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### 'She has like 4000 followers!'

The celebrification of self within school social networks

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## **‘She has like 4000 followers!’: the celebrification of self within school social networks.**

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## **‘She has like 4000 followers!’: the celebrification of self within school social networks.**

Online social interaction has become integral to contemporary social life, adding new dimensions to how young people learn, interact, and perceive themselves and one another. This paper presents theoretical insights from a year-long ethnographic study within a Scottish secondary school, where participant observation and qualitative interviews were used to explain pupils’ informal social relationships. Here, pupils aged 11-18 constructed and negotiated a hyper-surveilled social space within which many became (or strived to become) visible and ‘known’ amongst others and where online presentations of self were highly important. This facilitated a celebrity-esque culture amongst the pupil population whereby pupils learnt from and emulated macro celebrity culture and often framed social interactions as entertainment. Central to these practices, was a continual desire to “make gains in distinction” by demonstrating high social status amongst peers. The paper explores the resulting implications for teaching, learning and pupil wellbeing within contemporary educational environments.

Keywords: social media; celebrification; schooling; youth; distinction.

### **Introduction**

A growing number of researchers recognise the importance of investigating people’s engagements with digital technology and online social spaces (Lupton, 2017; Renold and Ringrose, 2016; Rich and Miah, 2017). Work in this area evidences how networked technologies can impact health and wellbeing, self-perception and social interaction. For example, some have explored how online communities facilitate a sense of belonging and social support around diverse areas like parenting, eating disorders and friendships (Kanai, 2017; Lupton, Pederson and Thomas, 2016; Miah and Rich, 2008). Others have investigated people’s engagements with self-tracking technologies, for instance considering the effect of health and fitness apps on physical and mental wellbeing (Depper and Howe, 2016; Goodyear, Kerner and Quennerstedt, 2017). Researchers have also considered how individuals construct online identities, with some focussing on how online self-representation

impacts on body image (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Tiggemann and Slater, 2017), and others exploring the gendered power relations surrounding the use of digital networks for sharing sexualised images (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015). This paper adds to the literature by investigating young people's use of online social spaces within a school context. The use of social media and online social networking is almost ubiquitous amongst young people, with 'smartphones' and tablets allowing wireless internet access at any time and any place (Perloff, 2014). This rapid and widespread extension of social interaction to online realms may have important implications for young people's health and wellbeing *and* their learning and is therefore an important feature of schooling and education requiring investigation (Inchley et al., 2016). For the purposes of this paper, the term young people will be used to refer to those of the Scottish secondary schooling age range (ages 11-18).

## **Background**

Schools are rich and intense social environments and many young people value schooling for the social opportunities it affords them – opportunities to interact with others and to build friendships (Lahelma, 2002; Weller, 2007). However, schools can also be harmful social spaces where young people are marginalised, socially isolated and bullied and where problems with emotional and mental health can be triggered and intensified (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Bond et al. 2001). Within Scottish schools, a significant number of pupils are dealing with mental health issues such as depression, distress and anxiety, eating disorders and self-harming (Edwards, 2003; Inchley et al., 2016). Further, school experiences can have lasting impact into adulthood - whether that be in relation to how young people define themselves and others later in life (Ortner, 2002) or in relation to how they transition into adulthood, employment and independent living (Sletten, 2011).

When exploring young people's social experiences within a school, it is important to

acknowledge that social interaction does not occur exclusively within the physical boundaries of the school gates. Social networks are formed during extra-curricular activities, across inter-school communities and, now increasingly, online. Online social interaction often occurs via platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, which allow users to create their own public ‘profile’ pages. These profiles are self-oriented spaces where people can engage in self-promotion and self-broadcasting as they share information about themselves through the presentation of text, photographs, videos and self-images (‘selfies’) (Fardouly et al., 2015). This ‘selfie culture’ often influences peoples’ bodily perceptions. For example, here many individuals are exposed to frequent images of idealised bodies accompanied by ‘appearance conversations’ (Meier and Gray, 2014). As Tiggemann and Slater (2017) discuss, the now common practice of posting self-images online is associated with a strong tendency to associate outward appearances with ‘who a person is’ and as a marker of self-worth. The process of explicitly constructing a self-image by way of a profile page also enables and encourages individuals to perceive their constructed image as others see it (Manago et al., 2015). In addition, since individuals can ‘connect’ and interact with other users by sharing their own thoughts, pictures, stories or links to online resources, information about people’s lives and their social interactions become very public and readily consumed by others (Rich and Miah, 2014). Here, ordinary individuals become collaborative producers of media as well as consumers either by creating and ‘posting’ content, by perusing content posted by others or by re-affirming such content through re-posting, ‘liking’, and commenting (Berriman and Thomson, 2015).

Some research has already explored the impact of social media on adolescents and young adults, although not necessarily within school environments. For example, boyd (2014) illustrates how online social spaces can provide young people with feelings of friendship and connectedness as they perceive themselves to be part of social happenings.

