more inconsistent, as the effect of the PPR index on commitment ceases to be significant after blocks 3 and 4 are added to the models. One possible explanation for this finding is that what matters for Snapchat commitment is not the PPR index of the broader peer-group, but the raging enthusiasm for Snapchat within a small group of close friends.

6. 5. 2. Impact of SNS uses and gratifications

The significance of nearly all explanatory variables related to SNS uses was perhaps the most striking finding from the regression models above. Motives for SNS use can be purposeful and/or ritualistic, so the survey independently measured professional, informational and social gratifications of SNSs. In particular, social and informational uses of the four sites appeared to have independent significant positive effects on people's commitment. This constituted the largest share of variance explained in all models (17.0% Facebook, 27.4% Snapchat, 29.5% Instagram and 30.0% Twitter). The regression results thus show that users' commitment attitudes to SNSs can be mainly associated with the gratifications obtained from using such sites. To a certain degree, this finding makes intuitive sense. Like the Internet, social media can be seen as an "experience technology" (Dutton & Shepherd 2006). The continued use of SNSs and the repeated gratifications obtained from their use can be habit-forming, which drives further commitment attitudes and psychological investment. The strong significant relationship between social uses and SNS commitment can, therefore, be explained in terms of the habit-forming acts of communication that people tend to experience on SNSs.

Furthermore, I contend that many of the hidden affordances embedded in SNSs can only be perceived through these kinds of learning experiences. Only by actively exploring the site and interacting with other users, can people form expectations about the social affordances of SNSs and their potential gratifications. In a more abstract sense, SNSs can thus be said to be spaces for immersive social experiences that are woven together through the shared narratives of the user community. In support of hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c, this could be one of the pathways how users develop genuine expressions of commitment to a site: through the active exploration of its affordances to learn what the site could represent in the social world. Still, not all gratifications

appear to be of equal importance in predicting commitment across the studied sites. To the extent that there are differences between the models, I contend that these differences can be understood in terms of the distinct social affordances of SNSs. In the eyes of the users, these particular affordances, and the resulting patterns of SNS uses, are what distinguishes one site from another. For instance, professional uses retained their significance only for Twitter users (see Table 8). This is apparent, because Twitter is commonly used for work-related networking. For example, this could entail connecting with peers at work or in one's academic discipline, e.g. to manage impressions or promote one's research articles. By contrast, Facebook may be just used to casually interact with one's friends, acquaintances and family members. In the case of Twitter, the difference in variance explained was particularly striking. While Twitter-related uses and gratifications explained approximately 30.0% of the variance, other sets of variables like identity-related predictors contributed as little as 8.0% to the model fit (see Table 8).

These observations merit further qualitative analysis. Future work could focus on questions related to users' habitual uses of particular SNSs, as well as people's selective perceptions of various inter-subjective affordances across multiple sites. The interview insights discussed in Chapter 8 go into this direction, but more rigorous ethnographic observations of SNS users are needed. Besides, it would be particularly interesting to investigate how the different social affordances of SNSs may be missed or misinterpreted by users due to the effects of algorithmic curation embedded in each platform.

6. 5. 3. Impact of SNS identities and self-presentation

The findings yielded by the models above show that explanatory variables related to sincere self-presentation and self-disclosure have a strong significant effect on SNS commitment,

but the relative effect size varies by platform. For example, the strength of association of these predictors is higher for Facebook users than for Twitter users. The differences between the four nested regression models are indicative of distinct self-presentational affordances of each SNS. In other words, it appears that self-presentation is conditioned through a bevy of platform-specific affordances, norms of appropriateness and implicit social conventions that distinctly govern social interactions on different SNSs. These affordances create markedly differing styles of maintaining contact, norms for sharing social and emotional information, and creating characteristic expectations of what a “standard” identity performance on each site should look like. This is why for many people there are attractive reasons to be a member of multiple SNSs with multiple accounts that warrant different self-presentational styles. These results suggest that users who believe that a given SNS account can represent their authentic self will use that platform more than users who do not believe that the SNS account can do so. Users’ sincere self-expression and self-disclosure can thus be linked to their commitment to a site, which supports hypotheses 3a and 3b.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that sincere self-expression is predicated on the use of one’s given ‘real-name’ on SNSs. As a case in point, the data tells an interesting story about the effects of ‘real-names’ on Facebook commitment. Though the pathways to Facebook commitment are varied, there is evidence that users who report a high sincere self-expression also tend to be more committed, regardless of any pseudonymous or ‘real-name’ identity-markers. In other words, the significant effect stems from users’ sincere self-expression, which might just as easily be accomplished by using pseudonyms or even partial ‘real-names’. Consequently, this finding constitutes a critique of the coupling of these two concepts in mass media and popular imagination, which has been at the forefront of policy decisions by large

Internet companies, such as Facebook and Google. Facebook Inc. has been particularly adamant that SNS accounts should represent one's authentic self and that a 'real-name' has to be the most direct representation of one's authentic self. However, the alleged positive effect of 'real-names' on Facebook commitment was not borne out in the data and hypothesis 3c was rejected.

On these grounds, I cannot necessarily make a claim that 'real-names' are authentic or that 'real-names' are how users develop a sense of commitment to certain SNSs. In future research, qualitative interviews need to further dismantle the notion of the 'real-name' account in order to better understand its indexicality for self-presentation, especially when users' self-presentational practices span across multiple SNS profiles.

6. 5. 4. Impact of networking styles

The final theme in this chapter concerns the subtle effects of people's networking styles in explaining their commitment to particular SNSs. Not all SNS users are created equal. The findings support the notion that as people go through different life-stages, making their own idiosyncratic life choices, they tend to form implicit preferences for certain ways of maintaining contact with the social world around them. While some prefer the company of a few close friends, others are inclined to unceasingly manoeuvre between many fleeting social groups and acquaintances. Based on these preferences for offline social contact, people may be predisposed to joining particular online platforms, perceiving and responding to different affordances, or using social media platforms in particular ways. Addressing hypotheses 4a and 4b, we can conclude that increased orientation towards networking with strong ties is linked to higher Facebook commitment. Meanwhile, the increased orientation towards networking with unknown audiences is linked to higher commitment on Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter. These results

demonstrate that these habitual inclinations towards certain networking styles partially predict commitment outcomes to all four SNSs. However, different inclinations have different effects on reported commitment attitudes to the four sites. For example, there is strong evidence that users committed to the use of Facebook prefer spending time online interacting with friends and acquaintances from within their personal network. By contrast, users of Twitter and Instagram appear to be more committed to each respective platform if they are also generally more comfortable interacting with strangers online. People who maintain contact with weak ties are also more likely to express a committed attitude to Instagram use.

Bearing in mind the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2, I contend that this finding is related to the social affordances that each platform tends to provide; while Facebook primarily facilitates interpersonal communication with known audiences, the other SNSs allow users to transcend the boundaries of who they know and freely interact with content posted by yet unknown users. Instagram facilitates this by encouraging users to open up their profiles to the whole Instagram community, as well as by using hashtags (#) to discover new visually appealing content posted by other users. Twitter also affords the discovery of content posted by unknown users, even though the data from the regression models suggests that users would be probably more committed to the site if their social feeds would feature more content from their ‘actual friends’, rather than strangers. For Snapchat, what seems to matter most, is not necessarily maintaining a focus on weak ties, but at least not talking to the same strong ties on a daily basis. Given that Snapchat users tend to be younger and at a point in their lives where their personal networks are in a state of constant flux, this finding also makes intuitive sense.

These results are promising, but more research is clearly needed to examine the effects of networking styles on people’s commitment decisions to particular social media technologies. For

example, further academic investigation of networking styles could focus on qualitative accounts of friending patterns and SNS configurations in everyday life. This could help elucidate the subtle effects of networking styles on commitment outcomes for each site.

6. 6. Chapter conclusion

In this chapter, the discussion has centred on the question of SNS commitment: what factors explain how people develop a genuine sense of commitment to social media platforms? And how are the predictors of SNS commitment possibly interrelated?

To address these questions, this chapter started out with an analogy between religious devotion and commitment to social media, as it has been depicted in the creative arts. While social science researchers have long studied worshippers of various deities, this thesis has attempted to provide a granular insight into the behaviours of SNS users and the factors that are associated with their commitment to each of four most popular social media platforms among the studied population of young adults in the UK: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

The chapter introduced the SNS Commitment Scale as an extension of the Facebook Intensity of Use Scale. The key modifications to this scale were informed theoretically and emerged empirically from factor analysis. This resulted in the separation of attitudinal questions related to SNS commitment from users' network size and self-reported time spent on each site. Next, based on existing research from the SNS literature, I have identified several explanatory variables that were organised into four analytical categories: SNS networks, SNS uses, SNS identities and users' networking styles. Four sets of hypotheses drawn from CMC research were proposed to investigate the relationship between these factors and SNS commitment.

The research design disentangled the size of users' SNS networks from the number of 'actual friends' on the site, which allowed us to make more nuanced statements about the effects of SNS audiences on commitment. Potential effects of social influence were also measured using the Perceived Peer-Rank (PPR) index, which measured users' perceptions of the relative popularity of each site in their own peer-group. Next, a distinction was made between different SNS gratifications based on social, informational and professional uses. Finally, identity-related variables encompassed emotional and personal self-disclosure, the use of 'real-names' in SNS profiles, identity experimentation and the overall sincerity of self-presentation. These predictors were sequentially added into nested OLS regression models for each of the four sites studied.

From this analysis it should be apparent that the way how individuals become committed to SNSs is a complex process that varies by platform. The findings indicated that, contrary to the logic of network effects, the size of one's SNS friendship network was not a significant predictor of commitment attitudes. Of course, like other social media platforms, SNSs are better when more people use them together, but this is evidently not the whole picture when it comes to understanding sustained user commitment. Instead, there was robust evidence that different types of SNS uses and gratifications were more strongly associated with commitment attitudes.

Further, while adding to the explanatory power of the models, identity-related variables had different effects on commitment for different sites. For example, Facebook commitment was explained by a combination of gratifications and self-presentation, while Twitter commitment was overwhelmingly predicted by just gratification experiences. An important finding was that expressions of SNS commitment seemed to depend on the active exploration of the social affordances embedded in each site. Some affordances may not be perceived, while other

affordances may be misunderstood. However, through shared exchanges of experiences and continuous use, people can develop strong emotional attachments to the SNSs they use.

With regard to distinct self-presentational practices, a surprising finding concerned the lack of evidence for the effects of ‘real-names’ on commitment to any of the four SNSs. Instead, the chapter has argued that it is important to decouple the notion of a ‘real-name’ from sincere self-expression, especially when it comes to SNS policy-decisions and platform designs. In particular, the findings indicate that it is sincere self-expression that seems to be strongly associated with SNS commitment. The data has also shown that individual differences in personal networking styles, which were predominantly formed through years of offline interactions, had an effect on online networking behaviour and commitment. Subtle preferences for particular friending patterns and the organisation of one’s personal network affected commitment attitudes to different SNSs in different ways.

While the quantitative findings in this chapter have contributed to a better understanding of different factors that are associated with SNS commitment, we still know relatively little about different groups of users and the ways in which they might react to these factors. This is why, before proceeding to the qualitative interviewing stage, it is important to use the survey data at hand to establish conceptual categories of users by examining the attitudes they might share. This analysis will hopefully enhance our understanding of how differences in SNS commitment could be explained by a typology of SNS users. Given that SNS users have different attitudes and beliefs about social media and digital technologies in general, the following chapter will thus attempt to construct a meaningful typology, which could provide an analytical backbone for the next qualitative investigation of SNS affordances that could magnify commitment.

CHAPTER 7: RELATING TECHNOLOGY ATTITUDES TO SOCIAL NETWORK SITE COMMITMENT

7. 1. Introduction – Beyond digital detox and digital natives

Public discourse concerning generational differences in social media use frequently speaks of young people as hyper-connected pioneers, who readily embrace new technologies. These young people are typically associated with a highly skilled and engaged population of ‘digital natives’ who can comfortably and adeptly navigate the technological environments of everyday life (Palfrey & Gasser 2013; Prensky 2001). In media reports, these ‘digital natives’ are frequently assumed to be somewhat insensitive to privacy issues. Consequently, they are said to be fully sharing their private lives online, either because they do not care about digital privacy or because they do not fully comprehend the potential implications of their social media activities (Barnes 2006; Hargittai & Marwick 2016).

At the other end of the spectrum, mainstream media has also made bold claims about the increasing popularity of the ‘digital detox’, i.e. the trend towards social media refusal (Portwood-Stacer 2013) and social media fatigue (Bright et al. 2015). It is noteworthy that these extreme positions paint a polarised picture of young people and their use of SNSs. More controversially, young people’s attitudes toward digital technologies have been typically either described in terms of their untrammelled enthusiasm for, or vehement denial of social media. Using this simplistic logic, many media analysts have tried to predict new trends in social media by looking at the behaviour of young users, but failed to make any substantial predictions. Instead, more

often than not, this has resulted in a media frenzy with clickbait articles making ambitious, yet unfounded claims about a ‘new renaissance’ of social media (or its ‘imminent doom’).

I contend that the popular dichotomy between highly engaged and highly disengaged users is misleading in at least two ways. *First*, it assumes that users have a somehow uniform level of engagement across all social media platforms when, in fact, their engagement between sites can vary greatly. One could certainly imagine, for example, the possibility that users’ levels of engagement vary as they enact different identities on each platform, or follow distinct paths of self-presentation on and across SNSs. This implies that they may interact with each other quite differently and with different frequencies, depending on the social context proffered by each site. *Second*, in places where individuals do turn to an ‘adigital’ lifestyle, they are still embedded in a larger offline network that can grant them access to information that is passed through social media channels, thus integrating them back into the broader peer-group. This suggests that there may be no direct link between the non-use of SNSs and lower levels of social activity. What is more, the spread of personal data concerning individuals may not be strictly conditional on their own SNS use. In other words, if you do not have a Facebook account, this does not guarantee that there is no information about you on Facebook or elsewhere on other sites.

Given these erratic levels of engagement on and across SNSs, we can ask if there are any guiding themes in the way how young people use multiple SNSs in concert, and what drives their patterns of SNS commitment. Previous studies have indicated the important effects of people’s attitudes on their behaviour (Ajzen 1988; Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Glasman & Albarracín 2006). Therefore, it seems apt to suggest that there may be certain general beliefs and attitudes about the Internet and digital technology that affect how individuals perceive, adopt and use SNSs – and

more pertinently, how they become committed to the use of certain sites. Based on the analysis of SNS commitment in the previous chapter, this leads to the next research question:

RQ₂: *How can people be classified into meaningful categories of attitudes towards digital technology such that it explains variations in their commitment?*

Beliefs and attitudes toward digital technology come in many shapes and forms. For example, the extent to which individuals believe that digital technologies are a positive force in society may play a role in the way how they use SNSs. Conversely, the extent to which digital technologies are seen as problem-generators may be related to different patterns of SNS use. Finally, the extent to which they feel dependent on technologies in everyday life may also influence their SNS choices. In order to make sense of these factors, this chapter proposes an exploratory SNS user typology based on such attitudes and beliefs.

Recent examinations of media users indicate the existence of several types of SNS users that each exhibit coherent patterns of platform-specific behaviours (Brandtzæg 2010; Heim & Brandtzæg 2011; Hermann et al. 2007). Different types of users may also respond differently to messages and interventions (Elliott & Polyakova 2014). Such typologies allow us to organise users' behaviours or attitudes into broader categories of user types that help explain complex social phenomena in a more analytically nuanced fashion (G. M. Johnson & Kulpa 2007). This approach helps to overcome minute individual differences between research subjects to examine overall patterns and similarities between people in the broader population.

In order to break down RQ₂ into more specific sub-questions, I propose the following subordinate research questions. **RQ_{2.1}:** *To what extent do young people differ based on their general attitudes and beliefs about digital technologies?* **RQ_{2.2}:** *How are clusters based on such*

*attitudes associated with any distinctive patterns of SNS use and demographic factors? RQ_{2.3}:
How are such types of SNS users reflected in different levels of SNS commitment?*

These exploratory questions follow an inductive approach to identifying and describing differences in the studied population. Furthermore, the typology method complements the other chapters by establishing a conceptual foundation for the interpretation of research findings. To that end, this chapter first examines previous efforts to create abstract categories of SNS users and behaviours, and discusses key challenges in addressing the research problem at hand. The typology of SNS users in this chapter is based on quantitative survey data. Qualitative findings are used to test, validate and expand the clustering solution. As such, the analysis in this chapter remains mostly descriptive, because it needs to paint a broad canvas for the contextualisation and interpretation of research findings in Chapter 8.

It should be noted, however, that the proposed clustering solution is not intended to be a universal classification of SNS users in general. Rather, it presents one plausible approach that is broadly aligned with the clustering strategy used in the OxIS reports (Dutton & Blank 2013, 2015). This helps to analytically unravel the dynamics of multiple media use, where other typologies are less suitable to address my research questions. More than anything, the typology in this chapter provides the groundwork for subsequent analyses of the interplay of factors that are associated with social media choice and commitment. This allows me to provide more nuanced answers to questions about how different types of SNS users differ in their approaches to mediated sociality and how they might reconfigure their social accessibility through different SNS choices. In particular, the proposed typology develops this foundation (a) by acknowledging that users' behaviours span across multiple jointly used sites that are drawn from a multi-media

environment that consists of a plethora of other social media technologies; and (b) by focusing on users' attitudes rather than reported frequencies of SNS-related activities. Chapter 8 extends and refines this typology using additional insights from qualitative interviews.

7. 2. Typologies of SNS users

One of the perennial challenges of SNS scholarship has been the inherent heterogeneity of uses and users of social media. On the one hand, the diversity of users – their identities, preferences and perspectives – has been a challenge for generalising research outcomes. On the other hand, this diversity has also been an opportunity for researchers to classify users into abstract categories of behaviours and attitudes. For this purpose, scholars have used *typological analysis* to group subjects according to their similarities in order to construct and examine ideal types that represent an abstraction from reality, yet are derived from empirical observations (Babbie 2013 p. 190). This is useful, because it permits scholars to conceptually differentiate between different categories of user types and describe segmentations in the social world.

In addition to that, typological analysis has been employed in the past as a useful tool and a foundation for theory building (Doty & Glick 1994). Examples for this include studies measuring the association between particular types of media behaviour and their social implications (Brandtzæg 2010; G. M. Johnson & Kulpa 2007), as well as studies investigating how differences in character lead to different profiles of technology adoption (Dutton et al. 1987; Rogers 1962). The main theoretical premise behind these studies is the following: while it is impossible to create a universal typology of users that captures all nuances of SNS use, there are qualitative differences between certain types of people in terms of the amount, variety and type

of their SNS use. These differences can be studied and used as a basis to inform my inquiry of SNS commitment.

As with most user typologies found in the literature, the downside of this approach is that it is very difficult to produce a dynamic representation of SNS users and their behaviours. While typologies tend to capture only a snapshot of user behaviour, usually on a single social media platform, it is evident that cultural norms and use patterns around SNSs are constantly shifting. As noted in Chapter 4, substantial changes in user behaviour can occur as a result of both endogenous and exogenous forces. For example, as the engineered architectures of each site change, different SNS uses could become more salient, while others fade into the background. Equally, even if the technological features of the platform remain stable over time, people's use patterns may still evolve. For example, this could happen when users learn more about the affordances of a site and gradually transition from consumers of information into active contributors to the platform.

Even though SNS scholarship shows no consensus on which behavioural and attitudinal categories are most useful in the context of social media choice and commitment, there have been a number of attempts at creating comprehensive user typologies that have aptly provided empirical instruments for understanding the diversity of users on selected sites. In recent years, a number of different approaches have been proposed by both industry practitioners and academic scholars (see Brandtzæg 2010 for a comprehensive review of previous SNS user typologies). Broadly speaking, these approaches can be grouped into typologies based on the logically independent dimensions of *amount*, *variety* and *types* of SNS use (Blank & Groelj 2014).

First, typologies based on the amount of SNS use focus on the frequency of SNS uses or the intensity of individual SNS activities. Throughout all such studies, the goal of analysis is to deduce clusters of people from their time spent using sites like Facebook and Twitter or using particular features of such sites. For example, Lampe and colleagues (2013b) draw the line of distinction between ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ SNS users, as compared to ‘non-users’. While it seems evident that a simple binary characterisation of SNS behaviours into users and non-users would result in a typology that is too broad and lacks analytical nuance, this perspective has been very popular among SNS scholars. With the same motivation, other scholars differentiate between ‘active’ users, who generate and publish content on SNSs, and ‘passive’ users, who merely consume the content produced by others (Davenport et al. 2014; Pagani et al. 2011). Though, it needs to be pointed out that the latter typologies tend to include several logically inconsistent dimensions in their clustering approaches that go beyond mere amount of use.

Second, variety or breadth of SNS use is typically grouped into interval variables that account for the number of different activities people undertake on SNSs. For instance, Blank and Groselj (2014) find that people may spend an equal amount of time on the Internet, but still exhibit individual differences in the variety of their online activities. Other studies take a similar approach to differentiate between ‘low media users’ and ‘screen-entertainment fans’ (Johnsson-Smaragdi 2001), or between groups of ‘online visitors’ and ‘online residents’ (White & Le Cornu 2011). But these typologies also tend to conflate several dimensions of use, and there are few examples of studies that solely focus on identifying user types based on variety of SNS use.

Third, types of SNS use usually refer to the qualitative differences in the way how people use social media, which can be measured with nominal variables. This could entail variables related to e.g. accessing news, socialising with peers and publishing creative content. Typically,

studies focusing on this dimension start out by recognising that an analysis of the mere frequency or breadth of SNS activities would be insufficient to distinguish between different categorical types of SNS users. This is why, a number of typologies have proposed to take into account the qualitative differences in the ways how people use social media, e.g. how they use SNSs and what psychological gratifications can be associated with different types of media uses (Donohew et al. 1987; Palmgreen & Rayburn 1979; Schlosser 2005). This line of studies, in particular, has produced very promising research.

Despite the fact that these three dimensions are frequently conflated in the literature, it is important to conceptually distinguish them. Failing to do so can result in incoherent categories in its respective property space (Barton 1955). For example, a recent McKinsey study (2011) locates users along a behavioural continuum of information-seeking from online communities and informational contributions to such communities. According to the study, this results in six broad segments of users, which are subsequently named ‘simplifiers’, ‘surfers’, ‘bargainers’, ‘connectors’, ‘sportsters’ and ‘routiners’. The problem with this approach is that the scholars use the number of hours spent online alongside the variety and types of users’ online activities as their main clustering dimensions. Based on the available evidence, the study claims that ‘routiners’ typically use the Internet to access information, while ‘connectors’ use the Internet to relate to other people through SNSs. While this approach may be useful for marketing purposes, it suffers from an incoherent analysis of users’ online activities, because it tries to capture several logically unconnected variables in a single typology.

Conceptual problems like this abound in the literature. For example, Alarcón-Del-Amo and colleagues (2011) employ a latent-segmentation approach that takes into account users’ frequencies of SNS activities, SNS experience, SNS interaction patterns and other socio-

demographic variables. The researchers label the resultant groups as ‘introvert users’, ‘novel users’, ‘versatile users’ and ‘expert-communicators’ (Alarcón-Del-Amo et al. 2011 p. 548). The apparent problem with this approach is similar to the McKinsey study above. Their employed segmentation strategy conflates people’s technology competencies, personality traits and SNS use patterns in a single clustering solution. Consequently, logical inconsistencies like this could reduce the informative capacity of the overall typology.

One of the most cited SNS user typologies that tries to avoid these conceptual pitfalls is produced by Brandtzæg and Heim (2011). The scholars propose an alternative approach to identifying and describing the different ways in which people use SNSs: they conceptualise SNS use in terms of people’s intensity of SNS use and their preferred mode of participation, i.e. whether people use SNSs primarily in an informational or a recreational capacity. The employed methods involved an online questionnaire with open and fixed response questions, socio-demographic metrics, as well as metrics of social capital. Their sample contained 5,233 survey-responses across the four major Norwegian SNSs in 2007: *Biip.no*, *HamarUngdom.no*, *Nettby.no* and *Underskog.no*. Based on these two dimensions, the scholars use k-means clustering to carefully construct a typology of five ideal SNS user types: ‘sporadics’, ‘lurkers’, ‘socialisers’, ‘debaters’ and ‘actives’. The researchers find that these groups significantly differ in their uses of SNSs. For instance, lurkers mostly go to SNSs to “write letters and messages” and “kill some time”. By contrast, socialisers appear to be using SNSs to “contact others” and “write letters and messages”. Debaters use SNSs to “discuss topics they care about” and to “read new contributions”. Actives, by contrast, appear to make the most use of various different SNS features, such as “profile surfing”, “looking for new friends” and “sharing pictures”. What unites

all groups is their tendency to come back to SNSs to “see if somebody tried to contact them”. Sporadics and debaters use SNSs mostly in the informational mode, whereas socialisers and lurkers use SNSs in the recreational mode with various levels of engagement. Furthermore, the authors emphasise that the reported types are dynamic and that users can progress from being sporadics to being actives over time (Heim & Brandtzæg 2011).

Nonetheless, there are several methodological limitations of this clustering approach, which may undermine some of its conclusions about how different groups of people use SNSs. *First*, the employed k-means clustering strategy requires a specific number of clusters as input, which is a limitation that is commonly recognised in the literature. This implies that the final clustering solution is sensitive to outliers and suboptimal cluster-centre initialisation. Even though several methodological approaches exist to better estimate the number of clusters right from the start, determining an imprecise number of types can have several implications. For example, setting too few clusters could result in rough, overly inclusive groups. Contrariwise, setting too many clusters could result in overly meticulous distinctions that reflect minor differences between users. *Second*, this approach makes hard assignments of points to clusters, which means that a user either belongs to a cluster or not at all. In reality, the boundaries between user types are fluid, with some users being located at the cluster centre and others being located at the intersection of several clusters. *Third*, this approach assumes that all variables have the same importance for all clusters; yet some variables might be more defining for certain clusters. *Fourth*, despite efforts to avoid the conceptual conflation of clustering categories, the typology conflates users’ amount of use with their type of SNS use, which is theoretically incoherent. For instance, ‘sporadics’ is a category that relates to amount of SNS use, while ‘debater’ reflects people’s preferences for certain types of use. It is plausible that some users may

have strong preferences for online debating activities, but who are less frequent users of SNSs. The same criticism can be applied to all other listed categories above, due to the lack of a conceptual distinction between SNS user types that are derived from their amount of use, as opposed to their preferred type of SNS use. *Fifth*, the self-selected nature of the sample limits the generalisability of the study – as does the strong influence of the Nordic culture on the way Norwegian people use social media. The influence of culture on SNS use patterns should not be underestimated; worldwide research on the cultural differences of Internet use indicates that there are important variations between cultures in terms of people's attitudes toward privacy, freedom of expression and other values (Dutta et al. 2011). This may explain the differences in engagement levels and self-reported motives of SNS participation, given the traditionally strong emphasis on the collective good and locally bounded communities in Nordic culture.

In general, by using behaviours rather than attitudes as a clustering dimension, the scholars tend to omit people's values and meanings associated with the observed behaviours, which weakens the conceptual validity of the typology. For example, some users may exhibit sustained activity levels without developing any sense of commitment to a particular SNS. Other users may be more passive in their SNS use, even though they are fully committed to a particular site to help them organise their social life. More importantly, in the context of SNSs, it seems fitting to measure whether people are at all comfortable with making themselves socially accessible to others: how comfortable are users with disclosing their emotions or personal lives online to others? In order to account for these dynamics, I need to look at people's general attitudes toward social media and digital technologies. In particular, do they believe that these technologies contribute to a better social life, making it easier to meet new people and access information online? Or, are these technologies frustrating to work with? Is the Internet seen as a

source of problems and, maybe, even immoral content? To what extent do people think they depend on digital technologies for everyday tasks? For example, do they turn off their mobile phones in order to concentrate? Bearing this in mind, I can begin to make sense of the huge diversity of SNS users based on their answers to these kinds of questions, which are indicative of their general technology attitudes.

The following section describes how these complexities will be addressed in this chapter: *methodologically*, by using a hierarchical clustering strategy instead of the k-means approach, which allows for the number of clusters to inductively emerge from the data; and *theoretically*, by using only people's attitudes and beliefs about digital technologies instead of their self-reported SNS behaviours as the main clustering dimensions of the typology. This will help prevent any theoretical or logical inconsistencies that could stem from the conflation of the three conceptually separate dimensions of amount, variety and types of SNS use.

7. 3. Clustering methodology

Broadly following the clustering strategy from the Oxford Internet Surveys by Dutton and Blank (2015), my overall approach to identifying different types of SNS users entails a four-step hierarchical clustering strategy on a stratified sample of UK youth aged 20-30. As such, this typology is based on respondents' attitudes toward and beliefs about digital technologies.

7. 3. 1. Survey measures of technology attitudes

The four-step process begins by reviewing the survey questions that measured people's beliefs about and attitudes toward digital technologies. These questions were used as the main foundation for the hierarchical clustering strategy. In light of the research problem at hand, I

assert that technology attitudes are a useful way of clustering SNS users, because these variables capture a lot of the personal dispositions that people develop over time about the role of digital technologies in their social lives. What is more, research finds that these attitudes appear to be relatively stable over time (Dutton & Blank 2015 p. 14). All survey questions for this approach were measured on five-item Likert scales. This allowed for the adequate comparison between the relevant dimensions of technology attitudes without the need to standardise the variables beforehand. The survey questions were based on the OxIS (2013) questionnaire and were tailored to elicit respondents' general opinions about the Internet and social media, regardless of their use of specific SNSs. The goal of OxIS was to identify different cultures of Internet users for the entire UK population across all ages. In this way, my approach builds on a firm theoretical grounding and the cultural stratification methodology by Dutton and Blank (2015 pp. 9–18), adapting the approach to the research problem in this thesis.

7. 3. 2. Principal components analysis

The second step of this process involved a principal components analysis (PCA) on the weighted survey data. This allowed me to analyse the interconnectedness of the abovementioned survey questions with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalisation to assess whether the variance in the data could be explained with a smaller number of dimensions. This process resulted in three components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 that emerged from the data: *technology optimism*, *technology anxiety* and *technology dependence*. The labels for the three dimensions stemmed from the variables with the highest factor loadings. Table 11 shows the factor loadings on each of the components. The data indicates that the components are not mutually exclusive, but they are conceptually independent and internally consistent with my theoretical framework.

This contributes to an understanding of which of the prevailing attitudes toward technology may be associated with particular patterns of SNS use in the population.

Table 11: Principal components analysis items and factor loadings of technology attitudes

Factor	Item (agreement with statement)	Loadings		
		<i>Comp1</i>	<i>Comp2</i>	<i>Comp3</i>
<i>Technology</i>	“Internet makes life easier.”	0.571		
<i>optimism</i>	“Digital technologies make things better.”	0.521		
	“Internet helps me to keep in touch.”	0.501		
<i>Technology</i>	“Internet is frustrating to work with.”		0.496	
<i>anxiety</i>	“Digital techn. fail when you need them most.”		0.502	
	“There is too much immoral content online.”		0.694	
<i>Technology</i>	“I leave my mobile phone turned on next to my			0.578
<i>dependence</i>	bed every night.”			
	“I turn off all digital technologies in order to			0.796
	concentrate.” (reversed)			
Eigenvalues:		2.122	1.695	1.374

Notes: n=800. Loadings <0.30 have been converted to blank spaces. Probability weights have been applied to the sample in accordance with target population proportions for gender and age obtained from the ONS (2015). Factor loadings after varimax rotation and Kaiser normalisation.

The first dimension is users’ *technology optimism*, which looks at digital technologies as a positive force and a social facilitator in everyday life. Evidently, respondents scoring high on this dimension tend to believe that digital technologies make life easier and allow them to keep in touch with their friends. Three variables load strongly on this factor. Past research has found that a positive view of technology is associated with higher perceived usefulness and perceived

ease of use of IT services (Walczuch et al. 2007), which was also associated with higher levels of technology adoption and use (Parasuraman 2000).

In contrast, the second dimension of *technology anxiety* measures the extent to which digital technology is seen as a problem generator in day-to-day tasks and activities, potentially leading to emotional distress, concerns about bad experiences and feelings of frustration, when something doesn't work. This dimension also encompasses respondents who worry that there is a lot of morally questionable content on the Internet (Dutton & Blank 2013). Three variables load on this component. By way of illustration, there is research evidence that suggests that young people could struggle with the demands placed upon them by social media. This may be due to the social tensions and anxieties caused by boundary-crossing digital technologies and collapsing social spheres on SNSs (Baumer et al. 2013; Binder et al. 2009; Lampe et al. 2013a). Other studies have controversially associated SNS use with higher levels of stress and lower wellbeing (Bevan et al. 2014; Fox & Moreland 2015; Shalom et al. 2015; Tandoc et al. 2015).

The last dimension of *technology dependence* captures feelings of being tethered to digital technologies. Two variables load highly on this factor. A high score on this dimension indicates that respondents are connected to their devices and to the Internet at all times: they leave their phone turned on next to their bed at night and do not turn off potentially distracting digital technologies in order to focus. As the qualitative interviews will later show, this may be related to the notion of the 'always-on' culture, which has been linked to SNS use in the literature (Karaiskos et al. 2010; Lee et al. 2014; Salehan & Negahban 2013; K. S. Young 2004).

As an additional robustness check, Table 20 in the Appendix presents the bivariate correlations between the individual survey questions before they were combined into the three technology attitudes. Variables that were highly correlated loaded on the same component, while

variables that were less strongly or not at all correlated loaded on different components. For example, the bivariate correlation between the variables that were combined into technology optimism were significant under $p < 0.01$, ranging from 0.294 to 0.548. Similarly, the correlations between the variables that were combined into technology anxiety were equally significant, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.259 to 0.436. Using the three emergent components as clustering dimensions, the next step involves clearly identifying groups of respondents who share similar attitudes and beliefs about digital technologies.

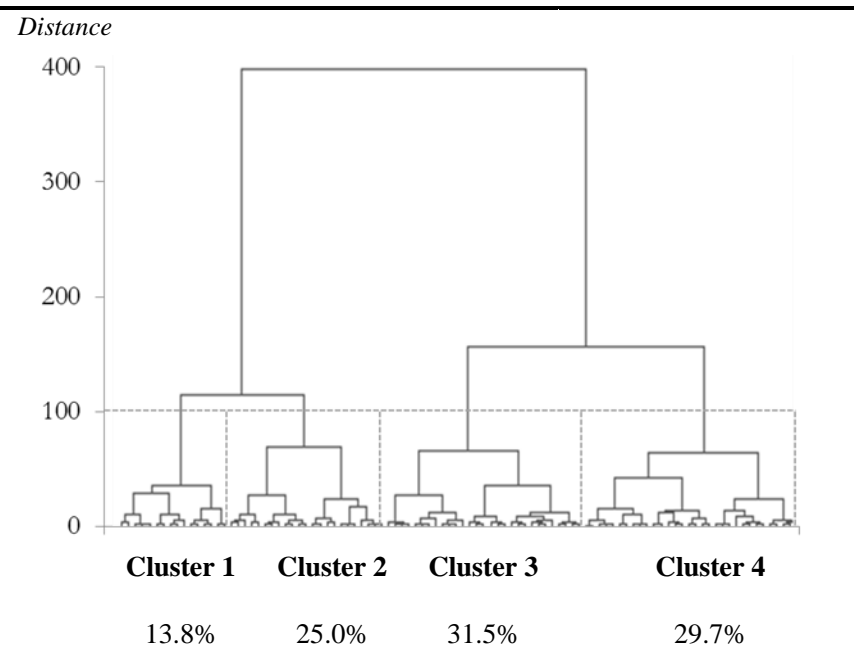
7. 3. 3. Hierarchical clustering

The third step utilises the three distinct measures from the PCA to locate users in clusters of shared beliefs and attitudes. For this purpose, I apply a technique of hierarchical cluster analysis that relies on Ward's linkage method with squared Euclidean distances to produce the most interpretable clusters (Ward 1963). This particular technique has been shown to outperform other hierarchical clustering techniques (Ferreira & Hitchcock 2009) and was used for the survey dataset of OxIS in particular (Dutton & Blank 2014). This approach is useful because it does not assume the number of clusters in advance and is less sensitive to outliers. It computes the relative distance between observations and arranges the observations in a hierarchical tree-like structure. This approach also allows viewing partitions at various levels of granularity using the dendrogram visualisation in Figure 9 below.

The visual representation of the clustered data suggests the existence of several distinct technology cultures among young Internet users in the UK, which can be broadly grouped into two large clusters or four smaller clusters based on the relative within-cluster and between-cluster distances of technology attitudes. Implicitly, this may reflect the divide between light and

heavy SNS users, but it is important to remember that the solution is solely based on technology attitudes and does not take into account the intensity of any SNS activities. In sum, the outlined clustering methodology has produced four distinct clusters of SNS users based on their technology attitudes, which are characterised and named in the next step. To ensure that no intricate nuances in the data were sacrificed to achieve a greater level of parsimony and interpretability, as it is often the case in typological analyses (Doty & Glick 1994), a separate clustering approach was implemented that did not entail any initial dimensional reductions of the survey questions through PCA. The same four clusters emerged again and the clustering solution was broadly consistent with the original typology.

