SOCIAL MEDIA, NEWS, AND YOUTHS: HOW YOUNG ADULTS CONSTRUCT AND ENGAGE NEWS CONTENT ON FACEBOOK

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate and critically assess how and to what extent young adults engage with 'news' on *Facebook* and what types of content they engage with. Eight young adults aged 22-30 years were interviewed along with the observation of their *Facebook* activity-logs over a 1-month period, from May 22nd to June 19th, during the 2017 UK general election and campaign period. The findings indicated overall that the participants used *Facebook* primarily as an *intermediary* for developing *social context/understanding* of news, as a means for *commentary* and *personal expression*; complementary to, prior and proceeding, their news engagement through additional media. The specifics of the participants' *Facebook* engagement are outlined and discussed in detail.

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1. Introduction

When it comes to watching the news, previous research has declared that youths are 'apathetic' (Bennett, 2000). Even more recently, in 2010, Purcell et al found that, ''younger adults are the least likely to say they follow the news avidly and the most likely to say they hardly ever or never get news'', finding only 35% of 18- to 29-year-olds *follow the news all or most of the time* (Purcell et al, 2010, ch.1, para.2). In 2016, Mitchell et al similarly reported that individuals aged 18-29 ''are less interested in local and national news, and they discuss the news at lower rates compared with those older than them'' (Mitchell et al, 2016, ch.6), specifying that only 27% of this age group *follow news all or most of the time*. But, these unsurprising results are nevertheless derived in *comparison* between younger individuals and their elders, which may undermine young audiences' news interest. As will be discussed, contemporary research identifies that 'following the news' may be an outdated and inaccurate expression to capture the way in which younger individuals currently engage with news (Boczkowski, 2017; Bowe and Wohn, 2017; Madden et al, 2017).

It's easy to understand how such concerns have naturally lead into the political sphere. The conventional viewpoint over the years has also maintained that youths and young adults are just as apathetic toward political matters (Parry et al, 1992; Heath & Taylor, 1999) as they are towards the news in general. This school of thought would appear to be senescent and not in keeping or reflective of the current, increasingly complex multimedia environment. Even in the year 2000 this perspective was beginning to be recognized as outdated, with the Internet instead being acknowledged as a 'hotbed' of potential in the mobilization of younger audiences' political engagement (Delli Carpini, 2000). In the ensuing years of the 2000's the typical 'frame of reference' regarding political activity seems to have shifted – seemingly carried forth by what has been termed the 'technology Tsunami' (Fisher, 2012) – focussing on the alternative migration of political possibilities online instead (Kelly Garrett, 2006; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009; Carty, 2010). Consequentially, younger audiences have been labelled the 'net generation', along with a multiplicity of synonymous 'voguish' nouns. These terms strive to capture the new ways by which youths and young adults engage with media, such as giving Internet-information predominance, creating their own digital content, and, in general, rejecting traditional, conservative forms of behaviour and thinking (Prensky, 2001; Palfrey & Gasser, 2013). Nonetheless, even *these* claims are cast in doubt by research which questions their validity, instead suggesting that these stipulations are substantially emotive rhetoric and in need of much more evidence (Bennet et al, 2008; Margaryan et al, 2011). Nonetheless, what

must be further considered, is how these changes in behaviour potentially influence or reflect younger generations' developing perceptions of news and politics in a digital/online context. This appears imperative given the body of research suggesting youths' evident migration toward the Internet for news (Mitchell et al, 2018). Huang claims that the Internet as primary news source is abreast with youths' busy lifestyles, providing ''easy navigation'', diversity and ''handiness, an ever-ready escape from work to news and other ways of relaxation, lean and mean content, rich media, easy time shifting, random accessibility, filterability for relevant news'' (Huang, 2009, p.117).

In regard of these findings, many scholars have declared the redundancy of traditional news media (Meyer, 2009; Herndon, 2012; Cole and Harcup, 2009). However, there is evidence that would suggest otherwise. Qayyum et al (2010), by interviewing twenty 18- to 25-year-olds, found that television news played a major role in their news engagement, in which fifteen of the participants claimed to watch it occasionally, with nine participants ranking TV as their top news source. The Internet played a minor role, with only two participants ranking it as a primary source (Qayyum et al, 2010). Similar findings were drawn by Van Cauwenberge et al (2010), who, in conducting a cross-national survey of 1,193 European 'youngsters and young adults' in 2009, found that, ''television news is still regarded as the main source for news'' (Van Cauwenberge et al, 2010, p.343).