These young people may also receive social affirmation online by gaining increased attention from others, for example receiving flattering comments or explicit cues that people appreciate their posts. However this can also lead to increased social comparisons, for example assessing crude markers such as quantities of ‘likes’ for photographs or analysing numbers of ‘friends’ or ‘followers’ (Tiggemann and Slater, 2017). Such hierarchical monitoring of social approval can become compulsive, inciting envy and disappointment, whilst individuals may overlook that others can intentionally publicise or enhance the ‘good’ and ‘flattering’ parts of their lives (Manago et al., 2015). In addition, with increased online visibility comes an increased risk of receiving negative comments. Research examining cyber-bullying on social networking sites evidences that negative remarks are commonly directed at those classed by others as having undesirable physical characteristics such as being ‘too fat’, ‘too skinny’, ‘too spotty’, or ‘too ugly’ (Cassidy, Jackson and Brown 2009; Mishna et al., 2010). Such remarks can be made more easily with apparent anonymity online and blunted awareness of the hurt they may cause others with whom they do not physically interact (Berne, Frisen and Kling, 2014). Marwick and boyd (2014) claim that such remarks and retorts are often branded ‘drama’ by young people as opposed to bullying, making the process seem more acceptable but no less hurtful.

There is also a body of literature evidencing the gendered nature of young people’s engagements with digital platforms, particularly in relation to how bodies and bodily actions are (re)presented, interpreted and experienced. Researchers in this area especially point towards ‘double standards’ magnified within online realms where female bodies are heavily surveilled in comparison to male bodies, frequently commented upon and often considered the property of others. Here, adolescent girls are more often posited as ‘slutty’ or shameful for sharing (public or private) images of their bodies (Handyside and Ringrose, 2017). Images of girls’ bodies also hold high currency amongst youth populations. For example,

research evidences boys collecting trophy images of girls' bodies in order to amass kudos and social status (Renold and Ringrose, 2016). It is through such practice that images of girls' bodies are often shared without the girl's consent but it is she that is stigmatised for being involved in sexualised image exchanges. Here, there is huge potential for her identity to be 'spoiled' online as information and images can spread quickly and widely and there is a historicity to social interaction (Berriman and Thomson, 2015). Further, since girls are more likely than boys to be pilloried for acting sexually, any derogatory reputation attributed to girls has greater longevity, with boys (and males) being more easily able to repair spoilt identities (Handyside and Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015). Young females face particular challenges within a post-feminist context where they are also expected to present themselves as powerful, independent and sexually assertive – as individuals who speak boldly and are unaffected by what others do or say about them (Dobson, 2014). In such a context, there is also a societal fear that girls are prematurely over-exposed and over-sexualised. Therefore, numerous youth campaigns are designed to alert girls to the risks and consequences of sharing bodily images and these often focus on negative feelings of shame and regret (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016).

### ***Theoretical insights***

The increasing prominence of online social interaction within contemporary societies has also been associated with a continual rise in celebrity culture (Cashmore, 2006). Celebrity culture is ubiquitous within contemporary Western societies and increasingly infiltrates, and is proliferated by, new media technologies (Marwick, 2016). The terms 'celebrification' and 'celebritisation' are often used interchangeably within the literature. However, in trying to disentangle these terms, Driessens (2013b, 643) explains that 'celebritisation' refers to "the broad social and cultural changes implied by celebrity," whereas 'celebrification' refers to

“changes at the more individual level,” and the processes by which ordinary people become celebrities. Therefore, the suffix ‘ification’ is used within this paper when referring to the processes by which young people themselves do (endeavour) to become perceived as celebrities within their own social contexts.

Striving for celebrity status can be related to individuals seeking to assert their (high) status among their peers. Here, Bourdieu’s (1984, 20) work in *Distinction* proves a useful sensitising framework. Bourdieu refers to such status-seeking as the attempt to make “gains in distinction”. He specified that social groups within a social setting judge one another’s actions according to “schemes of perception and appreciation” (SPA). These SPA are situation-specific judgements related to individual group dynamics and involve the perception and appreciation of action, behaviour and values based on factors such as fashion, internal group dynamics and values, and group members’ position in the group hierarchy. Furthermore, both displaying and judging the behaviours and values attached to SPA requires deep levels of knowledge and understanding of what are often subtle signifiers among a social group; what we can call “insider knowledge”. This results in different groups imbuing social practices with potentially different self-gratifying properties.

Utilising a Bourdieusian influenced theoretical framework, this paper explores how young people engage in social interaction, constructing and negotiating relationships within their contemporary school environments. We suggest that digital capital combines with social capital to form the overarching “schemes of perception and appreciation” by which pupils seek affirmation (both self and peer) in their continual striving for acceptance and status (making gains in distinction). These pupils make gains in distinction by accumulating digital “capital” and what results is a range of school pupils being highly literate in the language of celebrification and skilled in the presentation of self in the school and online environments.



## **Methodology**

The findings presented within this paper come from a wider ethnographic study investigating young people's perceptions of health and the body. Data was primarily collected via participant observation, supported by informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. This involved the lead author 'immersing' herself within the research context, building and negotiating relationships with participants and attempting to understand their socio-cultural practices from both their own and our own perspective.