Figure 9: Dendrogram for hierarchical clustering of typology



Notes: n=800. Cluster size as proportion of survey sample.

7. 3. 4. Naming the four clusters

In the fourth step, I position each group along the three clustering dimensions to derive distinct labels for each cluster profile. Using evocative cluster labels can be problematic when the labels are associated with additional meanings and connotations that were not measured in the typology. This is why it was important to use labels merely as devices for clarity. While the cluster labels presented below inductively stem from the data, the theoretical claims tested in this chapter come from the interplay of clusters with other constructs rather than from their specific labels. As one might expect, the identified clusters are overlapping, but each has a characteristic profile. To understand these profiles, I assess the mean of each dimension of technology attitudes for each of the groups and proceed to naming them.

Table 12: Summary of user type characteristics after hierarchical clustering

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Dimension	<i>Sceptics</i>	<i>Moderates</i>	<i>Enthusiasts</i>	<i>Entangled</i>
Technology optimism	3.027	4.300	4.689	4.181
Technology anxiety	3.636	2.747	1.898	3.151
Technology dependence	2.018	2.685	4.367	4.317
Total cluster size	n=110	n=200	n=252	n=238
% of total survey sample	13.8%	25.0%	31.5%	29.7%
Interview participants	n=10	n=13	n=14	n=13
% of total interview sample	20.0%	26.0%	28.0%	26.0%

Notes: Table shows the means of each clustering dimension for the four groups of SNS users.

Sceptics (Cluster 1): People who fall into this cluster score highest on technology anxiety and lowest on technology optimism. This group is relatively small with n=110 respondents in the survey (13.8%). Further qualitative interviews show that they exhibit restrained SNS use, which emanates from a sceptical attitude toward digital technologies and social networking activities. The interviews have shown that people in this group worry about the intrusive potential of social media. They also view SNSs as problem generators because of several factors, such as the persistence of SNS content and the commercial misuse of personal data. Sceptics can be described as guarded users who either passively dwell on, or actively disengage from social media. Despite that, they tend to maintain a few SNS accounts they deem essential for personal communication, most notably on Facebook. In terms of their typical SNS activities, they do not appear to display any strong forms of emotional attachment or commitment to any particular social media platform. As a result of that, many sceptics seemed to use SNSs with caution, preferring face-to-face meetings and alternative means of communication when possible. What is more, the evidence indicates that they are not only sceptical about the benefits of digital media in general, but also somewhat suspicious about the social contexts in which these technologies are used. The interviews also suggest that this active disengagement from social media frequently takes a toll on them. According to interviewed sceptics, it costs them a lot of energy and effort to uphold these practices, while watching how all their friends would seemingly “carelessly” continue to consume SNS content.

Moderates (Cluster 2): The second group of SNS users is characterised by a combination of above-average scores on technology optimism, and moderate scores on both technology anxiety and technology dependence. Furthermore, the qualitative interviews suggest that people

in this cluster do not entertain any strong notions against SNSs. Consequently, they connect to SNSs when the need arises or when there is a particular task that needs solving. In the survey sample, a quarter of respondents (n=200) were classified as moderates. The evidence from the interviews also indicates that moderates tend to see digital technologies as mostly functional tools to access information and keep in touch with their acquaintances, friends and family members. This supports the notion of their somewhat instrumental approach to regulating social accessibility. Being modest users of SNSs, they adhere to mainstream views of social media and do not think that the problems typically associated with social media could affect them personally in any way. This contributes to their confidence in technology and their optimistic beliefs about SNSs as social facilitators and a positive force in society.

Enthusiasts (Cluster 3): The third group of people has the highest scores of technology optimism and the lowest scores of technology anxiety. What makes this cluster even more distinct is that they also tend to have the highest score of technology dependence. The data shows that they appear to be generally optimistic about the impact of digital technologies, seeing social media as a positive force and a social facilitator for their personal relationships. They are most likely to agree that the Internet helps them to keep in touch with their friends and that digital technologies make their lives easier. Conversely, enthusiasts exhibit the lowest scores on technology anxiety, which indicates that they do not see SNSs as problem generators, but rather as technologies they can control and benefit from. This cluster encompasses the largest group of respondents with n=252 or 31.5% of the survey sample. The interviews suggest that these people tend to adeptly navigate media environments in everyday life. They also have the highest media diversity among all other clusters. As such, people in this group could be considered social media

omnivores. They are able to proficiently use multiple SNSs in concert to share visual content, opinions, emotions or details of their personal lives. In a way, their use of social media becomes routinised in everyday situations. Furthermore, interviews show that these people would typically self-identify as early adopters of new SNSs. They are also more likely to use their 'real-names' on each of the four studied sites and are more likely to engage with other users based on shared interests. As evidenced by the analysis presented in the following sections, enthusiasts also show a consistent proclivity to cultivate larger networks, alongside with a genuine excitement for different types of SNS features. Even though they appear to be relying on SNSs to keep track of their lives, social contexts and personal networks, they welcome a diversity of new SNSs as they enfold them into their daily routines and conversations that span across several sites.

Entangled (Cluster 4): The fourth cluster contains 29.7% of the sample (n=238) and represents one of the most intriguing combinations of technology attitudes and beliefs. They combine the second-highest scores on technology anxiety and technology dependence, while still showing above-average scores of technology optimism. This is due to their ambivalent attitudes towards digital technologies: even though the people in this group are mildly optimistic about digital technologies, they have mixed feelings about the use of SNSs in their personal lives. The analysis in this thesis shows that this group is comprised of mostly young, highly active users of multiple SNSs who both embrace social media *and* worry about its consequences for personal communication. In other words, they are very similar to enthusiasts, except for their higher scores on technology anxiety. Respondents in this group tend to associate the use of SNSs with worries, stress and frustration. Clearly, experiencing social tensions and problems does not put them off from heavily using SNSs. These anxieties have been described by one interview

participant as feelings of being “*entangled in a social web*”. Since nearly all users in this group expressed similar feelings, I have assigned the “entangled” label to this cluster in order to capture their complex relationship with social media. This is well aligned with their high self-reports of technology dependence. In addition, further analysis shows that people in this group tend to use their ‘real-name’ as a unifying identity-marker across all their social media profiles. For example, they interact with their SNS friends in a variety of social situations online. They also try to stay up-to-date on the many experiences and conversations that are happening across their extended social circles. Yet they are also deeply concerned about their social privacy on SNSs and are more likely to feel anxious about the expectation of being constantly socially accessible, as well as the risk of context collapse from colliding network audiences.

For comparison, OxIS (2013) identified five cultural types of Internet users that were labelled as ‘e-mersives’, ‘techno-pragmatists’, ‘cyber-savvy’, ‘cyber-moderates’ and ‘adigitals’. The first group of *e-mersives* uses the Internet naturally as part of their everyday life, as a way to keep in touch with friends, as well as to pass the time. This group is most closely related to the group of enthusiasts in my clustering solution due to their high online activities and their social media diversity. *Techno-pragmatists* primarily use the Internet in an instrumental fashion to save time and to be more efficient, which broadly fits the description of moderates in my analysis. The *cyber-savvy* users in the third group express ambivalent views about the Internet. Even though they tend to use the Internet as an informational resource and a social utility, they are concerned about their digital privacy and sometimes feel that that they are not in control of their online activities, which is somewhat related to the entangled users in my approach. The fourth cluster of *cyber-moderates* accepts the Internet as an important part of their lives, but does not

have any strong views on issues of privacy and immoral content online, which is, once again, related to moderates in my sample. Finally, the *adigitals* are a group of people who express grave concerns about the negative ramifications of the Internet, while also being less skilled and frequently frustrated about the use of digital technologies. As with the people who fall into the group of sceptics, this group feels left behind from the technological progress and tends to be a bit older compared to the other respondents. Overall, the identified types in my clustering solution broadly map onto the OxIS user types, but there are also important differences with regard to SNS use and commitment, which will be further explained in the following sections.

7. 3. 5. Limitations of the user typology

Lastly, there are a few limitations that need to be spelled out before proceeding with the thematic analysis of the four clusters. Even though this typology contributes to a more nuanced measure of people's attitudes towards digital technologies, it is mainly applicable to Internet users in the UK aged 20-30 in the year 2015. It does not automatically extend to younger or older respondents, or other research contexts. It is evident that opinions, attitudes and beliefs about digital technologies change over time, e.g. as new SNSs are launched or as people move through different life-stages. Thus, the attribution of users to particular clusters only reflects their present state of mind about the role of digital technology in their personal lives. More broadly, the diversity of SNS users in my sample makes a typology of respondents based on technology attitudes a challenging undertaking, especially considering other characteristics of SNS use that could be alternatively used as clustering criteria (Ellison et al. 2007; T. Ryan & Xenos 2011; Smock et al. 2011). Besides, based on the dendrogram depicted in Figure 9 other clustering approaches were possible. This is why the clustering solution was further tested for its validity

and generalisability. Indeed, there is no one best rule on how to evaluate a clustering solution, but research suggests that validating an emergent typology with mixed-methods data can produce more robust results (Jain et al. 1999). Furthermore, since the clusters cannot be entirely homogenous, additional qualitative interviews were needed. The small number of observations in some of the sub-groups in the sample necessitated complementary qualitative analysis. Chapter 8 introduces additional interview data to dive deeper into the differences between the four clusters. It can thus be said that the four quantitatively-derived cluster profiles are rooted in a mixed-methods approach and based on a range of different observations. This helps to differentiate the various implications of technology attitudes for people's social media choices and their commitment to various SNSs.

7. 4. Characterising differences between clusters

The implemented clustering approach has uncovered systematic differences in young people's attitudes toward digital technologies. In this section, I return to the research questions outlined at the beginning of the chapter and attempt to characterise the differences between the four identified clusters. The discussion will touch upon systematic between-cluster differences in demographic profiles, SNS account membership, patterns of SNS use and SNS commitment. Data on other between-cluster differences, such as differences in different uses of SNSs (see Table 23) and differences in the PPR index (see Table 25) can be reviewed in the Appendix.

In the next sections, I employ a series of one-way ANOVAs to examine the differences in means of pertinent variables for the questions above. Bartlett's test for equal variances indicates that the assumptions of ANOVAs are satisfied. The weighted ANOVA results indicate that the four groups significantly differ from each other on a number of variables ($p < 0.001$). To delve

into the multiple-comparisons of means between the four clusters, further Bonferroni post-hoc tests are conducted, illuminating which sub-groups are significantly different from each other on each SNS¹³. Pairwise comparisons of the weighted means are reported in the respective tables if the Bonferroni-adjusted significance of the difference is below 0.001.

7. 4. 1. Demographic factors

The available evidence from the data indicates that there are minor demographic differences between the four clusters. However, the differences are not large enough to suggest that the identified types act as surrogates for demographic profiles. For example, sceptics tend to be slightly older and the gender balance in this cluster is slightly geared towards male users. Conversely, entangled users tend to be younger and female. These differences are most likely due to the fact that older male users and younger female users were overrepresented in the sample. Therefore, probability weights have been applied to all models to correct for this problem in accordance with target population proportions from the ONS (see Table 22). Furthermore, Table 13 shows the differences in demographic variables between clusters. These findings show that most of the demographic variables are not significant, indicating that the clusters do not reflect any distinct demographic profiles.

Based on the analysis of variance, differences in users' occupational status are mostly not significant, but there appears to be only a small proportion of students among the sceptics.

¹³ Bonferroni post-hoc tests are multiple-comparison tests following one-way ANOVAs. To obtain the Bonferroni-adjustment, the assumed true critical level α is divided by the total number of tests (Van Belle et al. 2004 pp. 534–7). For example, given a significance level of 0.05 and 4 tests, this procedure would yield a critical level of $0.05/4=0.0125$. The reason for this is that we want reduce the overall probability of falsely rejecting each hypothesis, rather than increasing the chances with each additional test (Hochberg & Tamhane 1987; R. G. Miller 1981). This examination of pairwise differences is a more conservative approach; it reduces the likelihood of rejecting the null-hypothesis when it is true, while increasing the chances of not rejecting the null-hypothesis when it is false.

Contrariwise, enthusiasts are, on average, the most educated respondents in the sample (large proportion of people with higher education degrees). Furthermore, in terms of educational attainment, entangled users tend to be slightly more educated than sceptics, but less educated than enthusiasts. In terms of the geographic spread of respondents, there are no significant differences between the four groups with the exception of a larger proportion of respondents from rural backgrounds among the sceptics. The other groups, for the most part, come from urban or suburban areas. That being said, more evidence is needed to make stronger claims about the distinctiveness of the geographic distribution of particular user types.

Table 13: Differences in demographic factors between clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Post-hoc test on
Variable	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>	ANOVA pairs
% female	40.91	49.50	45.23	60.50	C1 C3 C2 < C4 ***
% employed	51.82	50.50	43.25	45.80	
% self-employed	8.18	12.00	9.92	9.24	
% student	20.91	35.50	42.86	39.92	C1 < C2 C3 C4 ***
% with higher education	40.91	45.5	51.19	49.58	
% urban	58.18	64.50	63.10	65.97	
% suburban	29.09	30.00	31.35	29.41	
% rural	12.73	5.50	5.56	4.62	C4 C2 C3 < C1 *
Age (20-30)	25.89	25.18	24.91	24.54	C4 < C3 C2 C1 **
Total cluster size	n=110	n=200	n=252	n=238	

Notes: Table shows relative number of people matching particular demographic profiles in each cluster. ANOVA significance values: ***= $p < 0.001$, **= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$ with pairwise Bonferroni post-hoc test.

In order to further test whether the identified clusters are not simply measuring differences in demographics (e.g. younger users being enthusiasts and older users being sceptics), I compute a binary logistic regression model of the four clusters. In this model, each identified type is a dichotomous dependent variable and the goal is to disentangle the impact of each cluster dimension from one another. The predictors in this logarithmic regression include a range of demographic factors alongside the Big-Five personality types. Including these predictors was important to investigate whether the four emerging user types were not simply reflecting differences in demographic or personality profiles. Finally, the model also included a control variable for daily time spent on SNSs to make sure the clusters were not simply dividing respondents into active and inactive users. Table 24 (see Appendix) shows that technology optimism and technology dependence are significant for all clusters, while technology anxiety is significant in all cases but one ($p < 0.001$). In particular, the most important predictor for sceptics is technology anxiety, while moderates are overwhelmingly predicted by technology optimism. Enthusiasts are predicted by a combination of technology optimism and technology dependence. Entangled users are strongly associated with technology dependence and technology anxiety. More importantly, the models show that the identified clusters cannot be accounted for by demographic factors or personality traits alone. Therefore, the analysis shows that the identified types do not reflect any characteristic demographic groups in the sample.

7. 4. 2. SNS account membership

SNS account membership is very unequally distributed across the four clusters (see Table 14). For example, enthusiasts typically use a greater number of SNSs in concert with one another. Out of the four studied SNSs, they report to use an average of 2.84 SNSs, while 35.3%

of enthusiasts have accounts on all four platforms. With a majority of Facebook users (97.6%), some sampled enthusiasts were also active users of Twitter (75.0%), Instagram (61.1%) and/or Snapchat (50.8%). Interview participants also mentioned Tumblr, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Kik, Telegram and Pinterest as additional applications they would use to maintain and/or expand their social relationships. Every SNS and every application appeared to have a specific purpose and a dedicated place in their social lives – a theme that we return to in Chapter 8. In contrast to enthusiasts, the group of moderates only used an average of 2.48 SNSs. 29.5% of people in this group said they were active on all four platforms. What is more, it appears that these users specifically favoured Facebook over other SNSs. Over 98.0% of moderates in the sample self-reported to be active Facebook users. Contrariwise, sceptics only used an average of 1.56 SNSs. In fact, 24.6% of respondents in this group said they were not using any of the four SNSs at all.

Table 14: Differences in SNS account membership between clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Post-hoc test on
Variable	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>	ANOVA pairs
% Facebook users	73.64	98.00	97.62	98.32	C1 < C3 C2 C3 ***
% Twitter users	33.64	63.00	75.00	60.01	C1 < C4 C2 < C3 ***
% Instagram users	24.55	47.50	61.11	60.92	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
% Snapchat users	23.64	39.00	50.79	48.32	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
% all of the above	18.12	29.50	35.32	34.03	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
% none of the above	24.55	1.00	0.00	0.42	C3 C4 C2 < C1 ***
Average number of SNSs	1.55	2.48	2.85	2.67	C1 < C2 < C3 C4 ***
Total cluster size	n=110	n=200	n=252	n=238	

Notes: Table shows relative number of SNS users in each cluster. ANOVA significance values: ***= p<0.001, **= p<0.01, *= p<0.05 with pairwise Bonferroni post-hoc test.

The ANOVA results in Table 14 indicate that between-cluster differences in the share of SNS accounts are significant for all platforms ($p < 0.001$). The other main insight emerging from this data is that Facebook remains a dominant platform across all four clusters, but the adoption of other SNSs, such as Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter, varies greatly between the different groups. As a result of that, some sub-groups of clusters contain fewer than 100 observations, e.g. Snapchat users among moderates ($n=78$) and Instagram users among sceptics ($n=27$). This can be contrasted with other sub-groups that have up to 246 observations, e.g. Facebook users among enthusiasts. This observation emphasises the need for complementary interviews to examine the smaller sub-groups, as well as other features of interest concerning multi-platform networking.

The apparent inequality in SNS account membership raises a number of questions about SNS use patterns in each cluster. For example, are enthusiasts who are active across a greater number of SNSs, also more committed to each individual SNS? Are moderates more committed to Facebook at the expense of other SNSs? More generally, if users' commitment is not equally distributed across all used SNSs, what does this tell us about the dominant networking practices in each cluster? The following chapter might help to shed light on these questions.

While people's network size was expected to be consistent across SNSs, the data shows that users cultivate networks of varying forms and sizes across different social media platforms – and these networks seem to be only partially overlapping. It is worth remembering that research finds that Facebook networks can be typically seen as reasonable proxies of people's offline personal networks (Brooks et al. 2011; Steinfield et al. 2008; Valenzuela et al. 2009). In this regard, the data in Table 15 indicates that enthusiasts appear to have larger personal networks across all studied SNSs, with an average of 597 friends on Facebook, 292 followers on Twitter,

318 followers on Instagram and 46 friends on Snapchat. Moderates report to have an average of 567 friends on Facebook, but only 211 friends on Instagram. There may be several explanations for this difference that are related to differences in social affordances between the two platforms. Interestingly, Facebook users among sceptics have an average Facebook network of 394 friends, while Twitter users in this group have an average of 249 followers. This indicates that people in this group are not as isolated or marginalised as some media analysts tend to suggest. Given their high scores on technology anxiety, they appear to be reluctantly maintaining a small number of SNS accounts, but whether they are committed to any of these sites remains an open question.

Table 15: Differences in SNS network size between clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Post-hoc test on
Variable	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>	ANOVA pairs
Facebook: Network	393.93	567.84	597.24	528.05	C1 < C4 C2 C3 **
Facebook: 'Actual friends'	67.43	116.77	116.83	121.87	C1 < C4 C2 C3 *
Twitter: Network	248.57	227.79	291.58	206.36	
Twitter: 'Actual friends'	42.59	34.13	42.79	29.08	
Instagram: Network	153.37	211.37	318.08	267.12	
Instagram: 'Actual friends'	34.37	54.97	73.03	53.60	
Snapchat: Network	32.69	33.54	46.34	29.76	
Snapchat: 'Actual friends'	20.54	21.87	24.18	17.88	

Notes: Table shows absolute number of friends/followers and actual friends in each SNS for each cluster. ANOVA significance values: ***= $p < 0.001$, **= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$ with pairwise Bonferroni post-hoc test.

In addition to the number of friends or followers that an individual may have accrued on any given SNSs, the survey also measured the number of 'actual friends' as a sub-set of their

total SNS friends (Lampe et al. 2013a). As noted in Chapter 6, the reported number of ‘actual friends’ is open to interpretation, yet it represents a unique insight into what an individual user might perceive as their genuine friends on each site. The results are promising, insofar as the proportion of actual friends is substantially higher for Snapchat accounts (73.5%) than for Twitter accounts (24.6%). This is likely due to the fact that many people use Snapchat to connect with their strong ties, while Twitter is typically used to connect with weak ties and the general public. However, despite the evident dissimilarities in the average network size across SNSs, the differences between the four clusters are not statistically significant in all cases but one: sceptics tend to maintain smaller networks on Facebook. However, more evidence is needed to confidently say whether SNS network size is a distinctive factor that uniquely describes each cluster. For instance, one would assume that a defining characteristic of the cluster of enthusiasts might be that they tend to be somewhat gregarious in their social networking activities, accruing larger numbers of online ties across SNSs. Indeed, the survey data hints at this proclivity, but there is not enough evidence in the sample to reject the hypothesis that this tendency does not significantly distinguish them from the other user types.

Moreover, there are noticeable differences between the four clusters in terms of times of SNS adoption. In particular, enthusiasts and entangled users seemed to be early adopters of the studied SNSs, while moderates and sceptics appeared to be late adopters. The available evidence from the qualitative interviews supports this proposition. For example, an average enthusiast in the sample joined Facebook in 2007 and Instagram in 2012, while an average sceptic joined these SNSs at a later point in time: Facebook in 2008 and Instagram in 2013. Figure 17 in the Appendix shows the temporal distribution of joining dates in the sample to put these numbers

into perspective. Even though there is not enough evidence in the survey sample to suggest that this temporal difference is significant, the uncovered pattern is still noteworthy; it echoes the popular notion that ‘digital natives’ are early adopters of new social media due to their apparent competence with and enthusiasm for digital technology (Palfrey & Gasser 2013; Prensky 2001).

7. 4. 3. SNS activities

Next, I assess the extent to which there may be significant differences in SNS-related behavioural patterns between clusters. In particular, I examine the frequency of various SNS activities, e.g. ‘liking’ content, sharing photographs or updating one’s profile. Interpreting the results summarised in Table 16, there appears to be a statistically significant difference in the frequency of nearly all SNS activities between the four clusters. In particular, it becomes evident that sceptics are significantly less frequently engaging in all measured SNS-related actions. As such, differences between sceptics and all other types are almost always significant, according to the ANOVA results. By contrast, differences between enthusiasts and entangled users are only statistically significant for the following activities: frequency at which they add or remove friends on SNSs, and the frequency at which they update SNS privacy settings. The available evidence indicates that entangled users and enthusiasts can be described as heavy users of SNSs, who engage in all measured SNS activities more frequently than moderates and sceptics. By way of example, 18.9% of entangled users share pictures daily or several times a day, 38.2% of them comment on their friends’ posted content daily or several times a day, and an overwhelming 70.6% ‘like’ other users’ content daily or several times a day. Furthermore, entangled users and enthusiasts spend significantly more time per day on SNSs compared to the other groups.

Table 16: Differences in amount of SNS activities between clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Post-hoc test on
Variable	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>	ANOVA pairs
Acknowledging or liking	3.23	4.62	5.08	4.92	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
Exploring other profiles	3.22	4.12	4.68	4.48	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
Commenting on content	2.90	4.04	4.39	4.22	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
Interacting with brands	1.96	2.50	2.81	2.64	C1 < C2 C4 C3 ***
Sharing visual content	2.40	3.28	3.62	3.52	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
Sharing status updates	2.38	3.37	3.71	3.48	C1 < C2 C4 C3 ***
Sharing creating writing	1.87	2.01	1.92	2.13	
Updating SNS profile	2.32	2.68	2.88	2.82	C1 < C2 C4 C3 ***
Updating privacy settings	2.19	2.49	2.34	2.53	C1 C3 < C2 C4 *
Joining new groups	2.08	2.53	2.84	2.65	C1 < C2 C4 C3 ***
Adding new friends	2.46	3.23	3.53	3.29	C1 < C2 C4 < C3 ***
Removing friends	2.08	2.32	2.25	2.51	C1 < C3 C2 < C4 **
Daily time for SNS use	1.70	3.21	3.90	3.75	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
Total cluster size	n=110	n=200	n=252	n=238	

Notes: Table shows means for each cluster. All variables, except daily time spent using SNSs, is identically measured on a 6-point Likert scale, where 0 means “never” and 6 means “more than once per day.” ANOVA significance values: ***= $p < 0.001$, **= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$ with pairwise Bonferroni post-hoc test.

To understand the gap between the two extreme positions, enthusiasts spend an average of 3.90 hours per day on SNSs, while sceptics only spend an average of 1.70 hours on SNSs. This is the lowest daily average time spent on SNSs among the four clusters. As one would expect, moderates tend to be located in the middle of the spectrum. What is more, sceptics are also more likely to report that they do not regularly share status updates about their personal life

on social media and that they do not use SNSs to discuss personal feelings. However, many interview-respondents in this cluster admit that they do use SNSs to keep in touch with their friends, even if they were reluctant to join these sites in the first place. Since people in this cluster appear to remain somewhat active on social media, one cannot generally classify them as lurkers (Heim & Brandtzæg 2011) or adigitals (Dutton & Blank 2013). Combining these insights with interview findings, I recommend more research on people who remain active SNS users, but quietly resists new trends in social networking.

7. 4. 4. SNS commitment and enjoyment

Finally, I test whether there are significant differences between the four clusters in terms of people's commitment to and enjoyment of the SNS they use. Although the two measures are clearly interrelated, enjoyment and commitment are treated separately in this section. Their bivariate correlation values between these two measures range from 0.58 (for Facebook users) to 0.76 (for Twitter users). The interviews show that some users were not entirely satisfied with the SNSs they used; most notably with Facebook, which was clearly not universally liked, but still considered an "*indispensable platform*" to keep in touch with friends. Notwithstanding the conspicuous dissatisfaction, many users remained committed to Facebook in their day-to-day lives and a broad range of mediated conversations. Clearly, this is an interesting dynamic that needs to be more fully explored in future research to gauge the potential implications of the divergence between SNS commitment and SNS enjoyment.

Across the four studied SNSs, the data gathered in the survey indicates that commitment to SNSs is consistently positively related with user types that score highly on technology optimism and technology dependence. SNS commitment is also negatively related to user types

that score highly on technology anxiety. The data supports the claim that there are significant differences in the extent of commitment exhibited by the four clusters in relation to Facebook and Instagram (see Table 17). Nonetheless, there is not enough evidence to identify statistically significant differences in users' commitment to Twitter and Snapchat ($p < 0.001$). If commitment attitudes regarding Twitter and Snapchat do not vary greatly between the four clusters, could this imply that perceptions of affordances of these sites do not depend on general technology attitudes? This raises an important question about the interdependence of SNS affordances, which is explored in greater detail in Chapter 8.

Table 17: Differences in SNS commitment between clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Post-hoc test on
Variable	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>	ANOVA pairs
<i>Facebook (n)</i>	<i>(81)</i>	<i>(196)</i>	<i>(246)</i>	<i>(234)</i>	
Enjoyment	3.14	3.89	4.17	3.97	C1 < C2 C4 < C3 ***
Commitment	2.84	3.68	4.00	3.84	C1 < C2 C4 C3 ***
<i>Twitter (n)</i>	<i>(37)</i>	<i>(126)</i>	<i>(189)</i>	<i>(143)</i>	
Enjoyment	2.95	3.42	3.62	3.42	C1 < C2 C4 C3 *
Commitment	2.58	2.85	3.05	2.88	
<i>Instagram (n)</i>	<i>(27)</i>	<i>(95)</i>	<i>(154)</i>	<i>(145)</i>	
Enjoyment	3.41	3.86	4.27	3.93	C1 < C2 C3 < C4 ***
Commitment	2.78	3.28	3.62	3.27	C1 < C4 C2 < C3 ***
<i>Snapchat (n)</i>	<i>(26)</i>	<i>(78)</i>	<i>(128)</i>	<i>(115)</i>	
Enjoyment	3.42	3.67	4.00	3.69	C1 C2 C4 < C3 *
Commitment	2.83	3.02	3.21	2.91	

Notes: Table shows means for each cluster and each SNS. ANOVA significance values: ***= $p < 0.001$, **= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$ with pairwise Bonferroni post-hoc test.

The following subsections focus on the relationship between technology attitudes and commitment for each of the four clusters, starting with *enthusiasts*. While the previous analytical steps have indicated that enthusiasts tend to be early adopters of social media, their patterns of commitment to their jointly used SNSs cannot be described as unstable or “promiscuous”, i.e. they are not quick to abandon an older SNS for newer alternatives. By contrast, enthusiasts display the highest levels of commitment and enjoyment compared to the other clusters. For example, Snapchat users in this group seem to be particularly enjoying the use of the app. In terms of their broader SNS use patterns, this finding makes sense since they generally seem to rely on sites like Facebook and Instagram to configure their sociality in day-to-day life. They have also invested a lot of time and energy into accruing large friendship networks to manage their offline/online relationships through these platforms. In this regard, their higher level of psychological attachment to SNSs in general, as well as Facebook in particular, is a theme that repeatedly comes up in the interviews. High levels of commitment are also closely linked to the apparent ubiquity of SNSs in the social lives of enthusiasts. Along similar lines, surveyed enthusiasts are most likely to say that each of their active SNS accounts is part of their socially-relevant interactions and that they tend to check their SNS profiles as soon as they wake up in the morning. They are also particularly more likely to use Facebook to connect with new acquaintances they have just met. What is more, they are most likely to agree that they feel part of a larger SNS community and that they would be sorry if these sites were to shut down. All of these elements partly contribute to enthusiasts’ high levels of commitment that are closely linked to their overwhelmingly optimistic attitudes towards digital technologies, and beliefs about SNSs as social facilitators and a positive force in society.

Next, *sceptics* could be said to represent the inverted image of enthusiastic users. For sceptics, their predominantly lower levels of SNS commitment go hand-in-hand with their high levels of technology anxiety. Additionally, this is connected to the observation that sceptics appear to engage in all SNS-related activities less frequently than the other user groups. In light of these findings, this is hardly surprising. Compared to the other clusters, sceptics exhibit significantly lower commitment to and enjoyment of both Facebook and Instagram. While their levels of commitment to both Twitter and Snapchat are equally low, the ANOVA results in Table 17 indicate that the differences of means of Twitter and Snapchat commitment are not significant. Based on these insights, in addition to the qualitative interviews, it is plausible to suggest that sceptics represent a group of people, who display systematic patterns of low SNS use and low levels of SNS commitment, as well as an overall sceptical attitude toward social media and other digital technologies.

Lastly, the other two groups of *moderates* and *entangled* users tell an intriguing and counterintuitive story about the relationship between technology attitudes and SNS commitment. Since the findings about these two groups are conceptually interrelated, I discuss them together in the following sub-section.

Since moderate users score highly on technology optimism while entangled users score highly on technology anxiety, one would expect that the former group would display high SNS commitment and the latter group would display low levels of SNS commitment. There is great empirical support for this hypothesis in the literature and this logic was, indeed, applicable to enthusiasts and sceptics in the sample. However, the data lend support to the counterintuitive claim that, for some groups in the population, technology optimism and anxiety may be inversely

related to SNS commitment. The same can be said about privacy concerns for moderate and entangled users: On the one hand, entangled users have expressed strong privacy concerns both in the survey and the interviews, especially with regard to social privacy and general privacy; and yet, they also appear to be most frequently engaging in a variety of SNS-related activities, displaying high levels of SNS enjoyment and commitment. On the other hand, moderates have expressed high levels of technology optimism and very low levels of privacy concerns; and yet, they are less frequently engaging in the measured SNS-related activities and are less committed to the SNSs they are using. The qualitative interviews show that, while moderates appear to routinely underestimate the risks of security breaches, context collapse and other privacy issues, entangled users can sometimes be overly sensitive to these issues, despite (or because of) their frequent and active SNS use. This is partly consistent with a recent finding by Blank and Lutz (2016), who find strong support for the notion that people who experience the most benefits from Internet use also tend to experience the most harm.

In theoretical terms, these inverse relationships can be best understood through the lens of the social media privacy paradox. Based on previous research, scholars have pointed out that young SNS users affirm the importance of privacy while also willing to disclose large amounts of personal information online – either because of an apparent lack of awareness regarding the public nature of their SNS activities (Acquisti & Gross 2006; Barnes 2006), a lack of privacy-protective skills (Y. J. Park 2013) or the motivated advantage-seeking practice of impression-management (Marwick 2010). New empirical evidence expands this notion, pointing towards a negative relationship between age and privacy, suggesting that young people are more likely to check their privacy settings on SNSs, taking more active steps to protect their privacy (Blank et

al. 2014; A. L. Young & Quan-Haase 2013). This is coherent with my findings for entangled users. More pointedly, even though they appear to worry about their privacy, and suffer from excessive personal disclosures online, they continue to be highly committed users of SNSs.

Conversely, recent studies have also found evidence for the opposite conclusions, by pointing to patterns that show how higher SNS use can be associated with the quiet acceptance of existing social media rules and privacy expectations. In particular, young people were found to recognise the general need for using SNSs, while accepting that once information is shared online it is ultimately out of their control (Hargittai & Marwick 2016). This is logically in line with my findings for the group of moderate users, who appear to be quite content with their social media choices, yet are also less committed to their SNSs. They do not attempt to challenge the existing technology order and they do not seem to worry too much about any personal privacy ramifications that might result from their social media activities. Qualitative findings reinforce these observations. This shows that there may be, indeed, systematic differences between different groups of users that are related to variations in SNS commitment.

The uncovered patterns of commitment in Table 17 are noteworthy, because they hint at potential differences in users' perceptions of affordances across social media platforms. While there are significant differences between the four groups in the extent to which they are committed to using Facebook and Instagram, this is not the case for Twitter and Snapchat. As I have noted earlier, this may be related to the salience of specific affordances of the latter two sites, which could standardise or homogenise the way young people use these platforms, regardless of any technology attitudes. Another competing explanation of these differences may be related to perceptions of affordances about what Twitter and Snapchat are meant to be used for – a theme that is further examined in Chapter 8.

7. 5. Chapter conclusion

This chapter started with a discussion of popular public narratives that tend to group young people into binary classifications of ‘digital detox’ vs. ‘digital natives’. Therefore, the first goal of the chapter was to challenge the binary manner in which the mainstream media has described millennials’ engagement with SNSs. In response to this, this chapter has contributed to exposing a substantial diversity of SNS user types that are indicative of the complexity of social media choices in the cultural context of the UK. People have vastly different understandings of what it means to be connected and socially accessible online. But there are still noteworthy similarities and differences between people’s technology attitudes that allow us to group these people together in abstract clusters. While some readily embrace SNSs as novel spaces for creative self-expression and social interaction, there are others who attempt to actively disengage from these new social venues online; while some view SNSs as useful tools to access information and keep in touch with their friends and family members, others say they only use particular SNSs, because they feel the need to be socially accessible to their friends.

In response to RQ₂, this chapter has introduced a typology of SNS users that is based on people’s attitudes rather than observed behaviours. That is, instead of classifying individuals as users, non-users or ex-users of social media, this chapter inductively derived four types of SNS users based on their attitudes towards and beliefs about the Internet and digital technologies. This was an important analytical step, because users clearly differ in their cultural values and their willingness to engage with digital technologies. Importantly, this approach did not conflate any demographics or usage variables with the attitudinal clustering dimensions. Instead, the SNS user typology has clustered the diversity of users into four broad categories that each can be

associated with a distinctive profile pertaining to their scores on three technology attitudes: technology optimism, technology anxiety and technology dependence.

There was also ample support in the data for the claim that the four clusters were associated with distinct profiles of SNS-specific attitudes and behaviours. While the data show that people in each cluster shared similar attitudes towards social media, there was also noteworthy within-cluster variance in the uses of each site. These findings suggest that technology attitudes were not just related to people's adoption of SNSs, but also to the amount, variety and types of their SNS use. In particular, between the four clusters, there were significant differences in terms of the frequency of SNS-related activities, e.g. sharing photographs, checking privacy settings and 'liking' the content shared by other users. While some of the clusters appeared to have slightly younger or more educated groups of SNS users, there were no unique distinctive demographic characteristics associated with each cluster. In this regard, the analysis presented in this chapter shows that technology attitudes make a greater difference to people's SNS uses than demographic factors, such as age, gender or educational attainment.

While the typology could not fully explain variations in people's SNS commitment, it has hinted at a couple of noteworthy relationships between commitment and technology attitudes. In particular, the findings show that technology optimism seems to be positively related to SNS commitment (enthusiasts), while technology anxiety is negatively related to SNS commitment (sceptics). However, there was evidence for two exceptions to this logic. The data revealed that users, who scored highly on technology optimism and were least concerned about their SNS privacy, were less active and less committed to their SNS choices (moderates). Conversely, there was evidence in the data that users, who were anxious about digital technologies and concerned about their privacy on SNSs, were also among the most active users in the sample (entangled).

