

Omnipresent publicness

Social media natives and protective strategies of non-participation in online surveillance

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ABSTRACT

People's perceptions of and experiences within online spaces are central to understanding implications of current online surveillance mechanisms. The aim of this study was to gain insight into how people accustomed to online spaces as part of social life negotiate social media as private and public spaces. This study drew on in-depth interviews with "social media natives" in Norway for this purpose. The interview data especially pinpointed two analytically separable, but currently empirically interchangeable, factors that were pivotal to the interviewees' negotiations of private and public space: the Internet's lack of temporal and spatial boundaries and social media's distributive logic. While the interviewees took these features of the online for granted, they explained feeling potentially surveilled by anyone, at any time, and thus acting accordingly. As social media that utilise people's data for economic profit are increasingly providing spaces for people's interactions, these feelings of uncertainty and surveillance prompts questions about the future role of prominent social media.

KEYWORDS: online participation, social media use, social media logic, public space, private space

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Introduction

In its early phases, the Internet prompted utopian visions of how it would revolutionise public sphere participation and citizens' agency (Coleman, 2005; Lindgren, 2017; Quandt, 2018). A society was envisioned where everyone would participate in public discussions and have their voice heard on equal terms. As social media platforms have become ever more important for information and communication practices (Flamingo, 2019; Newman et al., 2020), this would mean that digitalised societies experienced flourishing public spheres of citizens engaging in public discussion. However, while some point to the Internet as a place where people with not much debate experience can train for political participation (Winsvold, 2013), other studies indicate that people do not see online spaces as arenas fit for public conversation (Moe et al., 2019). Social media pose challenges to managing audiences and social contexts (Papacharissi, 2010; Velasquez & Rojas, 2017).

While social media platforms vary in terms of the combinations of strong and weak ties they afford (Goyanes et al., 2021), a distinct feature of the online world is that borders are lacking between what is public and private (Jensen, 2007). Facing a potential collapse of social contexts (boyd, 2014), people may engage in self-censorship practices (Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). Furthermore, a logic of virality and maximum exposure developed for corporations' economic profit currently steer how interactions travel on social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Some argue that the ideals underlying and shaping social media platforms must be changed for the purpose of healthy societies (Brevini, 2013; Fuchs, 2014), while others advocate for more transparency regarding how social media companies use people's data (Demertzis et al., 2021). The relevance and urgency of such criticisms are echoed in research suggesting that people increasingly feel monitored online (Andersson et al., 2020; Fulton & Kibby, 2017). However, being attentive to surveillance mechanisms does not mean that one is necessarily concerned about corporate surveillance or how one's personal data is used. The concept of social privacy explains how some individuals may first and foremost see *other people* as potential violators of their privacy online, rather than the corporations that own social media (Demertzis et al., 2021; Park et al., 2018). While research on people's perceptions of algorithms is growing (Bucher, 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019; Hargiatti et al., 2020; Swart, 2021), more research is needed to grasp the complex, non-binary responses to social media as private and public spaces.

Social media are especially ingrained in young people's lives (boyd, 2014; Moe & Bjørgan, 2021). Usage purposes are wide, ranging from self-expression and entertainment to learning and engagement (e.g., Hautea et al., 2021). Notably, social media have become crucial to upholding and staying in touch with offline-anchored relationships (McRoberts et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2017). Research shows that young people negotiate the perceived risks and benefits of social media use rather than merely resist or comply (Debatin et

al., 2009). The concept of social media natives describes young adults who have grown up with social media (see, e.g., Brandtzæg, 2016). This study is guided by the following research question: How do social media natives negotiate social media as private and public spaces?

The aim of this study is to capture and understand how people accustomed to online spaces as part of social life evaluated and used social media as private and public spaces. As social media platforms become increasingly prominent to citizens' interpersonal communication and to their connections to the larger public, this was considered a pertinent question to gain further insight into the role of current prominent social media in Norwegian society. The study focuses on the perspectives of 11 young adults in Norway for this purpose.

In the following, the theoretical framework of the study is outlined. Here, I present two overarching mechanisms in the current online world that I argue may prompt feelings and experiences of surveillance. One is the intangibility of the Internet as space. Another is that people are accustomed to the rationales underlying social media, emphasising virality and maximum exposure. While these two mechanisms may be treated as distinguishable surveillance features, they are not empirically separable, as I demonstrate in the analysis, after the material and methods are introduced. The analysis section further illustrates a negotiation of risks and benefits of social media, in which a protective strategy of non-participation when in public space is crucial to circumvent surveillance mechanisms. Lastly, implications of these findings are discussed, where the relevance of people's perceptions of online spaces and online surveillance is emphasised. Particularly, I argue in this chapter that the economic incentives of social media are intensifying forces to the concept of the "omnopticon" (Jensen, 2007).