### ***Procedure***

Participant observation allows the researcher to 'get close' to participants and their everyday situations (Pole and Morrison, 2003). Here, the researcher engages in observation whilst also being involved in the social environment under investigation for an extended period of time (Hammersley, 2006). The lead researcher did this by assuming the role of a teaching assistant within a state funded comprehensive secondary school in Scotland. The school was located in a suburban area, with a socially diverse student population of approximately 1000 pupils. There were also approximately 120 staff members, with 80 of those being teachers. The lead researcher spent 2-3 days per week within the school over an academic year, also attending extracurricular events, making every effort to experience school life as an 'insider.' This gradual process enabled a deep and authentic understanding of aspects of school life.

Building rapport and trusting relationships with pupils (and staff) was essential so that participants felt comfortable eliciting and providing access to information. The lead researcher was therefore part of the everyday interaction whilst observing and engaging in conversations with participants and fully performing her role as teaching assistant. Throughout this process, the lead researcher kept a detailed field journal with notes of observations and informal conversations that she was having with the young people in the

school. The focus of field notes included: 'pen portraits' of participants and various social groupings within the school; details of patterns of behaviour and relationships between people; and details of how various people and groups were interacting with one another, for example, what was being said, how people spoke to one another, people's non-verbal communication and spatial behaviour. These notes were organised around key themes of the wider research project such as those relating to: friendships, social status and popularity; attitudes towards schooling; perceptions of the body and health (including physical, social, emotional and mental health); and experiences of physical education and physical activity contexts. Efforts were made to ensure that descriptions of participants' actions, words or contexts were as 'thick' (Geertz, 1973), full and accurate as possible and all notes were written up promptly. In *all* cases where it was not possible to guarantee that talk was recorded verbatim, it was crucial that the essence of what was being said was recorded precisely.

On the whole, participant observation was broad in nature but narrowed in focus as the researcher discovered what was important to participants. As the study progressed, qualitative interviews were conducted to support participant observation and allowed the researcher to have longer, deeper and uninterrupted conversations with participants. Therefore the interviews were used to follow up on themes and incidents that had emerged during the observation phase of the research. A combination of focus group and paired interviews were used. In all, 14 group interviews were conducted with a total of 22 female and 19 male participants. All interviews took place with single-sex groups and participants chose to be interviewed with their friends or those they felt comfortable with. This resulted in homogenous groups of different sizes; some were pairings whilst others consisted of up to six pupils. Participating pupils were aged between 11 and 18 and were selected for interview via an organic process of purposive and volunteer sampling. A number of interviewees were those with whom the lead researcher had built rapport but observation field notes were also

used to identify a range of participants such as: those who were of different age, gender and social background and those from a variety of peer groups. Interviews were designed thematically to investigate how participants perceived and engaged in social relationships within the school. For example, participants were asked questions such as how do people make friends in school, how do you want others to see you and where do you feel most comfortable socialising? Questions were further formed around themes emerging from participant observation. For example, some questions probed specific topics that participants themselves had previously mentioned in conversation, especially questions relating to social media use as that had been something participants had spoken at length about informally. Following consent, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis was continuous. All expanded field notes and interview transcripts were organised thoroughly so that initial notes, ideas and keywords could be written alongside them. Since very large amounts of qualitative data were generated within the study this process then required sorting data into more manageable units, a process similar to ‘open coding’ as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). Subsequently, initial categories were created for data so that similar segments could be grouped together whilst information irrelevant to the research questions was discarded (Punch, 2009). Categories were then organised so that some could be grouped together (becoming subthemes) under broader overarching themes. The sorting process was ongoing and qualitative data and original field notes were continually re-read to ascertain whether initial data categories were fitting, whether any additional data could fit into the codes created. For example, some themes were collapsed as they were too similar or new themes were created for significant data which did

not fit into any of the initial categories. Throughout the data analysis process, regular meetings took place between the lead researcher and the two co-authors with the latter sometimes playing ‘devil’s advocate’ posing questions that encouraged the lead research to consider whether her interpretations derived from the data, rather than being overly influenced by her own dispositions (Shenton, 2004).

### ***Ethical considerations***

The British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011) were adhered to throughout the study and ethical approval was granted by the Edinburgh University School of Education ethics committee. Voluntary informed consent was sought from all interview participants, their parent/guardians and the participating school prior to their involvement in the study. Conducting participant observation requires additional ethical considerations. As Denscombe (2010) details, it is not always possible to gain voluntary informed consent from all participants when conducting participant observation. However, consent was attained from the participating school to conduct observation and all pupils and teachers were verbally informed of the research aims of the study, the nature of their involvement and of how data would be collected, used and disseminated. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. However, as a researcher integrates into a social setting, establishing a rapport and trusting relationships with participants, there is potential for participants to reveal information that they consider to be ‘off the record’ or to engage in social practice differently to how they would have if they had felt details of this were always being recorded. Following Denscombe (2010), the decision was made to engage in participant observation but use such information only after ascertaining the following:

1. That no participants would be negatively impacted upon by being observed.
2. That material disclosed by participants, advertently or inadvertently, would only be reported if it would not cause harm to themselves or others.

3. When it was possible to keep the identities of those observed or referred to completely anonymous.

## **Discussion**

Four key themes emerged from the data, each contributing to the accumulation of digital capital: the importance of becoming 'known'; emulation of celebrity interactions and identities; perceptions of being under constant gaze; and social interactions being framed as entertainment within the school. Each of these themes is now discussed in turn before suggesting some implications for those working with young people.