Summarising the findings so far, it can be said that the user typology in this chapter has provided a useful conceptual foundation for further analysis in this thesis. It has allowed me to group individuals together based on their commonalities, enabling me to specify the relationship between technology attitudes and SNS-related activities. In doing so, it has helped to reduce complexity of analysis by developing a coherent framework for organising my findings into more nuanced analytical arguments for the overall narrative of the thesis. As this chapter shows, understanding the systematic differences between clusters can shed light on young adults' variations in SNS use and commitment. These findings expand foregoing debates around the privacy paradox on social media and encourage further theoretical investigation.

The mixed-methods approach was particularly productive in linking the different themes and insights from the survey and the qualitative interviews. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the typology does not represent an end in itself. Rather, it is foundational for the inquiry in Chapter 8. This is where I intend to revisit the four clusters to further explore the relationship between commitment and gratifications sought from multiple media use. Finally, Chapter 9 also returns to the four SNS user types to synthesise the findings of the thesis as a whole.

CHAPTER 8: UNDERSTANDING COMMITMENT ACROSS SITES THROUGH AFFORDANCES AND GRATIFICATIONS

8. 1. Introduction – When Instagram became Snapchat

Ever since its launch, Snapchat was commonly known as the disappearing messages app that enabled intimate sharing of fleeting images with one's friends. By contrast, Instagram has set itself apart from other SNSs by affording interactions around carefully curated, aesthetically pleasing and persistent visual content. This strict juxtaposition of affordances began to crumble in August 2016 when Instagram introduced *Instagram Stories*: a new feature that allowed users to share ephemeral photos and videos with their friends and/or the wider Instagram community that were automatically deleted after a time span of 24 hours. This unexpected shift into ephemeral messaging was judged by many technology commentators as a blatant attempt to copy Snapchat and its key feature of self-destructing images. Since Instagram is a subsidiary of Facebook Inc., some commentators even drew parallels between this event and Facebook's previous unsuccessful attempts at adding Snapchat-like elements to its site. Other commentators noted that while ephemeral messaging made Snapchat unique in the first place, *Stories* was, essentially, just another format of sharing that could be replicated and integrated into other apps, similar to how the hashtag (#) was adopted by a range of SNSs after being pioneered by Twitter.

In addition to igniting a head-to-head race between Instagram and Snapchat, the move raised a number of interesting theoretical questions about the perceived substitutability and complementarity of the two SNSs. For many users, the dividing line between Snapchat and

Instagram seemed to have fallen away after the introduction of Instagram Stories. If you look at the two SNSs side-by-side, the similarities are evident. Both platforms are primarily visual and used for not dissimilar purposes. Both platforms are used by predominantly younger users with somewhat similar demographic backgrounds. Now, both platforms offer very similar capabilities for sharing disappearing images with, oftentimes, the same groups of people. Following the U&G perspective, the two platforms could essentially be seen as “functional alternatives”, i.e. when both media tend to fulfil similar gratifications (Ferguson & Perse 2000; Perse & Courtright 1993). But if both sites have lost the functional distinctions that made them unique in the first place, why do people remain committed to the use of one site over the other? Why do seasoned Snapchat loyalists continue using Snapchat, while Instagram devotees remain committed to Instagram? One could say that despite their functional similarities, the two SNSs offer distinct affordances that represent different things in the social environment. In the light of the findings from the previous chapter, one could further say that the affordances of the two sites may be perceived differently by different types of users. Accordingly, this topical example taken from the SNS industry raises a number of theoretical questions that are explored in this chapter: what happens when the affordances of two SNSs converge? And how do perceptions of the relative differences between two SNSs affect users’ commitment to each site? Consequences for SNS commitment, therefore, need to be scrutinised, and interpreted through the lens of affordance theory and the U&G perspective.

Several U&G studies provide the evidentiary basis for understanding the differences in gratifications sought from different SNSs (Papacharissi 2009; Quan-Haase & Young 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008). However, what few studies have recognised thus far, is that

these gratifications can either complement each other, or work independently. There may be conditions under which there can be complementarity of gratifications for particular uses; but there may be other instances where gratifications obtained from SNSs effectively displace one another. For example, I might use either LinkedIn or Xing for professional networking. Instead of investing time and effort into maintaining two profiles for a relatively similar set of gratifications, I might thus commit to exclusively using only one of the two sites. Conversely, I might use both Twitter and Reddit to discover new entertainment content online. Since both sites allow me to follow different interests and seek out non-overlapping gratifications, I might continue using both sites in concert.

In theoretical terms, I conceive of the relationships between the gratifications sought from different SNSs as *gratification structures*. This new conceptualisation contributes to existing U&G research by examining gratifications sought from the joint use of multiple SNSs from the viewpoint of the individual user. The reason why an inquiry of gratification structures is important is that media displacement effects are typically driven by the overlapping gratifications of media that are perceived as functional alternatives (M. L. James et al. 1995; Perse & Dunn 1998). With this in mind, the chapter focuses on the socio-psychological factors behind how SNS users make decisions about SNS commitment: how do they understand the affordances of different SNSs? And how do perceived differences in gratification structures between SNSs drive commitment to each site? The research question of this chapter is thus summarised as:

RQ₃: *What are the mechanisms by which perceived gratification structures across multiple SNSs affect people's commitment to each site?*

To help uncover the nature of gratification structures through the lens of affordance theory, the following subordinate research questions are formulated: **RQ_{3.1}:** *How do users make*

sense of gratification structures across multiple SNSs in their communication with their personal networks? RQ_{3.2}: How do perceptions of affordances of different SNSs affect people's gratification structures? RQ_{3.3}: Are gratification structures path-dependent, and if so, how could they affect people's commitment to each SNS they use?

These theoretical challenges are deep and complex. Since quantitative methods alone would not be sufficient to address these questions, the analysis in this chapter is based on a qualitatively-driven approach to mixing methods (Mason 2006). The results link previous survey findings to 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews in which participants (ages 20 to 30) were asked to describe their own beliefs about SNSs, and provide detailed accounts of their past and present social media choices. Following the guidance in the methodological literature, contexts and social experiences were considered as part of the qualitative analysis. Thus, the chapter pays close attention to the rich narratives of users' media environments and the diversity of practical meanings associated with social media choices in people's day-to-day lives. The highlighted interview quotes provide information about age, gender and user type of each respondent (e.g. enthusiast, female, 25) to help the reader with additional context about each interviewee. An exhaustive list of all interviewees can be found in the Appendix (see Table 31).

Addressing these points, the chapter first introduces the main results from the semi-structured interviews based on overarching themes in Section 8.2. Next, Section 8.3 synthesises key findings and places them into a broader theoretical context. To that end, the available evidence is reviewed and links to the quantitative findings are made apparent where necessary. The chapter explains the main findings in this chapter by building a theory of *social media repertoires* from the research outcomes. The conclusion is offered in Section 8.4, which

summarises the main findings by going back to the original research questions, identifying practical implications and suggesting promising avenues and ideas for future research.

8. 2. Results

The findings in this chapter indicate a complex transformation of the way how people avail themselves of social media platforms for interpersonal communication in everyday life. In order to structure the presentation of the main results, this section organises the research findings into three main themes. Differences between groups of users that share similar beliefs about the Internet and digital technologies (from the user typology in Chapter 7) are also selectively highlighted. The chosen interview quotes specifically focus on recurring patterns of SNS use and commitment, imagined affordances and gratification structures. Other topics that were discussed during the interviews, e.g. concerns about data privacy, personal examples of context collapse, perceptions of social surveillance and observations of notable cultural differences in SNS use were not included in this chapter, but could be used in follow-up studies.

Table 18: Demographic statistics of interviewed participants

User type	Number of interviews	% Female	% Students	% Employed	Age range	Mean age
Sceptics	10	50.0%	60.0%	30.0%	21-30	25.3
Moderates	13	53.9%	30.8%	46.2%	23-29	26.5
Enthusiasts	14	57.1%	28.6%	57.1%	20-30	25.6
Entangled	13	38.5%	61.5%	38.5%	20-28	22.9

Notes: See Chapter 5 (Section 5.5.1) for more details on the implementation of the purposive sampling strategy for the interviews based on a pre-interview screening survey of technology attitudes to infer hypothesised user types. A list of all interviewees can be found in Table 31.

8. 2. 1. Differences in perceptions of SNS affordances

First and foremost, it quickly became apparent that all interviewees were critically aware of their personal social media choices. For many interviewees, even the term “*social network*” immediately conjured up images of “*Facebook likes*”, “*Snaps*” and “*Tweets*”. Yet a common thread that could be seen throughout all interviews was that users appeared to have vastly different perceptions of and experiences with SNSs. At first sight, this ostensible idiosyncrasy challenges the transferability of research findings. What can we learn from a handful of case studies of SNS behaviour if there is a wide array of unique meanings associated with each platform? However, the data at hand show that there may be common narratives about the affordances of each site that can be grouped together based on different types of SNS users (see user typology in Chapter 7): sceptics, moderates, enthusiasts and entangled users. Each group seemed to share beliefs about digital technologies and the affordances of SNSs that were internally consistent within each type, but distinct from other groups. These common narratives reflected not only similar interpretations of SNS affordances, but also seemed to result from social learning and social influence in their social environment. In other words, people seemed to adapt their beliefs and behaviours to the observed beliefs and behaviours of the people around them. These effects of social learning, influence and imitation were broadly in line with the notion that ‘behaviour affords behaviour’ (Gibson 1986), as one interviewee puts it:

Sometimes you just have to learn from others – the social media game is kind of transparent, so you can learn what’s working and what’s not by looking at other accounts. It’s not like a there’s a confidential business plan to get lots of likes. –P30 (entangled, female, 28)

The highlighted quotes below illustrate how an assessment of imagined affordances of each brand of SNSs might differ by user type. For example, while most interviewed users were

inclined to see SNSs as “*social spaces*” for interpersonal communication, social networking and self-presentation, sceptics maintained a more selective and goal-oriented approach to social media. For example, this is expressed by the following interviewed sceptic:

Five years ago, I decided only to be Facebook friends with people I've met in real life and keep my Facebook posts only to my friends. I'm glad that I've stood by that decision until today. A lot has changed in this time, but Facebook still remains a place where I feel like sharing my stories with people I care about. (...) this is what Facebook was built for in the first place. –P46 (sceptic, male, 22)

In this example, the interviewee describes how he has decided to organise his Facebook friendship network around his friends – mainly as a result of his perception that Facebook afforded social interaction with strong ties, rather than weak ties. His understanding of Facebook as a restricted space for sharing private information with his closest friends can be directly contrasted to the next interview participant:

You meet people all the time and Facebook is a way of keeping them all in one place. Before Facebook, you would have to go through your phone and diligently find them to text them. It's good you can now keep in touch with them on Facebook, because you never know when you might need them. (...) You might not talk to these people every month or every week, but all of the sudden, out of nowhere, they might have a piece of information that you might need at that very moment. Without Facebook I wouldn't be able to keep in touch with these people, but now that I have such an easy to use platform I can see what they're doing and what they're interested in. –P44 (entangled, female, 24)

This interviewee's use of Facebook is related to her perception of Facebook as a site that affords relationship maintenance and communication with weak ties from her wider social circles. As the interview went on, she also noted that there may be some “*unwritten rules*” and social norms on Facebook that govern what kinds of posts are deemed appropriate in any given situation. According to her, these social norms should be “*universally*” understood by her peers, but an older generation of users may not be fully aware of their existence and their effects:

Facebook sometimes reminds of the [London] Tube. There are so many unwritten rules. If you see someone from another country, who has never been to London before, you can immediately tell that they are not used to it. There are many rules on Facebook as well: what you post, what you don't post; who you friend, who you don't friend; all of these sorts of issues become a really big thing. –P44 (entangled, female, 24)

According to the interviews, the same kinds of rules seem to exist on Instagram, but interviewees could not always agree on them. In particular, there seemed to be two prevailing user perceptions of Instagram's affordances. On the one hand, Instagram was described as a convenient "social photo album" that could be easily shared with others. To illustrate this, an interviewee notes: "Instagram is simple and easy to use. It's basically my main photo album that I can share with friends and strangers. I can also find related content through hashtags when I am looking for new stuff" (P35, enthusiast, female, 24). On the other hand, Instagram was also described as a harsh "social media photo competition" in which photographs were not just posted for one's own pleasure, but submitted with the specific goal in mind to gain attention and outperform other Instagrammers. The following quote emphasises this trend that repeatedly emerged from several interviews, especially with entangled users and enthusiasts:

Life on Instagram seems to be about likes and the constant pressure to share something unusual or creative with my friends. It's almost like a barometer of popularity. The attitude is 'If you get less than 50 likes on your posts, I won't talk to you.' This is why I always delete posts that haven't drawn enough attention. –P42 (entangled, male, 24)

As entangled participants have emphasised, Instagram is now deeply entrenched in their everyday lives, causing both increased social connectedness and increased stress. While it expedites social sharing, the platform may also have some hidden psychological costs for its users. For example, some interviewees described the sharing climate as "hostile" because posters seemed to be always concerned with the relative popularity of their posts. A new Instagram user might not notice these subtle cultural rules, but somebody who has spent enough time on the site

will “*understand what is really going on behind the curtains*”. This feeling is further described by the following interviewee, who strongly believes that this “*race for approval*” on Instagram is hardcoded into the very design of the platform:

People [on Instagram] always behave like there is an all-seeing Instagram deity somewhere up there judging their posts. Because the number of likes you've got is always visible to everybody else, people constantly behave as if they're waiting to be plucked from obscurity by a model scout or a film producer. –P09 (enthusiast, female, 27)

The fact that different people might associate different meanings and functions with different SNSs was recognised by many of the interviewees themselves. A moderate user among the interviewed participants, for instance, points out that there may also be functional motives for using Instagram. She notes that “*Instagram has different functionalities and it depends on how you use it. My Instagram is all about my friends*” (P14, moderate, female, 24). After a pause of reflection, she continues, “*of course, there may be other people who use it primarily to follow brands or celebrities, who only post nice fashion photographs. It can be a great source of inspiration.*” This example shows that interviewees were generally capable of imagining other users who used Instagram in various capacities, dissimilar to themselves, based on different perceptual cues for action as well as different gratifications.

Not unlike Instagram, users of Snapchat also revealed to have vastly different opinions about the purposes of the app. In exploring the differences in the perception and reception of the affordances of Snapchat, the interviews showed that there was a great diversity of beliefs about the meanings attributed to Snapchat. The main disagreement between people was whether ephemeral interactions on Snapchat were “*meaningful ways of strengthening friendship relationships*” or simply “*a pressure release valve for sharing all the trash-memories*”. In other

words, does Snapchat gratify an outward-facing need of networking or an inward-facing need for real-time self-expression? The following interview quotes represent these two polarised beliefs:

Snapchat is quite transient, so all the content goes by quite quickly. There are no memories that are created and so you're always motivated to come back and be part of the moment with your friends. It's fresh, fast and furious (laughs). (...) It helps create friendships that feel more 'real'. –P18 (enthusiast, male, 25)

I use Snapchat mainly to keep a real-time diary of my day. I usually add the current time to each photograph with the time filter so that I can keep my followers up-to-date on what I'm doing: from the morning when I get out of bed and have breakfast, to the late evening when I'm at the bar with my friends. I document these different things during the day and, of course, I try to keep it interesting for my friends, but it's mainly a way for me to just get certain things out there. –P21 (enthusiast, female, 20)

The alternative viewpoint was predominantly represented by non-users (mostly sceptics and moderates), stating that Snapchat's affordances to not gratify any needs at all. As a result, some interviewees elaborated on the reasons why they have chosen not to engage with their friends on Snapchat altogether. This is best captured by the following interview excerpt in which an ex-user of Snapchat evaluates his motives for discontinuing his use of the app:

I used to have Snapchat, but now I just think it's a waste of time. It didn't really give me any extraordinary experiences I wouldn't get otherwise. I know people go crazy with the puppy dog filters, but I think it's silly! I won't get a job for using that filter or being on Snapchat. I told my friends that their filters are bloody stupid and that they are wasting their time. –P26 (sceptic, male, 21)

In a similar fashion, the alleged lack of gratifications on Snapchat has led several other interviewed sceptics and moderates to abandon the app altogether. This example shows how misperceived or misunderstood affordances can have real consequences for the adoption and use of new SNSs. One interviewed user, in this case, furiously describes why his experience with Snapchat did not live up to his emotional expectations. Given his apparent lack of appetite for sharing the “*raw moments*” of everyday life, it is striking that his perceptions of Snapchat's

affordances were still so fixated on mundane examples of ephemeral sharing, instead of some of the other aspects that have been mentioned by the users above:

I'm no longer using Snapchat. It gets tiring! Only 5% of the posts are actually interesting and the rest is just food and selfies. I'm not interested in that! Why would I spend all this time looking at snapshots of other people's lives? I'm interested in the interesting things they are doing, not the lame or silly things. It's good that the silly things mainly stay on Snapchat and don't go to Facebook, where I'm still friends with these people. That's why I stopped using it; it just doesn't give me any added value. –P27 (moderate, male, 28)

Given the relative novelty of Snapchat, the extent of disagreement between people displayed in the interview quote above is hardly surprising. There are many narratives about the social affordances of Snapchat. As such, “*society at large hasn't agreed yet what kind of beast it's supposed to be*”, as an interviewee puts it (P03, moderate, male, 27). As a result of that, some interviewees admitted that, thus far, they have not discovered any relevant relationship practices, features or distinct gratifications that are uniquely offered by Snapchat. On a related note, the following moderate user expresses her feelings in relation to this by stating that she does not see how Snapchat can be used in interesting or engaging ways. This point connects to the finding from Chapter 6 that the gratifications of SNSs need to be actively explored to form commitment:

I think there's not much I can do with Snapchat. Frankly, my life is not that exciting, so I don't use it that much, except when friends send me some snaps of their pets. It's not like you can make new friends on Snapchat. –P20 (moderate, female, 26)

Based on the above, even though the social affordances of SNSs appear to be objective qualities of the socio-technical environment that each platform provides (i.e. as facts of the environment and facts of behaviour, as Gibson wrote), they are still perceived and interpreted by users in very different, and oftentimes contradictory, ways. The next section looks at how these SNSs are perceived in conjunction with each other and how different subjective perceptions of affordances can lead to different compositions of people's personal media environments.

8. 2. 2. Complementarity and substitutability of affordances

The second salient theme that emerged from the interviews with all user types was related to the way how people interpret the relationships between gratification structures and distinct affordances across multiple jointly used SNSs. This is an important finding because interviewees did not only seem to have hardwired beliefs about the affordances of each site, but also about how the affordances of each site may be interconnected with one another, i.e. how they might intersect or be used in parallel. A classic example of the latter case of divergent gratification structures is when users said they were primarily using Facebook for “*keeping in touch with family and friends*” while using Twitter primarily for “*discovering information and news content*”. These strict divisions were recurring themes in all interviews, as participants were explaining how the organisation of different SNSs into “*some sort of orderly structure*” was creating both opportunities and challenges for pursuing sociality across multiple sites. For example, this theme is illustrated by these selected interviewees in the following two quotes:

I've always looked at the three apps like this: Instagram is for your best pictures, Facebook is for your memories, Snapchat is for everything else. –P40 (entangled, female, 20)

For me to use a new social platform, this platform would have to fulfil a very special need. For example, LinkedIn is very valuable to me, because it's for my work and professional needs. Facebook is for my social needs. Tinder is for an even smaller subset of my social needs and it provides me with some of that randomness of profiles to date. So it's a very unique need that I can't satisfy elsewhere or that Facebook cannot integrate into their own systems. –P08 (enthusiast, male, 26)

The resultant patterns of SNS use can be characterised by seemingly complementary uses of platforms that are employed in concert. “*It's almost like we are craving for some order*” said one interviewee to describe this inclination to organise SNSs gratifications in one's personal lives (P40, entangled, female, 20). Interviewees described how they would always start by

recognising what a site represents (affordances) and what it can do (gratifications). Next, they would, implicitly or explicitly, compare the site to other available sites that they have already used. They would then try to arrange them in such a way that the elements of each SNS would amplify one another, or at least not interfere with each other's distinct gratifications – an internal arrangement of gratifications from different sites that made sense to them personally. This is especially visible in the way how people jointly used two seemingly similar social applications, such as Instagram and Snapchat:

Every Instagram picture is a bit of a production: it takes time to get the photo just right. Even if it appears spontaneous, there is usually a lot of work that goes into the pic. On Snapchat, I don't have to worry about any of these things. I can just share anything and everything in real-time. –P50 (entangled, female, 22)

In the mind of the user, each SNS seemed to be associated with a particular position in their personalised media environment – even if the site represented a collection of otherwise indistinct gratifications. For instance, Instagram was compared to a “*museum to showcase all the highlights*” with “*carefully controlled exhibits*” and “*prettifying filters that made everything look perfect.*” Twitter was compared to a “*high-frequency news update*” that was also used for “*jokes and witty quotes.*” By contrast, Snapchat was compared to a “*reality TV show, where everything happens in real-time and there are lots of embarrassing stories to tell*”. Only Facebook seemed to represent all of the above, depending on the subjective experiences of each interviewee. For instance, one interviewee who might be said to epitomise this attitude had this to say about the gratifications sought from Facebook in her day-to-day life:

All these social platforms are so similar, but they are also very different. (...) Only Facebook is everything and nothing all at once. –P32 (moderate, female, 24)

According to common themes that were mentioned by the interviewed participants, distinct gratifications could also be associated not just with particular uses of SNSs, but also with particular networks and the benefits of being socially accessible to certain audiences. The following three interview quotes attempt to demonstrate how people may distinctly perceive the differences in gratifications between three separate pairs of SNSs (Facebook-Twitter, Facebook-Snapchat and Instagram-Snapchat):

I'm now getting most of my news from Facebook rather than Twitter. Although the function is essentially the same, it still feels different. I will continue to use Twitter for work though, because I have a different audience there. I share myself differently on Twitter. –P38 (moderate, male, 29)

I started using Snapchat because, in many ways, it has always been the anti-Facebook. The quick and dirty snaps just make much more sense for casual chats and capturing raw moments, compared to Facebook messages that feel more like work email. –P50 (entangled, female, 22)

I think Instagram and Snapchat have very different use cases. There's always an app for everything. Snapchat allows you to be more 'real'. It's raw, it's goofy, it's unedited. Instagram is always so polished and perfect. The whole attitude towards life that people display on Instagram makes me sick! –P11 (entangled, male, 23)

However, a large proportion of interviewees across all types also described use patterns that could be interpreted as overlapping gratifications, i.e. how perceived gratification structures between two concurrently used SNSs may be converging on the same needs. This was especially evident when interviewees mentioned that they were using the same platforms for similar need gratifications, as exemplified by the following interview passage:

There are different networks for different types of activities and different personalities; it's how you want to be viewed by others. LinkedIn is for the serious stuff – Tumblr is for the fun stuff. Snapchat has funny filters – Instagram has prettifying filters. But ultimately, these are just tools to get attention – it's just a different way of getting there. –P01 (enthusiast, male, 25)

As a result of converging gratifications, interviewed users said they were beginning to view some SNSs essentially as functional substitutes for one another. For example, focusing on communication-based factors, this would be the case if two platforms offered similar affordances and constraints for conversations with the same groups of people (e.g. WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram messaging). I conjecture, therefore, whether perceptions of the substitutability and complementary of gratifications can have real effects on people's social media choices. This could be especially relevant in relation to the distribution of attention between established and emerging SNSs. The next two interview participants provide insight into user perceptions regarding the extent to which a number of smaller specialised sites may be gradually eclipsed by a single large SNS (Facebook) that can fulfil equivalent needs all in one place:

I guess I could just open an Instagram account to look at people's pictures, but I'm already seeing them on Facebook; so what's the point in creating a new account on Instagram? The prospect of seeing more of the same stuff on a new site is really not that exciting to me. –P17 (sceptic, female, 22)

Facebook does a few things well: it holds existing connections (similar to LinkedIn), provides users with personalised content (even better than Twitter does), makes instant communication easy (like WhatsApp) and establishes a way for brands to communicate with their audience. Of course, I think Facebook will be replaced one day, but until then I don't need any other apps for all these things. Facebook is the one social network to rule them all. –P49 (moderate, male, 28, written interview)

Importantly, there were notable differences between the four user types in the way how they arranged their main social network sites in their everyday lives. Entangled users and enthusiasts evidently used a greater number of SNSs in concert, despite any perceptions of converging or diverging affordances. Their mediated experience typically spanned several platforms and SNS accounts. The following interview quote reveals how some of these users recognised the similarity in affordances between two sites (Instagram and Facebook, in this

instance), but still continued to use both sites – either because of their overall affinity for these SNSs or because of their belief that the medium makes a difference to the posted message:

Of course you can post a political meme on Instagram, but it doesn't have the same impact as going to Facebook and posting it there. On Facebook, that meme becomes part of a larger political discussion. This is where I could also read a short opinion piece by a friend on the same political issue, or 'like' a related inspirational quote on a friend's Facebook wall. That's something I could only find on Facebook and not on other social media platforms. So yes, when I share this piece on Instagram it's not the same as sharing it on Facebook: the audience is different, the context is different and the effect is different. –P41 (enthusiast, male, 27)

Meanwhile, sceptics and moderates seemed to be particularly sensitive about perceived gratification structures of multiple SNSs, stating that they would not join a new site unless it offered “*something special*” or “*something sufficiently different*” from what they were using already (P25, moderate, female, 23). Consequently, some interviewees were reluctant to join new SNSs if they were even slightly functionally similar to the sites they were already using:

Unless a new platform brings me something unique that is different from Facebook, I won't even bother checking it out, because there is no need for these other copycat social networks. –P04 (moderate, male, 26)

No Snapchat, no Tumblr, no Instagram, no Twitter! It's a conscious choice. Facebook already connects me to the people I want to be connected to. Why would I need another social network for that? I don't want to have two similar applications that essentially do the same thing. –P34 (moderate, female, 29)

In this context, it is interesting to note that interviewed sceptics and moderates were rarely very active users of Instagram, even if they owned an account on the platform. What is more, a characteristic observation of these people was their strong commitment to Facebook as their main, and sometimes only, SNS. As the quote from P34 expressed earlier, Facebook is seen by many as an all-encompassing platform that affords a variety of different social uses, while apparently leaving no room for other SNSs with partial or overlapping affordances.

To sum up this sub-section, I draw the following conclusion: while there are consistent differences between user types, each individual user still seemed to form his or her own conjectures, understandings and beliefs about how the affordances of various SNSs are interrelated – and how these sites could be used in conjunction with one another. When multiple platforms all seemingly converge on the same gratifications or the same needs, these beliefs can determine users' long-term commitment to available SNSs. The next section will explore the likely origins of these beliefs and the potentially path-dependent nature of social media choices.

8. 2. 3. Path-dependence of imagined affordances

The third notable theme that arose from the interviews is related to the path-dependent nature of social media choices. Since so many decisions about the use of social media platforms appeared to be contingent on pre-conceived beliefs and conjectured differences between SNS affordances, I wanted to find out where these beliefs might originate from.

The interviews uncovered that people ascribe different meanings to SNSs at different times, but these meanings seemed to accumulate over time. Oftentimes new meanings cannot fully replace old meanings. Therefore, the interpretations of new affordances are oftentimes subtly affected by previous social media choices. During the interviews, it became evident that if participants first started using one site for a particular purpose (e.g. Twitter for accessing news), they were less likely to consider alternative sites for the same need (e.g. Facebook for accessing news). In other words, their current interpretation of social affordances seemed to be clouded by their previous SNS choices. Furthermore, user perceptions of particular sites, as well as their assessment of the broader umbrella of SNS brands in general, were also influenced by their very first experiences with social networking applications (e.g. Bebo, MySpace, Friendster or

Facebook). For instance, the following interviewee describes how she first signed up for a new Facebook account at a relatively young age:

I guess it was just this thing that people started using 10 years ago. We were relatively young at the point when Facebook started to become popular, so I'd say it's probably something the whole school started accessing and then everyone started using it. I joined initially because I knew a few of my friends were there and they said I should sign up. It was definitely at a point where I had to lie about my age and change my date of birth to join. I was only 11-12 years old back then and I didn't like it in the beginning, but I've been on Facebook ever since. –P12 (entangled, female, 21)

By contrast, a number of younger interview participants expounded how Facebook was simply proffered to them as the “*default platform*” by a previous generation of users. Consequently, many of them felt the need to join Facebook per social convention (e.g. “*because it's what people do*”) or as a personal identity-placeholder on the Internet (e.g. “*because it's proof of my existence*”) – not because they were particularly fond of the site. Meanwhile, their passions and interests were often with newer social media applications, such as Snapchat and Instagram. This attitude is colourfully expressed by P45, one of the youngest interviewees in the sample, in the following interview passage. Here, he describes how he initially struggled with the default expectation of joining Facebook before moving on to alternative sites:

When I was 15, my older brother told me I needed a Facebook account. I didn't like the whole concept of Facebook and the fact that I had to add my siblings and my parents as friends immediately after signing up. It always felt like a tool that was used to control us. It was chosen as the default social network by an older generation and we didn't have any say in it. Today, Facebook is finally dead for us. (...) Well, not entirely. I still have an account so that the world knows I exist. But I spend most of my time on Instagram and Snapchat. –P45 (entangled, male, 20)

As evidenced in the above comment, interviewees were particularly out-spoken about the social and psychological persistence of Facebook in their everyday lives, despite the fact that other SNSs were potentially better suited to fulfilling their socio-psychological needs. They are not enjoying to Facebook, but they use it anyway. This observation contextualises an important

finding from the quantitative survey, which hinted at the high degree of commitment that people exhibited towards Facebook. In many ways, this reluctant emotional investment in Facebook is a combination of path-dependent beliefs, deep-rooted usage habits and network effects. As another case in point, this sentiment is expressed by the following two interviewees:

So now we've all been on Facebook for about 10 years and I don't think anything is going to change in the next 10 years. Sadly there is no other way around Facebook anymore. But that's only because everyone uses it, not because the social network itself is good. You might think, if it's trash, why do we keep using it? And that's precisely my point. No one knows! I feel as though Facebook could get away with anything these days and nobody would care. –P28 (enthusiast, female, 30)

Somebody someday decided to use Facebook and enough people followed them. Now, we are all part of Facebook's vision of what it means to be social. It sets the rules and we play by the rules. We may complain about the site, but still we put up with it anyway. But if you choose not to use it, you ostracise yourself. You'll miss events, groups and new friend requests (...) At some point you simply disappear from the day-to-day lives of your friends. –P11 (entangled, male, 23)

This dependence on SNSs was particularly palpable in multiple interviews with enthusiasts and entangled users. As a case in point, the non-use of Facebook was typically associated with social isolation and a lack of connectivity to the outside world. The words interviewees would typically associate with this feeling were “ostracising”, “fear or missing out” and “exclusion”. This is why interviewed enthusiasts were typically not ready to give up either their Facebook accounts or any other SNS accounts, especially if they had already spent a considerable amount of time using them. By contrast, moderates and sceptics were more comfortable with not using social media for a limited time period or even permanently. In fact, some interviewees in these two groups even noted they would prefer face-to-face meetings and email exchanges to any form of mediated communication on SNSs. For sceptics, this form of communication was seen as a less invasive alternative, allowing them to control the flow of exchanges with their friends.

At this point, it is important to scrutinise why so many users commit to their previous SNS choices despite the recognition that their choices may be suboptimal. Psychology research on escalated commitment shows how people maintain behaviours that align with previous decisions and actions (Staw 1997). Strong feelings about SNSs do not emerge from a deep understanding, but from past deeply-personal and emotional experiences with the technology. Chapter 6 has shown that having a history of obtained gratifications from a site could contribute to people's commitment to that site.

On the one hand, this is due to habit-forming, recurring use patterns that reinforce SNS commitment, as users become gradually more invested in particular sites. This rationale stems from the literature on habit-formation and automatic media use (S. S. Kim et al. 2005; Rosenstein & Grant 1997; Verplanken 2006). On the other hand, this is due to post-hoc rationalisation of social media choices, as users retrospectively alter their perceptions of the usefulness and personal importance of particular sites. The latter cognitive process stems from the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957; Festinger & Carlsmith 1959). It stands to reason that rationalisation may be commonly applied on a subconscious level to reduce cognitive dissonance between past and present SNS choices, thereby strengthening people's internal convictions about the use of particular sites. As such, at least some of the observed path-dependency could be explained by post-rationalisation motives. In part, this is exemplified by the following two interview quotes about Twitter and Facebook:

After spending so much time on Twitter, I think I've grown to appreciate the culture here, learning what an appropriate tweet is and what's not. I didn't quite like it in the beginning, but after so much time on the site, it feels like home now. If you spend enough time in a place, eventually you get accustomed with the rituals and the norms of the people who live there. I think the same happens with social media. –P02 (enthusiast, female, 22)

I used to be a bit concerned about my Facebook privacy, but I got used to it after a while. Like beer or blue cheese, it's an acquired taste! I learned to love it. It takes some time getting used to, but it's truly addictive after a while. I think it's an experience thing. –P36 (moderate, male, 24)

In addition to the rationalisation of media choices, these interview passages also highlight that there are learning effects that need to be considered. Social learning theory (Bandura 1977) and social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) predict that individuals learn from the people around them and mimic their behaviours even without external incentives. Applied to the context of gratification structures, this would imply that people's perceptions of affordances are not only influenced by their own past SNS choices, but also by the past SNS choices of their peers. This could help explain why interviewees typically followed the SNS habits of their close friends.

Next, the interviews have shown that when users become increasingly invested in a site, they tend to react to changes in affordances or emerging SNSs in different ways. Participants showed an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards changes in the platform policies and user interfaces of their favourite platforms. The only exception to this trend were enthusiasts, who seemed to embrace new features and new ways of connecting to their peers. Moderates and sceptics were, by contrast, particularly sensitive about the salient “*power imbalance*” between users and SNS providers in terms of the key affordances of sites. Instead of seeing affordances as non-deterministic perceptual cues, some interviewees noted that the designers of SNSs could have particular goals and intentions in mind about how these sites were meant to be used. Any substantial changes in the affordances of SNSs could thus contribute to cognitive dissonance for users, who have already come to accept sites for what they are. This notion emerged from discussions about recent changes in the user interfaces of Facebook, as suggested by a moderate user in the following comment:

I don't like the fact that Facebook constantly keeps changing its interfaces and privacy settings. I need some stability in my life right now. Every time they introduce a new feature it completely changes how you use the site. It's almost like somebody with a lot of power is shaking up the basic principles of how the world works. Imagine somebody tells you tomorrow that you've got to use the toilet the other way round or that shoes are now supposed to be worn on your hands, just because a big shoe company said so. That's basically how I feel about Facebook's new feed. –P29 (moderate, female, 29)

The cognitive dissonance described by this user hints at the likely reasons why people frequently get upset about changes in SNSs: their deep-rooted beliefs about the imagined affordances of sites are suddenly rendered obsolete, which forces them to reconcile internal and external meanings and views of the world. This appears to be especially confusing and emotionally draining for people who are deeply invested in the respective sites.

At the same time, when people are heavily committed to the use of certain SNSs they may misinterpret new affordances or even dismiss any positive signals from newer, but underappreciated SNSs altogether. Their commitment to one SNS may bias their perceptions about the gratifications provided by other sites. Researchers have emphasised that, in cases of escalated commitment, new information may be “*slanted, omitted, highlighted, and forgotten in ways that depart from objective reality*” (Staw 1997 p. 206). For instance, due to their high commitment to Facebook, some interviewees appeared to dismiss new evidence about Twitter, which suggested that Twitter was better suited for gratifying some of the same needs as Facebook. This was particularly evident in interviews with moderates. The following research participant, for example, admits her affinity for older versions of Facebook and its uses in the following comment:

I've been using Facebook for a while, but every time there is a new feature I get this odd nostalgia for the old Facebook. Most of these updates, of course, improve the user experience. But it takes a while to get used to it. –P07 (moderate, female, 29)

Along similar lines, continuous investment in Instagram leads the next interviewee to dismiss any evidence that Snapchat could gratify practically the same needs. In this example, the research participant justifies his dismissive attitude towards Snapchat by an assumed overlap of gratifications, as well as a perceived technical superiority of Instagram over Snapchat:

I think Snapchat is used mostly for sharing shaky cam videos and ugly selfies, which annoys me a lot! That's why I feel that if I get a Snapchat account I'm supposed to share that kind of content, which is something I don't want to do. I think it's a waste of time. If I really want to look up selfies, I guess Instagram works, too. I've been on Instagram for a few years now, so I don't feel like I need to join Snapchat on top of that. –P48
(enthusiast, male, 27)

Finally, despite the persistent and path-dependent nature of commitment decisions and social media choices, the interview data also showed that beliefs about imagined affordances can be updated under certain circumstances. Some interviewees stated that they have previously re-evaluated their social media activities in response to catalysing moments, such as negative experiences with context collapse (Vitak et al. 2015) or changes in personal life circumstances, such as marriage, transition from college to work, etc. Two interview quotes are highlighted below as examples of how users might alter their behaviours and beliefs over time. The first passage demonstrates how an individual user has changed his usage habits around Facebook, while the second passage shows how another user has updated her beliefs about Twitter:

During university, I've used Facebook to post a lot of party pictures. I used to interact with a lot more people and I had a lot more friends at that time; more of a social life. After I graduated, I realised I needed to get serious with my life so I deleted all pictures from Facebook and started using Snapchat for all these awful things. I can't do that on Facebook anymore, as I could lose my job and face real-world consequences. –P08
(enthusiast, male, 26)

Twitter is changing somehow. I am sure that some people still use it to find information, but I find myself being increasingly less drawn to it. In the beginning, Twitter was this shiny, exciting new site that would let you tweet to people who you share interests with, wherever they live. But now there are so many trolls and fake accounts that tweeting is

no longer enjoyable. I'm getting most of my news from Facebook now. –P24 (enthusiast, female, 30)

These highlighted quotes show that continuity of gratifications plays an important role in SNS commitment (e.g. “*does this SNS still gratify my needs?*”) However, not all research participants were ready to update their SNS choices in accordance with their updated beliefs. In particular, enthusiasts seemed to update their preferences more frequently than moderates and entangled users. Consequently, these preferences result in a relatively higher turnover of social media choices for enthusiasts compared to the other user types. By contrast, rather than alter course and update their beliefs or behaviours, the other user types remained committed to using Facebook, even if they were personally unsatisfied with the site.