Surveillance and behaviour

Surveillance is a term with many connotations that varies in different contexts and regions (Fuchs & Trottier, 2015; Lyon, 2017). One approach concerns whether, and how, people perceive and imagine surveillance in their surroundings and life situation, and how this affects their behaviour, participation, or engagement in social and public life (e.g., Foucault, 1975/1994; Lyon, 2017). In digital society, surveillance is not just less personal and direct than previously (see, e.g., Mathiesen, 1997), it is also less visible while simultaneously more encompassing. As in Foucault's panopticon, major players (e.g., corporations, governments) monitor citizens, and power and responsibility are harder to locate. Furthermore, there is no end or pause for online activity, and ordinary people surveil other people (Lyon, 2017). In other words, the Internet facilitates a mutual mediated surveillance, where everybody can watch everybody, continuously (Jensen, 2007). Terms such as lateral surveillance have thus come to describe peer-to-peer observation

(Andrejevic, 2004). In this chapter, I suggest that two features are particularly relevant for understanding how online spaces may facilitate surveillance imaginaries in democratic and digital countries. One is connected to people's perceptions of a boundaryless Internet. The other is connected to people's close acquaintances with the political economy of social media.

First, the Internet and its boundaries between spaces cannot be seen by citizens interacting online. To that end, the Internet disrupts space. Furthermore, the online world has no time limits or curfew: It reaches different time zones and disrupts previous (more set) time frames for the public sphere and social spaces. Hence, the Internet lacks the previously more easily grasped boundaries, both in spatial and temporal terms (see, e.g., Lindgren, 2017; Wittel, 2000). One's audience is, in other words, uncertain (boyd, 2014). As pointed out by Papacharissi (2010: 142):

[Online social spaces may] collapse front and backstage into a single space, by allowing privately intended information to be broadcast to multiple public audiences, and delivering publicly produced information to private and intimately known audiences. Moreover, the individual must assess not one situation, but potentially an infinite number, in which the same self-performance must maintain authenticity, coherence, and relevance.

Goffman (1959) theorised how people continuously engage in self-performance practices, moulding certain self-presentations as frontstage behaviours, which, unlike backstage behaviours, are oriented towards an audience and make use of “expressive equipment” to manage how one is seen (see, e.g., Goffman, 1959: 13). Papacharissi (2010), however, illustrated that managing how one is seen may be a rather complicated task online. Meyrowitz's (1985) theorisation of how electronic media disrupt previously set physical socialisation places for different stages of life becomes evident.

The boundaryless nature of the Internet makes what is public and personal blurred and ambivalent. While a blurring of the personal and the public is not a consequence of social media itself (Andersen, 2020), it may be especially relevant there (boyd, 2014). As found by Vatnøy (2017), people's online practices add elements to their profile, which in turn is taken to represent the totality of their identity and preferences. When lacking boundaries as defining mechanisms, new and constant evaluations are required. In highly digital societies such as the Nordics (Skogerbø & Karlsen, 2021), definitions of private and public are consequently not as easily set as they were in pre-digital times. Jensen's (2007) term *omnopticon* provides a useful account of these mechanisms' stimulation of an *ongoing* public sphere.

The concept of the public sphere originates from Habermas (1989) and describes public discourse arenas as inherent parts of a functioning democracy. According to deliberative theories, the public sphere must be

free from financial and political interests to serve its proper function and to enable equal and free participation in discussions concerning shared concerns (Habermas, 1991). How people perceive the public sphere, its boundaries, and its barriers thus also matters to public participation. The omniopticon explains that the Internet has become a place of ceaseless mutual observation.¹ The social control mechanisms of Foucault's (1975/1994) panopticon and Mathiesen's (1997) synopticon² are combined, and the Internet's disruption of borders makes the public sphere never-ending, as observation of others is a characteristic of the public sphere (Jensen, 2007). Moreover, as borders or spaces cannot be used to define what is public online, "publicness must be defined solely in social terms, as mental processes, within and between individuals" (Jensen, 2007: 362). The term publicness reflects that when there is a lack of distinct and static places that can easily differentiate the public and the private, then spaces, interactions, and expressions can become defined or understood as part of public life. Thus, while a public space may be treated as a place – and hence a noun – publicness describes an adjective, inviting a description of the state or quality of *being*.