### ***'Knowing' others and becoming known***

Online social interaction was evidently widespread amongst pupils and integral to their culture. The majority indicated that social media sites and mobile apps (for example, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp) were important to them, indicating that they "don't know an awful lot of people that don't have it." These young people spoke of accessing these sites "constantly" throughout the day, mostly via smartphone devices with Wi-Fi access or mobile data. Pupils would check their phones during lessons, for example stealing quick glances under their desks as the teacher's back was turned. They engaged with online social spaces for numerous reasons, one of which was a desire to feel connected with friends and to communicate with others not physically present. As Ryan (aged 12) emphasised:

You can go home from school and just because you have left school doesn't mean you have left your friends, you have still got your phone.

Marwick (2013) explains how online social spaces afford people feelings of intimacy and friendship. People using online social spaces can 'see' and interact with each other frequently, sometimes simply by noticing information others post online. This leads individuals to experience feelings of 'knowing' others and their lives, even if they barely

interact with these people offline. For example, Lucy (aged 17) referred to people she ‘knew’ who were:

Friends of friends like, you kinda know, like you would smile at them if you saw them but you don't really know them but you will see their pictures all the time.

Therefore, with the assistance of social media platforms, pupils negotiated large social networks, expanding throughout the school but also beyond it and across the city. These were complex networks of friends and “friends of friends,” both people they felt close to in daily life and those whom they only ‘knew’ online. The following discussion, within which 14 year old girls spoke about young people from other schools in the city, illustrates this:

Natalie: ...cause people go like oh she's pretty in her pictures but in real life she's ugly.

Summer: Yeah.

Researcher: Okay, so do you mean like people in school?

Natalie: Well just overall, in general.

Summer: Yeah like...

Researcher: Like famous people?

Summer: No like people who live here then you follow on Instagram and then if you see them in town.

Natalie: Yeah if you see them in real life.

Summer: Like, oh that's Imogen from St Mark's, she's ugly.

The data pointed to a culture where pupils were becoming celebrified. They ‘knew’ teenagers from other schools from their Facebook and Instagram profiles and followed them and their lives in similar ways to how they would traditional celebrities. This was also the case with high status peers – such as older pupils - within their own school. Pupils talked about popular peers who were, “really well known... everyone knows them,” and a number of pupils strived towards becoming known amongst others in these vast social networks. As Natalie further explained, “if other people know your name, like in other years too, then that's good.” Seth (aged 14) also explained, “the more people you know, the more popular you are perceived ... it's all to do with numbers, how many people follow you, how many people you are following.” This digital fame was illustrative of pupils “making gains in distinction” demonstrating their high social status. Although boys and girls sought online popularity there

were clear parallels with Ringrose and Harvey's (2015) work with gendered dimensions of online activity impacting girls more acutely than boys. It is worth acknowledging that our lead researcher is female and this may have impacted how both male and female participants interacted with her and how she interpreted the nuances of male and female pupils' talk, behaviours and interactions within an ethnographic approach.

In a context where the female body is so heavily surveilled and evaluated, these girls were acutely aware that they could achieve enhanced social standing by being known as 'pretty' or 'hot'. Therefore, they may have had more incentive to post self-images, despite any risk of being negatively judged. Although research has evidenced that girls can be stigmatised for posting sexualised images (Handyside and Ringrose, 2017), the determination to become known did lead girls to post more self-images of themselves, with knowledge that 'hot' images would make them known amongst boys and 'pretty' images would gain respect amongst fellow females. As Tegan (aged 17) explained:

You will have more followers [on Instagram] like say if you post pictures and guys say you're really hot, you'll get more followers and if you're like beautiful obviously more girls will follow you.

Females had particular challenges here to tread the fine line between embodying normative femininity – being 'attractive' and feminine – while avoiding the descent into stigmatised female embodiment – being too 'slutty' or making too conscious an effort to be 'attractive' whereby risking being branded fake. The following dialogue between the lead researcher and a group of boys illustrates online female sexual identity being judged:

Researcher: Okay so what do you mean by if you are a slag?

Kristoffer: [laughs]

Researcher: [pause] I mean, like would you judge certain girls and things like that?

Kristoffer: Oh yeah, definitely.

Reece: Definitely, a lot yeah.

Researcher: Like for what though? [pause]...

Reece: Just for minging things that they've done [minging is Scottish slang for disgusting]... Cause like when one person knows, everyone knows.

Kristoffer: Yeah, cause like how many people they've slept with and stuff like that.

As these 17 year old boys explained, female pupils could be very harshly judged for their perceived sexual exploits. This corroborates Dobson and Ringrose's (2016) work which also revealed that rumours about girls' supposed sexual exploits frequently spread across digital networks potentially damaging reputations. Our research builds upon this by evidencing an added complexity where young girls are not only having to tread a thin line between being considered 'sexy' or 'slutty' but also between being considered 'famous' or 'infamous'.