Such research is, again, arguably outdated, failing to keep up with the ubiquity of mobile phones in youths' lives and their increasing dependence upon them (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Nonetheless, these past studies reveal a certain trend where the Internet is used alongside a variety of other media in youths' news seeking. As Qayyum et al's findings indicate, youths use a *mix* of media to seek news, not necessarily 'dedicated' or 'fixed' to one specific medium. From this, Qayyum et al propose that, ''for young adults in particular, news has become less connected conceptually to particular sources such as newspapers and television'' (Qayyum et al, 2010, p.188). News seeking, as such, becomes a 'multi-media habit', in which no specific medium is given prominence over the other (Casero-Ripollés, 2012).

More recently, in 2015, Gasser and Cortesi concluded with a similar idea. Their findings showed, ''that youth access news through a broad range of online and offline sources, including parents, friends, TV, news websites, and social media, depending on the type of information they seek and the context in which they interact with it'' (Cortesi & Gasser, 2015, p.1442).

Following on from this, Gasser and Cortesi discuss the implications of these findings. In discussing 'content diversity', they claim:

> At the most fundamental level, our research suggests that the notion of what constitutes news is in flux. Rather than think of news as a well-defined type of content, youth in focus group interviews refer to anything, from current events and celebrity gossip to sports and weather, as news. This broadened understanding of news has important implications with respect to how often and where youth access news. (Cortesi and Gasser, 2015, p.1442)

As youths use and mix various media for information seeking, and their Internet news exposure increases, news in this sense loses its 'fixed' determinacy, its redundancy through habit and, as such, becomes an activity that's of chance, less defined, amorphous, and in 'flux' (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Cortesi and Gasser, 2015; Len Rios and Bentley, 2001; Madden et al, 2017).

These trends could provide some indication as to why recent findings suggest that social media e.g. *Facebook*, is becoming an increasingly popular news source with younger audiences and consumers in general; providing access to a variety of media and perspectives in a singular platform i.e. *convergence media.* Contemporary research finds youths' definitions of news as, more specifically, conflated with social media characteristics, discussed in parallel to *Facebook* and its associative 'newsfeed' features (Gritckova, 2016; Madden et al, 2017) e.g. friends' social media 'posts' (Cortesi and Gasser, 2015) as well as live-streaming video (Madden et al, 2017). In a 2017 survey of 4,971 respondents, Gottfried and Shearer found that 67% of Americans receive some form of news on social media, with 2 out of 10 doing so regularly. It was also found that *Facebook* 'outstripped' all other social media platforms as a source of news, with just under half (45%) of American *Facebook* users getting their news from the platform (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017).

The proceeding literature review aims to understand how young audiences engage with news on *Facebook*, and subsequently politics, by evaluating some of the key themes found by recent research. Doing so will provide the necessary criteria by which to 'map' this current thesis's investigation. The literature review will establish an enquiring narrative from theme to theme, whereby news and political engagement on social media will be discussed in parallel to one another for reasons of efficiency, but to also highlight and underscore the relationship between the two more clearly. Contradictions in the literature will be assessed, limitations will be critically evaluated, and gaps will be identified to ascertain why further research needs to be

gathered in this area. Crucially, this will contextualize this study and determine how it contributes to the current literature on this topic. The review strives to maintain the focus on *Facebook* throughout, but additional research will be used regarding social media generally to support and contextualize the discussion.

It must be noted beforehand however (although this does apply to the preceding introduction), that, although the studies may not all pertain to the same exact definition of 'youth' and 'young adult', there are, nevertheless, evident overlaps in age-brackets. However, admittedly, for practicality, the following literature has not been selected in accordance to any *specific* age definition, but more so regarding other priorities such as methodology, results, and research questions etc. The decision to investigate both 'youths' *and* 'young adults' was deemed necessary due to, again, the overlapping similarities of these definitions, with specific regard to age-brackets, in varying research-contexts. It may be worth granting that differing research 'parameters' call for differing definitional considerations. This study is governed by its own definitional guideline – which will later be discussed and reasoned (see *Methodology*, *Participant Sample*) – but which, nonetheless, includes an age-bracket that is commensurable with the literature (18-30). Finally, then, when used in *discussion* of the studies, the terms 'youths' and 'young adults' should be, more appropriately, considered in regard to their context in the developing review of the literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Significance of Social Media News Engagement

The significance of social media as a news source for young audiences has been recently indicated in a study by Mitchell et al (2018). In a large demographic study of 38 countries, it was found that in the UK alone 72% of 18- to 29-year-olds use *Facebook* for news, compared to 38% of 30- to 49-year-olds, and 21% of 50+ year-olds. Overall, the findings showed: ''In 37 of the 38 countries studied, adults ages [sic] 18 to 29 are more likely than those 50 and older to use social media at least once a day for news'' (Mitchell et al, 2018, p.4).