To summarise, past experiences with SNSs shape new SNS choices. In spite of notable difference between user types, what all users had in common was that their decisions about which social media platforms to use (in concert with other platforms) were influenced by path-dependent perceptions and beliefs that appeared to be largely perseverant and stable over time. The next section will further develop these key themes that emerged from the interviews.

8. 3. Discussion

8. 3. 1. Assessing imagined affordances and gratification structures

Thus far, this chapter has demonstrated that people’s decisions about which SNSs to use were largely influenced by individual perceptions and interpretations of social affordances, which are perceptual cues in the socio-technical environment that enable social action (see Chapter 2). Based on the themes that emerged from the interviews, there is strong support in the data to make the following observation: social media choice cannot be said to be simply an outcome of the objective qualities of the platform. Nor can we say that it is primarily determined

by network effects; it is much more about the perceptible differences of imagined affordances and the deeply subjective gratifications that users might associate with them.

Even though SNSs are designed with certain use cases in mind, the main theme that materialised from the interviews was the following: from a design-perspective, there can be no sharp boundary between one SNS and other related sites in terms of their need gratifications. Any perceived differences in gratifications (and the extent to which there may be complementary or substitutive gratifications between any two SNSs) were only constructed in the minds of the users. Gratification structures were typically imagined, and users frequently recognised patterns where none existed. Clearly, there is no master-narrative for the social affordances of each site. And yet, interviewees always had a specific story to tell about what each platform was “*meant to be used for*”. Conceptually, this statement is related to the notion of “normative images” in the CMC literature. Normative images have been defined as “*widely shared perceptions about a medium’s typical usage, which are based on the functions that they serve*” (Perse & Courtright 1993 p. 486). Consequently, people tend to jointly use multiple SNSs in ways they imagine them to meaningfully work together. For some users, this might work relatively well. For others, however, the constructed perceptions of a multitude of different affordances might work at cross purposes with each other. Given the vast diversity of SNS users, this seems hardly surprising. The borderlessness of gratifications allows people to adopt and use SNSs in ways that make sense for them personally, i.e. based on idiosyncratic considerations and as a function of the perceived interrelatedness of affordances of available sites.

Even though gratification structures that arise from the use of multiple SNSs are merely imagined, it is posited that they are not arbitrary. As Nagy and Neff (2015 p. 6) note: “*The*

perceptions of affordances are as much socially constructed for users as they are technologically configured.” This rationale explains why there were so many common themes and shared perceptions among interview participants about the gratifications of each site, despite the many possible interpretations of SNS affordances. By way of example, Facebook was overwhelmingly seen as a social space, while Twitter was overwhelmingly seen as an informational space. As has been argued previously, user perceptions are grounded in the socio-technological realities of SNSs and their perceptual cues, which are both socially and technologically configured. It is possible that this is what reinforces shared beliefs and facilitates the interpretations of uses.

On a related note, this finding reinforces a previously expressed argument that it is not enough to calculate absolute user numbers to estimate whether a site has reached critical mass. Rather, perceptions of critical mass could be mediated through socially constructed perceptions of imagined affordances and the observation of behaviours of other users. This constitutes a critique of commonly cited network effect arguments in mainstream media. In Chapter 9, I will return to this point when I summarise the main findings of this dissertation.

The interviews have also demonstrated that people’s perceptions of SNSs are deeply rooted in their past experiences and path-dependent social media choices: not just as individuals, but also as groups of users. The interviews illuminated how habits and post-hoc rationalisation of social media choices may reinforce this path-dependency. People make impressions of the imagined affordances of sites through active exploration and repeated use. These impressions are path-dependent insofar as they are contingent on previous social media choices (i.e. the way I see Instagram is different from how a younger user might see the app, who recently joined Instagram without having been an active Facebook user for the past 10 years). Once formed, impressions of imagined affordances appear to be remarkably stable and persevering. For some interviewees,

the conjectured differences between sites and their affordances could be only compared to absolutist personal convictions about “*how social media works*” in general. This is why, by aiming for internal consistency and the alleviation of cognitive dissonance, people showed a tendency to increase their relational investment in, and emotional commitment to SNSs over time. Accordingly, the imagined gratification structures of SNSs both shape and are shaped by persistent patterns of SNS commitment.

8. 3. 2. Towards a theory of social media repertoires

Regardless of user types, all interview participants described their social media habits in terms of relatively stable preferences for particular SNSs and their associated affordances of mediated networking, communication and self-presentation. Based on the central themes that arose from the survey and interview data, I propose the following theoretical explanation of the observed behavioural patterns: I theorise that the sum of all social media platforms available to individual users represents their *social media repertoire*. This can be compared to a mental representation of all platforms that individuals might make use of for the purposes of self-presentation and communication with their wider social environment. Similar to traditional media repertoires in the CMC literatures (Choi 2016; Hasebrink & Domesy 2012; Hasebrink & Popp 2006; S. J. Kim 2014), social media repertoires are continuously shaped by selective media use. Accordingly, the degree of commitment to particular sites could be seen as a measure for the persistence of people’s social media repertoires through time.

The concept of *media repertoires* has a rich history in CMC research. Hasebrink and Popp (2006) first propose this notion as a conceptual framework to examine the composition of different (traditional) media that people regularly use in their everyday lives. The most important

contribution of this concept is its user-centric perspective that moves the media user into the focus of analysis. While the scholars attempt to capture the entirety of people's media channels, there is value in narrowing the focus to social media platforms in particular¹⁴. The reason why this repertoire-oriented approach is useful in considering people's social media choices primarily relates to its main premise: "*the media repertoire of a user is not just the mere sum of different media he or she uses, but a meaningfully structured composition of media*" (Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012 p. 760). The resultant patterns of media use, deliberate non-use or other social practices around SNSs could thus emerge from this notion.

With this in mind, I propose that within such social media repertoires, each SNS is associated with its own set of affordances, identity norms and network audiences. Qualitative findings show that media repertoires appear to be critically arranged around the interdependence of imagined affordances. Therefore, choosing which SNSs to use becomes not just a matter of personal preference, but also a matter of interpretation of the ostensible differences of affordances. As we have seen from the interviews, the overlaps that shape the composition of social media repertoires can follow both instrumental and ritualistic motives (Rubin 1981). This may entail a range of hedonic elements of SNSs, such as Snapchat filters, as well as more instrumental SNS elements that afford expressive information-seeking on Twitter or the strategic impression-management in a professional context on LinkedIn.

¹⁴ Research on media repertoires commonly assumes a broad "trans-media" focus, attempting to be overly inclusive with regard to the types of analysed media. For example, Kim (2014) uses the repertoire approach to describe a wider media context that encompasses not just social media, but also traditional news consumption and television broadcasting. Hasebrink and Domeyer (2012) go as far as to include books, radio, laptops, TV, SNSs and various other digital media channels into their analysis. While this approach may have its own merits, my definition of social media repertoires narrowly and exclusively focuses on SNSs and comparable social media platforms.

Relative differences in affordances thus become the principal organising principle for people's media repertoires; which SNS fulfils any unique needs? Which SNSs fulfil the same needs? Taking such questions into consideration, I theorise that the relative distribution of time and attention across all available channels must follow from these distinctions and the inter-subjective meanings assigned to each SNS. This is something that was clearly noticeable in the interviews with all types of SNS users. Nevertheless, I maintain that the composition of social media repertoires must be highly personalised, because it depends on how users make sense of the relative gratification structures and the social affordances of each site.

Despite these individual differences, this chapter has demonstrated that there are consistent patterns between groups of users (based on the user typology from Chapter 7). The ways in which media repertoires are formed are different for different types of people. It appears that different user types have preferences for more dynamic (enthusiasts, entangled) or more stable media repertoires (moderates, sceptics). For example, the narratives provided by some participants seem to indicate that they use specific SNSs that support unique gratifications (e.g. LinkedIn for work, Facebook for friends, Snapchat for dates). Other participants indicated that they use multiple SNSs for very similar purposes (e.g. Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat for chatting with friends). There were also differences in how many times users replaced older sites, when a new platform was launched that fulfilled equivalent needs. The findings indicate that there may be further systematic differences in the turnover of social media repertoires, which can be expressed in terms of coherent user typologies, such as the one presented in this thesis.

Given the above, I posit that the conceptual framework of social media repertoires works particularly well with the socio-psychological communication perspective of U&G research. On the one hand, it builds on one of the main U&G assumptions of competing media gratifications.

On the other hand, it also extends it by conceiving of the media repertoire as an internal view of (or a “shortlist” of) technologies from which users can purposively draw gratifications across multiple social media platforms. Accordingly, social media repertoires are formed from many situations of selective media choices, and are reinforced from repeatedly obtained gratifications.

The underlying premise of this approach is, evidently, that SNS users “*apply a small number of general principles that guide them in constructing their personal media repertoire. (...) media users differ with regard to the degree of selectivity, involvement and utility when they compose their repertoires*” (Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012 p. 761). In practice, imagined affordances are precisely these cues that guide people’s social media choices. They allow users both to identify different media gratifications and to arrange their social media repertoires in a personally meaningful way. The various gratification structures across sites can interact with each other and result in the continuously evolving composition of personalised repertoires. This conceptual link has not yet been developed in the existing literature and represents one of the novel approaches proposed by this dissertation. Thus, I position the notion of personalised social media repertoires at the intersection of affordance theory and U&G research.

8. 3. 3. Impact of gratification structures on commitment

Summarising the main arguments above, the qualitative interviews have provided a rich exploration of people’s social media repertoires and their composition. They have examined how people make sense of the diversity of available SNSs; how they imagine the affordances of each site; and how they draw invisible lines in the gratification structures of the SNSs they use in concert. Even if there was clearly nothing inherently competitive in the affordances of different sites, users oftentimes felt the need to explain their SNS commitment decisions in relative terms.

What is most striking is that, throughout all interviews, research participants clearly and overwhelmingly described a preference for SNSs that do different things. In other words, they narrated their social media choices in terms of perceived differences in gratifications: when the imagined affordances of two SNSs were converging on the same needs, they were almost predominantly seen as substitutes for one another. Over time, the use of one site would thus eclipse the other in terms of personal importance, communication habits and overall time spent on the site. By contrast, if the affordances of two SNSs were diverging towards the gratification of different needs, commitment to both sites was possible. It may thus be even more ambitiously formulated that commitment to multiple sites is driven by perceptions of diverging gratifications.

There were numerous cases that indicated the potential effects of perceptibly converging affordances on commitment. For example, interviewees explained how they started using two very similar applications that addressed the same need, but gradually transitioned from concurrently using both sites to committing to only one platform, while abandoning the other (e.g. MySpace *or* Facebook, Xing *or* LinkedIn, Hipstamatic *or* Instagram). Conversely, several interviewees have offered an alternative logic, stating that they would be happy to engage with two similar SNSs in their day-to-day lives if these sites would gratify noticeably distinct needs, wants or interests (e.g. Facebook *and* Snapchat, Twitter *and* Instagram, Tumblr *and* LinkedIn). As part of this ongoing commitment to multiple jointly used sites, interviewees repeatedly noted that there may be important reasons for continuing to use several SNSs in concert, due to their diverging gratifications and the way they could complement one another. Nevertheless, there were also a small number of examples that showed that some interviewees did not have any clear expectations about the potentially intersecting gratifications of SNSs. In these cases, interview

participants explained that more time was needed to explore the affordances of each site to form a better understanding of what each site was meant to be used for. From that point forward, it could be said that time becomes the final arbiter of SNS commitment.

The effects of perceived complementarity and substitutability were not only limited to the affordances of mediated *communication*. The interviews indicated that the same logic could be also applied to the affordances of *networking* and *self-presentation*, which have been introduced in Chapter 2 as key defining characteristics of the genre of SNSs. In other words, perceptions of diverging gratifications could manifest themselves on two additional levels:

First, perceived differences between SNSs may stem from the distinct affordances of mediated self-presentation that support different presentations and exhibitions of identities. Like distinct uses of SNSs, these differences could facilitate the commitment to multiple jointly used sites. For example, Tumblr may afford users with distinct pseudonymous self-presentational means to perform counter-public facets of their identities. At the other end of the spectrum, LinkedIn may afford users to present a public ‘real-name’ self in a professional networking context. While the communicative features of Tumblr and LinkedIn are very similar, in that they allow users to send each other private messages or share blog-style status updates, the key difference between the two sites is deducted from their perceptibly divergent affordances of self-presentation. This allows users to calibrate their personalised social media repertoires along a continuum of available self-presentational choices, using different personas in different social contexts on multiple sites.

Second, the interviews illustrate that users frequently commit to the use of two similar SNSs if these sites allow them to regulate their social accessibility in distinct ways, e.g. by

granting them access to certain audiences or excluding certain viewers from their networks. In particular, the interviews show that users tend to become emotionally invested in certain SNSs that allow them to interact with new people from outside their personal networks who share their interests – regardless of any perceived overlaps in their communicative and self-presentational practices. Some research participants have emphasised this point as a rationale for their commitment to Instagram and Twitter; others have alluded to dating-focused applications like Tinder and Hinge, as examples of applications with unique affordances of networking. There were also numerous cases, where users joined new social media applications like WeChat or QQ, because they wanted to interact with new audiences that were not available on Facebook.

These observations are conceptually aligned with the user-centric approach of this thesis, because they emphasise the agency of individual users, who perceive the affordances of multiple sites and utilise this understanding to shape their personalised social media repertoires.

In closing, these research findings show that commitment is never about individual SNSs, but about the perceived interrelationships between multiple SNSs. If the imagined affordances of any two sites converge on the same needs, users will most likely substitute one site for another after a period of time. However, if the two SNSs are associated with distinct affordances of networking, communication or self-presentation users are more likely to spend more time on each site and become emotionally invested in both SNSs. The complementarity of imagined affordances can thus be said to be an important pre-condition for commitment. Therefore, I argue that sincere and sustained commitment to more than one SNS is only possible if the new site notably differs on at least one of these three dimensions from what is already in use.

There are two implications that stem from this logic of converging and diverging social affordances of SNSs. On the one hand, this implies that incumbent SNSs, which people already have developed strong emotional bonds to, are incredibly difficult to displace by new social media entrants. The reason why new visual SNSs like Prisma are not catching on with so many users is because users are already committed to using Instagram for the same needs, and are thus unwilling to fully engage with the new applications, even after they have signed up for a new account. In this regard, several likely psychological biases were briefly mentioned in this chapter that require further scholarly attention.

On the other hand, this also implies that emerging SNSs increasingly need to offer users a greater set of differentiated choices over their self-presentation, their degree of privacy, and the size and nature of the audiences they want to address. Given the path-dependent nature of social media repertoires, it seems that the only way to nurture sustained engagement with new sites is through a set of unique affordances that are substantially different from what is already in place on at least one of the three dimensions: differences in communication, self-presentation and networking. For example, the reason why the running and cycling app Strava managed to build an engaged and committed user base is that they have managed to differentiate their new SNS from Facebook on all three dimensions. Once again, communicating these differences to new users is vital, since social media repertoires are primarily based on perceptions and expectations, rather than any objective technological realities. Meanwhile, the interview data showed that there are systematic differences between users in the way how they respond to these communication efforts, as well as how they interpret the perceptual cues from the broader media environment.

8. 4. Chapter conclusion

The previous chapters have looked at the predictors of commitment to individual platforms, finding that commitment is critically predicted by repeated uses and gratifications of sites. However, the process through which people might perceive the intersecting gratifications of multiple SNSs was yet unclear. Building on the previous findings, this chapter has examined how people make sense of the differences and overlaps in gratifications between multiple sites, and how these constructed perceptions are reflected in their decisions about which SNSs to use and to commit to. The perceived interrelationships between gratifications of available SNSs (e.g. whether gratifications of SNSs appear to act in complementary or substitutive ways) have been summarised as gratification structures. This theoretical distinction supports the user-centric approach of this dissertation and helps to understand the different ways in which users might fathom the wide array of available SNSs and their affordances.

The chapter analysed the rich narratives of individual SNS users that arose from 50 semi-structured interviews about their daily SNS uses, attitudes, emotions and general social media habits. Although the predictors of SNS commitment have been already intensely discussed in Chapter 6, several open questions remained that were addressed with rich qualitative methods. For example, how do affordances make a difference to which SNSs people use? How does the use of multiple sites affect users' patterns of SNS commitment? And what factors affect the formation of beliefs about the potential gratifications on each site? Using interview data, this chapter has attempted to provide a qualitatively rich exploration of these questions.

The most important finding of this chapter is the observation that people's SNS choices tend to be organised in meaningful social media repertoires, which systematically vary by user

type. Social media repertoires are deeply personalised, because they are based on subjective readings of perceptual cues for action from the broader socio-technical environment. These repertoires are also based on perceived gratification structures, which themselves are rooted in conjectured differences of imagined affordances between SNSs. Furthermore, the interviews suggest that the formation of beliefs about the social affordances of SNS may be path-dependent and perseverant over time. This results in differences in how people become increasingly emotionally invested in the use of certain sites the more they use them. Differences in use patterns and commitment, as well as people's identity practices across sites, can thus be understood in terms of the imagined differences in SNS affordances. This shows that the diffusion of SNSs is neither inevitable nor certain; it is contingent on past choices in the social media environment and human actions that follow from it. Above all else, the evidence in this chapter contrasts with popular arguments in mainstream media that propagate universal uses of SNSs, e.g. assuming that all Facebook users see the site in the same consistent way.

In examining the relationship between gratification structures and SNS commitment, these research findings extend affordance theory and provide new empirical evidence for the effects of imagined affordances in the context of social media. Further untangling these effects may provide important ideas for SNS scholarship and the practical strategies employed by Internet companies developing new social media platforms. Future research thus needs to pay close attention to the different ways in which users interpret the affordances of sites, since different people attribute different meanings to SNS affordances. From a practical perspective, these findings demonstrate that an understanding of affordances, as well as how perceptions of such affordances may affect people's commitment, is important for fostering a committed user base on new social media platforms.

Furthermore, these findings need to be placed into the broader context of cognitive theories that investigate how people make decisions and perceive the world around them. For instance, a viable starting point for further research would be to examine psychological frameworks of biases in social cognition and how they might contribute to explaining people's social media choices: are media repertoires a psychological device that helps people cognitively distinguishing between the many available social media technologies? In addition, are people's perceptions of SNS affordances based on cognitive heuristics to simplify the constantly evolving social media landscape? Finally, to what extent is confirmation bias playing a role in reaffirming people's beliefs about SNSs? New research into the cognitive aspects of commitment decisions could thus lead to better platform designs and strategies for more sustained user engagement. Notwithstanding the relevance of these points, a discussion of these psychological questions goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

Before we move on to the conclusion, it may be worth returning to the case of the rivalry between Instagram and Snapchat, which was introduced at the outset of this chapter. When Instagram moved into ephemeral messaging, many users did not perceive its new affordances as functionally equivalent to Snapchat's ephemeral messaging – notwithstanding any technical similarities. In fact, user perceptions of the two sites varied greatly, because each user would draw his or her own dividing line in the gratification structures between the two SNSs.

From a functional perspective, Snapchat and Instagram indeed both seem to afford ephemeral information sharing through a set of very similar features. However, this functional similarity does not mean that people will use the two applications in similar ways. As this chapter has shown, people tend to invent their own uses and their own internal folk theories

about the uses and contexts of each site. This is why the same actions on Instagram and Snapchat could not only “*feel different*” but also offer very different gratifications to different people.

As this chapter has shown, the extent to which two SNSs are seen as converging on the same needs, or diverging towards different needs, depends on people’s constructed perceptions of their imagined affordances. Even if you completely recreate an SNS and make a carbon copy of it with a different brand name, it is possible that people would still find new ways to navigate it differently and discover new and surprising gratifications that may not be perceived by other users. This may be the very reason why prolific users of ephemeral messaging on Snapchat remained committed to Snapchat, while new users who did not yet have the chance to experience ephemeral messaging began to use Instagram Stories. The path-dependent nature of commitment to both Snapchat and Instagram has only become more salient after the introduction of Instagram Stories. Ten months after its launch, Stories was used by 200 million daily active users (DAUs), allegedly contributing to the decline of Snapchat’s user growth by 82% within one quarter. Technology reporter Josh Constance (2017 p. 6) notes: “*Snapchat users might have asked for faster horses, but Instagram gave them the automobile.*” Nevertheless, Snapchat’s current 100 million DAUs remain active loyalists of the app and, for the most part, do not seem to be very open to the idea of substituting their daily sharing habits with Instagram’s alternative features.

To link these findings to the findings in Chapter 6, we can once again see the comparatively greater effect of gratifications on SNS commitment compared to the effect of networks. People’s decisions to remain committed to Snapchat were deeply rooted in their perceived differences of affordances between the two platforms: it relates to what people think Snapchat could represent in the social world compared to what they think Instagram can offer, rather than merely calculating which site can offer you the biggest audience. While the number

of users in one's SNS audience, unmistakably, also plays an important role in the formation of people's social media repertoires, it does not appear to be the most critical driver of commitment. Clearly, network effects cannot fully explain what is going on in the ever-changing world of social media. There is more to the story than just user numbers.

CHAPTER 9:

CONCLUSION

9. 1. Concluding reflections – Studying SNSs in a changing media environment

Social network sites lie at the locus of our contemporary social lives. They capture a substantial share of our time and daily media attention. They are frequently at the forefront of current news and popular culture content. They appear to have transfigured nearly every aspect of our sociality. And they have certainly inspired a great number of folk theories about their effects on our everyday lives. In fact, the use of SNSs now constitutes the most popular Internet activity in many countries, including the UK (Dubois & Blank 2017).

Research studies have proffered many different views of the effects of SNSs on society. Some scholars have described SNSs as a transformative force that has come to dominate the zeitgeist of a generation, spawning new communities, where there were once just distributed individuals. Others have depicted SNSs as a risky technology that has blurred the boundaries of the private sphere, frequently and inadvertently exposing personal data to unintended audiences.

As such, writing a thesis on social media choice and commitment in a time when society and mass media appear to be oversaturated with SNSs was no easy task. On the one hand, any research findings are bound to be instantly compared to hardwired conventional wisdom and popular beliefs, which are oftentimes inaccurate since they are not backed up by any empirical evidence. On the other hand, the rapid technological change of social media makes research in this area a moving target, since the findings of even the most cutting-edge research studies

typically become outdated by the time they are published. These challenges, however, do not diminish the importance and ultimate value of this kind of research for academia, business and society, which has been postulated throughout this thesis.

I have to admit that studying the ways in which people choose and commit to social media has fascinated me ever since I joined Hi5, my first social network site, back in 2007. Part of the appeal of studying this social phenomenon is the fact that social media choices rarely occur in a social vacuum; sometimes they occur over and over again, forming meaningful patterns that can be observed across many seemingly unconnected cases. People make similar social media choices, but they develop a sense of commitment to the same SNSs for very different reasons. While predictions about people's individual media selection may be sometimes erroneous, inquiries of the broader social dynamics underpinning people's media selection can lead to sustainable research outcomes and enhanced theory development. Following on from this, the thesis at hand represents an attempt at understanding the underlying theoretical mechanisms of social media choice through the lens of SNS commitment, rather than any particular social media activities of individuals on any given day. The theoretical framework of this thesis, and especially the conceptual integration of affordance theory with the U&G approach, has enabled me to examine the fundamental, long-term narratives of commitment. Even if the four selected SNSs for this research might change their user interfaces, site architectures and features over time, which they likely will, the present study has demonstrated that it is possible to discern underlying trends and consistent patterns of user behaviour using theory and empirical data.

With this in mind, it is my intention to summarise the main findings and contributions to communications research from this thesis into a coherent conclusion. To that end, the last chapter

of this thesis first synthesises all the major insights drawn from my analysis in Section 9.2 before discussing the five main limitations of the study in Section 9.3. In doing so, the chapter offers an overall story of the effects of perceived affordances on SNS commitment in the geographical and cultural context of young adults in the UK.

9. 2. Social media choices – What have we learned so far?

The main goal of this dissertation was to understand the factors that determine people's commitment to the social network sites they use. This research question was primarily motivated by the observation that, despite the vast amount of different social media platforms that exist today, people typically choose only a small number of SNS applications for networking, communication and self-presentation with their personal networks. However, existing research does not offer a compelling answer to this conundrum: is commitment to an SNS driven by its audiences, uses or the self-presentation that these sites afford? It remained unclear why people continue using a particular combination of sites, and even become increasingly committed to the use of such sites in their quotidian lives, when new SNSs can seemingly fulfil the same needs.

To the general audience, the question of SNS commitment may appear trivial or mundane on first sight. After all, choosing which social media to use is probably one of the most common decisions we face on a day-to-day basis. However, the question of social media commitment is deep-rooted in a range of theoretical questions related to imagined affordances, perceptions of gratification structures and social networks. Therefore, the core argument in this thesis examined people's SNS commitment through their perceptions of gratification structures and affordances. It addressed the outlined research question by scrutinising how people may be able to reconfigure their sociality through their social media choices.

In order to study how young adults choose social media, the present study has adopted a user-centric approach that focuses on people's understanding of SNSs as bundles of affordances. Consistent with previous U&G research, social media choices were theorised as being active rather than passive; especially insofar as the number of available SNSs, as well as possible combinations between such sites, has increased in recent years. Accordingly, the findings summarised in this chapter are hopefully not just perishable insights about ever-changing technical realities of SNSs, but more sustainable insights into the mechanisms of SNS commitment that can be further studied in future research. The user-centric approach helped to ensure that the theoretical contributions of this thesis are transferable to future studies that examine how people choose social media beyond Facebook and Twitter. With this in mind, Chapters 2-4 made five central conceptual choices that informed my research design. Below I briefly summarise these points before moving on to the main conclusions of the dissertation:

- **Emphasising the interactions of people and platforms:** Journalism is replete with reports about the development of various social media platforms, e.g. which SNS has introduced which features? Which SNS has grown its user base? Which SNS has plans to expand into new countries? While these accounts are certainly worth reading, they remain parochial at best in the light of academic research that investigates the social dynamics of SNSs from a user-centric perspective. Chapter 3 sought to explain why a study of people is at the very heart of this dissertation. Considering this, the dissertation investigates the perceptions, motivations, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of individuals, as they avail themselves of the affordances of social media platforms. This is why my investigation into people's social media choices and commitment is best addressed by drawing on affordance theory and the U&G approach.

- **Recognising the path-dependence of social media:** In addition to the user-centric focus of the present study, it was also important to recognise that SNSs have evolved over time, regularly adding new features and UX functionalities to their platforms. This pace of change will only accelerate in the future, and CMC research needs to find novel theoretical approaches to social media that will not be rendered obsolete by new features. For example, there is a big difference between growing up with social media in the 2000s and growing up with social media in the 2010s. Chapter 4 has explained how frequent updates to SNS architectures may have changed the social dynamics of these platforms. It has also elaborated on the global convergence of features across major SNSs. Adding this temporal dimension to my thesis has provided me with a better foundation to ascertain the path-dependent nature of commitment. Being cognizant of the history of SNSs has helped me better understand people's current perceptual states and SNS experiences.
- **Underlining multi-media contexts instead of single-medium research:** As the Internet has expanded the social media ecosystem, it has also provided users with a variety of new communication possibilities within diverse media contexts. Chapters 1 and 3 have explicitly emphasised that the present state of SNS scholarship is disproportionately oriented towards single-medium studies, as evidenced by recent reviews (Binder & Sutcliffe 2014; Rains & Brunner 2014; X. Zhao et al. 2016). There is a growing academic consensus that research that examines social phenomena in isolation through data from an individual site, such as either Facebook or Twitter, may inadvertently ignore the effects of the larger socio-technical environment on user behaviour (Stoycheff et al. 2017). Ultimately, this may diminish the usefulness and generalisability of single-medium studies, unless the examination of user behaviours on individual SNSs is theoretically

justified (Dubois & Blank 2017). The present study has, therefore, contributed to the CMC literature by supporting the call for multi-media research and helping to elucidate the social dynamics of the broader media ecosystem.

- **Focusing on social affordances instead of features:** In line with ongoing research on the affordances of social media, this thesis has adopted an affordance-based view of SNSs. The historical discussion in Chapter 4 has demonstrated that SNSs have evolved, but there are some persistent qualities that have defined the genre of SNSs despite their ever-changing collections of features. These affordances were defined in Chapter 2 as non-deterministic signals that indicate possibilities of action with regard to SNSs. In contrast to technical features, I have argued that the key social affordances of SNSs have largely remained stable over time. Next, Chapter 2 proposed three long-term narratives that could be said to conceptually differentiate the genre of SNSs. They can be summarised as *affordances of mediated networking*, *mediated communication* and *mediated self-presentation*. Each of these socially embedded affordances was related to how people make decisions about which SNS to adopt and use, when multiple alternative sites are available. Therefore, I postulated that in this research SNSs are not studied as independent technical entities, but assumed as parts of a larger media environment that offers users the choice of a variety of different social affordances across sites.
- **Examining commitment instead of adoption or use:** The most important change in perspective is the focus on explaining users' level of commitment to particular SNSs, rather than on merely documenting their activity patterns. This new theoretical angle was introduced in Chapter 3. People may join a new SNS out of curiosity, the promise of

positive social experiences, or the aspiration for novel and distinctive self-presentational means, but they continue using sites for different reasons. In particular, I theorised that SNS commitment is tied to the social and psychological persistence of SNS choices as a result of users' personal affinity, emotional attachment and relational investment in a given site. I have posited that many of the mechanisms that drive the adoption of SNSs do no longer work when it comes to keeping users engaged and getting them emotionally invested in a site. This is why the thesis makes a distinction between merely using SNSs and being committed to a site. This was associated with different behavioural patterns, attitudes and beliefs that helped to investigate how people make sense of social media.

With the above premises in mind, the following story is offered about young adults' perceptions of imagined affordances in their commitment decisions regarding SNSs:

9. 2. 1. Network effects alone do not explain SNS commitment

The nested regression models in Chapter 6 and the qualitative interviews in Chapter 8 indicated that purely relying on network effect arguments may not be sufficient to explain why people remain committed to the use of particular SNSs. This finding is contrasted with the conventional wisdom frequently epitomised by media pundits and financial analysts, i.e. that 'network effects are the holy grail of social networking'. In particular, Wall Street analysts' obsession with user numbers has mistakenly led many publicly-traded SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, to prioritise user growth over user engagement. While many social media analysts have been obsessed with user numbers and statistics on SNS user growth, some scholarly studies have also noted that some of these aggregate statistics have been inaccurate in

the past (Pearce 2015). In fact, an assessment of user numbers alone provides little insight into the intricate socio-technical dynamics of multiple media use, which is what typically drives the rapid growth of new platforms.

In contrast to this logic, the present study has suggested that the success of SNSs may not necessarily be about the scale of the platform, but about the depth of engagement and user commitment to the site. The survey-responses have shown that it is mainly sincere self-expression and the recurrent gratifications obtained from SNSs that predict commitment. Moreover, the interviews uncovered the intricate role of perceived overlaps in gratification structures between jointly used sites as important factors in people's commitment to multiple SNSs. What is more, for some user groups, people's perceptions of their SNS audiences did not seem to be related to commitment at all; instead, users were much more motivated to continue using sites like Facebook and Instagram to express themselves and be curious about other people – to see others and be seen. Therefore, instead of looking at SNSs as the sum of MAUs or DAUs, media analysts are well advised to examine the reasons why people may be interested in pursuing their sociality on a particular site, instead of a range of alternative sites.

For example, some of the findings in Chapter 8 have shown that there are people who may remain prolific users of Snapchat, even though they have only a handful of friends on the application. By contrast, there are also people who have large friendship networks on Facebook, who are looking for the next best opportunity to abandon the site, due to the hidden costs of context collapse and the social tensions between their heterogeneous network audiences. In a similar vein, even users with the largest number of followers on Twitter admitted that they rarely checked the site, because other sites like Snapchat and Instagram allowed them to express themselves more freely and more creatively. So the interesting finding in this part of the thesis is

that, what really matters is not how many contacts a user might know on any given SNS, but rather how the user decides to spend his or her time on the site; how he or she interprets the kinds of relationship practices that the site affords; and recognising what the site represents for the user in his or her social world. Therefore, users' psychological investment in a site, as measured by the commitment scale introduced in Chapter 6, can be used as an additional indicator of the 'health' of a platform, as opposed to merely relying on officially reported user numbers.

As a practical implication for SNS service providers, I asserted that only considering network effects may not be enough to succeed in the social media space. As such, it may be problematic to assume that a large user population is a good enough safeguard against potential disruption from emerging, more agile upstarts. After all, there are natural limits to growth of a user population. As prospective new users dwindle and growth slows down, companies may need to look elsewhere to continue to be relevant for both their fresh and faithful users. In this context, the thesis has made an argument for considering the broader picture of social networks: by exploring how people perceive the relative differences in the imagined affordances of SNSs, as well as by exploring how these perceptions form the foundation of social media commitment.

9. 2. 2. Commitment is tied to sincere self-presentation, but not 'real-names'

Having reviewed the affordances of SNS for mediated self-presentation in Chapter 2, the thesis has shown that the ways in which users choose to link all their digital identities across multiple SNSs can have an effect on their commitment to each site. Therefore, social media choice may not only be about what to present and what to keep to oneself; it may also be about choosing the right platforms for these self-disclosures. While some users were inclined to use sites like Facebook as a place for the consolidation of multiple social contexts and identities,

others have opted for a clear-cut disconnect of identities. This was frequently achieved through the use of multiple disassociated SNS accounts. In these instances, identity-markers were used to reconfigure the level of indexicality of profiles across multiple sites. Typically, the use of ‘real-names’ pointed to multiple accounts with the same consistent unified identity, whereas pseudonyms were commonly used to keep social media profiles disconnected by trying to limit their discoverability and traceability through search.

In the past decade, large Internet companies have tenaciously promoted the use of ‘real-names’ on platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+. However, the present study asked whether there is any evidence to suggest that people who use ‘real-name’ accounts on SNSs are also more committed to participating in these sites? The answer to this question is complicated, and the very notion of the ‘real-name’ account has been subject to much controversy lately. Critiques of ‘real-name’ policies have come from across the political spectrum, though they have been felt acutely by some individuals, such as political actors in authoritarian countries, supporters of culturally marginalised groups and members of the LGBT communities. For example, for transgender people even the mention of one’s ‘deadname’ (i.e. the gendered and ascribed name) can be a source of intense psychological distress.

Recalling Chapter 6, there were important evidentiary signals to decouple the notion of one’s authentic self from the notion of the ‘real-name’. In counterbalancing a tendency towards ‘real-name’ accounts, the results in this thesis suggested that there is little evidence for the effects of ‘real-names’ on SNS commitment. Instead, quantitative findings reinforce the notion that it is authentic self-expression through frequent emotional and personal disclosures that predicts commitment. Given the above, I contend that some users might feel that their authentic self was not best represented by their ‘real-names’. These results should help us recognise that

SNSs cannot be regarded as exclusive ‘real-name’ spaces, but rather spaces for the expression of the authentic self. Consequently, the key issue at hand is whether users perceive that an SNS can afford the authentic expression of their identity or not – regardless of the usefulness of either ‘real-names’ or pseudonymous accounts in their mediated self-presentation. In support of this logic, these effects were replicated across all four studied SNSs with analogous results.