When suggesting the omniopticon, Jensen (2007) does not, however, consider one additional mechanism currently thriving upon the Internet's lack of borders that may further engender imaginaries of never-ceasing lateral surveillance. The second feature of online spaces that facilitates surveillance mechanisms is namely people's close acquaintances with the distributive logics of social media – a trait of the political economy of social media. This describes platforms' economically incentivised handling of people's data and interactions. While the way in which platforms infringe upon privacy – and collect and utilise people's data – is usually invisible (Debatin et al., 2009), the coding and datafication of people's movements and interactions has become normalised (van Dijck, 2014). The way communication and information commonly flow in online spaces is hence not entirely decided by users themselves. Instead, a logic of virality and maximum exposure impacts how communication travels within and across online spaces (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Social media's logics – aiming for a maximum exposure of content and profiles – further engenders potential unknown audiences and surveillance agents in other users. When these circumstances are normalised as inherent to the online world, accompanied by blurry boundaries as explained above, unquestioned surveillance imaginaries and protective strategies may be instigated.

Material and methods

Eleven in-depth interviews with Norwegian young adults were conducted for the purpose of this study. Norway facilitates most of its citizens with the infrastructure required for taking part in "the digital" (European Commission, 2021), and as much as 82 per cent of the Norwegian population used

social media on an average day in 2021 (Medienorge, 2022). As in the other Nordic countries, the Internet has become increasingly relevant to public communication in Norway (see, e.g., Skogerbø & Karlsen, 2021). The interviewees – six women and five men – can be described as social media natives (see, e.g., Brandtzæg, 2016). Born between 1992–2001, most (if not all) of their youth had been spent with social media and the smartphone ingrained in their social life. Their perceptions of social media as private and public spaces were thus particularly interesting, as they represent the most accustomed (adult) generation to our current media environment. As generational status often matters to one’s perception and use of technology (Fang et al., 2019), a study of this particular group of individuals was considered interesting because they could give novel insights to, and potential prospects for, the role of increasingly relevant communication arenas.

The interviews were held between January 2020 and February 2021 (with a gap between April–December 2020 because of national Covid-19 restrictions). The interviews provided material for a more in-depth understanding of the use and perception of prominent digital social spaces; thus, the informants did not need to be representative of a population. The informants were all students at a Norwegian university, signing up for interviews via e-mail. They were all given non-gendered pseudonyms for anonymisation purposes. The interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 hours and were semi-structured. The interviews started out with broad questions, talking about the informants’ everyday lives and general media use. We then moved into more narrow areas and topics (see, e.g., Hermanowicz, 2002). Topics and areas of interest were at this stage guided by the information the interviewee had given thus far, in relation to the research question.

The later stages of each interview were guided by the photo elicitation technique (see, e.g., Harper, 2002; Vassenden & Andersson, 2010). Posts from Instagram and constructed illustrations of comment sections adhering to some of these posts were used at this stage. Some posts were drawn from typical Norwegian “influencers”, illustrating typical lifestyle posts (Abidin, 2016), while others were drawn from public individuals frequently addressing public issues (Salte, 2022). This method was fruitful as it helped elucidate the intricacies of taken-for-granted practices and the informants’ experiences and feelings: It allowed for reflections and details. This allowed a fuller grasp of their considerations of appropriateness and necessity on social media as communicative spaces. Questions were thus not directly concerned with privacy and online surveillance (cf. Samuelsson, Chapter 6; Mäkinen & Junila, Chapter 7). The interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Quotes used in this text were translated by the author before a simple test for accuracy was done by a colleague of the author translating the same quotes. The quotes were then adjusted by the author and the colleague in conjunction into the version they now appear in.

Thematic analysis was utilised as a qualitative analytical tool (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is useful to detect main themes across qualitative data such as interviews, enabling in-depth analysis of certain parts of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is useful when 1) looking for a pattern of meaning reoccurring across the dataset that 2) captures something essential regarding the aim of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allows for detecting main themes across the interviews of particular importance to the research question. Themes found at the latent level were especially interesting for the purpose of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviewees, for example, continuously returned to describing hesitations to being visible, connected to (taken-for-granted) online circumstances.

Analysis

Three key themes were detected: 1) a hesitation to be visible in open and unsafe spaces, 2) a construction of closed spaces, and 3) information gathering and learning while revealing as little meaning as possible. While these were analytically separable, they overlapped empirically. The interviewees, for example, described the necessity of closed spaces as following from the characteristics of open spaces. In the following, the themes are described throughout three sections, where this relationship between themes is demonstrated.