Although these findings highlight the demographic prevalence of this phenomenon, the problem with such a large quantitative approach is that the richness of an individual's experience is overlooked. The former study does not clarify what the criteria are for what is deemed as *using social media for news;* the study does not establish the extent of the participants' news engagement – this could vary from glancing at a news item, to reading, commenting on, and sharing content – which may, consequently, exaggerate the significance of these findings. Furthermore, this approach does not identify the extent of each participant's motivation *to seek* news on social media. For example, by qualitative method, some research has found rather contradictory behaviour regarding youths' social media news engagement. In 2015, using media diaries, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups on 26 Swedish high school students (17 to 18 years old), Svenningson found that youths, indeed, primarily received their news from social media. But, the participants perceived social media news, nonetheless, as 'false', 'biased', 'subjective', 'fragmented' and 'flawed', and consumed 'real news' elsewhere instead. In another study, Craft et al (2016) conducted three focus groups consisting of 27 Chicago high school students. The participants stated that *relevance* is a key motivator for seeking news, yet they regarded the news which they *did* consume on social media as irrelevant, despite claiming social media as one of their primary news sources.

These two studies reveal the complexity of youths' social media news engagement, supporting the notion which stipulates that *news* is allocated alongside multiple uses and motivations, in which *entertainment*, *passing time*, and *socializing* may instead take precedence (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Specifically, it may be a case of 'content saturation', in which youths are simply *exposed* to news content on social media *incidentally*, in spite of their intentions to do so and consequently in conflict with some of their values. Given evidence which finds that 81% of

American 18- to 29-year-olds use *Facebook,* this remains a plausible hypothesis (Pew Research Centre, 2018).

2.2. Incidental Exposure

Incidental exposure has been described as unintentionally/accidentally stumbling across news when involved with other activities (Kim et al, 2013; Tewksbury et al, 2001), and it appears to be a prevalent phenomenon in contemporary research in regard to youths' social media news engagement. In 2015, Fletcher and Nielsen surveyed over 30,000 people from 18 countries, finding evidence of incidental exposure on social media, with only marginal differences from country to country when controlling other factors, and that the effects of incidental exposure are greater for younger audiences (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Moreover, in June and July of 2016, Madden et al (2017) conducted 52 focus groups consisting of teenagers and young adults from across the United States. Although a fraction of the participants claimed to daily purposeful news consumption, many of the participants claimed to come across news accidentally as they dip into a variety of news media and sources such as social media. To note: what was additionally remarked by Craft et al's (2016) participants was that they claimed to receive news on social media 'incidentally', which may explain their seemingly contradictory perceptions of their engagement.

It has been suggested that this form of reception is significantly determined by social media's 'content streaming' characteristics, as well as youths' interaction with their mobile phones. For example, Boczkowski et al (2017) identified their participants' (18 to 29 years old) incidentally-exposed news engagement as undifferentiated from the plethora of content streamed on social media platforms, consequently shaped by the predominance of their mobile phones as primary modes of access to social media. Young adults evidently value the ease of access and utility associated with mobile news engagement, and further indications suggest that this does not *substitute* traditional news media consumption but *complements* it (Chan-Olmsted et al, 2013) – adding to the findings of Svenningson (2015).

Research suggests that youths don't engage with social media (specifically *Facebook*) as a news platform, then, and that it's not necessarily youths' intention to engage with news, even when they have been found doing so (Schafer et al, 2017). News is consumed more so, as Boczkowski states, ''in a process that is derivative of social media interactions rather than deliberately sought for'' (Boczkowski, 2017 p-1790). Nonetheless, evidence suggests that this

can mediate users toward political information, and thus political engagement on social media, who may not have had the preliminary inclination to do so (Schafer et al, 2017) – engaging in easy political activities such as 'liking' and 'commenting on' political content for example (Bode, 2017). In fact, prior political interest has been found, not to moderate this correlation but, to decrease the correlation between accidental exposure, political information, and political activity (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016).