Another surprising finding in Chapter 6 concerned the mixed effects of users’ identity experimentation on commitment attitudes. Using interview data in Chapter 8 to contextualise this result, it became apparent that the tendency to conceal one’s ‘true self’ and experiment with a range of alternate SNS personas was associated with a lower degree of commitment. In fact, other more intricate self-presentation strategies, such as maintaining duplicate SNS accounts, selectively managing audience disclosures and the strategic use of privacy settings, were also related to being less committed to each site. In other words, research participants who used SNSs as spaces to genuinely reveal their authentic self, while accepting others as passive witnesses of their self-presentation, exhibited a tendency to become more invested in each site they used.

Conversely, actively seeking out more complex self-presentation strategies and engaging in identity concealment and experimentation was associated with less salient commitment to any given site. On the one hand, this may be due to the fact that people who engaged in more strategic self-presentation may have also been subject to negative experiences, such as context collapse, which led them to be more cautious and more guarded in their SNS use. On the other hand, this may also be related to the observation that these individuals also have a somewhat more instrumental approach to SNSs, and are less emotionally attached to platforms in general. After all, actively managing one’s self-presentation can be seen as a source of work which

requires greater effort and time investment. Both lines of reasoning are plausible, but more empirical research is needed to deepen our understanding of the implications of this finding.

If we accept the conclusion that SNS commitment is predominantly linked to sincere self-expression rather than the use of any specific identity-markers on the part of individuals, what are the theoretical implications of this finding? First, building on the notions of self-symbolising and self-construction (Gollwitzer 1986), this implies that users' commitment decisions could be tied to a shift away from strategic self-presentation towards the sincere and consistent presentation of the self across multiple sites. Second, a higher degree of emotional and personal self-disclosure on SNSs could reinforce commitment through a virtuous cycle of positive audience signals and social capital provision, e.g. through a sequence of paralinguistic digital affordances that have been linked to social support in previous studies (Carr et al. 2016; Wohn et al. 2016). Third, the resultant higher commitment implies that social media repertoires which are unified by sincere and consistent self-presentation will be more persistent and resilient against emerging sites, which attempt to challenge established sites with features that gratify similar socio-psychological needs.

9. 2. 3. Commitment is reinforced by social and informational uses

In addition to the confluence of self-presentation and audience considerations, the thesis has identified a third important factor that affects users' commitment attitudes to SNSs. While researching predictors of commitment, Chapter 6 has corroborated the logic that repeated gratifications obtained from SNSs tend to amplify commitment attitudes. In particular, the gratifications of social and informational needs were associated with users' greater psychological investment in all four sites. By contrast, the recurrent gratification of professional needs was only

associated with commitment attitudes to Twitter. The difference in uses between the four sites could be explained in terms of the differences in their social affordances. Although most research in this field assumes that SNSs are associated with specific gratifications, few studies have actually attempted to disentangle the different types of SNS gratifications by their relative effects on persistent psychological attitudes that reinforce existing use patterns.

The chapter further explained the importance of social and informational uses of SNSs for commitment outcomes by theorising SNSs as “experience technologies” (Dutton & Shepherd 2006). This notion recognises that users’ perceptions and expectations of an SNS, as well as any gratifications sought from its use, may be intricately linked to previous experiences with the site. In other words, the social affordances of an SNS need to be actively explored to be able to realise the relationship practices and modes of communication that the site might support. Through interactions with multiple SNSs, users learn about how their affordances may be interrelated and what modes of communication and self-presentation are available to them. As already noted, this understanding is what allows people to become committed to an SNS over time. In part, this is an important theoretical contribution to SNS scholarship, which has previously taken user motives for granted, without considering the possibility that users of one site may still actively interact with the affordances of other sites.

Furthermore, the combined findings from the analysis in Chapter 7 show that different user types have vastly different perceptions and expectations about the potential gratifications provided by each site. For example, sceptics tended to have a more instrumental approach to SNS uses, which resulted in the higher value placed on informational uses rather than social uses. By contrast, enthusiasts and entangled users exhibited a tendency to use SNSs in ritualistic ways, which resulted in a tendency to become committed to SNSs through repeated social uses

and gratifications, which emphasised their need for social connection. In this way, their general beliefs about digital technologies appeared to play a central role in their commitment attitudes.

Specifically, the results in Chapter 7 are indicative of an inverse relationship between users' technology anxiety and their commitment to a site for the groups of enthusiasts and sceptics: the more anxious a person appears to be about the uses of SNSs, the less likely it is that this person will develop a genuine sense of commitment to the site. Contrariwise, there was no evidence for such a relationship for the groups of moderate and entangled users. In particular, entangled users seemed to be both highly anxious and highly committed to their main SNSs, whereas moderates seemed to be both less anxious and less committed to sites they used. These findings could pave the way for future research aimed at investigating the effects of technology attitudes on social media commitment for different sub-populations of users.

Finally, Chapter 8 helped to contextualise these results by exploring the ways in which repeated gratifications could contribute to habits around the social, informational and professional uses of SNSs. Moderate users, in particular, exhibited an apparent preference for consistency between past and present SNS gratifications. This can be interpreted conceptually as a cognitive post-rationalisation process that reinforces commitment outcomes. Along this line of thought, Staw (1981 p. 584) notes that "*individuals can become committed to a course of action simply because they believe, consistency in action is an appropriate form of behaviour.*" For some sub-groups of users, therefore, past social media choices could be seen as psychologically binding acts, which can be remarkably stable and persevering over time. Following the research in the cognitive psychology literature, the decision to regularly use one SNSs over another could create a "*motivated state that must be resolved or justified through changes in attitudes and*

beliefs” (Staw 1997 p. 199). This is comparable to a self-inference process by which users tend to affirm attitudes that are consistent with their previous behaviours (Bem 1972; C. A. Kiesler 1971). To be more exact, cognitive psychology research has explained this practice in terms of the subconscious process to appear “rational” to oneself and thereby alleviate any cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). For example, having spent several years on Facebook, people might convince themselves that their decision to join Facebook was correct in the first place, hence continuing to use the site in the future. In fact, there is research evidence to suggest that people might become even more committed to SNSs in order to internally rationalise their ongoing use in the face of new negative signals from the environment. Staw (1981) evidently demonstrates this in the organisational context of escalated commitment in management decisions. In a similar vein, the increasing level commitment from repeated use could also be explained in terms of people’s ‘sunk costs’ of gradually committing time and resources to a single brand of SNS. Sunk cost approaches typically attempt to explain the “*tendency to continue an endeavour once an investment in money, effort or time has been made*” (Arkes & Blumer 1985 p. 124). Seen in this light, it is plausible to say that this logic further strengthens the effects of repeated gratifications on SNS commitment.

9. 2. 4. Relative differences in imagined affordances drive commitment

While the quantitative analyses in Chapters 6 and 7 identified common threads in young people’s social media choices, the qualitative interviews in Chapter 8 ascertained the rich diversity of SNS uses and people’s interpretations thereof. I anticipated this diversity of user perceptions, but I was struck by the variety of ways in which people seemed to approach and make sense of the relative differences between the affordances of each site. To reach a common

framework for these emotional expectations and perceptions, I turned to the concept of imagined affordances as a way of bringing back “*into the scholarly conversation the importance of imagination, non-rational thought and perception for describing the process of the formation of technological affordances*” (Nagy & Neff 2015 p. 7). From this perspective, the extent to which users are able to recognise whether a site affords particular uses largely depends on their deeply personal experiences, expectations, affective states and subjective meanings associated with the platform. This is why the pathways to SNS commitment were not only systematically different for different sites, but also for different types of users, as seen in the clusters in Chapter 7.

The interesting conclusion, however, is not that users differ in their interpretations of affordances, but that they form strong beliefs about how the affordances of *different sites* work together. Moreover, since SNS affordances were typically associated with specific gratifications, I theorised that perceived interdependencies between gratifications sought from different SNSs could be summarised as *gratification structures*. This user-centric approach conceptually integrates U&G with affordance theory, placing each perceived affordance within the broader context of available gratifications. Accordingly, Chapter 8 contributed to existing U&G research by arguing that commitment decisions are driven by perceptions of the substitutability and complementarity of affordances within such gratification structures.

For example, if the affordances of two jointly used SNSs appear to converge on the same need gratifications, users may continue using both sites. However, the data suggests that they are likely to commit to only one site in the long run (e.g. Facebook vs. MySpace). Conversely, if the affordances of two SNSs appear to diverge towards the gratification of distinct needs, users may become psychologically invested in both sites (e.g. Facebook and Snapchat). Even in cases where no hard-coded differences between any two sites existed, some users still found ways to

justify their heavy use of both sites by pointing out conjectured differences in their affordances. Simply put, they participated in SNS that made the most sense to them in relation to other sites. It is worth noting that it is difficult explain these considerations with classic models of rational economic decision-making, because user perceptions of affordances are typically affective and based on emotional baselines. That being said, Chapter 8 uncovered that SNS users, in fact, frequently think of their own assessments and interpretations as “*accurate or at least [as] an unbiased rendering of reality*” (Staw 1997 p. 198). Granted, this may not be a universal rule, but the interviews have shown that this was a consistent pattern among nearly all interviewees.

Furthermore, Chapter 8 has provided new evidence for three conceptual categories that signify differences between sites in terms the affordances of networking, communication and self-presentation. These categories clearly correspond to the three types of social affordances that were introduced in Chapter 2 as part of the long-term narrative of the genre of SNSs. Later on, during the interviews, users were found to indirectly refer to these affordances by approaching them as points of comparison between sites. For example, users would frequently compare two sites based on whether they offered them access to different people, allowed them to present themselves differently or to share content in different ways. With respect to this finding, I theorised that differences in affordances contribute to user perceptions of how any two sites relate to each other; whether any two SNSs tend to gratify the same needs or whether they contribute to distinct gratifications; and how they can be used together or independently. For example, users might want to join two seemingly similar SNSs. If one of the sites is perceived as substantially different in terms of the audiences one can access, the modes of connectivity that are supported or the self-presentational means that are available, then commitment to both sites should be possible. This is why interviewed users frequently admitted to be committed to the use

of pairs of seemingly similar SNSs. By way of illustration, some users explained their commitment to both Facebook and Twitter; because the two sites allowed them to selectively regulate their social accessibility across the two platforms. Similarly, some prolific users of Twitter and Snapchat stated that the two platforms allowed them to express distinct facets of their identity, which was a reason for their heavy use of both platforms. As a counter-example, users of both Instagram and Facebook, who perceived that there were far-reaching overlaps of audiences, identities *and* shared content between the two sites, explained that they were generally more emotionally attached to either one. In each of these examples, differentially perceived affordances thus allowed users to calibrate their social media choices along a continuum of available gratifications; and their commitment decisions were partially shaped by constructed perceptions of affordances and gratification structures.

9. 2. 5. Different user types exhibit different approaches to commitment decisions

Next, the thesis has explored opportunities to summarise the vast diversity of SNS users into abstract groups of people according to their similarities and common attitudes. The idea that users can be grouped into broad categories based on a set of variables is prominent both among scholars and practitioners. Still, in order to avoid the conceptual conflation of amount, variety and types of SNS-related activities, the clustering strategy in Chapter 7 exclusively focused on users' attitudes towards digital technologies.

This methodology followed the clustering approach developed by Dutton and Blank (2015). By means of principal components analysis, three attitudes were identified and used as the main clustering dimensions in the hierarchical clustering methodology: *technology optimism*, *technology anxiety* and *technology dependence*. The names of the four resulting user types were

merely indicative and were not meant to encompass any additional evocative connotations. The range of SNS behaviours that could be associated with each user type was later examined through the analysis of variance and a series of bivariate correlations. Further differences between the four emerging user types were elicited in a series of qualitative interviews, which were presented in Chapter 8. These interviews added alternative interpretations and deepened my understanding of the four types of SNS users, which are briefly summarised below:

- **Sceptical users** (lowest optimism, highest anxiety and lowest dependence) displayed an overall cynicism towards digital technologies and social networking. They expressed strong concerns about their privacy, relied on pseudonyms and appeared to prefer face-to-face interactions to any form of mediated communication. Because of their guarded use of social media, few sceptics were committed to the use of any particular site.
- **Moderate users** (high optimism, average anxiety and average dependence) did not have any strong notions either for or against SNSs. They were primarily committed users of Facebook and justified their non-use of other sites by postulating a perceived overlap in gratifications to other SNSs. Their trust in Facebook was reinforced by an apparent lack of sensitivity to privacy issues, government surveillance and the risk of context collapse.
- **Enthusiastic users** (highest optimism, lowest anxiety and high dependence) exhibited many of the traits commonly associated with ‘digital natives’. They were heavy users of social media and relied on a diversity of SNSs to organise their quotidian lives. Many used social media to expand their network and connect with new people. As early adopters of SNSs, they also did not mind using several SNSs that gratified similar needs.

- **Entangled users** (average optimism, high anxiety and high dependence) were also very prolific in their use of multiple SNSs, but they expressed strong negative feelings about their social privacy and the need to be constantly connected. Among all user types, they were perhaps most acutely aware of the risk of context collapse. In spite of that, they continued to be emotionally invested in their SNSs, especially Snapchat and Instagram.

In order to derive possible implications for policy and practice, it is important to recall the existing approaches to audience segmentation and online stratification to-date. The most common stratification methods are typically grounded in socio-demographic factors, which have been shown to be only marginally related to commitment in my analysis. Therefore, if audience communication is solely based on demographic variables (e.g. age, gender, educational attainment or occupational status) it might fail to convey its message. Even messaging based on personality traits may not be effective, if the goal is to persuade users of existing sites to try a new SNS. Instead, a more persuasive approach is proposed by tailoring communication based on people's cultural technology attitudes, i.e. their willingness to engage with new platforms and their commitment to existing platforms. Some people are fundamentally more open to new SNSs; others seem to have profoundly more resilient SNS choices. For instance, I anticipate that the conversion rate of an advert inviting people to install a new social media application will be substantially higher for SNS omnivores like enthusiasts compared to more selective SNS users like moderates. As such, matching the content of persuasive appeals to technology attitudes of potential adopters could help to accelerate the growth of new social media platforms.

Another implication is that SNS service providers, who are interested in fostering a more engaged and invested user community, also need to change their approach to their own sites. For

example, sending out more and more notification-emails to bring back passive users to their site will not help to persuade a sceptical user, who may reject the idea of social networking outright. In contrast, if an entangled user abruptly stops sharing public posts, it is possible that this sudden lack of engagement could be attributed to social tensions and context collapse on the platform. Different users face different problems and, therefore, different interventions may resonate well with some users and backfire with others. In summary, understanding how technology attitudes relate to SNS commitment could help SNS designers to facilitate more meaningful interactions between their users, thereby contributing to an overall more engaged user population.

9. 2. 6. Changing SNS choices requires changing social media repertoires

Already within the previous sub-sections, I have explained how users' perceptions of affordances may influence their commitment decisions. Next, this thesis has attempted to theorise the composition of these SNS choices within people's personalised *social media repertoires*. There was strong evidence in the data that users tend to make sense of the entirety of their social media platforms in everyday life through an abstract mental framework that was based on relatively stable media choices, self-presentation strategies and networking preferences. The combined research findings from Chapters 7 and 8 suggest that, as people adopt new social media technologies, they also tend to compare these new sites to their existing social media repertoires. This view takes into account users' understandings of the gratification structures that exist between sites, as well as their perceptions of the relative differences in what each site can offer. It is clear that media repertoires do not merely represent the sum of all SNSs a person might use, but rather a meaningful representation of social media that are structured according to some internal logic or a set of organising principles.

Furthermore, the findings in Chapter 8 show that the composition of social media repertoires is shaped both by individual agency, as well as perceptions of collective social media choices in the broader social environment. This is relevant to the conclusions drawn from this thesis, insofar as different user types appeared to exhibit distinct approaches to the formation and maintenance of their social media repertoires. For example, the present study has demonstrated that moderate and entangled users were more susceptible to the social media choices proffered to them by their peer-groups. They would also frequently accept Facebook as their main, and oftentimes only, social network site. Enthusiasts were also avid users of Facebook, but they demonstrated a higher willingness to experiment with emerging platforms and renew their social media repertoires at a higher frequency. By contrast, what distinguished sceptics from the other groups was their forthright resistance against new SNSs, which resulted both in a guarded use of Facebook and a lower turnover of social media repertoires in general.

In broader terms, the composition of social media repertoires was shown to be extremely perseverant and difficult to change regardless of user type. A discussion of the qualitative findings hinted at the persistence of social media choices. Although not every one of the factors contributing to the path-dependence of SNS commitment could be tested, the findings contributed to debate whether humans are merely creatures of habit or whether they have agency over their digital choices. In this regard, a brief survey of the cognitive psychology literature was also presented to round out our understanding of how users might become emotionally invested in SNSs. On the one hand, people's attitudes, perceptions and expectations appeared to be path-dependent, as noted above. On the other hand, when people were presented with new SNS choices, they were likely to interpret them in terms of their pre-conceived notions of existing

affordances. Like all beliefs, these notions were difficult to change, not least because of cognitive biases. As seen in Chapter 8, people tend to interpret new information as confirmation of their existing beliefs about what each site already represents to them. This deep-seated tendency has been studied as confirmation bias in the literature, showing that people examine relevant evidence in a biased manner to support existing attitudes (Caldwell & O'Reilly 1982; Lord et al. 1979). The eminent English philosopher, statesman and scientist Francis Bacon was one of the first scholars to lament this human frailty. In his work on the scientific method “*Novum Organum*” originally published in 1620 he wrote (2016 p. 10):

The human understanding, when any proposition has been once laid down (...) forces everything else to add fresh support and confirmation; and although most cogent and abundant instances may exist to the contrary, yet either does not observe or despises them, or gets rid of and rejects them by some distinction, with violent and injurious prejudice, rather than sacrifice the authority of its first conclusions.

Nevertheless, the picture that emerges from the present investigation is far more complex and nuanced than Francis Bacon’s quotation would lead us to believe. In modern times, the tendency to interpret new evidence so that one’s prior beliefs and perceptions of gratifications and affordances remain intact is one of the main impediments for change in people’s social media repertoires. This inertia is, perhaps, the most lucid theoretical response to the conundrum of social media choice from Chapter 1: how is it that each person is committed to only a handful of social media platforms, while the rapid pace of the digital media industry continuously produces an abundance of new platforms with similar affordances?

Research has already identified some contributing elements to this question. With the analysis presented in this thesis we can now take a further step in this direction. After reviewing the major theoretical approaches and antecedents of social media choice, I believe that we now have a reliable framework to address this theoretical puzzle. Combining the insights presented

here, we should now be able to see why users remain committed to a small number of SNSs at the individual level, despite the vast number of available SNSs at a societal level. The findings show that users' commitment is based on constructed perceptions of the interrelationship between gratifications and affordances. Cumulatively, these decisions result in people's social media repertoires that appear to be historically and culturally path-dependent. However, as this thesis has repeatedly demonstrated, people's commitment in a social media context cannot be explained by path-dependence alone.

9. 2. 7. Implications for social capital provision

Lastly, it is important to note the potential of the concept of SNS commitment to be used in social capital research for disentangling social capital outcomes across multiple sites, i.e. the social and information-based resources and the benefits derived from people's positions in a social network (Brooks et al. 2014; Wellman & Quan-Haase 2001). There are notable parallels between the two concepts. In the literature, social capital is typically theorised as an *investment in one's social network* (N. Lin 2001), while commitment is theorised in this thesis as an *investment in one's social network sites*. Past research has already shown a strong positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and bridging social capital (M.-W. Kwon et al. 2013). There are also studies showing important links between the provision of social capital and multiple media use. For instance, Binder and Sutcliffe (2014) find that alternating between multiple SNSs can help users to manage diverse social and cultural spheres, and thereby maintain social ties with larger network audiences. This facilitates the accumulation and consolidation of social capital for people moving between different locations.

Other researchers also note that different SNSs could provide different opportunities for the gratification of diverse needs (Lindley et al. 2013; Vitak & Kim 2014; X. Zhao et al. 2016). This has implications for the provision of social capital, which is now distributed across a variety of platforms. Social support may be primarily available on sites like Facebook and Snapchat, while informational diversity may primarily be accessible from sites like Twitter and Instagram. In relation to that, research finds that users may value different potential benefits in a site (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011). There is also evidence that users may have different prospects of accruing social capital based on how they are using different SNSs to close the “socio-technical gap” in their communication environment (X. Zhao et al. 2016). What is more, Burke and colleagues (2011) find evidence that not all time spent on SNSs is equally “social”, which has implications for social capital provision based on types of site activities, users’ communication patterns and individual differences among users.

Using the affordance-based view of SNS commitment proposed in this thesis, we can further examine how social capital outcomes may be related to differences in behaviour and commitment across multiple sites. For example, if a person is committed to using Facebook, does this mean that any social activities on the site will be associated with better access to social capital compared to similar activities on other sites? If this is the case, to what extent is SNS commitment associated with improvements in both bridging and bonding social capital across sites? The present research has identified strong links between personal and emotional self-disclosure and commitment, as well as people’s gratifications derived from the social uses of SNSs. Following these early results, the notion of SNS commitment could thus pave new directions in our analysis of social capital online, because we have to consider social capital as being diffused across a multi-platform environment.

9. 3. Limitations and directions for future research

Having synthesised the main research findings of this thesis, I would like to acknowledge some of its main limitations. In addition to the methodological restrictions that have been already discussed in previous chapters (Sections 5.4.3, 5.5.4 and 7.3.5), the following section offers some conceptual caveats that should be noted in the review of my research findings. Specifically, there are aspects of this thesis that may not have received sufficient attention within the scope conditions of this study. Below, I would like to highlight five such limitations that invite further scholarly attention in future studies.

First, the selection of SNSs – Quantitative elements of this study were delimited to only four SNSs so as to ensure analytical insight while reducing complexity: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Based on industry statistics, these four sites are, indeed, the largest and most popular social media platforms in the studied population of UK youth, as described in Chapter 4. However, it is clear that the diverse landscape of social media warrants a broader inquiry of more complementary services. For example, other platforms like Pinterest, Tumblr and LinkedIn may also constitute critical components of people's social media repertoires, and should therefore be considered in future studies. Besides, research in other culturally diverse contexts is clearly encouraged to improve the external validity of findings. I also recommend that the logic of social media choice articulated by this thesis is tested on a number of geographically diverse case studies in order to understand the limits of its applicability and generalisability (e.g. in China or Russia, where Facebook is not the most popular social media platform). In a similar vein, industry reports indicate that SNS users in selected African countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Morocco and Kenya) use fewer social media platforms; but each platform is used for longer and

in a more engaged way (Mander 2017). Future research could examine these differences in SNS use to capture different cultural dimensions of SNS commitment.

Future research on social media choice could especially consider people's approaches to specialised platforms that have fostered small, but highly engaged communities of users, such as DeviantArt, Strava and Club Penguin. This could prove to be a very promising pathway for future research on SNS commitment in the context of niche affordances. On the one hand, this approach could enable scholars to theorise beyond the bounds of a handful of popular sites by taking into account users' preferences for self-presentation, communication and networking across a diversity of sites. On the other hand, this approach could also help us to better understand the "spread" of commitment from a small group of early enthusiasts to a larger population of users. I anticipate that this would entail considerations of people's social connectivity and their propensity to act as ambassadors of niche sites.

Second, the selection of the sample – The second limitation of the study has to do with the age, period and cohort effects in the sample that limit the generalisation of findings. In terms of age effects, it is important to keep in mind that I have selected a very specific group of users at a very specific time of their lives. As young adults grow older and take on greater work and family responsibilities, their changing life circumstances may have an effect on their uses of social media and their commitment to specific sites. For instance, imagine a single student in her early 20s, who graduates, gets a new job, moves to a new city and get married by the time she reaches her late 20s. As this person goes through several life-stages over the course of a decade, her social media needs, choices and usage habits might also evolve over time.

In terms of period effects, there are a number of external factors that may have affected SNS use in the studied sample, e.g. the widespread adoption of mobile phones and the growing availability of mobile Internet connectivity in the UK. Period effects typically affect all people in a given population, influencing widespread beliefs, values and behaviours. For instance, it could be argued that critical improvements in the technical infrastructure have allowed users to access SNSs more frequently and form a deeper, more personal relationship with their digital devices. Thus, the extension of findings to other time periods and geographic contexts may be limited.

In terms of cohort effects, people in the selected age group of 20-30 year olds in the UK have grown up with social media from a relatively young age and, as such, were collectively and individually exposed to new media technologies for an extended period of time. For example, most people in the sample have joined sites like Facebook in their early teenage years. This means that at the time of the study, many of them have experienced SNSs for over 10 years. Therefore, it is very difficult to say how the findings in this thesis generalise to other cohorts, where SNSs are still considered a fairly new phenomenon. By looking more closely at the patterns of social media use and commitment, it is also possible to further distinguish different intra-generational sub-cohorts within the targeted age cohort, e.g. people who joined Facebook when they were students at university or people who joined Facebook when they were just old enough to sign up for the site. The selected age-range covers both of these extremes with people born between 1985 and 1995. Future research could use longitudinal data to examine some of the outlined age, period and cohort effects in the context of SNS use and commitment, which could contribute to a better understanding of people's changing social media repertoires through time.

Third, the role of the social network – Even though the effects of social influence have been acknowledged at multiple points in this dissertation (especially by including the PPR index in the nested regression models of Chapter 6), people’s social media choices and commitment considerations have still been largely treated as individual decisions. In many ways, this is due to the theoretical framework chosen for this dissertation. The U&G approach, in particular, has been criticised before for not paying enough attention to interpersonal factors, such as power, compliance and other social dynamics of groups, as noted in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, there is recognition that we must move beyond individualistic accounts of SNS-related behaviours.

For instance, taking into account the effects of collective social media choices in the way how people form beliefs about SNSs would broaden the scope of analysis. In this thesis, this has been partially addressed by a discussion of path-dependency in Chapter 8. However, the importance of contextual factors encourages further investigation into the effects of the social environment on individual commitment decisions. By way of example, some group dynamics in cohesive groups may suppress the diversity of available SNSs by dictating one specific site as the dominant mode of in-group communication. In the same vein, an increased frequency of communication between two close friends could stimulate greater information transmission, leading both individuals to adopt new SNSs at a faster rate to jointly explore their uses.

Other contextual factors may emanate from mass media. In the past, there have been deliberate attempts in the media to craft public narratives around particular sites (e.g. how Twitter is losing social relevance, or how teenagers are leaving Facebook) which may effect changes in users’ perceptions of such sites. However, the main reason why only looking at global media narratives does not explain SNS commitment is that people’s social media choices are predominantly influenced by their friends and their local peer-groups, rather than mass media

broadcasts. People continuously observe the dominant media behaviours within their personal network and these observations may override global frames of reference. The social structure and social processes within an individual's personal network may thus substantially influence their media choices (Palmgreen & Rayburn 1985; Valente 1996).

This is why, taking a deep dive into the social factors governing mediated communication could help explain how people negotiate social media channels with different groups of alters or specific individuals from their personal networks. Ultimately, as Laurie McNeill famously noted, “*there is no ‘I’ in network*” (2012 p. 65) and the use of SNSs necessarily requires the implicit or explicit coordination of communication channels with one's conversation partners. The use of multiple SNSs, therefore, implies differentiated access to alters through different media, which invites further scholarly attention. For example, future research could feasibly use a combination of media diaries and social network analysis to place social media choices and commitment in the greater context of social accessibility research.

Fourth, the purposefulness of actions – A fourth conceptual leap that may be problematic in some cases is the premise of the purposeful and goal-directed pursuit of gratifications. This does not imply that SNS use is always instrumental. On the contrary, the findings presented in this thesis point towards the possibility of ritualistic uses of SNSs, which would not imply any higher-order objectives on behalf of the user. In fact, the present research has clearly shown that both types of motivations can be integrated into the U&G perspective. However, what adds to the complexity of SNS use is the fact that observed behaviours can be arbitrary or accidental. As a case in point, some interview participants have noted that they would sometimes open the

Facebook Newsfeed without even thinking about it. Without a clear goal or need in mind, they would scroll through their feed while “*feeling nothing, not even boredom*”. This example appears to defy one of the core assumptions of U&G that users always have a rational self-awareness of their own needs. Thinking back to the earlier discussion of habitual SNS use in Chapter 8, I conjecture that such behaviours could perhaps be subconsciously driven by mental shortcuts to previously gratified needs. In reference to foregoing work by Samuel Johnson, the Irish writer Maria Edgeworth expressed a similar idea in her book on the “*Moral Tales for Young People*” (1870 p. 43), when she wrote: “*the diminutive chains of habit (...) are scarcely ever heavy enough to be felt, till they are too strong to be broken.*”

Consequently, both random elements and goal-directed gratifications could operate in users’ commitment decisions. Using longitudinal data in future research could help to determine whether an instance of a peculiar behaviour is, indeed, merely accidental or whether there is a consistent pattern to it that can be observed over time. Based on the findings from the qualitative interviews, in particular, I suggest that there is a potential for further study of people’s automatic uses of social media that awaits future scholarly investigation.

Fifth, the role of algorithms – As a final note, another limitation of the study concerns the lack of attention paid to the potential effects of algorithms on human behaviour. The question of whether machine learning algorithms may have an effect on people’s uses of SNSs was raised by a number of scholars in recent years (Eslami et al. 2015; e.g. Hogan 2015b; Nagy & Neff 2015; De Ridder 2013). To understand why this question is important, one needs to first recognise that the communication contexts provided by social media platforms cannot be entirely ‘neutral’. These contexts are designed by other humans with specific intentions and purposes in mind.

Consequently, the presentation of content in the engineered social spaces provided by SNSs is frequently regulated by curation algorithms that critically shape how content is discovered and consumed – oftentimes with little to no transparency or accountability for how such algorithms may operate. For example, some scholars have referred to these spaces as “*calculated publics*” that cannot be agnostic (Crawford 2016; Gillespie 2010). Furthermore, the effects of algorithms could be different depending on the means of accessing an SNS, i.e. whether the platform is accessed through a mobile app or through the Web. Even though there was no direct evidence for these effects in this thesis, I expect that these factors may still play an important role and affect people’s perceptions of affordances and gratification structures across platforms.

This leads to a non-trivial implication: while acting as platforms for social cues, SNSs are more than simply intermediators; they act as conduits for social practices, while conditioning and confining user behaviour through algorithmic prioritisation and other platform design choices along the way. The current research design of the thesis did not examine the effects of platform design choices and algorithms on SNS commitment, which could constitute an interesting area of inquiry for follow-up studies. In terms of future research, I recommend that the subjectivity of choices made by SNS designers and engineers is taken into account, alongside any corporate interests of SNS shareholders for maximising platform efficiency, amount of social engagement and possible monetisation. As we are entering a world that is permeated with AI algorithms, this research could help advance our understanding of how *human* decisions regarding SNSs may be subtly influenced by the *algorithmic* decisions made by the site itself.

9. 4. Conclusion

Social network sites are now firmly embedded in many communities around the world; they could be said to be a part of the digital infrastructure that shapes our social lives. Therefore, attempting to understand the theoretical mechanisms by which people deliberately choose social media and become deeply committed to certain sites was an important undertaking. Much of the current debate in the CMC literature has focused on people's motives for individual SNS use and the factors predicting independent adoption events. However, an interesting gap in the literature was identified in understanding why people commit to the use of certain SNSs over others in a complex multi-media environment. The review of the literature presented in this thesis should help us recognise that merely focusing on individual sites, or binary decisions of SNS adoption, may not be the most helpful way of studying the relationship that people tend to form with their sites. Thus, it is no coincidence that many users treat SNSs not only as mere technical entities, but also as salient spaces for mediated sociality and extensions of their own selves.

Understandably, there are many consistent personal reasons for individuals to actively use a variety of different SNSs. However, up until this day we have lacked a theory that can explain people's social media choices from within a broader media environment, especially when multiple SNS accounts are involved. To point again to the theoretical question discussed previously, research currently does not have an adequate answer to the question of why people remain committed to a handful of SNSs, while there is a wide array of alternative sites available to them that could equally gratify their needs. In addition, how do people's attitudes, identities and beliefs affect their commitment attitudes and decisions to each site they use?

The data analysed in the present study indicates that there is no simple answer to the questions of social media commitment. In many ways, this is due to the fact that, from the

vantage point of the researcher, people's social media choices appear to be inherently complex, even if they seem merely trivial from the perspective of the individual user. Conventional wisdom exists around some of these questions, but it is striking that CMC scholars have not yet formulated a coherent and empirically-grounded theory that explains the socio-psychological processes of selective SNS use and commitment.

The purpose of the present research was, thus, to examine the ways in which people become committed to particular SNSs; how they make sense of the social affordances of such sites and how they use social media to reconfigure their sociality in everyday life. By conceptually integrating affordance theory and the U&G approach, this thesis has addressed this gap in the literature by examining the predictors of SNS commitment, as well as user perceptions influencing the composition of people's media environments. A novel contribution was made by theorising the relationship between *imagined affordances* and *gratification structures* of SNSs across multiple sites in the broader multi-media ecosystem. Specifically, I argue in theoretical terms that commitment decisions could be largely driven by users' considerations of the complementarity and substitutability of affordances. This result was consistent across the studied SNSs, but there were significant variations between distinct user types. Another theoretical contribution was made by proposing the concept of *social media repertoires* to better express the underlying approach by which users combine multiple communication contexts into a coherent personalised framework of available gratifications. Accordingly, these concepts were related to the affordance-based view of SNSs, which was extended in this thesis by deriving three key underlying long-term narratives of the genre of SNSs through the *social affordances of mediated communication, networking* and *self-presentation*. The theory-driven research models have demonstrated how each of these social affordances is related to commitment attitudes for the four

studied SNSs. Finally, this research has pointed to the importance of taking into account people's non-rational affective states and usage habits in the process of developing emotional attachment and commitment to such technologies. This has opened the door for future research into how people tend to reconfigure their mediated sociality by meaningfully combining an array of available communication technologies into their own personalised social media repertoires.

Next, the above theoretical contributions have all been grounded in empirical data from a nationally representative web-based survey and a range of in-depth qualitative interviews. A methodological contribution was thus made by combining *diverse methodological paradigms* in the study of social media choice in a multi-media study. While the quantitative survey painted a broad picture of behaviours in the studied population, the semi-structured interviews helped to contextualise, interpret and enrich the insights that materialised from the quantitative data. For example, while the survey utilised a dedicated *SNS Commitment Scale* that was developed as part of this research, I was also able to ask research participants directly about their cultural values, beliefs and personal experiences with SNSs to better understand their commitment decisions in the context of multiple media use. Integrating and consolidating the data sources from the two sequential research steps allowed me to develop an empirically grounded narrative that addressed my research questions, as exemplified by the selected cases of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat users. Accordingly, this study could be seen as another example of how mixed methods research designs can contribute to the investigation of complex social phenomena.

Lastly, several practical recommendations for SNS service providers and other SNS industry practitioners were drawn from these findings. The evidence in this thesis suggests that much of the conventional wisdom that exists around social media needs to be re-evaluated. In particular, any predictions about the rise and fall of SNSs should take into account the attitudes,

perceptions and motivations of individual users (instead of simply relying on a calculation of overall user numbers). There is no natural order of the evolution of SNSs, but there is also no reason to believe that currently existing platforms will remain socially relevant forever. No universal rules can be derived from past instances of user migrations from one site to another.

As such, public narratives of the boom and bust of social media can be both naïve and inaccurate. Sometimes the real reason why a new social application fails to build a critical mass of early adopters relates to user perceptions of affordances and gratification structures, rather than the objective qualities of the new platform. Taking into account people's commitment decisions and technology attitudes might help emerging sites to gain new users in the right places. Likewise, an understanding of people's social media repertoires might also help incumbent SNSs to keep their users engaged by helping them to deepen their psychological investments in their sites. On a more practical level, this implies that companies building SNSs need to spend more time and resources on systematic UX research at all stages of their development. Still, sometimes the underlying social mechanisms of commitment may not be adequately explained by platform-specific research alone. This is why, above all, I recommend that future research continues to explore the social and psychological processes underlying people's *multi-platform* commitment decisions in more detail and nuance to elicit new platform design policies and strategies for increasing user engagement.

As social media platforms sweep across the world, we face everyday choices about how we use SNSs to communicate, network and present ourselves to others. We have come a long way since the days when SNSs were still a relatively new phenomenon. Not only have we increasingly incorporated SNSs into our lives; but we have also internalised the logic of tags and

tweets, sharing and streaming, snaps and selfies, memes and mentions, handles and hashtags. In recent years, a large body of research has been published to document this apparent shift towards a digitised society in which we have, in many ways, grown accustomed to social media.

However, what I found particularly fascinating about this area of research was how these changes have actually masked a much broader shift in our emotional relationship with mediated technologies: we seem free in our social media choices, but we are also bound by our past experiences, perceptions, beliefs, values and interpretations of social media affordances. This path-dependency of SNS choices is only made manifest when we attempt to change our social media repertoires and replace the gratifications of one site with another. In this way, the main argument of this thesis echoes what Sir Winston Churchill once said about buildings: We shape our social media choices; thereafter they shape us.