Closed versus open space

Observing rather than creating – and being careful of how one presents oneself to others if doing the latter – is nothing new when it comes to online practices (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019; Yang et al., 2017). The informants of this study similarly described being generally reluctant to leave visible traces for others to interpret online; rather, they preferred being careful and as invisible as possible. Being careful entailed not disclosing traces with much meaning for others to interpret, and different online behaviours rendered different amounts of meaning: Meaning-scarce actions such as “likes” were less critical, while meaning-dense actions such as posts or long comments were riskier. Such cautions, however, pertained predominantly to open online spaces. The informants’ explained feeling uncertain about who could see their interactions, as there were no borders or boundaries. Self-constructed one-to-one or few-to-few spaces, on the other hand, where unintended audiences did not have access, were seen entirely differently. There, users could create boundaries by invitation-only access. Examples frequently mentioned were Snapchat, Facebook’s Messenger, and the direct message function of Instagram. The close attention to how different spaces had different boundaries can be illustrated by Vikan, when speaking about their preference for Snapchat and their two separate Instagram accounts:

I use snapchat a lot. What I like about it is that you can, immediately when you post things on the story, it's like, eh, purpose, you are purposive or what it's called... I mean, you know who you reach. [...] But even if I don't post stuff on Instagram that much, I use it for sending stuff. And in that case, it is also this thing about taking it away from, like... the public and in, kind of away from... what everyone else sees [...] But like I said, I did make this... eh blogish profile on there also. That [profile] doesn't have anything to do with me, kind of. Because there is nothing personal or private there, right. So there, it's more like... either something like old photographs I find interesting or... like, a clip from a movie or a TV show I think is cool, and stuff like that.

My personal profile [on Instagram] is connected to that profile, but not the other way around. So, that profile doesn't exist, or there's no... link to me, except that a lot of the people that follow me is people I know. But in my private profile which is... private, you must ask to follow. And inside there is the link to that new profile.

Vikan here demonstrated an attentive evaluation to how different social media platforms, and different functions within them, enables constructing different boundaries. Without certain borders, what one posts is put in front of potentially everyone: The boundaries are ways to hide from unwanted observation instead of dealing with an otherwise uncertain audience. Vikan created different spaces for different areas in their social life, to keep some of their activities away from public spaces. While those allowed to enter the most private online life of Vikan may have seen other versions of them in the form of different Instagram profiles, it did not go the other way around: The more private, the more need for management of the audience. Vikan also illustrated that the interviewees' strategies were tailored to the affordances of the platforms. Snapchat, for example, facilitates strong ties, and its primary function entails preselecting who is able to watch one's content: It relies on active sending of messages, images, and videos to the specific receivers one wants to reach. Unlike Instagram or Facebook, for example, Snapchat does not provide spaces (i.e., a "feed" or a "profile") where others can observe one's interaction traces and content without one's knowledge. Snapchat may thus be considered as more manageable in terms of social context (boyd, 2014), and audience (Jensen, 2007). As result, it requires less self-censorship than social media such as Facebook (see Velasquez & Rojas, 2017). Interviewees still, however, created closed spaces *within* Snapchat, too. This way, visual and verbal messages could be easily sent for a specific audience, who in turn could comment on and discuss what had been sent – in a shared space. As informants elaborated on where and how they participated online, the notions of open and closed spaces became apparent. Delving into these responses disclosed imaginative surveillance mechanisms in play.

Spatial and temporal uncertainty – “eternal publicness” – in open space

When asked why they were reluctant to participate outside of spaces such as Snapchat and Facebook’s Messenger, the informants described a lack of control, and uncertainty, in open spaces. As boundaries were fluid and intangible in open spaces, interactions were available to potentially anyone. Moreover, as interactions and utterances were somehow datafied, they could travel anywhere and be monitored at potentially any time in open spaces. Thus, uncertainties arose both in terms of time and space when interacting in open spaces, as they lacked temporal and spatial boundaries: Once data traces were left, they were left for eternity and were easily available to anyone on the Internet, potentially travelling across platforms and spaces. So far, these notions of open space reflect the first theme, that is, a hesitation to be visible in open and unsafe spaces. The notion of a somewhat potential eternal publicness for things posted outside of closed spaces can be illustrated by Ask:

Maybe I don’t feel like writing anything, perhaps, a little bit, because I don’t want to have this, eh... like, imprint on... digital media, so it is... [...] I don’t know... I just feel like I have always thought about what the consequences of posting stuff like that may be. That it is not always a good thing, one can always search to find a whole lot about a person if everything is out there. [...] I just don’t want everything weird that I write – not that I write that much weird stuff – but, laying, laying out there for the public, for everyone to see.