The problem with this body of research, however, is that it isn't ascertained how these forms of incidental exposure take place, and what types of content youths are being consequently incidentally exposed to. In addition, if mobile phones *are* significant factors of incidental exposure, it's unclear exactly what other devices, alternatively, may affect this form of engagement and *how*. What is implied in these studies is the crucial prerequisite: *if* participants are exposed to political content. The factors/influences behind the likelihood of being incidentally exposed to political content are, hypothetically, multitudinous.

As such, the present literature is greatly limited in trying to uncover the specific factors that contribute to incidental exposure to news on social media (*Facebook*) and, subsequently, effective political mobilization. This thesis will aim to identify more clearly how, for young adults, incidental exposure takes place on *Facebook* (what factors contribute to this process and to what *types* of information) and how this correlates to their mobile phone use. One hypothesis, put forward by Fletcher and Neilsen (2017), stipulates that younger audiences may simply be more enthusiastic social media users, involved with 'larger networks' and thus likely to receive more news content.

2.3. Networks/Filters

More accurately, there is evidence to suggest that young audiences use these 'networks' – a variety of 'followed' sources on social media – to *filter* and provide *context* to their news selection/reception. Gritckova's (2016) findings support this, suggesting that youths are finding different ways to filter their news reception, in which the majority of their participants claimed that *Facebook* was a primary source of news. Gritckova adds:

> It was also found that young users are often overwhelmed by the amount of news on Facebook and now have to conduct extra intellectual work to navigate through all the data and make meaning of it. (Gritckova, 2016, p-74)

More specifically, Gritckova (2016) claims that the participants learned and monitored new information on *Facebook* by actively following different publishers and by passively observing friends' postings and what they 'like'. Further research supports this, adding that youths construct what has been termed 'social filters' (Stelter, 2008), highlighting a significant social orientation in which friends and peers etc., are fundamental agents within this process. The findings of Hermida et al (2012), accrued through online surveys of 1,059 Canadian social media users in 2010, indicated that social media news users are much more likely to source and engage with content via 'networked circles', which include friends, peers, as well as journalists.

Marchi's (2012) research supports Hermida et al's (2012) findings, but highlighting the significance of 'social networks' in providing a sense of context and 'order' through commentary:

> personal connections with friends and family in social networks served as news "filters," bringing various stories to the teens' attention and helping them understand their relevance via posted commentaries. (Marchi, 2012, p-7)

Consequently, Hermida et al (2012) claim that users now prefer friends as opposed to journalists to alert them to news articles, in which their news engagement becomes a form of 'personal exchanges'. Sports, art, and entertainment have been found to be the most popular topics amongst youths' 'exchanged-information', followed by current events, health/technology, and politics (Baresch, et al, 2011). Additionally, some research suggests that mainstream news outlets are less prevalent sources in users' news engagement, with interest groups appearing to be much more preferred (Edgerly et al, 2016). Hermida et al (2012) do warn, however, that the potential to 'like' journalistic pages and groups may change this 'social-pattern' in the future.

What is clearly limited and unclear about this research is *how* young audiences construct these networks. For example, what is the connection between journalists, friends, and peers? How do they coexist as part of youths' overall *Facebook* news engagement and what are the motivations in why youths select certain groups over others, with an apparent social orientation? Of course, most of this research suggests an a prior interest in news: as stipulated, constructing networks with a primary aim of controlling news reception. But, with interest groups, friends, and peers as significant network sources, this may indicate otherwise. Moreover, what are the types and styles of information associated with these sources? Crucially, how do networks affect youths' *engagement* with news?

In general, this literature is significantly reliant upon interviews alone (participant statements) without additional supporting data to provide detail regarding content/information specifications, as well as increase the reliability of the findings. Moreover, the obvious problem with much of this research is that it's arguably outdated, and so it's questionable as to the applicability of their findings to contemporary youth activity. The current thesis will try to answer some of these questions by not only interviewing youths regarding their *Facebook* news engagement, but directly observing their *Facebook* data through their 'activity logs'. Through this additional supporting method, the participants' statements can be juxtaposed along with their *Facebook* data, and details concerning groups and content can be made physically explicit, thus recorded and analysed.