Fame was valued amongst these young people and when posting online status updates and pictures, it was important to command (or appear to command) a large audience, as explained by a group of 13-year-old girls:

"The main social media we use is Instagram for photos," Samirah tells me. I ask if they put pictures up a lot and Samirah says yes but she would like to have more followers, "like Charlotte, she has like 4000 followers!" she tells me. I gasp, "really? 4000?" I ask. "Yeah but she just has wierdos follow her," I am told. Charlotte agrees, "yeah well I just follow people and then they follow me back. You can put hashtags like #likeforlike and then you get more followers" (field note, 11/09/14).

Whilst the number of 'followers' Samirah and Charlotte reported having could have been exaggerated, they still desired to achieve such numbers. Turner (2010) explains that with new online technologies and a rising popularity in reality TV formats, 'ordinary' people have the means to become famous and broadcast themselves to wide audiences. Select groups, such as PR gurus, professional agents or major corporations, no longer control the processes by which people become celebrities. Instead people can become 'do it yourself' celebrities (Cashmore, 2006). These pupils were aware that they had to be 'noticed' in order to be admired and respected and this meant competing against each other for attention. Many highlighted the importance of 'standing out from the crowd'. As Mollie (S1) explained, "you want to be unique and different ... you don't want to be the same as everyone else." This required young people to both discipline and promote their online self, essentially engaging in an ongoing 'PR' campaign within the online realm.



It is not always necessary to possess any talents or accomplishments in order to obtain celebrity status but it is crucial to develop an interesting self-identity that will gain social visibility (Turner, 2010). Pupils here detailed a number of strategies they drew upon in order to boost their 'fame'. For example, Seth (S2) explained that to display popularity "a lot of people ... will 'follow' a lot less people than they are being 'followed' by." This online presentation of self advertises a desirable status of exclusivity and social distance from peers, increasing levels of perceived social status or distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Goffman's (1967) insights on status and social distance also prove instructive here. Goffman observes that, "the distances an actor [person] keeps out of deference to others decline when he (sic) rises in status, but the self-protective ones increase" (70). Therefore, following fewer people than follow you may have acted as a status-recalibration mechanism for these pupils as they sought to demonstrate higher status.

### ***Emulating celebrity interactions and identities***

The young people within the school appeared to use similar self-presentation techniques to traditional celebrities who construct their self-identities in a commodified brand-like fashion. For example, pupils also indicated that they strived to gain attention and admiration through name-dropping their peers in 'tweets', through using trendy hashtags and re-creating particular looks and poses for selfies. Further, techniques like posting pictures or text alongside multiple hashtags such as #likeforlike allowed pupils and their online content to be visible, searchable and discoverable by many. It also enhanced the apparent popularity of their posts. As Driessens (2013a) suggests, fame can quickly fade and visibility needs to be persistent if someone is not to be forgotten or overlooked in favour of others. In many ways, these pupils were adopting what Marwick (2016) terms a micro-celebrity subject position. Marwick (2016) suggests that micro-celebrity is what someone does as opposed to being what they are - a set of practices, self-presentation techniques and ways of thinking about the

self. Here, the self is strategically perceived as a commodity for the consumption of an 'audience' or 'fans' or 'followers'. Marwick (2016) suggests the size of audience is not necessarily important. Therefore, whilst the young people in our study often desired a large audience, they could still adopt a micro-celebrity subject position irrespective of actual audience size.

The young people reported spending much time 'following' the lives of their favourite celebrities on sites such as Twitter and Instagram. It is therefore possible that they engaged in a number of learnt practices and strategies in order to gain visibility. It was the 'norm' for these young people to put the self 'out there' and be noticed by others. In a sense, this was just what people did and what they witnessed others doing - especially the traditional celebrities that they 'followed'. An emulation of celebrity culture was not only evident in the young people's desires for visibility but also in their interactions and ways that they treated one another. For example, whilst pupils felt it was important to be visible to many and have many 'followers' or online 'friends', who in a sense were viewed as 'fans', a fan culture could also be seen in the ways that well known and popular pupils were treated with a certain degree of respect and awe within the school. The following extract recorded during a school prom provides some indication of status and social distance interplay:

At one point Marie, who has been standing alone, asks Lucy to pose in a selfie with her as she walks past. Lucy has previously been highlighted by other pupils as being very popular. For example, another pupil had told me that the girls on their year "look up to all the popular ones, you know Lucy Smith and that, they copy them and it passes down, cause Lucy and that always look amazing in their photos." Anyway, Lucy obliges as Marie holds out her phone and both 'pose' in front of the camera, hands on hips. Marie shows Lucy the picture but once Lucy has checked it she quickly rushes off to join her own peer group, leaving Marie on her own again. Marie begins typing into her phone (field note, 17/12/14).

Yet, as previously noted, the social distance maintained by lower status individuals towards high status individuals decreases as the lower status individual's (self-perceived) status rises, resulting in deferential behaviour towards the established high status person declining. Thus,

as young people sought to demonstrate their desired higher social status, they became more familiar with high status people, seeking to be seen, photographed and ‘tagged’ with them. Such behaviours represented status-increasing actions.