“Everyone”, “out there”, and “always” pinpoint how these perceptions of lacking boundaries, and thus control, are connected to space and time. As informants elaborated on their preferred online practices, their attentiveness to spacial boundaries reflected concerns and continuous grappling with a collapse of the public and the private online. In closed spaces, as opposed to open spaces, boundaries were considered more tangible by (a control of) audience. This has thus so far reflected the second theme: a construction of closed spaces. Any action outside of self-constructed spaces was an action in uncertain, potentially eternal, publicness. When talking about expressing opinions online, this became particularly clear.

Participation forms revealing as little meaning as possible

The informants did occasionally post outside of private self-created spaces. When doing this, posts largely entailed non-controversial and non-deviant content; for example, if something extraordinarily fun, “cozy”, or exciting happened in their lives, some mentioned that they could publish on their Instagram story or make a regular post. Stories disappear after 24 hours, and posts remain part of one’s profile. As the former had a short life span,

unlike the more permanent post, the threshold for publishing there was lower. Informants could also interact with other people's post or comments, most often because they knew and wanted to socially support the creator. Some also mentioned sharing posts from organisations like Amnesty International, frequently posting about human rights issues. In most cases, the content of these posts was regarded as uncontroversial, though one informant mentioned abortion as a case with some controversy in the Norwegian public as one exception. This was described as a crucial issue for the informant, allowing them to step out of their typically (more) careful online behaviour. Whether controversial or not, the informants this pertained to would in any case re-post in these instances, rather than adding additional text to the post.

In general, content or actions not containing or rendering much meaning or opinion at all were preferred. Posting a comment in a comment section, for example, would require verbal and visual *self-chosen* text, leaving room for an unknown interpreter to make meaning of it – actions such as “hitting the like button”, less so. Such a least-information-dense content- or activity-rationale became particularly clear when discussing Instagram posts addressing public issues, such as gender inequality, sexual assault, and economic profit versus social responsibility of influencers in the Norwegian public. The use of public figures' publications on Instagram, and (made-up examples of) their corresponding comment sections, especially shed light on the informants' evaluations of appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. The informants often spoke in a light persiflage, chuckling or shaking their head in these instances. Moreover, some told stories of their own experiences with others' strange or inappropriate behaviour online, for example, people writing certain comments in public comment sections or sharing things excessively. Their own behaviours, on the other hand, were taken as a given, naturally leading from the online environment. Informants preferred not to engage with the posts shown to them, or posts of similar publicness visible for others to see. When asked what they would do in the comment section of a post, if they had to, the informants chose participation forms conveying as little meaning as possible. They would typically “tag” a friend in the comment section, or simply post an emoji. My intention in asking this was not to get information on their actual online practices, but to dig further into their views and negotiations. For instance, Finley explained:

I usually don't write anything, it's like... I would “tag” and then we would write in the chat instead.

Me: Why?

I think it's just... again, that I don't necessarily want to put my opinion out there. [...] I want to stay very neutral when it comes to my opinion... with the kind of stuff that might be a bit... so-so, when it comes to what other people think. And we rather just talk in the chat, with my friends.

As a feature commonly provided by social media, the tagging (“@-ing”) enables communication between people, by notifying and showing to each other.³ The action of tagging someone in a comment section can be seen as a kind of reciprocity. It is, however, performed in ways where outsiders cannot make sense of the meaning lying behind the tagging as long as no additional information is given in terms of emojis or text. The informants explained that they could find entertaining, informative, or interesting content outside of closed spaces, and by tagging someone in a corresponding comment section, further discuss it somewhere else, away from the eyes of others. Sending the content to a self-created space within the same social media platform provided the same functions. Risks were here mitigated; information would not suddenly end up in front of an unintended audience. That way, they could safely talk and keep in touch with friends and family, and also share and discuss news and common affairs. The last theme – information gathering and learning while revealing as little meaning as possible – shows in the activities that the interviewees described as appropriate and safe *enough*, in open spaces. They preferred content and actions that did not convey much meaning when interacting visibly in online open spaces, different from when interacting in offline settings or in private closed spaces online. As Kersten, a youth politician, said:

Based on my Facebook profile, I don't think anyone would even think that I am politically active.

Discussion: Negotiations of online spaces in omnipresent publicness

While the social media natives used their smartphones and social media throughout their day, they all shared a taken-for-granted reluctance to participate in online spaces they regarded as open. The hesitation was reasoned in uncertainties of audiences and how and where their data travelled (e.g., Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Online, interactions prevailed and flowed in uncertain ways (Jensen & Helles, 2017): Beginnings and ends were unknown, and therefore, also audiences (boyd, 2014; Jensen, 2007). What could be carved out from these responses was notions of temporal and spatial uncertainties. Spatial uncertainties pertained to the fluid boundaries between spaces online (i.e., both within and across platforms) (e.g., Wittel, 2000). Temporal uncertainties pertained to time – interactions were potentially stored and available for others for eternity, seen from the social media natives' point of view. These uncertainties pertained to everything outside of spaces where boundaries were self-drawn by invitation-only access.