By extending existing CMC research, the thesis examines why people are committed to specific SNSs, painting a picture of the affordances of social network sites that magnify commitment. The research findings in this thesis also hint at the complex socio-psychological processes by which people reconfigure their sociality. This typically happens as they selectively combine several SNS affordances from a broader multi-media ecosystem into a holistic and personalised social media repertoire. The findings further illuminate how people become deeply committed to the use of specific SNSs within this repertoire. This shows how people's attitudes, beliefs, values and perceptions might influence their social media choices. Consequently, these results both affirm and challenge the conventional understandings of social affordances and SNS uses. In light of the above, the dissertation has produced several new theoretical contributions to affordance theory, U&G research and SNS scholarship, which will hopefully provide important impulses for further work on social media commitment in this area.

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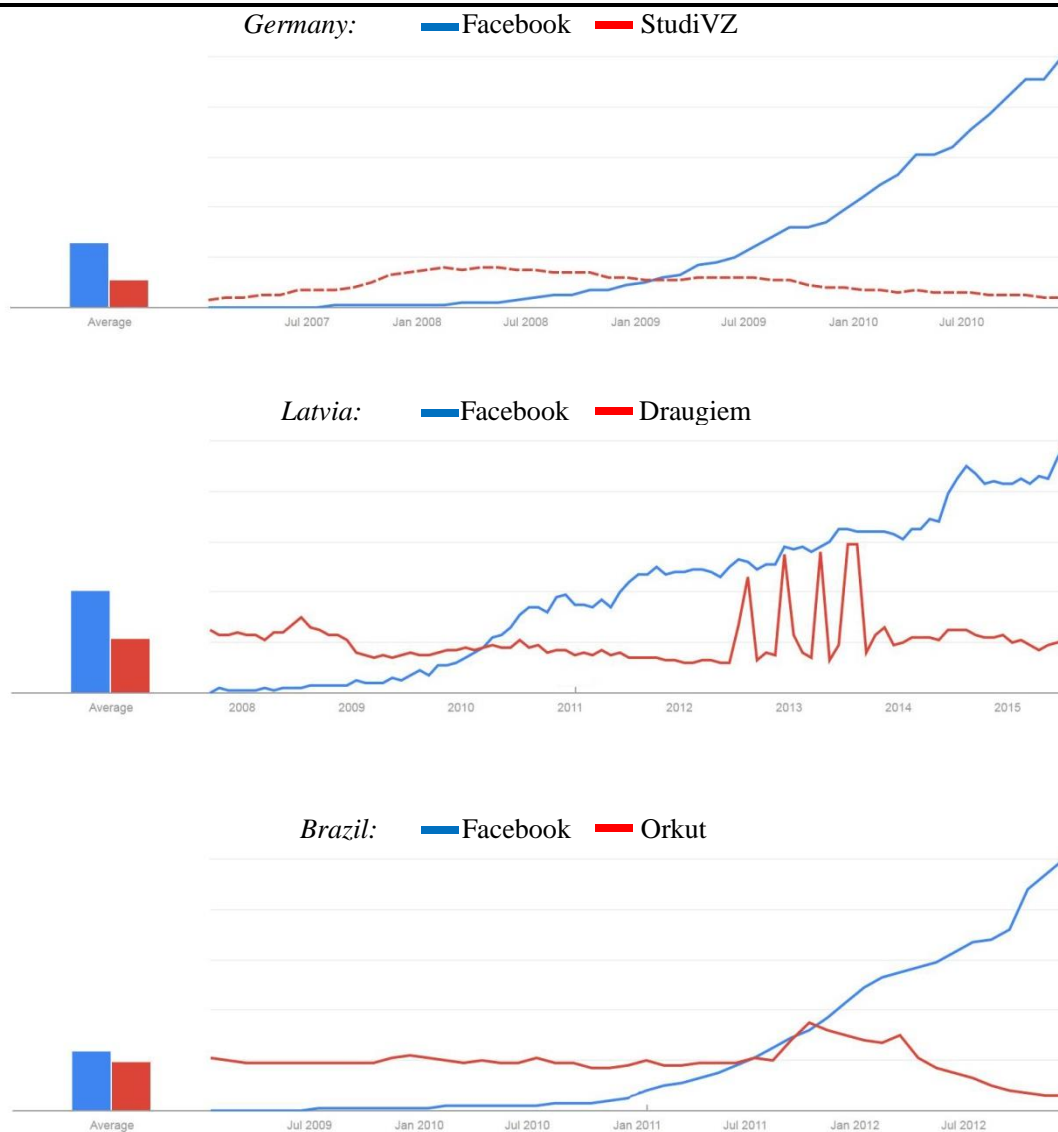
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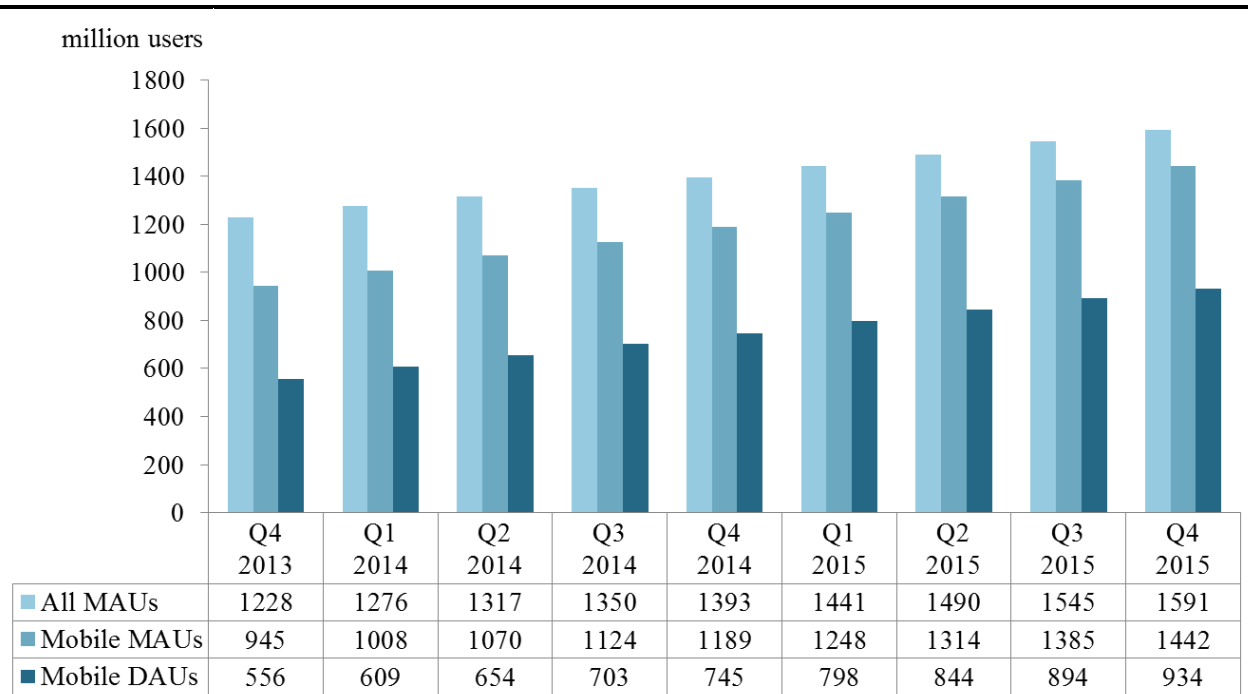
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APPENDICES

Figure 10: Changes in search interest expressed in Facebook vs. local SNSs in selected countries

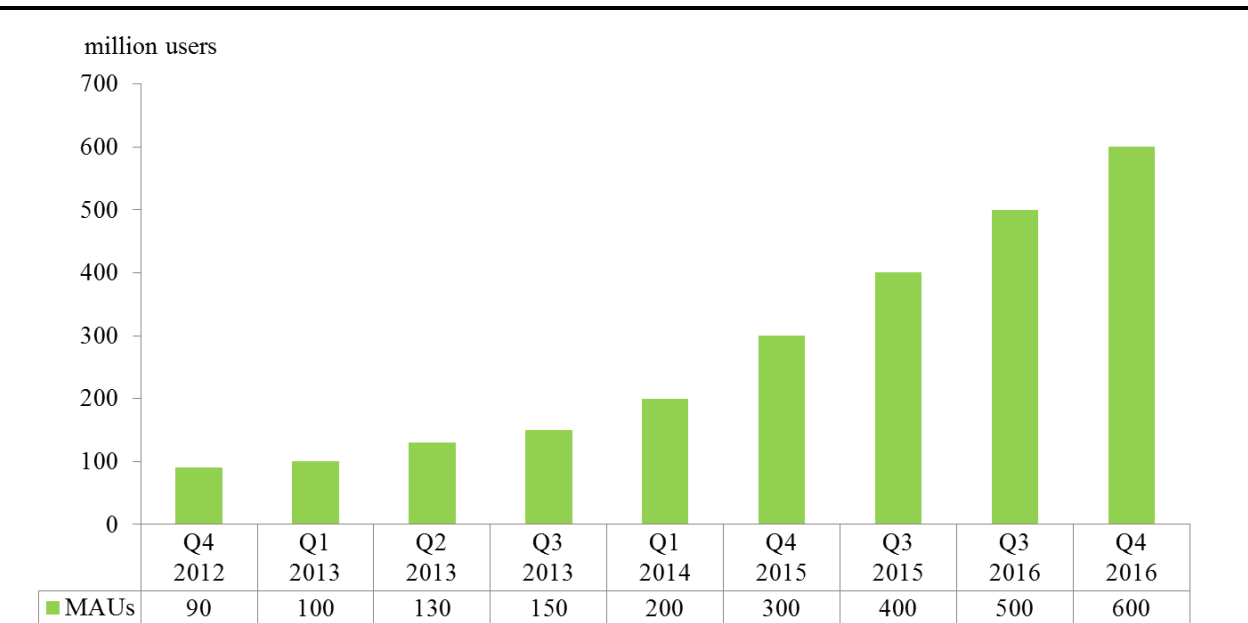
Notes: The visualisations are based on *Google Search Trends* data, representing the level of interest expressed in specific search terms in selected geographic areas relative to the highest point on each chart. The data analyses the percentage of Google web searches to understand how many searches were conducted over a certain period of time. Duplicate searches by the same person for the same keyword within a short period of time were excluded. Since Google is also frequently used for navigational search, it represents a reliable indicator of relative search interest for a given keyword (even if absolute numbers are not provided by Google). One notable limitation of this comparison is that it only captures searches conducted on the Google search engine and does not cover interest expressed on other search engines, e.g. Bing, Yandex or DuckDuckGo. Furthermore, the data excludes searches with special characters and is thus less reliable for countries that do not use Latin characters. Lastly, this cannot be reliably interpreted after 2012 when smartphones became widely available and users began using mobile apps to access SNSs instead of going to the Web-versions of SNSs on desktop computers.

Figure 11: Monthly active user growth of Facebook worldwide (2013-2015)



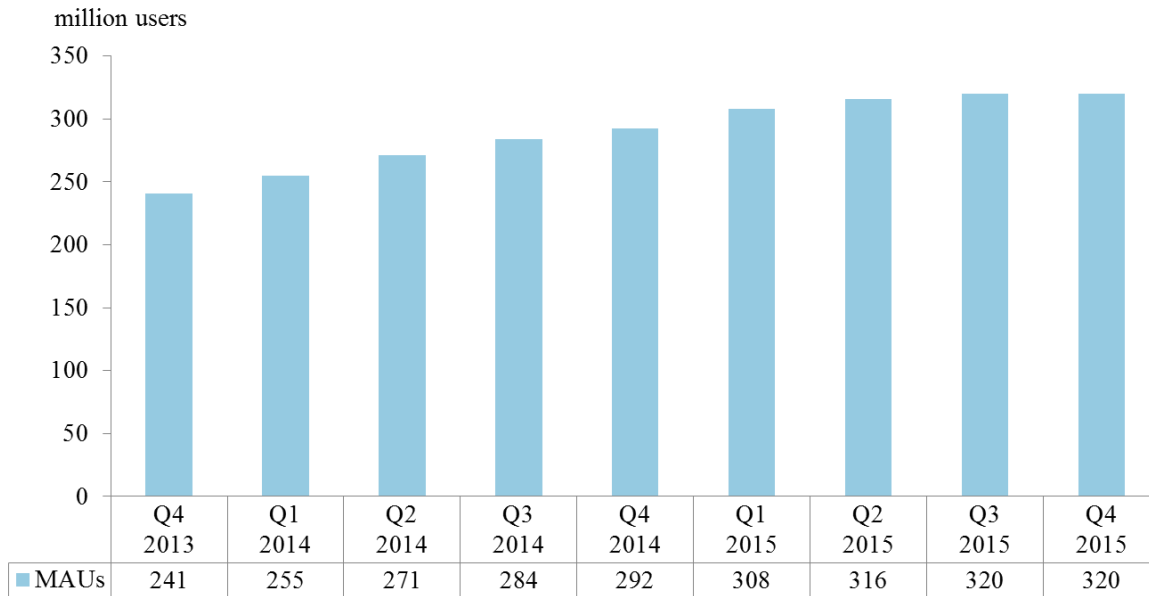
Notes: All MAUs includes monthly active users who access Facebook from the Web, the mobile Web or one of Facebook’s mobile applications (Data source: Facebook Investor Relations)

Figure 12: Monthly active user growth of Instagram worldwide (2014-2016)



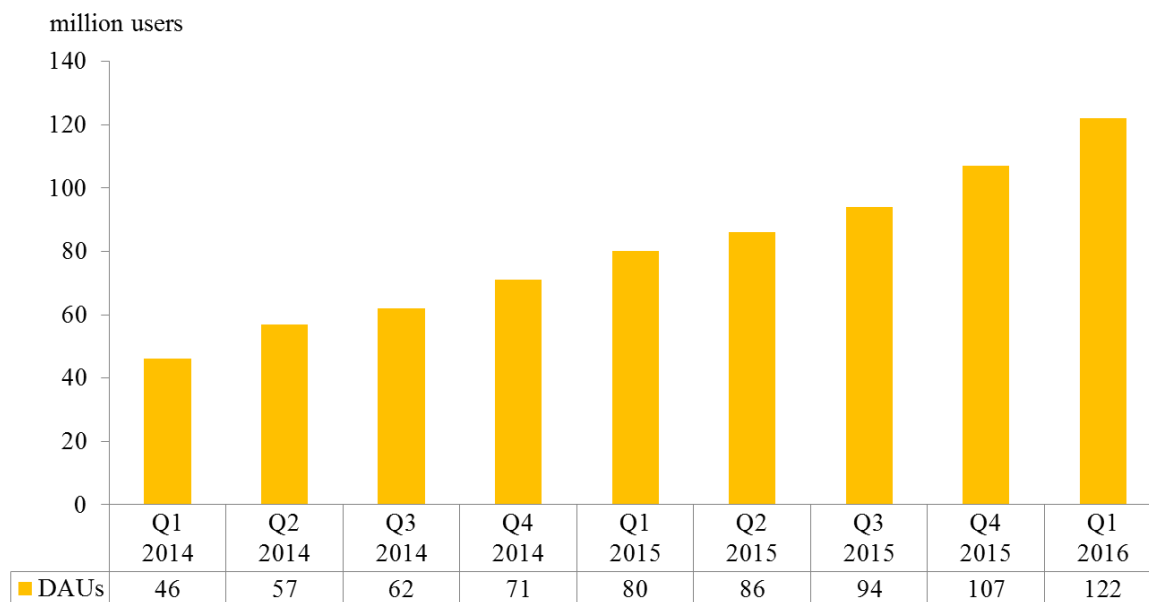
Notes: There are gaps in the timeline, since there was no data available on some quarters and DAUs. All MAUs include both web-based and mobile-based Instagram users (Data source: Instagram Investor Relations)

Figure 13: Monthly active user growth of Twitter worldwide (2013-2015)



Notes: All MAUs include both web-based and mobile-based Twitter users. Data on DAUs was not available (Data source: Twitter Investor Relations)

Figure 14: Daily active user growth of Snapchat worldwide (2014-2016)



Notes: All DAUs are mobile-based, since Snapchat does not have a Web-version. Data on MAUs was not available (Data source: Snapchat Investor Relations 2016)

Table 19: Examples of popular SNSs by category

Category	Examples of SNSs
General-purpose*	Facebook* , Twitter* , Instagram* , Snapchat* , MySpace, Google+
Professional	LinkedIn, Xing, Intro, Weave, Yammer, AngelList
Dating	Tinder, Grindr, Hinge, Happn, Badoo, OkCupid
Anonymous	YikYak, Secret, Whisper, AfterSchool, Ello
Groups	Frankly, GroupMe, Everyme, MightyBell, Islands
Photo-based	Pinterest, DeviantArt, Kong, Tiiny, Cloth, Imgur, Flickr
Video-based	YouTube, Vimeo, Vine, HouseParty, Periscope
Music-based	MySpace, Last.fm, Spotify, LoudUp, Crowdmix
Blog-based	Tumblr, WordPress, Medium, LiveJournal
Interest-based	Reddit, Imzy, Voat, Quora, Jelly, Fancred, Flipora, 6Tribes
Location-based	Foursquare, Swarm, Plague, NextDoor, Aki-Aki, Buzzd
Crowdfunding	Kickstarter, IndieGogo, Tilt, Crowdrise, GoFundMe, RocketHub
For pets	Catster, Dogster, MyDogSpace, UnitedDogs, UnitedCats
For children	LEGO life, Club Penguin, PlayKids Talk, Kimingo, Kuddle
Mobile messaging	WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, Skype, Kik, Line, WeChat
Encrypted messaging	ToxChat, Wickr, Signal, Gliph, CyberDust
Strong regional focus	Vkontakte, Mixi, Sina/Tencent Weibo, RenRen, Tudou

Notes: * **Bolded** items indicate the focus of this dissertation.

The social media landscape in China is notably different from the one studied in the UK context. In particular, this is due to several restrictive measures of the Chinese government to keep multiple prominent Western Internet services, like Google and Facebook, out of the country. As a result of that, the Chinese social media landscape has been dominated by local SNSs. In 2015, the top SNSs in China were *Sina Weibo*, *Tencent Weibo*, *QZone*, *Youku*, *Tudou* and *Renren*. At the same time, *WeChat* and *QQ Messenger* were the key mobile messaging applications in China. Users of Western SNSs in China tend to use VPNs and proxy servers to circumvent Chinese censorship.

Table 20: Bivariate correlations between technology attitudes and beliefs

Item (see Table 11)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Make life easier							
2. Make things better	0.548						
3. Helps keep in touch	0.527	0.479					
4. Frustrating to work with	-0.329	-0.363	-0.315				
5. Fail when needed	-0.329	-0.357	-0.343	0.436			
6. Immoral content online	-0.149	-0.173	-0.126	0.259	0.296		
7. Phone turned on	0.345	0.346	0.406	-0.209	-0.269	-0.121	
8. Tech turned on	0.201	0.214	0.257	-0.199	-0.245	-0.137	0.359

Notes: n=800. **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations ($p < 0.01$).

Table 21: Bivariate correlations between SNS networks, uses and identities on Facebook

Item	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Total friends							
2. Actual friends	0.515						
3. PPR index	-0.023	-0.048					
4. Social uses	0.118	0.126	-0.181				
5. Informational uses	0.150	0.139	-0.041	0.289			
6. Professional uses	0.232	0.214	0.019	0.022	0.244		
7. Emotional self-disclosure	0.100	0.186	-0.025	0.192	0.153	0.146	
8. Personal self-disclosure	0.183	0.188	-0.019	0.217	0.143	0.144	0.569

Notes: n=800. **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations ($p < 0.01$). Full version of this table for each SNS can be found on the horizontal pages in the Appendix.

Table 22: Sample type weighting targets and applied weights

Birth year	Target		Weights	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1985	4.64%	4.64%	0.774	1.546
1986	4.63%	4.61%	0.841	1.272
1987	4.54%	4.61%	0.931	1.085
1988	4.68%	4.67%	1.247	0.868
1989	4.65%	4.58%	1.128	0.917
1990	4.74%	4.57%	1.083	0.938
1991	4.81%	4.64%	1.373	0.844
1992	4.63%	4.55%	1.028	1.010
1993	4.48%	4.31%	1.025	0.908
1994	4.46%	4.24%	1.019	0.917
1995	4.27%	4.06%	0.976	0.854

Notes: Table shows applied weights to age and gender based on target population proportions provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2016).

Table 23: Differences in types of SNS-specific uses between clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Post-hoc test on
Variable	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>	ANOVA pairs
<i>Facebook (n)</i>	<i>(81)</i>	<i>(196)</i>	<i>(246)</i>	<i>(234)</i>	
Maintaining old ties	3.68	4.19	4.30	4.24	C1 < C2 C4 C3 ***
Creating new ties	2.38	2.77	3.13	2.97	C1 < C2 < C4 C3 ***
Social disclosure	2.38	3.01	3.39	3.10	C1 < C2 C4 < C3 ***
Emotional disclosure	2.20	2.75	3.00	3.00	C1 < C2 < C3 C4 ***
<i>Twitter (n)</i>	<i>(37)</i>	<i>(126)</i>	<i>(189)</i>	<i>(143)</i>	
Maintaining old ties	2.24	2.74	2.76	2.66	
Creating new ties	2.73	2.50	2.78	2.73	
Social disclosure	2.46	2.16	2.37	2.13	
Emotional disclosure	1.92	2.11	2.14	2.18	
<i>Instagram (n)</i>	<i>(27)</i>	<i>(95)</i>	<i>(154)</i>	<i>(145)</i>	
Maintaining old ties	3.04	3.55	3.70	3.33	
Creating new ties	2.67	2.61	3.02	2.73	
Social disclosure	3.15	3.21	3.53	2.98	
Emotional disclosure	2.63	2.69	2.83	2.60	
<i>Snapchat (n)</i>	<i>(26)</i>	<i>(78)</i>	<i>(128)</i>	<i>(115)</i>	
Maintaining old ties	2.92	3.78	3.87	3.57	C1 < C4 C2 C3 *
Creating new ties	2.15	1.91	1.92	1.91	
Social disclosure	3.11	3.24	3.48	2.98	
Emotional disclosure	3.00	3.06	3.04	2.95	

Notes: Table shows means for each cluster and each SNS. ANOVA significance values: ***= $p < 0.001$, **= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$ with pairwise Bonferroni post-hoc test.

Table 24: Binary logistic regression model for clusters of SNS users

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
Variable	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>
Technology optimism	0.02***	4.21***	39.12***	0.36***
Technology anxiety	5.50***	0.93	0.01***	11.76***
Technology dependence	0.11***	0.17***	13.35***	13.65***
Age	1.09	1.01	1.02	0.94
Gender	0.86	0.78	0.84	0.80
Education	1.08	0.97	1.11	0.99
Location	1.25	1.03	1.09	0.93
Daily time for SNS use	0.86	1.03	0.99	1.02
Number of SNSs	1.44	1.22	0.78	1.11
Extraversion	1.12	1.20	1.09	1.21
Conscientiousness	0.80	1.07	0.77	1.06
Neuroticism	1.10	1.00	1.00	1.11
Agreeableness	0.77	1.01	1.55*	0.95
Openness	1.05	0.81*	0.72	1.10
Pseudo-R ²	0.76	0.32	0.75	0.47
Cragg & Uhler R ²	0.83	0.45	0.85	0.62

Notes: n=800. Table shows odds-ratios, bracketed values represent *p*-values. **Bolded** items represent significant values, where ***= $p < 0.001$, **= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$. Since logistic regressions do not estimate R² for the goodness-of-fit of the model, the reported pseudo R² statistic is used following Cragg and Uhler's method (Cameron & Windmeijer 1997)

Table 25: Differences in average PPR index of SNSs between clusters

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Post-hoc test on
PPR index	<i>Scept.</i>	<i>Moder.</i>	<i>Enthus.</i>	<i>Entangl.</i>	ANOVA pairs
Facebook	2.13	2.24	2.03	2.34	
Instagram	3.35	3.01	2.73	2.84	C3 C4 C2 < C1 **
Twitter	3.54	3.72	3.28	3.71	C3 < C1 C4 C2 *
Snapchat	4.88	4.35	3.95	4.07	C3 C4 C2 < C1 ***
LinkedIn	5.92	5.72	6.08	6.02	
Tumblr	5.05	5.48	5.50	5.51	
Google+	5.87	6.30	6.83	6.40	C1 C2 C4 < C3 ***
Pinterest	6.65	6.26	6.60	6.39	
Yik Yak	7.73	7.97	8.00	7.66	

Notes: Inversed ranking on scale 1-9, where 1 indicates most popular SNS. ANOVA significance values: ***= $p < 0.001$, **= $p < 0.01$, *= $p < 0.05$ with pairwise Bonferroni post-hoc test.

There are no significant between-cluster differences in the PPR index of Facebook, but the other SNSs show interesting differences in perceived popularity of SNSs. To summarise the significant pair-wise comparisons of means, Instagram and Snapchat appear to be disliked by sceptics. Most enthusiasts think that Twitter is popular in their social circles, but they also believe Google+ to be particularly unpopular in their peer-groups.

Table 26: Descriptive statistics of users' networking styles

Item	%
<i>Question: "In a typical week, how do you usually spend your leisure time with people outside your family?"</i>	
Focus on strong ties: "Spend most of it with just one or two friends."	43.00%
Focus on weak ties: "Spend most of it with large groups of people."	14.25%
<i>Question: "In a typical week, which of the following groups are you most likely to engage with offline?"</i>	
Focus on known audiences: "People I know, such as friends and acquaintances."	74.13%
Focus on unknown audiences: "People I don't know, such as strangers."	18.00%
<i>Notes: Percentages indicate agreement and are based on n=800. N/A option was available.</i>	

Table 27: Bivariate correlations between Facebook variables

Item	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Total friends												
2. Actual friends	0.515											
3. PPR index	-0.023	-0.048										
4. Social uses	0.118	0.126	-0.181									
5. Informational uses	0.150	0.139	-0.041	0.289								
6. Professional uses	0.232	0.214	0.019	0.022	0.244							
7. Emotional self-disclosure	0.100	0.186	-0.025	0.192	0.153	0.146						
8. Personal self-disclosure	0.183	0.188	-0.019	0.217	0.143	0.144	0.569					
9. Sincere self-expression	0.155	0.144	0.011	0.274	0.195	0.204	0.528	0.457				
10. Real-name use	0.103	0.102	-0.050	0.197	0.148	0.012	0.100	0.072	0.127			
11. Identity experimentation	0.015	0.002	0.017	-0.038	0.022	0.159	0.100	0.018	0.019	-0.472		
12. Facebook commitment	0.237	0.244	-0.083	0.439	0.379	0.209	0.513	0.535	0.534	0.155	0.053	

Notes: n=757. **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations (p<0.01).

	VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF
Total friends	1.46	0.69	Social uses	1.28	0.78	Emotional self-disclosure	1.80	0.56
Actual friends	1.44	0.69	Informational uses	1.22	0.82	Personal self-disclosure	1.70	0.59
PPR index	1.10	0.91	Professional uses	1.22	0.82	Sincere self-expression	1.61	0.62
Age	1.17	0.85	Focus on strong ties	1.14	0.87	Identity experimentation	1.37	0.73
Gender	1.04	0.96	Focus on weak ties	1.09	0.91	Real-name use	1.41	0.71
Education	1.18	0.85	Focus on strangers	1.12	0.89			
Region	1.05	0.95	Focus on friends	1.24	0.81	Mean	1.30	

Table 28: Bivariate correlations between Twitter variables

Item	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Total friends												
2. Actual friends	0.360											
3. PPR index	0.014	-0.068										
4. Social uses	0.212	0.285	-0.085									
5. Informational uses	0.173	0.158	-0.138	0.349								
6. Professional uses	0.266	0.277	-0.034	0.203	0.270							
7. Emotional self-disclosure	0.130	0.115	-0.102	0.496	0.214	0.041						
8. Personal self-disclosure	0.224	0.332	-0.131	0.605	0.236	0.171	0.518					
9. Sincere self-expression	0.192	0.293	-0.127	0.495	0.347	0.259	0.407	0.397				
10. Real-name use	0.067	0.155	-0.014	0.141	0.093	0.312	0.072	0.091	0.236			
11. Identity experimentation	0.061	-0.018	0.017	0.046	0.045	-0.034	0.141	0.071	0.007	-0.534		
12. Twitter commitment	0.318	0.368	-0.138	0.650	0.478	0.331	0.538	0.623	0.566	0.148	0.138	

Notes: n=495. **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations (p<0.01).

	VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF
Total friends	1.29	0.77	Social uses	1.99	0.50	Emotional self-disclosure	1.65	0.61
Actual friends	1.40	0.71	Informational uses	1.27	0.78	Personal self-disclosure	1.98	0.51
PPR index	1.07	0.93	Professional uses	1.38	0.73	Sincere self-expression	1.67	0.60
Age	1.28	0.78	Focus on strong ties	1.15	0.87	Identity experimentation	1.57	0.64
Gender	1.06	0.94	Focus on weak ties	1.11	0.90	Real-name use	1.73	0.58
Education	1.26	0.79	Focus on strangers	1.23	0.81			
Region	1.09	0.92	Focus on friends	1.08	0.92	Mean	1.38	

Table 29: Bivariate correlations between Instagram variables

Item	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Total friends												
2. Actual friends	0.254											
3. PPR index	-0.025	-0.094										
4. Social uses	0.173	0.274	-0.173									
5. Informational uses	0.157	0.095	-0.098	0.250								
6. Professional uses	0.231	0.070	0.021	0.166	0.282							
7. Emotional self-disclosure	0.132	0.230	-0.147	0.491	0.222	0.216						
8. Personal self-disclosure	0.180	0.297	-0.183	0.589	0.225	0.151	0.556					
9. Sincere self-expression	0.160	0.294	-0.146	0.598	0.163	0.176	0.602	0.621				
10. Real-name use	0.037	0.168	-0.060	0.179	-0.016	0.047	0.160	0.141	0.192			
11. Identity experimentation	-0.011	-0.128	0.049	-0.100	0.091	0.149	-0.014	-0.068	-0.066	-0.593		
12. Instagram commitment	0.251	0.355	-0.244	0.668	0.356	0.202	0.643	0.690	0.628	0.189	-0.051	

Notes: n=421. **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations (p<0.01).

	VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF
Total friends	1.21	0.83	Social uses	1.91	0.52	Emotional self-disclosure	1.85	0.54
Actual friends	1.28	0.78	Informational uses	1.22	0.82	Personal self-disclosure	2.14	0.47
PPR index	1.09	0.92	Professional uses	1.26	0.79	Sincere self-expression	2.20	0.45
Age	1.29	0.78	Focus on strong ties	1.18	0.84	Identity experimentation	1.62	0.62
Gender	1.06	0.94	Focus on weak ties	1.11	0.90	Real-name use	1.63	0.61
Education	1.24	0.81	Focus on strangers	1.17	0.85			
Region	1.07	0.94	Focus on friends	1.11	0.90	Mean	1.40	

Table 30: Bivariate correlations between Snapchat variables

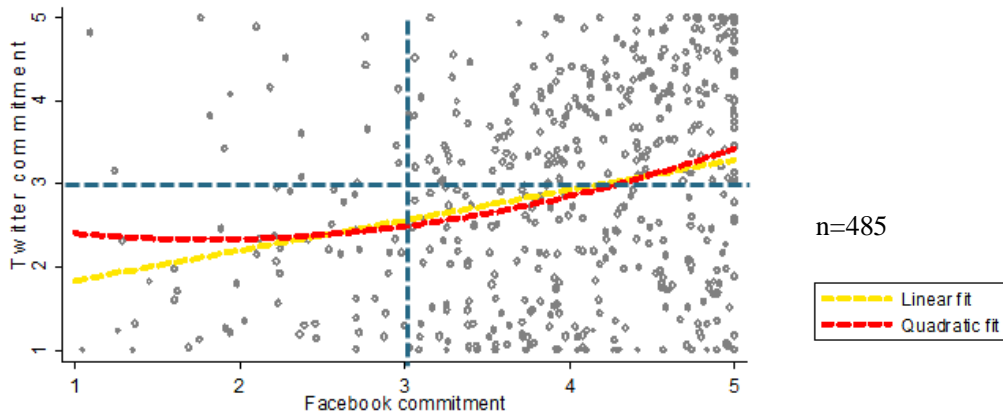
Item	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Total friends												
2. Actual friends	0.634											
3. PPR index	-0.145	-0.130										
4. Social uses	0.257	0.298	-0.290									
5. Informational uses	0.224	0.151	-0.070	0.225								
6. Professional uses	0.128	0.062	0.039	0.121	0.428							
7. Emotional self-disclosure	0.199	0.216	-0.253	0.518	0.242	0.148						
8. Personal self-disclosure	0.246	0.278	-0.351	0.607	0.215	0.149	0.565					
9. Sincere self-expression	0.209	0.261	-0.301	0.616	0.249	0.134	0.655	0.632				
10. Real-name use	0.080	0.140	-0.195	0.161	-0.026	0.072	0.193	0.170	0.261			
11. Identity experimentation	0.053	-0.018	0.120	-0.009	0.248	0.226	0.061	-0.013	-0.021	-0.494		
12. Snapchat commitment	0.342	0.349	-0.345	0.652	0.409	0.231	0.623	0.726	0.695	0.193	0.095	

Notes: n=347. **Bolded** items represent significant bivariate correlations (p<0.01).

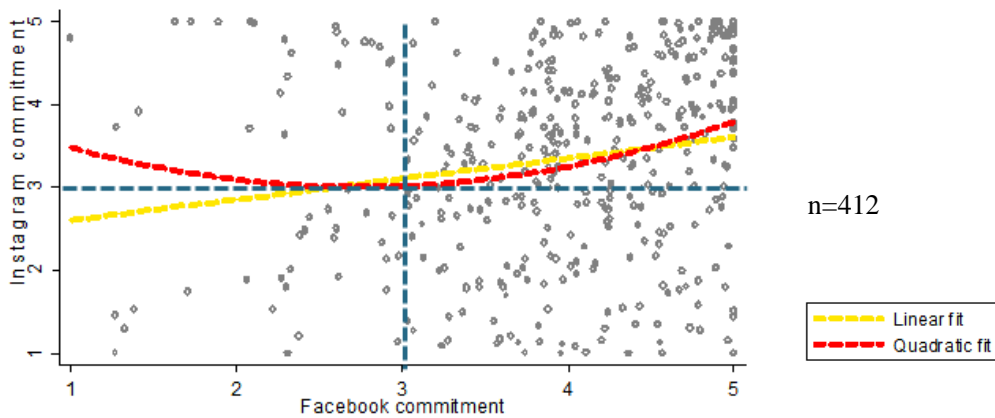
	VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF		VIF	1/VIF
Total friends	1.77	0.56	Social uses	2.00	0.50	Emotional self-disclosure	1.99	0.50
Actual friends	1.78	0.56	Informational uses	1.44	0.70	Personal self-disclosure	2.21	0.45
PPR index	1.26	0.79	Professional uses	1.35	0.74	Sincere self-expression	2.49	0.40
Age	1.24	0.80	Focus on strong ties	1.19	0.84	Identity experimentation	1.57	0.64
Gender	1.07	0.94	Focus on weak ties	1.11	0.90	Real-name use	1.54	0.65
Education	1.24	0.81	Focus on strangers	1.14	0.88			
Region	1.13	0.88	Focus on friends	1.12	0.89	Mean	1.51	

Figure 15: Scatterplot visualisations of comparative commitment across SNSs

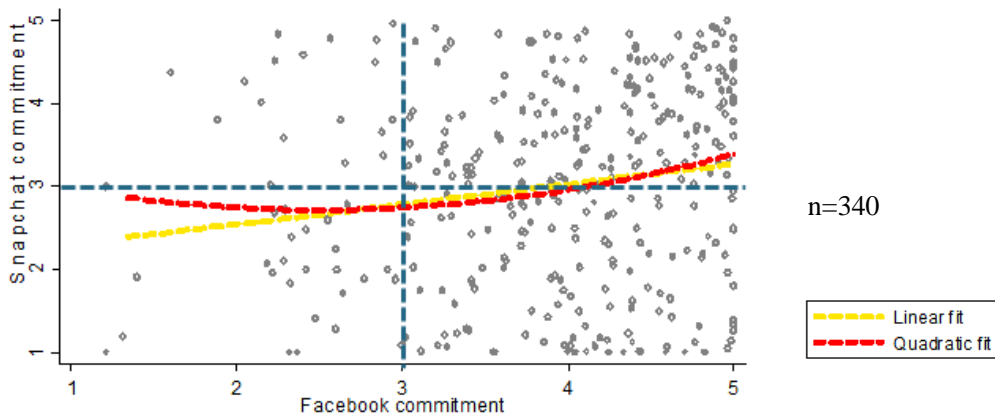
Comparative commitment of **Twitter** and **Facebook** users



Comparative commitment of **Instagram** and **Facebook** users



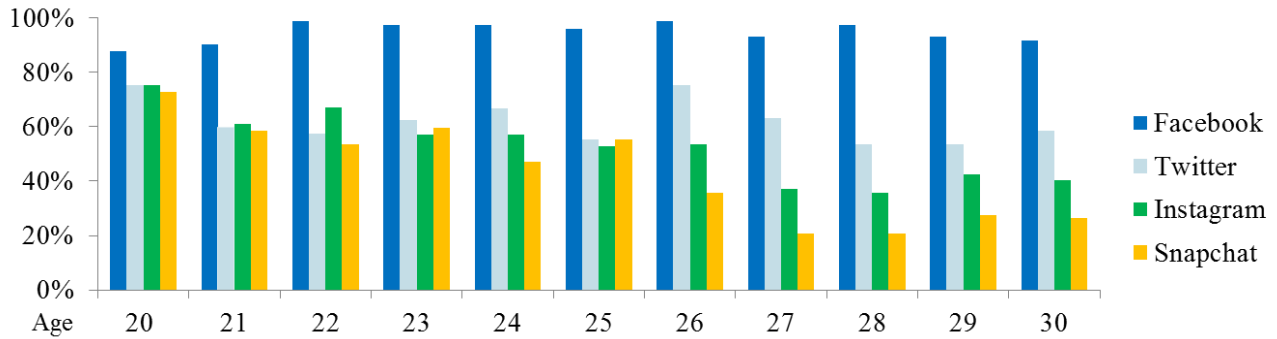
Comparative commitment of **Snapchat** and **Facebook** users



Notes: Sub-sample size varies due to variations in SNS account membership (see Figure 6).