Whilst some aspects of these young people’s self-presentation and treatment towards one another may have been conscious and calculated, it is also possible that they were being socialised so that ways of acting and inter-acting were gradually becoming part of their habitus and how they subconsciously thought, interacted and presented themselves (Bourdieu, 1984). An individual’s habitus develops continually in relation to one’s surroundings and Rich and Miah (2014) suggest that people’s experiences of social media and digital technologies influence how they subsequently interact with, and through, such technology. Their habitus will have developed in relation to the various, and overlapping, sub-fields they engaged with, whether that be the fields of celebrity, health and fitness or others. As they engaged with these fields, they would begin to instinctively understand valued ways of presenting the self in accumulating higher levels of social status among their peer group.

As well as treating one another like celebrities, pupils indicated that they themselves often thought like celebrities, further evidence of them adopting a micro-celebrity subject position. For example, the following extract emerged during a chat with a group of 17 year old girls before their forthcoming prom:

“Why are you worried about prom?” I ask. “All the photos!” Jasmine exclaims in response, “there will be so many!” The group continue to chat as we stretch and do some core exercises on the mats. “If I work on these exercises everyday till prom, will it make a difference?” Daisy asks me. The other girls contribute to the discussion by asking if the exercises will get rid of their “muffin tops” or “bingo wings” as they grab the ‘flab’ on their ‘problem’ areas. I ask them when the prom is and they tell me it is in April (it is only the beginning of October now). “That is a long way off!” I tell them with a smile. “No! It is sooooo soon!” they respond (field note, 08/10/14).

These girls were aware that a large number of ‘unvetted’ pictures would be taken of them at their prom, any of which could appear online, potentially within seconds. Such images would

be open to scrutiny and could be seen by many. With a school-leavers' prom being a high status and significant event, these pictures would likely endure and be viewed for a relatively long period of time. Pupils explained that they often approached other high status events with this preoccupation, as explained by a group of 16 year old girls:

Fiona: Like if I've got a party at the weekend I would like not eat for like a week, just drink loads and loads of water.

Researcher: Oh really?

Fiona: I wouldn't like, I'd eat, but I'd like make sure it was not as much.

Courtney: Not as much.

Fiona: Yeah and I'd drink loads and loads and loads of water.

Researcher: So would it be important to look good for parties and things as well?

Courtney: Yeah cause then you are getting photos and you don't want to look awful.

Three significant points emerge here. First, social status is linked to diet and presumably the (real or imagined) effects of diet on how the body looks. Looking 'good' becomes synonymous with looking thin and looking "awful" becomes synonymous with looking 'fat'. Secondly, it was mostly 'popular' girls voicing concern around having their pictures taken. These girls may have been aware of the high currency attributed to images of female bodies both within their own peer groups (Renold and Ringrose, 2016) but also within wider society, for example within the media. Therefore, they may have had awareness that images featuring them would become highly visible, intensely scrutinised and shared more widely than images of other pupils, such as those of their male peers or those less well known or perceived to be lower status pupils. This may also point to the historically established popular discourses around celebrity being positioned as feminine (Holmes, Ralph and Redmond, 2015; Kanai 2015) and the ways in which "female celebrities are used to determine normative femininity" (Kanai 2015, 322). Young females' digital presentation of self represents an extension of gendered labour practices which become "feminised practices of care" (Kanai 2015, 324) and exhibit "a disciplinary attitude towards improving one's feminine self" (Kanai 2015, 328). Thirdly, in this situation an equal concern was having recorded photographs seen (even just potentially), as opposed to a fear of *being seen* and scrutinised in the flesh. Some of these

girls were even concerned with choosing outfits that would photograph well regardless of being flattering in 'real life'. Such concerns mirror celebrity 'paparazzi' concerns whereby the publicised image assumes higher social value - and potentially greater risk - than reality itself. Here, the online presentation of self becomes just as important as the offline presentation of self, with both representations having implications for overall presentation of self and its consequential status.

### *Perceptions of being under constant gaze*

Whilst it is true that the young people were pre-occupied with controlling their own online identities in the knowledge they would be widely circulated retrospective of an event, they also held concerns that people were constantly surveilling them in the present. School pupils explained that they felt under intense scrutiny in the school setting, as if they were being 'judged' by others to "the furthest extent possible". For example, participants spoke of feeling 'on edge' as they walked through corridors or through social spaces:

Courtney: Walking past people as well, like I hate walking down the concourse in case people are looking at me like saying things and like laughing.

Maddie: You know when we get told to get in the hall, I even feel uncomfortable walking in when they are all sitting there.

Fiona: Oh walking in yeah!

Researcher: With the boys sitting there?

Fiona: yeah

Maddie: Everyone.

Courtney: No, but even just the girls, like just the class. I'm like, urgh I hate this.

Perceptions around the depth, detail and critical judgement of others' gaze further strengthened pupils' self-conscious feelings and some felt that even their mundane, everyday actions could be intensely evaluated by others. For example, Summer (aged 14) claimed:

Yeah, when I'm eating lunch, like when I'm eating something I always think, like when I'm eating my sandwich I just don't like eating it. Because like, I dunno... like if I was eating a chocolate bar, people will be like why is she eating that?