In closed spaces, on the other hand, the interviewees could discuss and share funny or interesting content and news. Closed spaces were thus valuable for upholding social relationships and for discussing and understanding public

matters (Winsvold, 2013). A “special (socialisation) place” (Meyrowitz, 1985: 157) online was enabled, as they controlled entrance and thereby both current and potential future audiences. They were isolated together, separated from outsiders (Meyrowitz, 1985). It should be noted, however, that the interviewees described *imaginaries* of complete separations from outsiders. Social media discussions and content distributed in what is perceived as private spaces are not necessarily, or will not forever remain, private (Hasinoff, 2012). Imaginaries, however, shape practices (Lyon, 2017). To the interviewees, the notions of open and closed spaces were essential to their negotiations of private and public spaces, and hence online practices. If they participated visibly in spaces that were not closed-off, unclear agents could potentially watch from somewhere not predicted or foreseen. In these cases, they could not know if, how, or when they were being monitored. If wanting to be in control of how they were perceived by current or future others, they needed to act as if they were being constantly watched. In other words, they “adjust(ed) their behavior as though” potentially being “monitored constantly” online (Jensen, 2007: 371).

The mechanisms explained by Foucault’s (1975/1994) panopticon metaphor become evident: The actual observation is not certain or needed. Internal notions of being watched are sufficient for the behavioural consequences to be in play. The interviewees’ worries may reflect social privacy concerns (Demertzis et al., 2021; Park et al., 2018). Other people were, however, not seen as *violators* of privacy – as intentional surveillance agents that aimed to laterally surveil them (Andrejevic, 2004) – but were rather considered potential audiences to an online utterance or action due to how the Internet, in their words, just works, or is. Collapsed contexts and imaginaries of audiences are inherent features of the online world, and they affect how people behave online (boyd, 2014; see also Meyrowitz, 1985). Social media enables an environment where front- and backstage may collapse, forcing the individual to “assess not one situation, but potentially an infinite number, in which the same self-performance must maintain authenticity, coherence, and relevance” (Papacharissi, 2010: 142). Everything is potentially up for publicness (Jensen, 2007). This may put heavy demands on individuals who are concerned not only with current, but also future, impression management (Goffman, 1959). boyd (2014: 32) proposed that teens deal with these circumstances by imagining the audience they want to reach, as it is “impossible and unproductive to account for the full range of plausible interpretations”.

The findings of this study indicate that when accustomed to a logic of virality, such a strategy may no longer be feasible. The likelihood of “going viral” and reaching unwanted attention may be too high. Having grown up with social media as part of their daily life, the young adults of this study had lifelong experience with the logics and structures of social media (Jensen & Helles, 2017), and the online as a boundary-scarce space (Wittel, 2000).

The intangibility of the Internet was seen as a natural part of the Internet (Jensen, 2007) – so too was a logic of virality (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Facing these features of the online, the social media natives of this study rather *do* “go out of their way to make minutia private” (boyd, 2014: 62). They embrace a mentality of keeping privacy through effort, resisting the “widespread public-by-default” setting of the Internet (boyd, 2014: 62). To that end, they demonstrated a continuous struggle with collapsed contexts and audiences that they cannot see or determine, as part of their everyday life (boyd, 2014).

Their explanations display that two surveillance mechanisms are interlinked in synergic effect, which may intensify the need to be attentive in omnoptic circumstances. Their elaborations elucidate how feelings of being surveilled may be accentuated when one is accustomed to for-profit social medias’ non-transparency and logic of distributing content. Like in Foucault’s panopticon, they were aware of potentially being monitored by someone they couldn’t see or predict, while being certain that surveillance was *somehow* present, and had an incentive. While the Internet’s intangible nature opens the possibility of surveillance by unknown others at any time, social media’s logic of virality promises its likelihood. The social media native’s familiarity with social media’s logic of virality and non-transparency may accentuate imaginations of ubiquitous surveillance, then. Consequently, they modify their behaviour as potentially monitored at any time in spaces they regard as open.