2.4. Diversity of Perspectives

Bowe and Wohn's (2016) research provides some recent support and additional insight into *how* these 'networks' affect youths' engagement with news (specifically concerning *Facebook*), which subsequently gives some indication as to *why* youths may engage in this manner. The researchers conducted two studies. Study 1 consisted of five focus groups with a total sample of 31 participants (10 graduate students and 21 undergraduate students – ranging from 18 to 30 years old), conducted in a Midwestern U.S large state university, 2011. The young adults were asked questions on how they obtained news and what influenced their interpretation of news. In study 2, conducted in 2013 at a large Midwestern University, 24 participants were interviewed regarding: their *Facebook* political activity, *Facebook* as a platform for political discourse, and the behaviour of other users.

Bowe and Wohn (2016) found that, firstly, participants were unlikely to be exposed to events if individuals in their 'social networks' were not also affected. But, also, the composition of participants' 'social networks' resulted in *diverse perspectives* on the same news events. Participants displayed shared awareness of events, but their understanding and interpretation of these events differed, being largely influenced by the construction of their 'networks'. It was found that, more accurately, diversity of perspectives relied on *diverse content*. In addition to these findings, further research also indicates that the more *diverse* youths' networks are the more inclined youths are to read news on *Facebook* (Beam et al, 2017). Furthermore, research also finds that *opinion leaders* are sometimes considered as significant agents in providing diverse content and perspectives, bringing users' attention to news content as well as

interpretation and context; by some youths they're even regarded as *crucial* to news engagement on social media (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018).

Through the indications of Bowe and Wohn's (2017) study, diversity of perspectives, achieved through network 'filters', may be an appealing trait for youths' social media news engagement, adding social context/understanding to a variety of content. Firstly, Svenningson's (2015) participants acknowledged the diversity of perspectives on social media, proclaiming they enjoyed seeing others' perspectives and opinions, liking when *Facebook* friends displayed different orientations to themselves or when they shared news items that provided new viewpoints. Gritckova's (2016) participants made similar claims, finding the potential to see others' perspectives on issues as appealing, viewing the high diversity of *Facebook* as positive. Marchi's (2012) participants claimed to like *Facebook* because it exposed them to other people's views, sometimes making them consider new perspectives. Adding to this, however, the participants were not convinced of the trustworthiness of professional news, suggesting that, instead, media like *Facebook* provides perspectives and background information to understand and make meaning of the news. It was even suggested that, for the participants, this was a more truthful version of the news. Participants considered the 'ideological clashes' on social networking sites as, ''objective and informative forms of news gathering'' (Marchi, 2012, p.13). Similarly, Banaji and Cammaerts (2015) found that young audiences had low levels of trust in the news, with many participants challenging news-frames and agendas by referring to personal and collective experiences.

There is some indication in the literature, then, that distrust in mainstream news media and diversity of perspectives may be correlative. Madden et al (2017) found that, of all the themes identified in their research, lack of trust in traditional news media was the most significant, with many of the youths discussing bias. Consequently, the youths assumed a sense of personal responsibility to seek out differing viewpoints and perspectives. The participants put less trust into original content producers and more value was placed in 'sharers' and 'authors'; they depended more on trusted contacts more than media outlets. Trending social media lists were noted as valued sources for keeping up with events. Additionally, user-generated content, such as live-video, was considered more trustworthy, in which individuals 'on the ground' were deemed as having less incentive to manipulate footage.

2.5. Social Context and Expression

The notion of diversity of perspectives, then, may explain the apparent contradiction in youths' behaviour, as discussed previously: engaging with social media news despite describing it as biased (Svenningson, 2015) and even irrelevant (Craft et al, 2016). That is to say, this literature indicates a type of socially-orientated news engagement that may possibly supplement, or complement (Chan-Olmsted et al, 2013) information-seeking practices, providing *social context/validation* in conciliation of mainstream news media distrust. This may further explain research that finds youths' news reading habits on social media as fragmented (Boczkowski, 2018) and superficial (Boczkowski, 2017), 'chain-reading' news (Gritckova, 2016), and using additional media outlets for information practices (Svenningson, 2015). This may also provide some indication as to why recent research even finds youths' social media news-engagement-motivations as focussing toward the striving for *expression*, as well as a social participation of news such as *to start discussions* and *to provide information/awareness* (Van Wyngarden, 2012) through lightweight forms of engagement such as 'liking', for example, which serve a variety of functions.