This does not necessarily imply that Summer's peers were actually judging (or even noticing) her eating behaviours but does highlight her perception that they could be and that this

possibility affects her (self-reported) actions and behaviour. And again, there is a lurking insinuation that social status and acceptance are linked to eating practices which, in turn, link to body image and 'fat'. Summer was a pupil who appeared very engaged with celebrity culture, frequently mentioning celebrities and reality TV stars that she 'followed' online and the celebrity magazines that she read. She was also highlighted as one of the 'popular' girls in her year group, a girl who "everyone knows." Yet at the same time, she felt very insecure. Celebrities' eating habits are often scrutinised within the media, frequently associated with value judgements around bodily appearance whilst any 'falls from grace' are sensationalised - for an example of this, see Giles (2015). Here certain foods and eating practices become symbolic of gluttony, imperfection and undisciplined femininity (Kanai, 2015). It is possible that Summer perceived herself to be under similar levels of scrutiny. Of course, it is likely numerous factors were impacting upon her feelings of insecurity around eating in public and there may possibly have been much deeper dimensions to this. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the breadth of young people's culture around things such as eating, food and the body in relation to informal aspects of schooling and the role online media plays.

Anxieties about being under the gaze of others may have been intensified by the young people's engagements with online social spaces. For example, it is possible that these young people were not only learning how to present themselves and interact with one another online but that they were also learning how to scrutinise and monitor one another. Fuchs and Trottier (2015) explain how social media and social networking sites have a number of inbuilt surveillance devices, such as location 'check ins', picture 'tagging' and so forth. These tools aid major corporations and intelligence agencies in tracking people and their behaviours but also seep into everyday life so that 'normal' people become familiar with them, normalising their use to aid their own surveillance practices. Pupils considered it fairly acceptable to use such tools to gaze and monitor each other's actions. Here, 'following' and looking at other

people in detail was a normalised practice amongst pupils, as the following conversation between Charlotte and Gita demonstrates:

“You have those white converse [trainers] with the blue line, don’t you?” Charlotte asks. Gita responds, “yeah.” “You never wear them though,” Charlotte continues. Gita pauses, “how do you know I have them?” she asks quizzically. Charlotte quickly replies, “oh I seen them on your Instagram, that photo you posted... that was 47 weeks ago!” Gita laughs, “oh yeah! I forgot about that!” (field note, 12/11/14).

Gita did not seem phased here beyond mild curiosity that Charlotte knew such specific details about her due to her online activity and Charlotte appeared to be comfortable with admitting how she knew these details. Individuals often use online social spaces to watch and follow other people’s lives in detail as evidenced when individuals themselves acknowledge their practices of ‘creeping on’ or ‘Facebook stalking’ others (Marwick, 2012). Interestingly, the young people in this study knew that they were continually being watched and judged because they also constantly watched others in this social space. These practices were accepted amongst pupils and were not taboo in ways that offline ‘stalking’ would be. As pupils explained, “social media is for looking at other people basically!”

These young people’s perceptions of being under constant gaze could be compared to Bentham’s (1791) panopticon, paralleling celebrities, politicians and others in the public eye whom are scrutinised in minute detail through traditional press and media outlets by a vast general population (Bauman, 1998; Mathiesen, 1997). However, within online environments this (perception of) intense scrutiny is not reserved for a select group of people or one-way, but is apparent in the way ‘ordinary’ people intensely watch each other (Doyle, 2011). Therefore, our participants were negotiating an environment where the ‘many’ were watching the ‘many’ – all scrutinising each other from a multitude of angles without any reduction in intensity (Marwick, 2012). This represents a two-way panopticon, whereby the watched are the watchers and vice versa. To an extent, the young people could opt out of this and prevent others from gazing at them, for example by removing themselves from the online

environment. The fact few appeared to do this further reveals the power of social media and its perceived potential for enabling young people to make gains (and losses) in distinction through their online presentation of self.

### ***Framing social interactions as entertainment***

As evidenced above, the young people in this study analysed one another intensely. This analysis of people and their social interactions also involved elements of drama. Marwick and boyd (2014) explain that ‘drama’ is a term young people themselves use to describe social occurrences that encompass “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience” (1187). This audience then becomes engrossed in, and part of, social situations and happenings that were not originally their own (Allen, 2015). Therefore, ‘drama’ occurred amongst these young people when they, as active and engaged audiences, viewed and talked about others and their relationships and when they themselves also played to their audiences, attempting to entertain as they socially interacted with one another. Much of this drama occurred online. Here, pupils could document their social experiences and ‘keep up’ with social happenings so that online spaces were perceived to be forms of entertainment. For example, pupils talked about browsing online social spaces to counter boredom by talking to and ‘looking at’ other people whilst finding out news and information. This provided them with sensationalised gossip, things to discuss during face-to-face encounters. As Kaylee (aged 16) informed:

I think now it has become all about social media and what people say on it. It's all anyone ever talks about. All the time... it's like have you seen what so and so posted last night. It's all about what's said online (field note, 17/09/14).

Drama also involves exaggerated reactions to social events, which are attributed excessive importance and emotionality and drawn out over a long period of time (Marwick and boyd, 2014). Exaggerated reactions and heightened emotionality were evident amongst pupils in the



present study. This was apparent in the ways pupils themselves framed conflict amongst each other, as evidenced in the following field note taken from an S2 physical education lesson:

Throughout the lesson it becomes clear that there is something going on between the two groups of girls. Frequently, when there are breaks in activity, each group sits huddled together whispering within their respective grouping. At times pupils will whisper something then glance over their shoulders at the other group. “These girls are always falling out... everything is made into such a drama,” their teacher tells me as the lesson ends and the class head away to get changed. A while later, two girls come out of the changing rooms in tears, lots of their peers begin flocking around them... “we are getting framed!” they accuse (field note, 27/11/14).