The social media natives’ elaborations elucidate experiences of living in and with spaces of unceasing mutual surveillance (Andrejevic, 2004), and thus an omnopticon in play (Jensen, 2007). Mutual observation is a characteristic of the public sphere (Jensen, 2007), and it may thus become all-pervasive in spaces where boundaries cannot be seen or controlled. Omnipresent publicness describes such a boundaryless environment, where the public is everywhere and constantly encountered – it is a quality of the environment. It hence describes the omnoptic effect theorised by Jensen (2007). This study shows that such an environment may especially matter, and pose challenges, when a logic of virality reigns.

The informants’ strategies must be further contemplated, however, as they may reflect specific social positions, media access, and literacy. If this study had been carried out elsewhere, the findings would likely be different. Education and income may, for example, conjunctly affect people’s access and use of technologies (Fang et al., 2019). The interviewees were not just university students but had grown up in a country where a large majority of the population use the Internet and mobile platforms (Skogerbø & Karlsen, 2021). Furthermore, the interviewees largely presented as members of the majority, being white (Fang et al., 2019), presenting as cisgender and not differently abled, and speaking fluent Norwegian. This matters for understanding their responses, as research on online aggression and incivility, for example, indicates that minorities in Norway are most often the targets of such acts

(Sønsteby, 2020). Their situated privileges (Fang et al., 2019) in these regards likely shaped their experiences and expectations of the social media environment in ways that, for others, are not as available. Research considering the relation between socioeconomic factors and political participation has shown that a range of different factors can prompt non-participation (Laurison, 2015). The social media natives interviewed in this study explicitly pointed to one barrier relevant to their hesitation to participate visibly in open spaces: the uncertainties of the Internet as space, and the threat of virality.

Their high attentiveness to audience may reflect a need for impression management. Managing how they present before current and future audiences may be especially pertinent to them at the time the interviews were held, for example, being young adults and students, they may be particularly concerned with identity, career, and future (e.g., Mazalin & Moore, 2004). When they have no control over where and when their communication and interactions may appear, what is left for impression management and control of social context may be not leaving any communicative traces at all. When facing what is seen as unfavourable or risky online environments, inclination towards non-participation thus works as a strategy.

Social media holds prominent roles to the distribution of information and perspectives in the Norwegian public today (e.g., Moe & Bjørgan, 2021; Skogerbø & Karlsen, 2021). Previously, main distributors were more closely connected to, and could more easily be held accountable to, journalistic principles with democratic purposes (see Napoli & Caplan, 2017; Sjøvaag, 2010). While traditional public service media holds a strong presence in Norway, current prominent social media are largely steered by economic principles (Moe & Bjørgan, 2021). Surveillance mechanisms may partly be a function of people experiencing the online world as not embodied in matter, different from the more tactile offline world. As shown in this study, however, surveillance imaginaries are also connected to social media's logic of virality and rationale of maximum exposure, leading from social medias' profit incentives (Jensen & Helles, 2017; Klinger & Svensson, 2015) – that is, in addition to the purposive monitoring of users for economic profit (Fuchs, 2014).

Not only does social media work as a medium, transferring communication and information among citizens like traditional distributors, but it also provides and augments communicative spaces. If social media are relevant to interactions in the public sphere, the interviewees are, in other words, accustomed to profit rationales steering how communication and information travels in parts of the public sphere. Economic rationales steering parts of the public sphere invites using the public sphere as a critical concept to scrutinise “the shortcomings of societies” (Fuchs, 2014: 63). The public sphere should ideally be free from economic and political power to reach equal and free participation in discursive democracy (Habermas, 1991). Deliberative democracy both depends on and facilitates a low threshold for

citizens' participation in conversations of common concern. Tearing down barriers is thus a part of the democratic project. If something makes people refrain from participating in such discussions, then it may be considered a barrier and a challenge to reach a healthy public.

Previous research has indicated that people do not see social media first and foremost as places for public debate (e.g., Moe et al., 2019). Likewise, the informants of this study mostly use social media for private sphere purposes (see Fuchs, 2014). To them, social media may first and foremost be spaces for upholding social relationships and for discussing and understanding public matters and disputes privately. To that end, social media natives' use of social media is valuable in a participatory democratic view insofar as it facilitates political participation training and preparation (e.g., Dahlgren, 2005; Pateman, 1970; van Dijck, 2000; Walker, 2005). Otherwise, it is a space of mutual never-ending surveillance by unknown audiences, both in terms of space and time. It is taken for granted that social media entails unknown present and future audiences, and that interactions are *somehow* stored and handled. The strategy of non-participation as default, as a response to surveillance imaginaries, thus poses further questions for the role of social media in digital societies such as the Nordics. As research continues to show the relevance of social media to public conversations, this is a particularly pertinent question: What kind of spaces are for-profit online social spaces becoming?