'Liking', for example, can provide support to other users' posts, indirectly reflecting the supporter's values. Youths have been found not to *comment on* or *share* that much content, but instead display behaviour synonymous with self-expression, conveying their identity to their friends through 'liking' routines, whilst additionally expressing acceptance and support to others (Gritckova, 2016). 'Liking' can increase the salience of other posters' content, increasing the distribution, and thus the audience, of one's valued/supported information. Clicking 'like' or 'favourite', for example, becomes a way for youths to 'broadcast to others' and express solidarity and/or approval, additionally helping increase the content's exposure to others (Bowe and Wohn, 2017). Youths can also join groups by 'liking', such as political candidates and parties (Van Wyngarden, 2012) – constructing their 'networks', so to speak.

However, as highlighted, overt forms of expression such as *commenting on* or even *sharing* news are sometimes avoided, regarded as potentially harmful to one's *reputation* (Madden et al, 2017). As such, some findings suggest that some youths prefer to engage with existing content (Chapman, 2015), or repost other users' posts as a form of expression when they couldn't find the right words (Van Wyngarden, 2012) – we can speculate, to possibly alleviate responsibility and thus the potential for affecting their *reputation*. Some youths *have* been found to share content etc., but through other platforms such as messaging apps. In general,

sharing content through multiple channels (including *Facebook*); removing content from its original platform; cutting, pasting, taking 'screen-shots', as well as 'tagging', have all been described as efficient 'tools' to send stories quickly to friends (Madden et al, 2017), remaining private.

2.6. Disagreement & Context-Collapsed Audiences

The implication in some of this research is that youths are quite reserved in their *Facebook* news engagement, doing so instead through more implicit means. This needs to be explored to determine what factors appear to be affecting this behaviour and how this may potentially influence youths' engagement with news and further political activity on social media. Some findings show that, despite positive attitudes regarding 'networks' and diversity of perspectives, youths (contradictory to their values) display difficulty in adapting to these counter-attitudinal viewpoints, especially in the context of politics. As of course, diversity of perspectives often means *disagreeable content*.

Youths have been found to ignore content they deem as disagreeable – often in evaluation of their relationships with other users – despite stating the importance of understanding counter-political views, for example (Chapman, 2016). It would be reasonable to presume that this aversive behaviour may depend on one's proclivity to be challenged i.e. a user's sense of political self-efficacy, the willingness to be engaged in political discourse. However, research also shows that youths who already hold strong opinions are more unlikely to be influenced by diverse perspectives, going as far as to ignore opposing views, expressing annoyance, and, in some cases, consequently seeking more like-minded content (Bowe and Wohn, 2016; Weeks et al, 2017) to possibly reinforce their 'political self-concept' (Weeks et al, 2017, para. 2 of chapter 7).

Considering these rather contradictory behaviours, additional research also indicates that diversity of perspectives can, resultingly, be generally *inhibiting* to youths' motivation to be expressive and engaged with news content (specifically politics) in the first place, in fear of disagreement and contention. *Facebook* can be deemed as intimidating due to the influence of an individual's social network, the constitution of which affects certain forms of political expression (Bowe and Wohn, 2016), specifically described as 'context-collapsed audiences' (Beam et al, 2017), or the 'imagined audience' (Litt, 2012), which create ''heightened tendencies toward self-censorship'' (Vraga et al, 2015, p-287). As such, youths often consider

the acceptability of their political engagement beforehand, concerned for their self-presentation on *Facebook*, cautious of creating offence, arguments, or alienation (Chapman, 2016). *Facebook* is considered by some youths as an inhospitable environment for political discussion – noting that other users sometimes discourage them from expression, especially in circumstances of disagreement (Bowe and Wohn, 2016). Vromen et al (2016) have identified the same behaviour with specific regard to 16- to 29-year-olds in the UK. The participants, again, showed a reluctance to engage politically on social media, displaying a fear for disagreement and conflict, as argument and dissent was not considered to be normal political interaction.