Figure 16: Distribution of SNS account membership by age

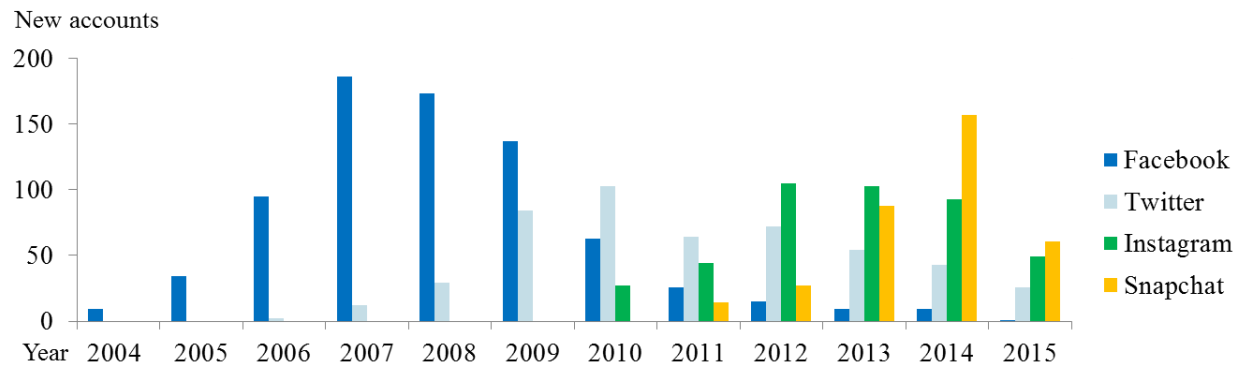
QS1: “Do you have an account on any of the following social network sites?”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses of each age group that have accounts on these SNSs.

Figure 17: Distribution of new SNS accounts per year

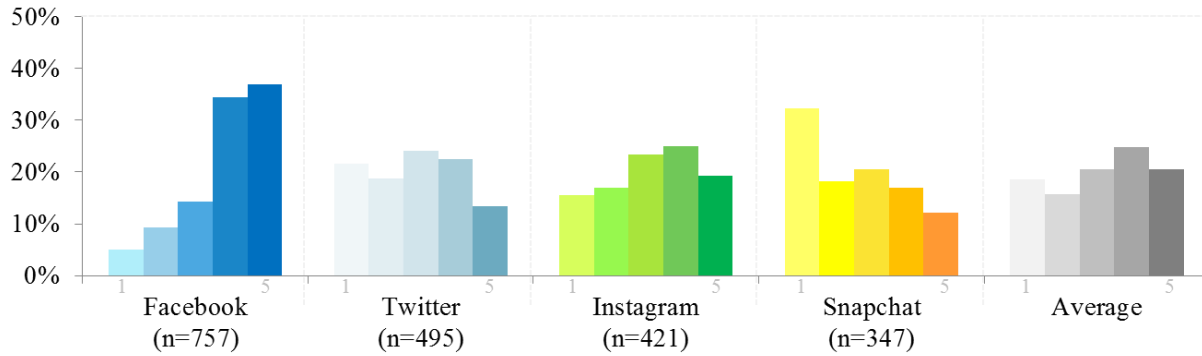
QS2-5: “When did you join this social network site?”



Notes: Table figure shows absolute number of new SNS accounts created per year on each of the four studied SNSs. There are a total of n=757 Facebook users, n=495 Twitter users, n=421 Instagram users and n=347 Snapchat users in the sample. Looking at the cumulative numbers, one can see that between 2004 and 2015 most new SNS accounts in the sample were created in 2014, whereas most new Facebook accounts were created in 2007.

Figure 18: Distribution of responses for general privacy concerns

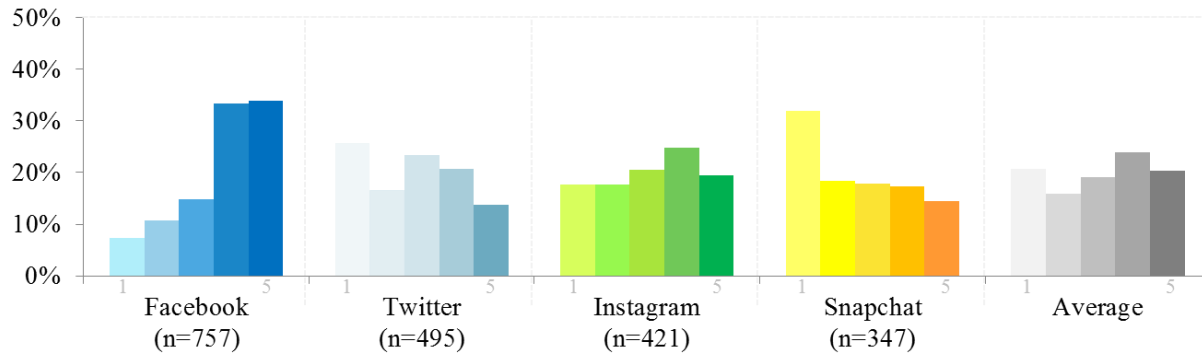
QP1: “I am concerned about my privacy on this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 19: Distribution of responses for social privacy concerns

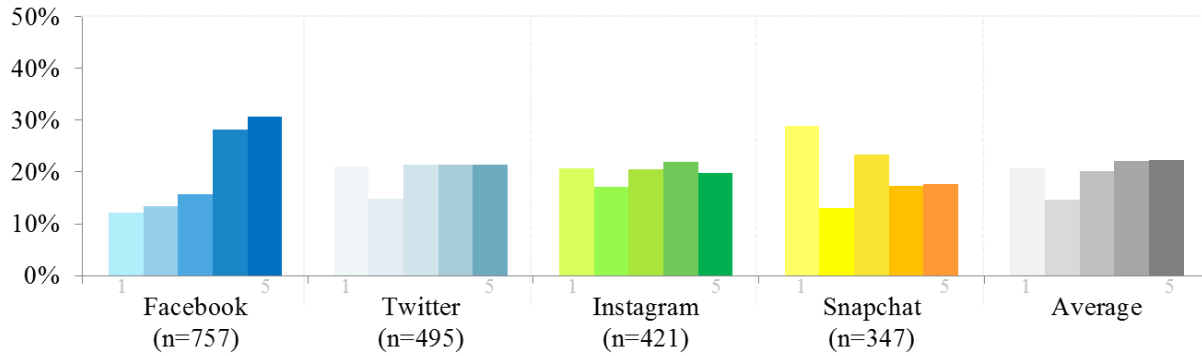
QP2: “I worry that what I post on this social network site may be seen by people, who were not supposed to see it.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 20: Distribution of responses for institutional privacy concerns

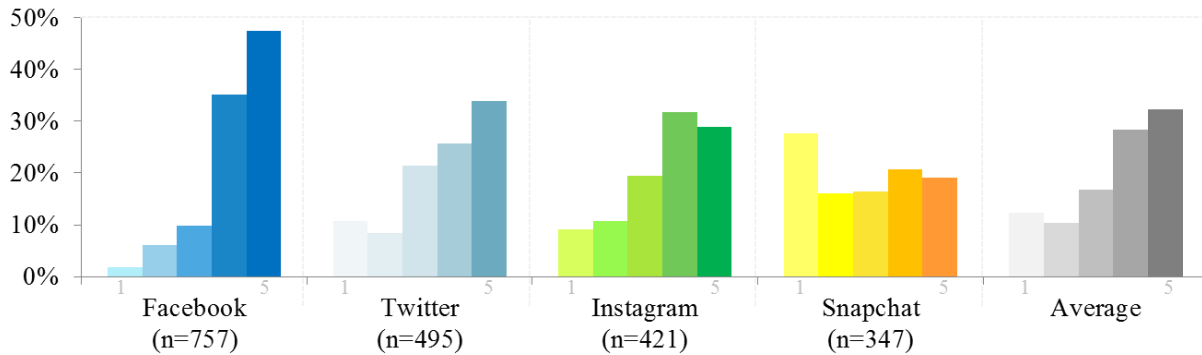
QP3: “I worry that my data on this social network site may be misused by government agencies or corporations.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 21: Distribution of responses for cautious posting on social network sites

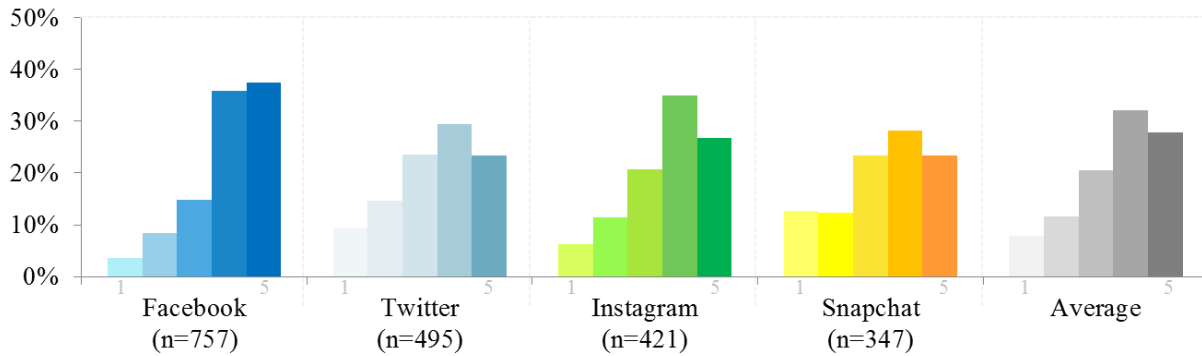
QP4: “I am very careful in what I post to this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 22: Distribution of responses for efforts to protect privacy on social network sites

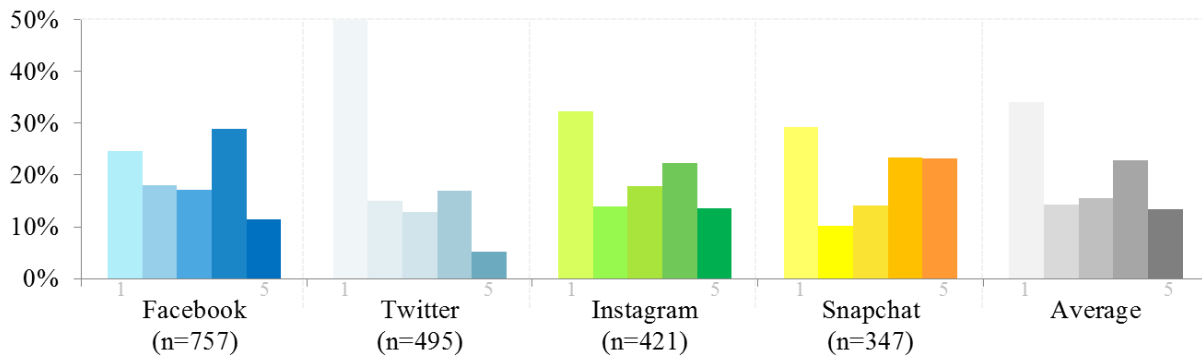
QP5: “I always keep my privacy settings on this social network site up-to-date.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 23: Distribution of responses for emotional disclosure on social network sites

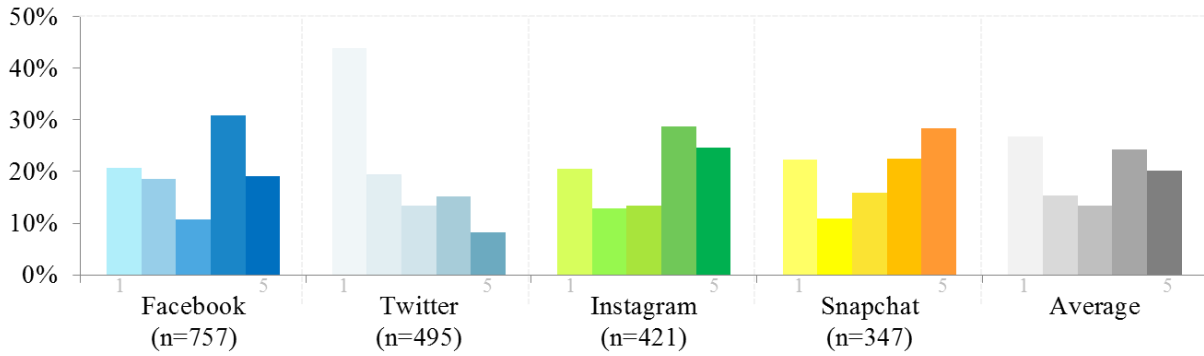
QI1: “I often discuss my personal feelings on this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 24: Distribution of responses for personal disclosure on social network sites

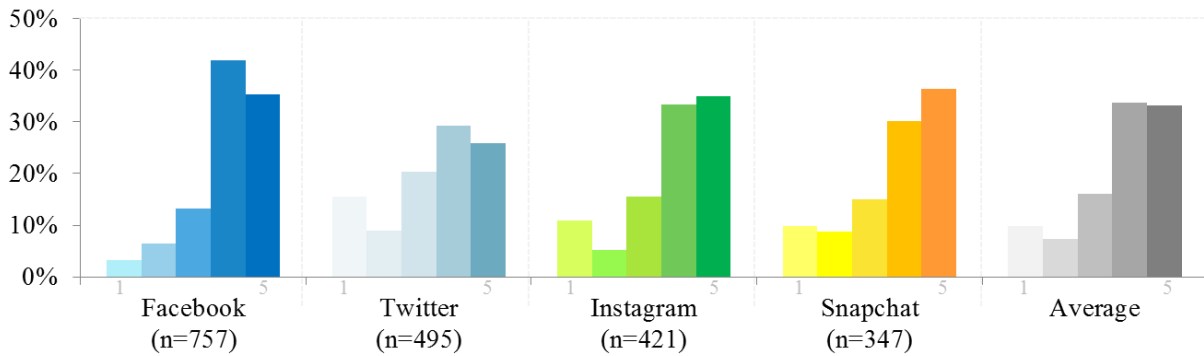
QI2: “I regularly share updates about my personal life on this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

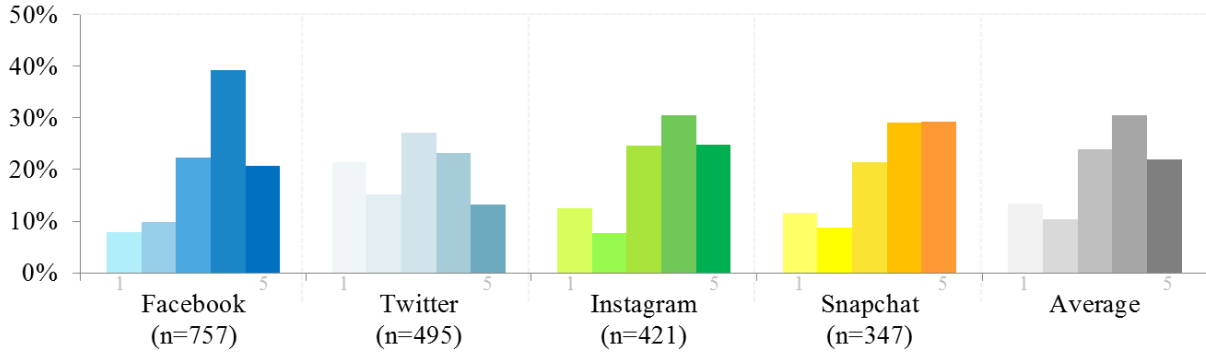
Figure 25: Distribution of responses for ‘true self’ identity on social network sites

QI3: “My digital identity on this social network site reflects who I am in real life.”



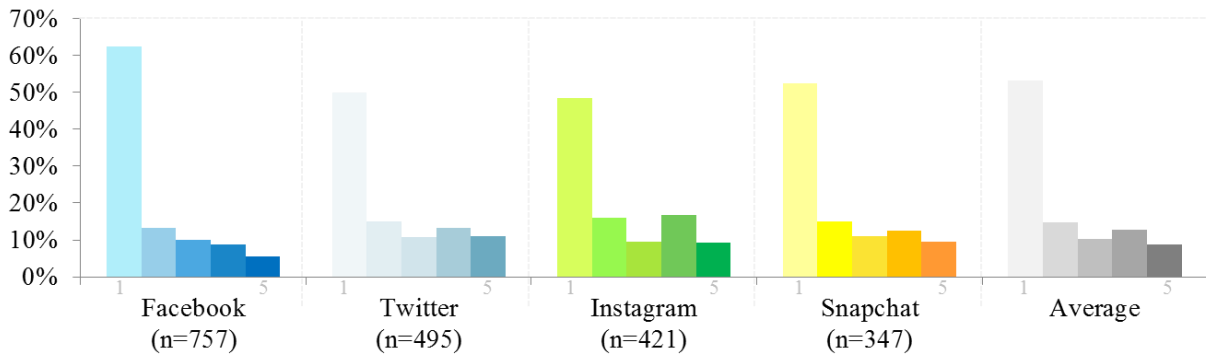
Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 26: Distribution of responses for ‘true self’ communication on social network sites
 Q14: “Using this social network site, I have given my friends a better idea of who I really am.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

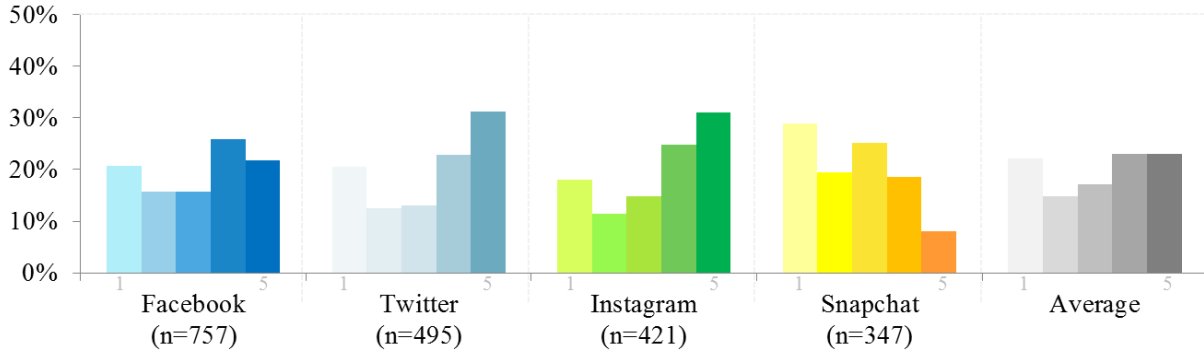
Figure 27: Distribution of responses for identity experimentation on social network sites
 Q15: “Using this social network site, I have experimented with different identities.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 28: Distribution of responses for identity-related motivations to join SNSs

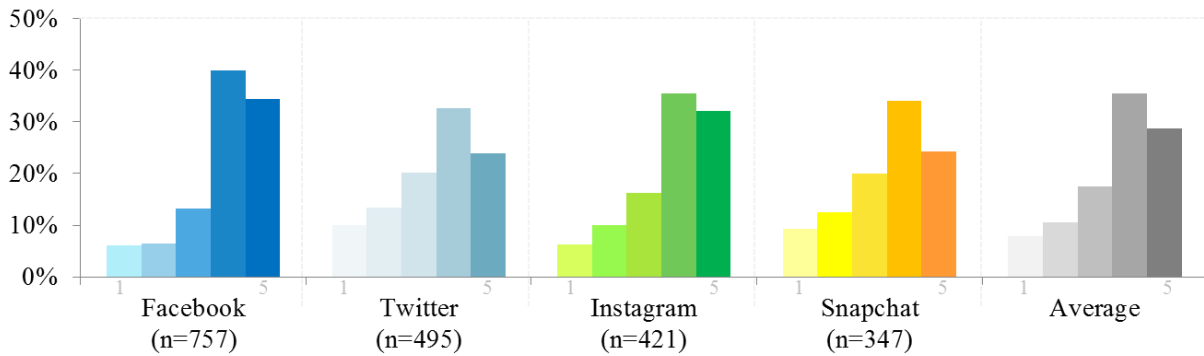
QA1: “I joined this site because I wanted to create a new online presence for myself.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 29: Distribution of responses for motivations to join SNSs related to social curiosity

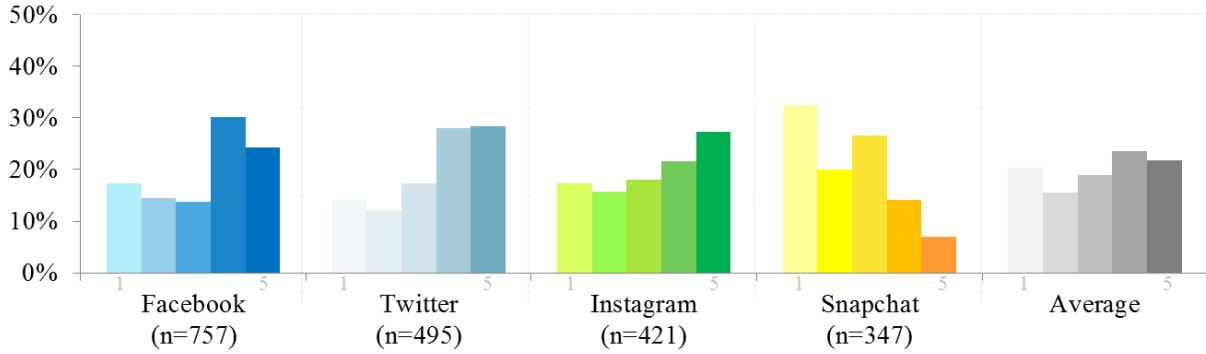
QA2: “I joined this social network site because I wanted to see what other people were doing.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 30: Distribution of responses for networking-related motivations to join SNSs

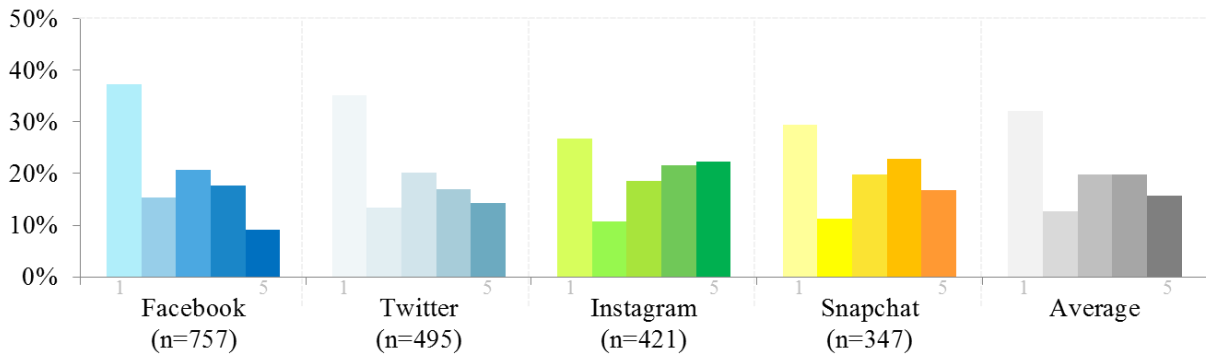
QA3: “I joined this social network site because I wanted to connect to new people.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

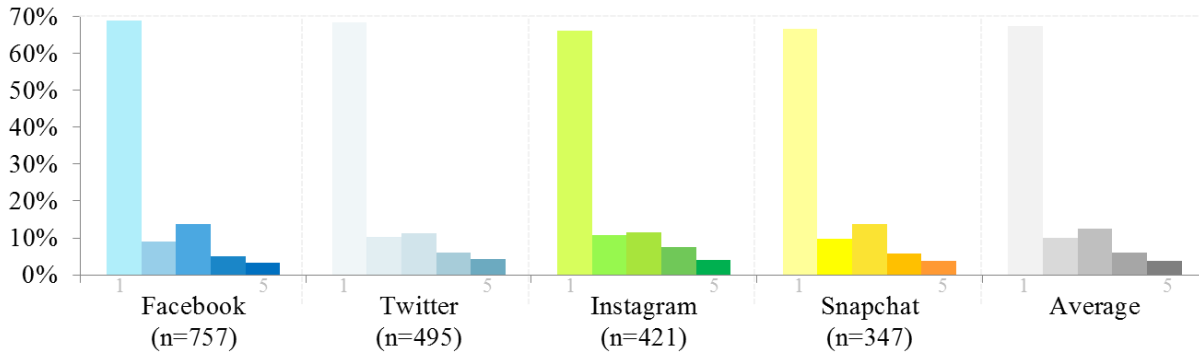
Figure 31: Distribution of responses for hedonic motivations to join SNSs

QA4: “I joined this social network site because I was bored with my old social network sites.”



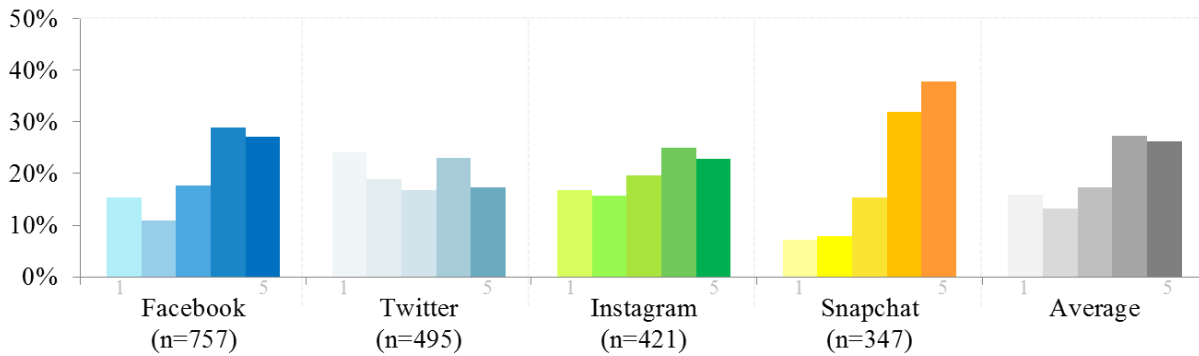
Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 32: Distribution of responses for motivations to join SNSs related to negative experience
 QA5: “I joined this site because I had a negative personal experience on my old site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

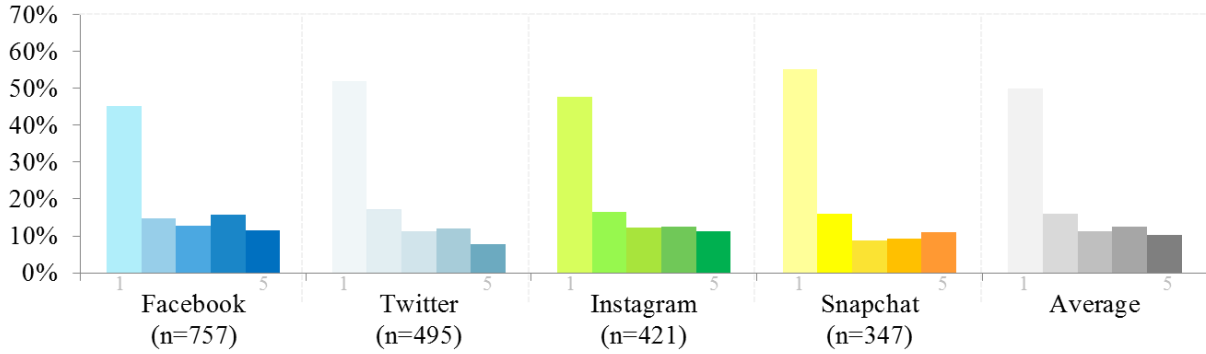
Figure 33: Distribution of responses for late SNS adoption relative to peer-group
 QA6: “I created an account on this social network site, because a friend convinced me to join.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 34: Distribution of responses for early SNS adoption relative to peer-group

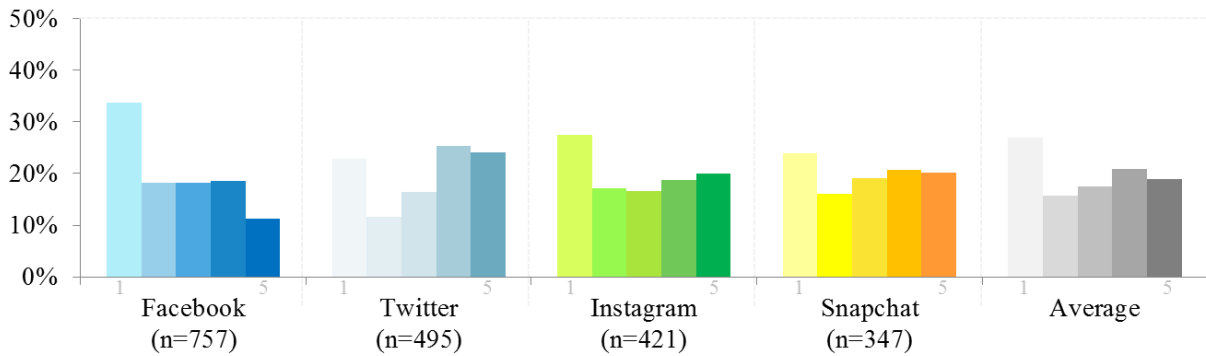
QA7: “I joined this social network site before any of my friends knew about it.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 35: Distribution of responses for resistance to join SNSs

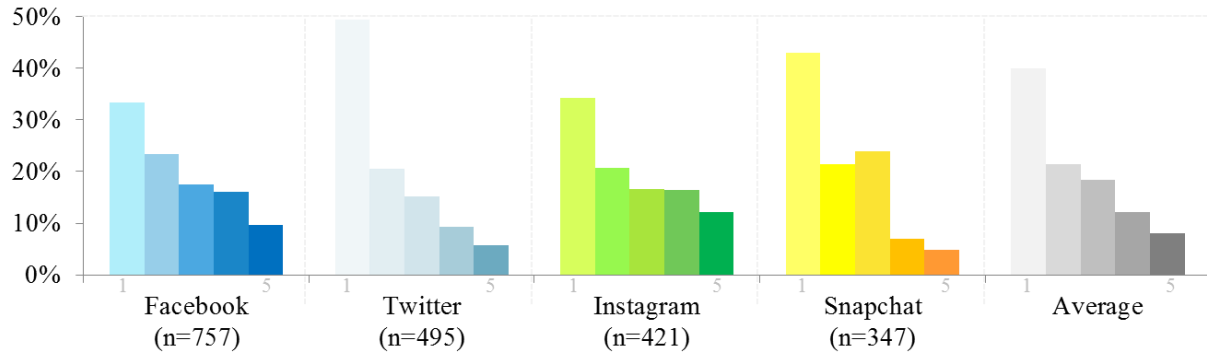
QA8: “I didn't want to join this social network site for a long time.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 36: Distribution of responses for perceived time spent updating SNS profile

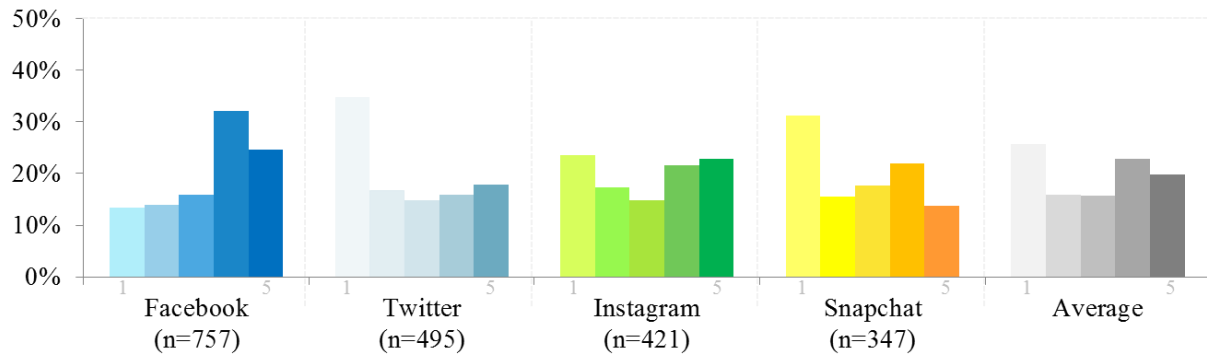
QF1: “I am spending too much time updating my profile on this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 37: Distribution of responses for perceived time spent keeping up with other SNS users

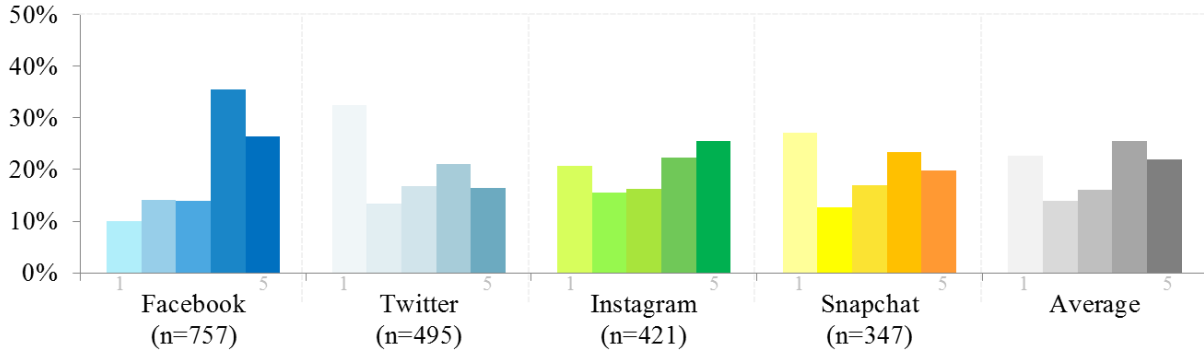
QF2: “I am spending too much time keeping up with what is happening on this site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 38: Distribution of responses for fear-of-missing-out on SNSs

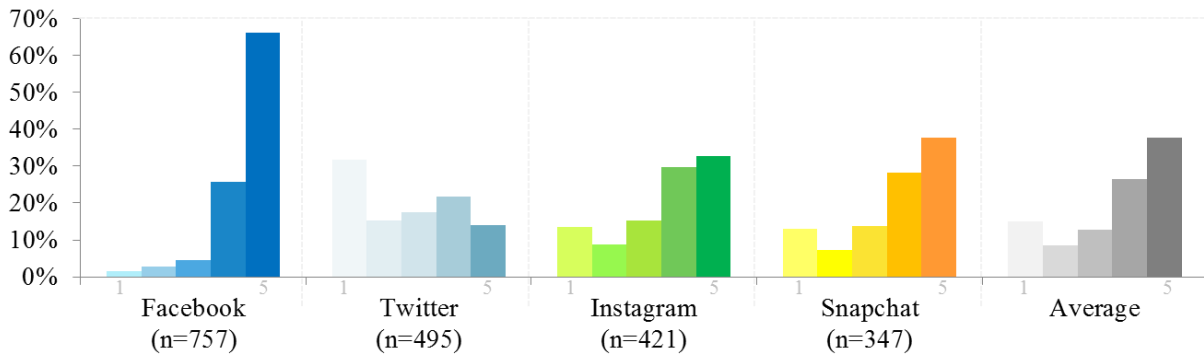
QF3: “I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto this social network site for a while.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

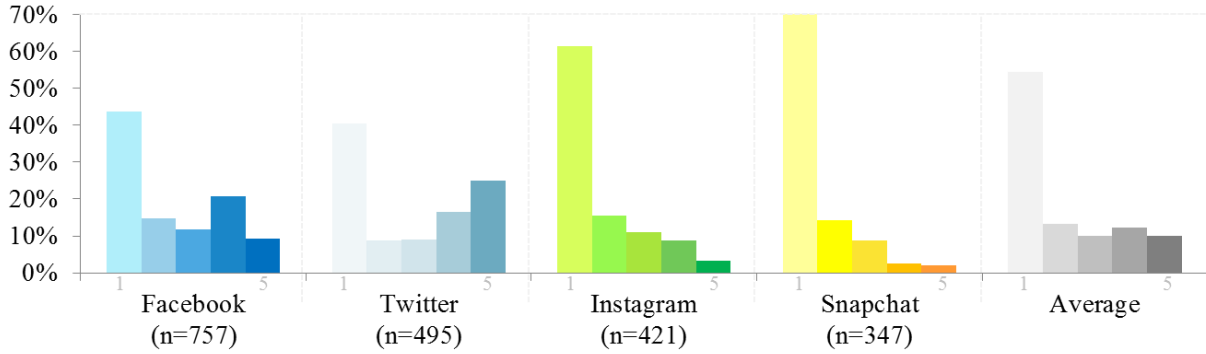
Figure 39: Distribution of responses for personal use of SNSs for social networking

QE1: “I have used this social network site to keep in touch with my friends.”