The young people here perceived social life theatrically. There was often talk about betrayals and broken trust and certain events and people were literally dramatised and sensationalised. Here, there was sometimes also a revelling in the downfall of others and almost a ‘soap opera’ or ‘reality TV’ quality to the ways in which social relations were perceived and talked about. These young people therefore recreated the drama and spectacle that was prominent within the celebrity lives and interactions that they actively engaged with as audiences (Allen, 2014). This could have more serious implications when identities were purposefully spoiled or ‘destroyed’ for entertainment. For example, pupils spoke of their worries about online gossip pages:

Fiona: It’s like people send photos in of other people.  
Maddie: Like gossip of like what they’ve done and stuff.  
Courtney: There’s like a few people from our school.  
Fiona: What was the one on Twitter it was like our school and two other schools or something, it was like all the gossip of people.  
Courtney: Yeah, stuff like blah blah blah slept with blah blah blah behind Tesco and that.  
Ashley: Like even if it was lies or anything.  
Courtney: totally slagging people off like.  
Me: Ah, and would people then who were the target of it would they likely see it?  
Ashley: Yeah they would.  
Fiona: People tag them.

As such, the social environment that the young people negotiated was very much a risky environment. Information such as the above could spread widely and almost instantaneously and pupils were aware of this. For example, Fiona (above) also explained that she would

constantly worry when she did not have her phone with her “in case something gets put up of me [online] or something like that”. Therefore, whilst these young people longed for fame (within their own ‘field’), they were acutely aware of the ever-present risk of infamy or, as Goffman (1959) labelled it, “spoilt identity”.

## **Implications and conclusions**

The above findings provide rich examples of young people’s social interactions within a contemporary context. These young people placed much importance on being and becoming ‘known’ and felt that online social spaces were especially important arenas for identity construction. They were learning how to present themselves effectively in order to make gains in distinction, often emulating celebrity culture. They also perceived themselves to be under intense surveillance within vast social networks where their actions and interactions were followed closely and dramatised. Our research adds to previous investigations of emerging digital cultures by evidencing how the celebrification of self may impact pupils’ perceptions and interactions within the social field of the school. Schools have long been considered places of intense and judgemental scrutiny, where individuals vie for social status. However, within a digital age, it is the scale and geographically limitless status of these social processes that may have a significant impact on young people’s wellbeing. As our findings indicate, social interactions are now enduring, intense and vast in nature. Given how new and ever-evolving these forms of social interaction are, we are yet to fully appreciate or understand the potential implications on, for example, mental health (Baker and Algorta, 2016; Pantic 2014). Preliminary reports do point to potential negative implications of social media use on anxiety and depression, sleep and body image amongst young people as well as more positive impacts where social media is used to build relationships, connect with others and receive social and emotional support (RSPH, 2017). Therefore, there is much need for

further research in this area. Exploring the different ways that young people engage or disengage with these processes will be especially insightful. For example, it will be important to explore whether there are young people who resist such aspects of contemporary culture and to examine what we could learn from such individuals.

It is also important to consider whether aspects of youth culture outlined in this paper have implications for young people's learning and, if so, how teachers should respond. Senior schooling has traditionally been structured around subject areas with the teacher's job being to teach their subject content. However, in countries such as Scotland, this is changing and teachers now have explicit responsibility for nurturing and caring for their pupils holistically as well as academically (Scottish Government, 2006). These teachers are encouraged to work together with other professionals such as social workers, youth workers and nurses to enhance the health and wellbeing of their students - not only within school but within their wider lives (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, 2014). To do this, professionals from each agency must be aware of young people are interacting and negotiating social relationships with one another. This requires professionals to be digitally literate - technically, but also culturally - in terms of understanding the subtleties around young people's tastes, values and desires in particular social, cultural and online contexts. This paper takes a step towards raising such awareness and may provide an incentive for teachers to better understand their own learners who will come from unique social, cultural, ethnic, economic and geographical contexts. Future research may explore what teachers and associated professionals already know and understand about not only the more obvious dimensions of online social interaction (for example 'cyber bullying') but also about the 'softer', subtle and nuanced dimensions highlighted in this paper.

Finally, our paper highlights that young people may need supported to recognise distinctions between 'drama' and 'real-life'. It is within face-to-face environments, like

schools, that these young people may be helped to develop skills around relationship building, empathy, compassion and care. As previous research shows, common educational approaches tend to ‘scare’ pupils, especially female pupils, by alerting them to the social risks associated with online interaction (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016). However, there is much potential for pupils to be provided with richer learning experiences where they can learn to develop respect for one another by thinking more critically about online self-presentation, celebrity culture and gendered power relations. Understanding how this can be achieved in practice is more challenging. In future, it would be helpful for researchers to work with teachers and other professionals to develop ways of addressing these issues in their own contexts - to build upon the professional capacities of those working with young people and those who can build trusting and authentic relationships that significantly and positively impact these young people’s lives.

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