Scholars have long advocated for developing social media in line with public service ideals for the sake of democracy. Brevini (2013), for example, has argued that the Internet should “be infused with the same public service ethos [that] characterised traditional broadcasting” (2013: 157), through new policies focused on implementing public service ideals. Fuchs (2014) similarly advocated for an Internet in line with public sphere ideals as a response to neoliberalism's – up until then – legitimising effects of surveillance and profit-incentives in social media. Yet since these advocacies, the social media natives have for almost ten years lived with for-profit social media as part of their social life and public sphere (e.g., Andrew & Baker, 2021). Other scholars have, in more recent years, proposed remedies that do not demand a complete transformation of social media platforms' structures and rationales *per se*. Demertzis and colleagues (2021), for instance, called for increased transparency through “explainable AI”, as a response to users' lack of agency and control. This included algorithms that disclosed their functions and why they made certain decisions (Demertzis et al., 2021). Transparency could, in addition to holding corporations accountable, increase a sense of control as to how and where people's interactions travel. This could mitigate the surveillance imaginaries described in this chapter.

The findings of this study do not go against the privacy paradox (see Norberg et al., 2007), nor do they demonstrate concern with personal data protection. Though the study does not capture the social media natives'

thoughts, for example, on their location or health data being accessed or shared, what it does capture is social surveillance imaginaries brought about by social media infrastructures and the Internet as provider of private and public spaces. It demonstrates that perceptions of the online world are crucial for if, when, and how people utilise social media, and hence how they negotiate private and public spaces.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how people accustomed to online spaces as part of daily social life evaluated and used social media as private and public spaces. It has shown that while the interviewees continued using dominant social media platforms for social benefits, they implemented protective strategies to circumvent what they perceived as risks. Benefits lie, to the interviewees, in the upholding and creation of community and close relationships, and information gathering and learning. These benefits are particularly reached through creating private and closed spaces where others may only enter if invited. The social media natives did not, however, see spaces outside of such private self-created locations as fit for public sphere discussion – not only for political and public issue conversations, but also not for *any* actions from which much meaning or opinion may be interpreted. Grappling with online spaces' lack of boundaries in both time and space, where traces are left and potentially stored for eternity, their best strategy to keep control of current and future audiences was refraining from leaving traces of (much) meaning. While it is still “impossible and unproductive” to take into consideration all potential social contexts and audiences one may reach when posting on social media, the social media natives of this study responded to these circumstances by actively resisting the “widespread public-by-default” setting of the Internet (boyd, 2014: 32, 62). Their elaborations illuminate that the distributive logics of social media may especially necessitate carving out private spaces, and otherwise largely refraining from visibly participating.

While Jensen, writing 15 years ago, emphasised the boundaryless Internet as ground for surveillance mechanisms from the state and between ordinary citizens, there is currently an additional factor to consider. Inscribed in social media structures, a logic of virality and tracking technology facilitate an environment that may intensify the surveillance mechanisms that Jensen's omnopticon describes. When in conjunction, they may prompt surveillance imaginaries (Lyon, 2017), and attentive negotiations of private and public space. Although this study demonstrates protective strategies, it also emphasises that people's responses to surveillance mechanisms cannot be theorised as either accepting or resisting. A lack of control of social contexts, and a distributive logic aiming for maximum exposure and taking advantage of the boundaryless Internet, is rather – by the social media natives of this study – considered inevitable, if wanting to continue being online.

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Endnotes

¹ Lyon (2017) presents similar accounts through the term surveillance culture, describing how multifaceted and ubiquitous surveillance is enabled by recent technological developments.

² While Mathiesen's concept of synopticon (1987, 1997) overlooks resistance (by only focusing on Foucault's panopticon, Mathiesen did, for example, not give much attention to Foucault's later emphasis on resistance when himself theorising the synopticon; see, e.g., Doyle, 2011), and indeed the Internet, it draws attention to the role of the media and surveillance mechanisms as theorised by Foucault. According to Mathiesen, the mass media had come to represent another system of social control, in parallel with the panopticon. A few people (such as journalists and celebrities) decided what a large (and passive) audience was exposed to.

³ For example, when using the "@"-symbol followed by a person's username as part of a comment in a comment section, the person "owning" that username receives a notification that enables them to go directly into the comment section to the place where that comment is located. It thus enables responses, creating or continuing conversations by notifying others. To that end, it differs from sending the post (of which the comment section is attached) to people in a more private and closed space (such as in their "dm", short for direct message, on Instagram), and from "sharing" it (consequently making it a part of the content featured in the space connected to one's own personal profile).