The way in which users express themselves appears to be significantly alarming for youths, concerned for the perceived incivility on *Facebook*, specifically the disruption of political etiquette. Vraga et al (2015) found that, generally, no types of information are disparaged, but tone and intention are considered crucial. Their participants perceived neutral content, such as links to news content/sites etc., positively, but opinionated and 'rant-like' content negatively, with the participants showing an overwhelming dislike for 'pushy', offensive, and indiscriminate forms of expression. Humour, on the other hand, is an exception; the participants reserving their 'likes' and 'comments' for funny content. The researchers suggest that humour is thereby a mechanism to alleviate and negate disruptive, aggressive, and uncivil forms of expression. They speculate that humour can even mobilize youths politically; several respondents claimed to pay attention to political content because it was funny. In this respect, memes have been identified as valued forms of political expression (Vraga et al, 2015) and one of the most significant forms of youths' social media news engagement, providing 'easily digestible news' and social commentary – a means by which youths can enter a dialogue regarding current events (Gasser and Cortisi, 2015). Then again, youths have also suggested that humour can have the opposite effect if used to offend others and can actually be harmful to political discussion on *Facebook* – or, simply, humour may just 'fall flat' or be inappropriately placed (Chapman, 2015), which, as noted, depends on a user's perceived *intentions.*

Yet, such studies place primary emphasis on external factors i.e. the perceived judgemental attitudes of the 'context-collapsed audience'. Indeed, an individual's network does appear to be a crucial factor, but what is not considered is *psychology*: youths' varying sensitivities and proclivities to conflict and disagreement. *Political interest* and *conflict avoidance* have been discovered as two significant predictors of attitudes regarding political expression and

engagement, but also political disagreement responses. Higher levels of disagreement have also been found to depress positive attitudes regarding *Facebook* as an appropriate domain for political discussion among those who are already conflict avoidant. Higher levels of disagreement also seem to *encourage* those who enjoy conflict, leading them to post more. Disagreement has also been found to increase the chance of posting-behaviours of those considered as relatively uninterested in politics (Vraga et al, 2015).

In addition: a problem with much of the literature discussed so far is that it's significantly saturated by American research. Youths' apparent reservations concerning social media expression may be indicative of American cultural norms, the 'political climate', or the perceived general appropriateness of public political discussion. Mor et al's (2015) research, for example, provides much needed demographic diversity regarding the study of political expression on *Facebook*, indicating how differences in political climate may influence differences in social media political expression. Mor et al (2015) conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen Israeli 23- to 29-year-olds, all self-described active *Facebook* users. The interviews were conducted in 2014 in a context of relative calm during conflict in Israel.

The participants were very aware of the risks involved in political engagement on *Facebook*, especially within the highly divisive socio-political atmosphere at the time. The participants displayed four key strategies for political expression/engagement on *Facebook* (with some similarities to the research discussed so far) to maintain self-presentation: *by restricting access to some or all posts*, *sharing or 'liking' others' content*, *vague phrasing or softening radical views*, and *humour.* Although, the participants displayed a much more explicit form of personal expression on *Facebook* than what has been suggested so far in the review. Participants were much more willing to express, even assert their own opinions, attempting to influence others. Despite being aware of the potential for conflict and disagreement on *Facebook*, the participants still considered it as important to raise awareness of political/social issues, at the risk of upsetting family and friends and even damaging their careers.

This study raises the issue regarding the limited research concerning youths' social media news engagement in the UK. Considering 'Brexit' for example, this is, arguably, critical. This is another issue by which the current thesis will contextualize itself and aim to add further insight to previous literature. The current study will aim to investigate youths' engagement with news within the context of the 2017 UK general election and campaign period. It is in the hope of providing more demographic insight to the limited research pertaining to the UK, but to also

ascertain how certain 'political events/climates' can influence youths' engagement with news. Lastly, this study will also aim to add to the significantly understudied literature pertaining to humour and youths' social media news engagement, and most specifically memes. To reiterate: through participants' 'activity logs', the role of, and the degree in which various types of content are used in youths' engagement on *Facebook* can be much more readily determined.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Participants for this study were interviewed once a week for 1-month during the UK 2017 general election and campaign period. The literature reviewed is significantly constituted of American research, which may be indicative of cultural/political norms (Mor et al, 2015). Thus, the UK 2017 general election was used as a thematic focus by which to measure participants' news engagement on *Facebook*, but was additionally used to try and ascertain differences in 'political climate' – and the influence of such events on youths' engagement with news – in contrast to previous literature. *Facebook* was chosen as *the* primary social medium for investigation due to youths' currently increasing dependence upon the platform for news (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were constructed to analyse and discuss, along with the participants, their *Facebook* activity – questions concerned their experiences and opinions regarding the information they had constructed and engaged with throughout the week. The interviews also questioned the participants for profiling, general media-activity, and political and news experiences.