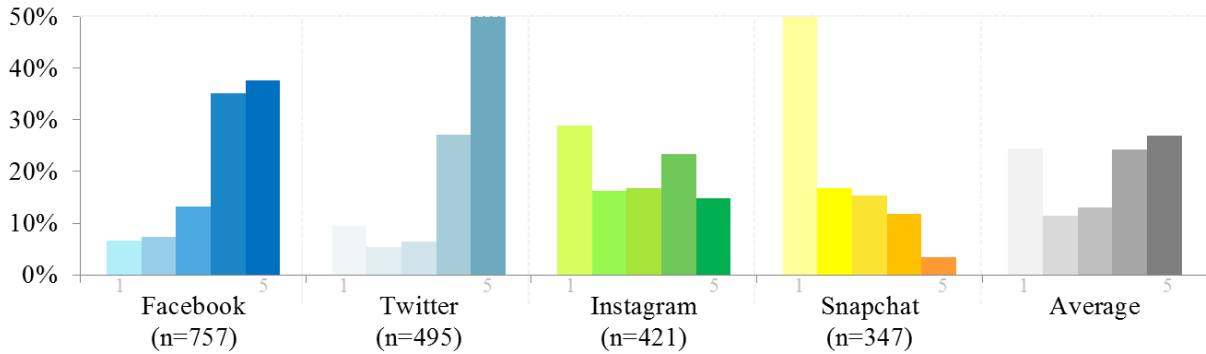
Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 40: Distribution of responses for professional use of SNSs for work-related networking
 QE2: “I have used this social network site for professional networking.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

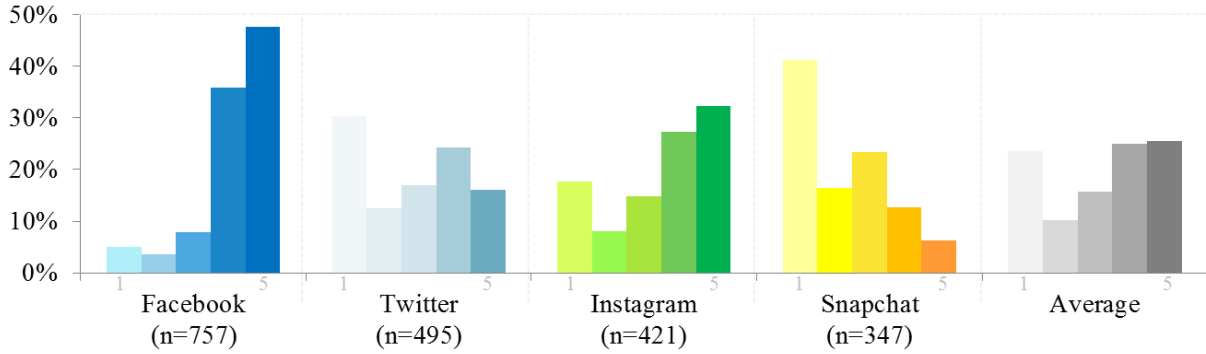
Figure 41: Distribution of responses for accessing news and entertainment on SNSs
 QE3: “I have used this social network site to discover news and entertainment content.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 42: Distribution of responses for traversing other profiles on SNSs

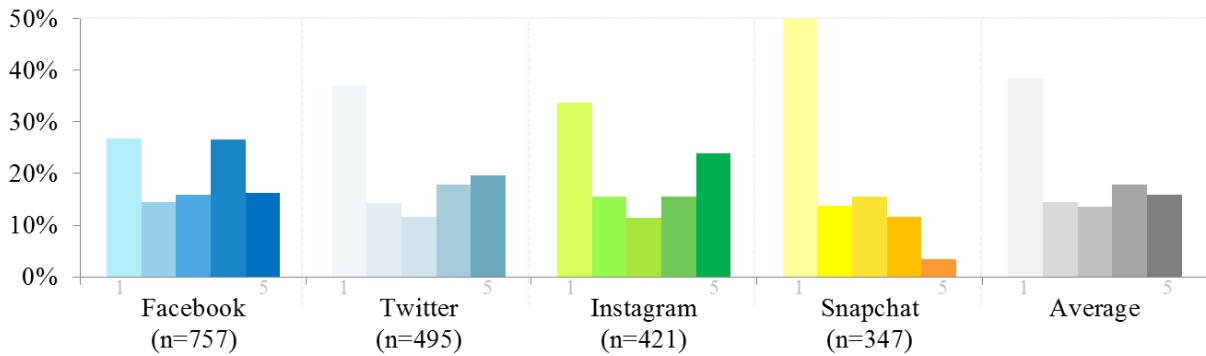
QE4: “I have used this social network site to check out someone I have met offline.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 43: Distribution of responses for building new social ties on SNSs

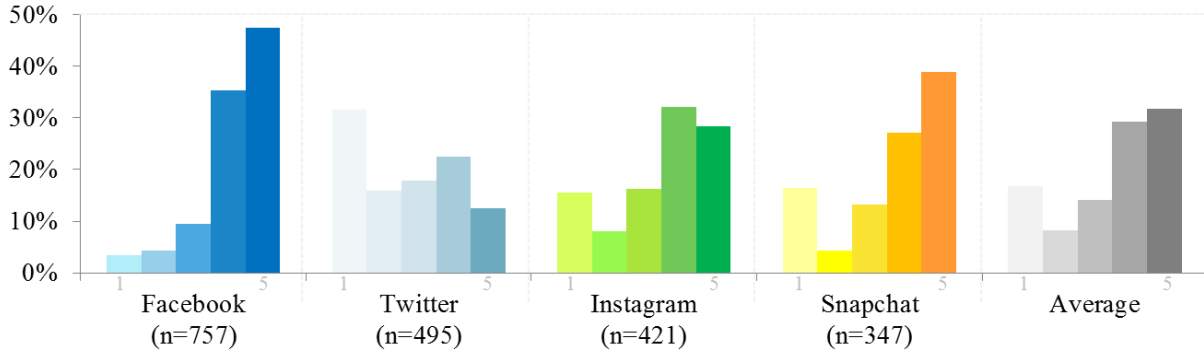
QE5: “I have used this social network site to meet new people.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 44: Distribution of responses for strengthening existing social ties on SNSs

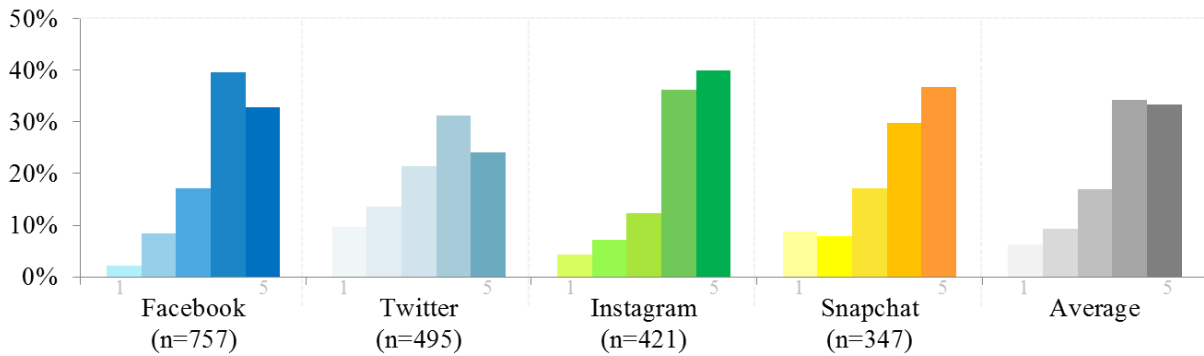
QE6: “I have used this social network site to strengthen my existing friendships.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 45: Distribution of responses for satisfaction with SNS experience

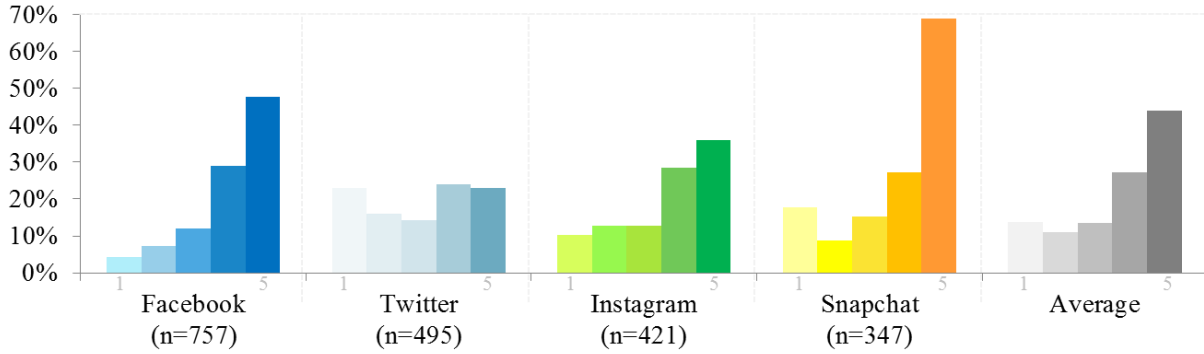
QL1: “I enjoy the overall experience on this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 46: Distribution of responses for integration of SNSs in everyday life

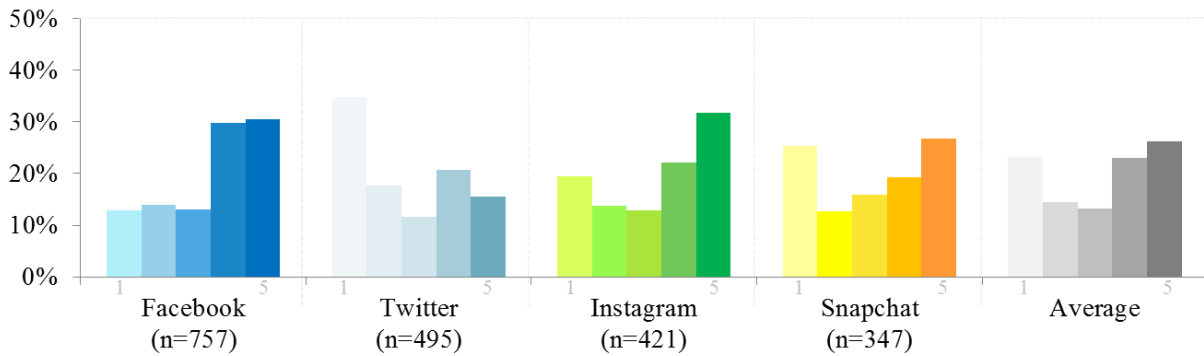
QL2: “This social network site is part of my everyday activities.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 47: Distribution of responses for compulsive checking of SNSs

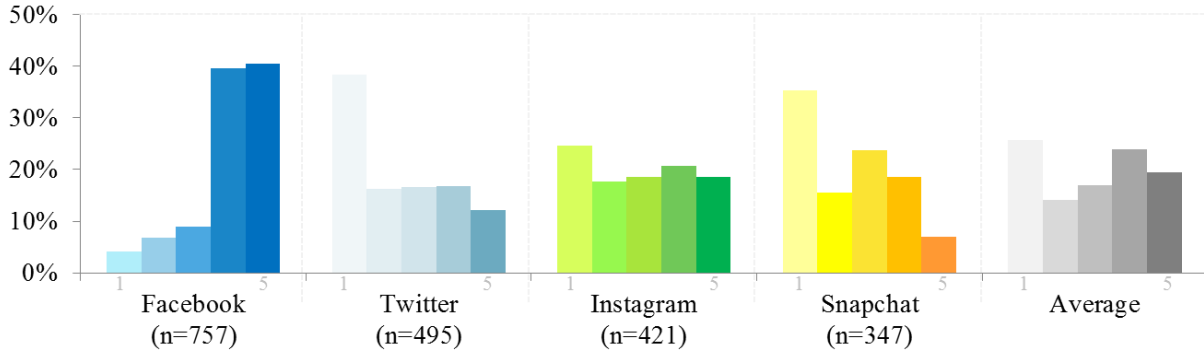
QL3: “I check this social network site as soon as I wake up in the morning.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 48: Distribution of responses for social connectivity of SNSs

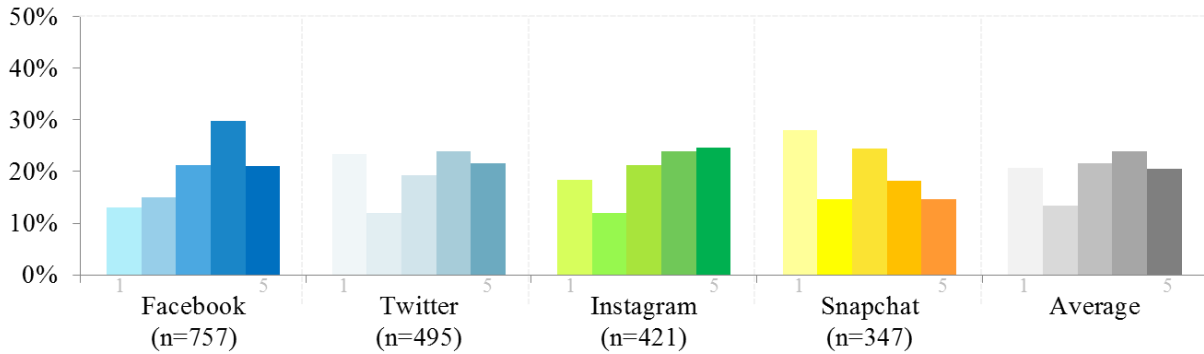
QL4: “When I meet new people, we usually connect on this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 49: Distribution of responses for feelings of belonging to larger community on SNSs

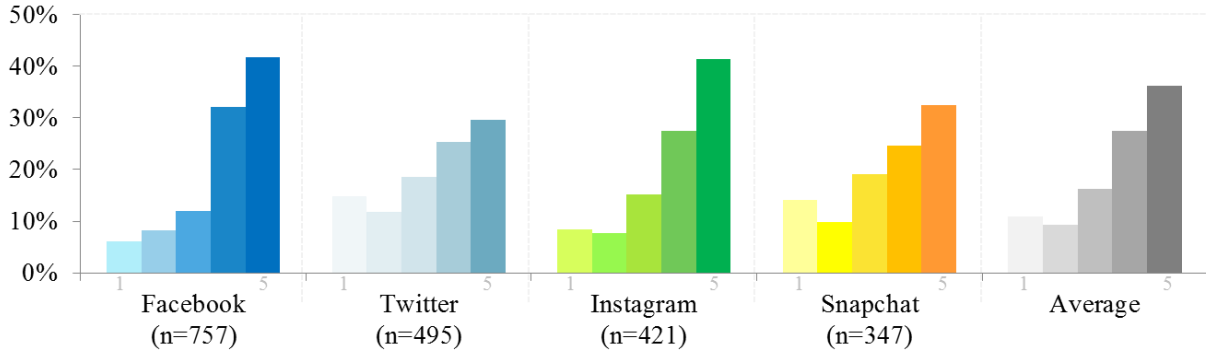
QL5: “I feel I am part of a larger community on this social network site.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 50: Distribution of responses for feelings of regret at loss of SNSs

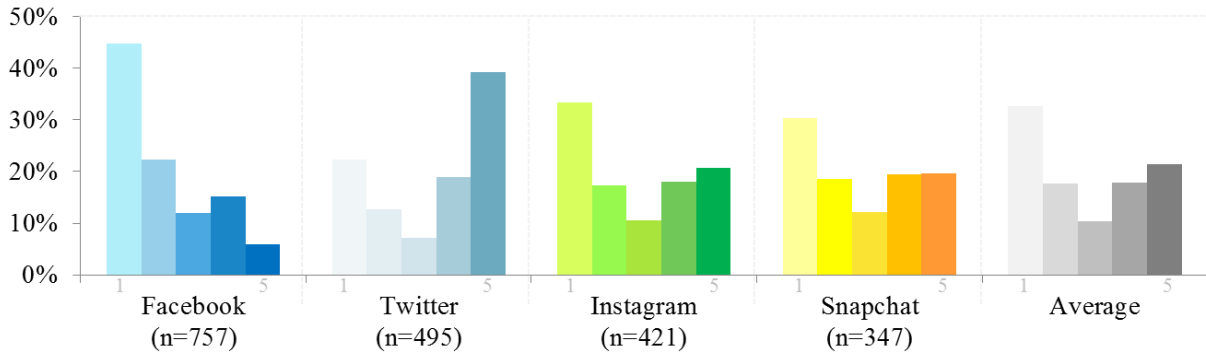
QL6: “I would be sorry if this social network site were to shut down.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

Figure 51: Distribution of responses for lurking on SNSs after adoption

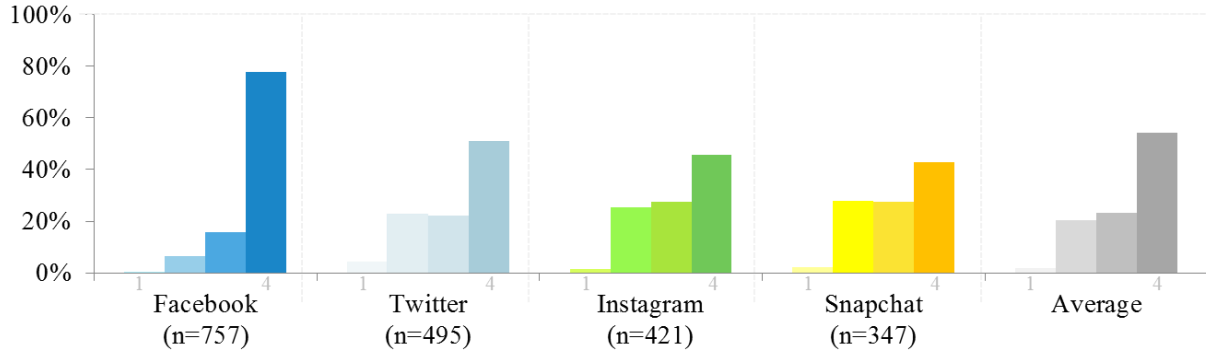
QL7: “After creating an account, I didn't use this social network site for a long time.”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Likert scale 1: Disagree strongly, 5: Agree strongly.

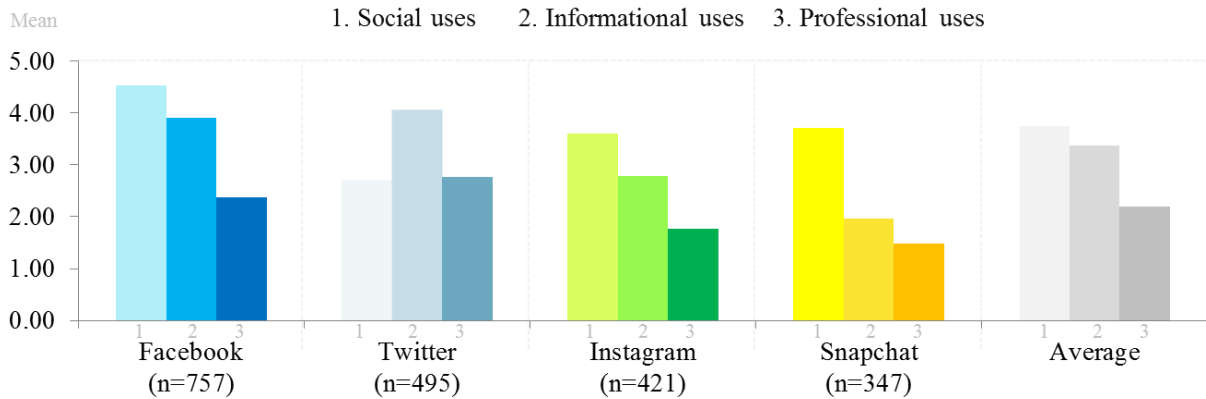
Figure 52: Distribution of responses for different identity-markers on SNSs

QN1: “Which of the following describes your main account on this social network site?”



Notes: Histogram of % survey-responses; Respondents could choose between: 1. Anonymous account, 2. Pseudonymous account, 3. Modified version of real-name, 4. Real-name.

Figure 53: Mean values for types of SNS gratifications



Notes: Figure shows mean values for sub-samples of users based on SNS account membership; Categories 1: Social uses, 2: Informational uses, 3. Professional uses.

Table 31: List of interview participants

Interview ID	Mode	Age	Gender	Occupation	User type
P01	Skype	25	Male	Self-employed	Enthusiast
P02	Skype	22	Female	Employed	Enthusiast
P03	Skype	27	Male	Employed	Moderate
P04	Skype	26	Male	Student	Moderate
P05	Skype	26	Female	Student	Sceptic
P06	Skype	22	Female	Student	Enthusiast
P07	Telephone	29	Female	Employed	Moderate
P08	Telephone	26	Male	Employed	Enthusiast
P09	Skype	27	Female	Employed	Enthusiast
P10	Skype	30	Male	Employed	Sceptic
P11	Telephone	23	Male	Student	Entangled
P12	Skype	21	Female	Student	Entangled
P13	Skype	25	Male	Student	Entangled
P14	Skype	24	Female	Employed	Moderate
P15	Skype	24	Female	Employed	Sceptic
P16	Skype	25	Male	Student	Enthusiast
P17	Skype	22	Female	Student	Sceptic
P18	Skype	25	Male	Self-employed	Enthusiast
P19	Skype	27	Male	Student	Sceptic
P20	Skype	26	Female	Unemployed	Moderate
P21	Skype	20	Female	Employed	Enthusiast
P22	Skype	28	Female	Employed	Enthusiast
P23	Telephone	21	Male	Student	Entangled
P24	Telephone	30	Female	Employed	Enthusiast
P25	Skype	23	Female	Student	Moderate
P26	Skype	21	Male	Student	Sceptic
P27	Skype	28	Male	Employed	Moderate
P28	Skype	30	Female	Employed	Enthusiast
P29	Skype	27	Female	Self-employed	Moderate
P30	Skype	28	Female	Employed	Entangled
P31	Skype	23	Male	Student	Entangled
P32	Skype	24	Female	Student	Moderate
P33	Telephone	27	Female	Employed	Sceptic
P34	Skype	29	Female	Student	Moderate
P35	Skype	24	Female	Student	Enthusiast
P36	Skype	24	Male	Employed	Moderate
P37	Skype	23	Male	Student	Entangled
P38	Skype	29	Male	Self-employed	Moderate
P39	Skype	29	Female	Student	Sceptic
P40	Telephone	20	Female	Employed	Entangled
P41	Skype	27	Male	Employed	Enthusiast
P42	Skype	24	Male	Employed	Entangled
P43	Telephone	25	Male	Unemployed	Sceptic
P44	Skype	24	Female	Student	Entangled
P45	Skype	20	Male	Employed	Entangled
P46	Skype	22	Male	Student	Sceptic
P47	Skype	24	Male	Employed	Entangled
P48	Skype	27	Male	Student	Enthusiast
P49	Typed messages	28	Male	Employed	Moderate
P50	Skype	22	Female	Student	Entangled

Attachment A: Informed consent form for survey participants

You are invited to participate in a research study on the uses of social network sites. This study is being carried out as part of my doctoral research for the DPhil in Information, Communication and the Social Sciences at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), a leading research centre for the multidisciplinary study of the Internet and society at the University of Oxford. You can find out more at www.oii.ox.ac.uk

In this survey, you will find a collection of questions and statements about your everyday experiences with social media and social network sites. Using the scales provided, please indicate how true each statement is of your general experiences. Please answer according to what really reflects your own experiences rather than what you think your opinion should be. Please treat each question and each item separately from every other item.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed. This study has received ethical approval from the Central Research Ethics Committee of Oxford University (approval code: OII C1A 14-022).

This study involves an anonymised online-survey about your social media activities. The survey will take 15-25 minutes on average. There will be no follow-up sessions after you complete the survey. The benefits of this research are that it will contribute to a better academic and practical understanding of social media use and adoption. No risks are foreseen from this research. The information you provide for this research will be kept confidential and your name will not appear in any research notes or outcomes. Your identity will never be disclosed.

If you have questions about the study or this form please do not hesitate to contact the researcher at any time: Vyacheslav Polonski, Oxford Internet Institute, 1 St Giles, Oxford OX13JS, United Kingdom; Telephone: +44(0)7814612177; Email: vyacheslav.polonski@oii.ox.ac.uk

If you agree to participate in this survey, please tick this box and write your initials in the field below:

(*Please check this box*) I have read this form and received a copy of it. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this survey and I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time by advising the researcher of this decision. I understand how to raise a concern and make a complaint. I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

Attachment B: Informed consent form for interview participants

Hi there!

I am a PhD student at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. I study the role of social media in everyday life. I'd like to invite you to take part in my study and participate in an interview about your social media activities, experiences and everyday habits. Before we start the interview, I'd like to ask you to fill out a short pre-interview survey. After you submit your responses, I'll get in touch with you to schedule a time for a short interview. The interview takes around 15-60 minutes and will be conducted via Skype/Viber/Messenger or telephone. The interview will be very informal, since I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on how you are using different social media sites and messaging applications in everyday situations.

Your responses to the interview questions will be recorded and kept confidential. The recording will not be made available to anyone but the researcher and will be deleted after the research has been written up. Each interviewee will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are never revealed during the analysis and write up of the research findings. Your participation in this study is voluntary. The information you provide for this research will be kept confidential and your name will not appear in any research notes, outcomes or publications. Your identity will never be disclosed. If you decide to withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed. This study has received ethical approval from the Central Research Ethics Committee of Oxford University (approval code: OII C1A 14-022).

Let me know if you have questions about the study or this form: Vyacheslav Polonski, Oxford Internet Institute, 1 St Giles, Oxford OX13JS, United Kingdom; Telephone: +44(0)7814612177; Email: vyacheslav.polonski@oii.ox.ac.uk

If you agree to participate in this interview, please tick this box and write your initials in the field below:

(*Please check this box*) I have read this form and received a copy of it. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to take part in this interview and I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time by advising the researcher of this decision. I understand how to raise a concern and make a complaint. I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

Attachment C: List of all survey questions

1. Demographic and personality questions

QD1: “What is your gender?” (*male or female*)

QD2: “In what year were you born?” (*enter 4-digit birth year; for example, 1976*)

QD3: “What city do you currently live in?”

QD4: “Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?” (*Student or recent graduate; self-employed or freelancer; employed; unemployed; retired; disabled, not able to work*)

QD5: “What is the highest level of education you have completed?” (*range of choices from no qualifications to completed graduate education*)

QD6: “I see myself as someone who...” (*...is reserved; ...is generally trusting; ...tends to be lazy; ...is relaxed, handles stress well; ...has few artistic interests; ...is outgoing, sociable; ...tends to find fault with others; ...makes plans and follows through; ...gets nervous easily; ...has an active imagination*)

QD7: “In a typical week, how do you usually spend your leisure time with people outside your family?” (*Spend most of it with just one or two friends; Spend most of it with large groups of people*)

QD8: “In a typical week, which of the following groups are you most likely to engage with offline?” (*People I know, such as friends and acquaintances; People I don't know, such as strangers*)

2. Technology attitude questions

Here are things people sometimes say about going online. Could you please indicate to what extent do you agree or disagree with each statement?

QT1: “Internet helps me to keep in touch”

QT2: “Internet is frustrating to work with.”

QT3: “Internet makes life easier.”

QT4: “There is too much immoral material online.”

Thinking about digital technologies in general (e.g. mobile phones, tablets, PCs) and not just social media, to what extent do you agree or disagree with each statement?

QT5: “I leave my mobile phone turned on next to my bed every night.”

QT6: “I turn off all digital technologies in order to concentrate.”

QT7: “Digital technologies fail when you need them most.”

QT8: “Digital technologies make things better.”

3. General SNS questions

How often do you use social network sites for the following purposes? Please consider all sites you use.

QC1: "Share status updates."

QC2: "Share pictures or videos."

QC3: "Add a friend or follow someone."

QC4: "Unfriend or drop someone from your network."

QC5: "Post creative writing, content you authored."

QC6: "Check or change privacy settings."

QC7: "Check someone else's profile."

QC8: "Update your profile."

QC9: "Like someone else's content."

QC10: "Like a commercial page."

QC11: "Comment on someone else's content."

QC12: "Join a new online social group."

Considering all your social network sites, how often do you interact with the following groups of people?

QC13: "People who share your personal interests."

QC14: "People who share your occupation."

QC15: "People who you know personally."

QC16: "Rank the following social network sites according to what you think is currently popular among your group of friends." (*SNSs listed in random order: LinkedIn; Facebook; Tumblr; Twitter; Google+; Instagram; Pinterest; Snapchat; YikYak*)

4. SNS-specific questions (Separate responses for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat)

QA1: "I joined this site because I wanted to create a new online presence for myself."

QA2: "I joined this social network site because I wanted to see what other people were doing."

QA3: "I joined this social network site because I wanted to connect to new people."

QA4: "I joined this social network site because I was bored with my old social network sites."

QA5: "I joined this site because I had a negative personal experience on my old social network site."

QA6: "I created an account on this social network site, because a friend convinced me to join."

QA7: "I joined this social network site before any of my friends knew about it."

QA8: "I didn't want to join this social network site for a long time."

QE1: "I have used this social network site to keep in touch with my friends."

QE2: "I have used this social network site for professional networking."

QE3: "I have used this social network site to discover news and entertainment content."

QE4: "I have used this social network site to check out someone I have met offline."

QE5: "I have used this social network site to meet new people."

QE6: "I have used this social network site to strengthen my existing friendships."

QL1: "I enjoy the overall experience on this social network site."

QL2: "This social network site is part of my everyday activities."

QL3: "I check this social network site as soon as I wake up in the morning."

QL4: "When I meet new people, we usually connect on this social network site."

QL5: "I feel I am part of a larger community on this social network site."

QL6: "I would be sorry if this social network site were to shut down."

QL7: "After creating an account, I didn't use this social network site for a long time."

QF1: "I am spending too much time updating my profile on this social network site."

QF2: "I am spending too much time keeping up with what is happening on this site."

QF3: "I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto this social network site for a while."

QI1: "I often discuss my personal feelings on this social network site."

QI2: "I regularly share updates about my personal life on this social network site."

QI3: "My digital identity on this social network site reflects who I am in real life."

QI4: "Using this social network site, I have given my friends a better idea of who I really am."

QI5: "Using this social network site, I have experimented with different identities."

QP1: "I am concerned about my privacy on this social network site."

QP2: "I worry that what I post on this site may be seen by people, who were not supposed to see it."

QP3: "I worry that my data on this site may be misused by government agencies or corporations."

QP4: "I am very careful in what I post to this social network site."

QP5: "I always keep my privacy settings on this social network site up-to-date."

QN1: "Which of the following describes your main account on this social network site?"

(Anonymous account e.g. 1534; Pseudonymous account e.g. DocDoom56; Account with modified version of my real name e.g. John S.; Account with my real name e.g. John Smith)

QN2: "When did you join the following social network sites? Please enter the year when you joined."

QN3: "How many total 'friends' do you have on this social network site? Please enter the approximate number. For Twitter and Instagram, enter the number of 'followers' you have."

QN4: "How many of your total 'friends' on this social network site do you consider actual friends? Please enter the approximate number."

Attachment D: Interview guide

I. General guidelines:

- Demand long answers and always keep asking “why?”
- Try to get down to inherent motivations and always ask for interviewee’s personal perspective.
- Ask about interviewee’s feelings and about his/her view of the feelings of others.
- If a subject relevant to the research question is being tackled, ask the participant to develop it.
- If the conversation is going off-topic, resume to asking questions from this guide.
- Do not judge or evaluate people’s opinions and ask to elaborate on non-conventional views.
- Do not influence the interviewee with directed / leading questions.
- Always double-record interviews in case there are technical issues with one of the recordings.

II. Agenda for 50-70 mins interview:

- Introductory phase (5 mins)
- Exploratory phase (5-10 mins)
- Investigative phase (15-20 mins)
- Scrutinising phase (15-20 mins)
- Generalising phase (5-10 mins)
- Summarising phase (5 mins)

III. Introductory phase (5 min):

[Focus on establishing trust and common ground for the interview]

- Thank interviewee for taking the time for this interview.
- Explain objectives of research and the context of the study.
- Describe (again) why the interviewee was chosen for the interview stage.
- Explain the nature and the format of the interview.
- Express specific goals for the duration of the interview.
- Emphasise that the interviewee(s) should:
 - Be aware that the interview is audio recorded.
 - Elaborate on their answers and do not be afraid to voice non-conventional views.

IV. Exploratory phase (5-10 min):

[Focus on general information and personal history with SNSs]

- When did you first have experiences of any sort with a social network site? *[Give examples of SNSs so that interviewee knows that this includes Facebook, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.]*
- What social network sites are you currently using and why? *[Take note of all mentioned SNSs]*
- What is your favourite social network site and why? Did this change over the past years?
- When did you join this social network site? How did you hear about it in the first place?

V. Investigative phase (15-20 min):

[Focus on daily SNS use patterns and attitudes to understand commitment]

- How extensively are you using this site on a day-to-day basis? How does this relate to the way you use the other sites you mentioned before?
- Could you show me an example of a recent post that you've shared on this site? Why did you decide to share this post on this site and not the other sites you mentioned before?
- What kinds of photographs and videos are you usually sharing? What are the reactions you would usually get from your friends for these posts?
- How would you characterise the groups of people you are speaking to on this site, compared to the other sites you are using?
- Is there something special about the people you are interacting with on this site? Did you join this site with a specific group of people in mind?
- How much have you felt free to share things with a friend on this site that you might have hesitated to share with them in person or on other social network sites?
- How would you describe the main purpose of this site? Do you use other sites for the same or similar purposes as this site?
- Have you ever been upset because this site has changed its features or the way it works?
- How important is it for you to understand how the site works on a technical level?

VI. Scrutinising phase (15-20 min):

[Focus on social influence, identities and audiences across multiple SNSs]

- How many of your close friends are using this site? How many acquaintances are using it?
- Did you talk about this site with your close friends or acquaintances before joining? How much did you know about this site before making the decision to create a new account?
- Do you use this site to interact with the same or with different people than on the other sites?
- Please tell me more about how your friends are using this site. Are different groups of friends using the site differently? Do you think they will continue using it in the same way next year?
- How is this site different from the other sites you mentioned earlier?
- Do you use your real-name on any of these sites? Do you use pseudonyms on any of these sites?
- How are your accounts between these different sites linked?
- To what extent do you feel you've expressed different parts or facets of yourself in your conversations with a friend on this site that you'd not expressed with them before in person?
- To what extent do you think your friends have been surprised to learn things about you through this site and your interactions with them? How is that different for the other sites you use?
- What do you think about the privacy on this site? Who do you think can get access to your data?

VII. Generalising phase (5-10 min):

[Focus on other hypothetical SNS users that could share similar characteristics]

- Do you think that people using this site seek acceptance from others? How does this differ from your own motivations for using this site?
- Do you think that people using this site share posts to get attention or to allow others to get to know them better? How does this differ from your own way of thinking about this?
- When people “like” other’s photos and videos on this site, do you think they do it to show support for others? How does this differ from your own way of using this site?
- How do you think people choose the social network sites they want to use? How does this differ from your own way of thinking about this? Please share your experiences and thoughts.
- Do you think the British use this site differently than other users? Have you noticed any cultural differences in the way people use this site here in the UK? Please share your observations.

VIII. Summarising phase (5 min):

[Focus on aspects that were left unsaid during the interview]

- Wrap up the main points of the interview.
- Ask for final thoughts and ideas that he/she feel have been left unsaid.
- Leave voice recorder on, in case that there are additional thoughts or ideas after the interview.
- Thank interviewee and assure him/her that his/her insights were priceless for the research project.
- Explain the next steps of the research project and make interviewee aware of how the research will be written up as a thesis, and how personal data included in that thesis will be treated.
- Interviewees to be notified when results of the study are available should they wish to see them.

Figure 54: Modern photograph of Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim's Temple of Friendship



Source: Gleimhaus Halberstadt <http://www.gleimhaus.de>

Figure 55: Church of Facebook Religion: “The letter F” and “Tablet of the Covenant”



Source: Recycle Art Group <http://recycleartgroup.com/>