3.1.1. Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to address key themes, issues and questions, reflective of previous literature in this field and the findings established so far. Much of past research has relied upon qualitative interviews without further methods to validate and enrich participants' statements; providing much needed depth and detail regarding networks/filters and associated content e.g. styles and themes, and the *how* of youths' *Facebook* experiences. To try and tackle this issue, interviews were carried out in conjunction with (at the same time as) the observation of the participants' *Facebook* 'activity logs' (a history of the participants' *Facebook* activity). This provided a direct, first-hand examination of participants' engagement, displaying detailed data on content and activity, as well as supporting the claims of the participants. 'Activity logs' were the focal point of discussion throughout the interview process by which the questions were based upon.

A general (or semi-structured) interview guide was constructed to aid the observation of the participants' 'activity logs'. As Turner indicates, this design has potential limitations, as the interviewer may interchange questions and thus derive differing responses across participants

(Turner, 2010). However, by constructing a more structured interview schedule, this would have substantially restricted the ability, as Turner states, ''to learn more about the in-depth experiences of the participants'' and the rich *Facebook* content they engaged with and why. As such, the interviews were designed and conducted in ''a relaxed and informal manner'' so as to ''develop rapport with the participants'' and ''ask follow-up or probing questions based on their responses'' (Turner, 2010, p.755); to maintain the possibility of depth and further illumination (Kajornboon, 2005).

The interview was divided into three sections. *Part 1* consisted of 9 profiling questions such as participants' careers and hobbies etc., as well as their media experiences and preferences – this section of the interview was conducted only on week-1 of the interview process. *Part 2* questioned each participant regarding their *Facebook* 'activity log' over the past week (every week for a month). Although this section had preliminary questions, these questions were designed in a manner as to provide a loose structure, to encourage further discussion and elaboration from the participant, with the opportunity for probing. *Part 3* involved 19 questions concerning participants' experiences with news and politics as well as their thoughts and opinions around the subjects. This section of the interview was only conducted on week-4 of the interview process. (See *Appendices*, *Appendix B*, for full interview schedule).

3.1.2. Activity Logs

The study at least needed the access to, and the analysis of, participants' *Facebook* behaviour over a 1-month period. The *Facebook* 'activity log' tool provided an efficient, automatic, and undemanding means for data collection and analysis; the semi-structured interviews, in conjunction, inquired into participants' experiences, ideas, and perspectives to provide context to the 'activity log' content. A preliminary method was to originally retain a digital 'copy' of the participants' 1-month 'activity log' content for reference and analysis. However, a few participants were uncomfortable with this suggestion, and so the method was retracted. As an alternative revision, participants were comfortable for the majority of the discussed 'activity log' content to be *print screened*, edited accordingly to protect private and sensitive information, and stored securely. All 'activity log' content was considered with impartiality, and no mention of normative news terms or normative political terms were explicitly disclosed until the final week – week-4, during *part 3* of the interview process – which avoided influencing the participants' behaviour during the analysis of their *Facebook* 'activity logs'.

3.2. Participant Sample

The data for this study was collected via semi-structured interviews conducted on 8 young adults (aged 22-30) in the UK. Participants were acquired through snowball sampling. This form of sampling is regarded as the most widely used method in accruing participants (Noy, 2008). It's considered as a stratified non-probability method, which is ideal for targeting 'hidden populations' that are difficult for the researcher to 'penetrate' (Heckathorn, 2011). Admittedly, more relevant to the present study, snowball sampling can be used instrumentally, as a feasible fall-back alternative (Noy, 2008) – an economical strategy in regard to time and financial constraints – by which the researcher can build up his/her initial sample size through the participants' autonomous assembling (Heckathorn, 2011). As Noy (2008) claims, the method can be adopted as an auxiliary or supportive means to enrich initial sampling clusters.

Reflective of this, participants for this study were accrued through an initial respondent and through further chain-referral. But, as is commonly criticized regarding this strategy, a bias 'social network' of respondents can be gathered who may share varying degrees of commonality in regard to their interests and, consequently, their behavioural patterns (Etikan et al, 2016). This was, of course, acknowledged. However, in consideration of the research context, such biases can be evaluated as helping to achieve the best strategy (Sadler et al, 2010) – in increasing the potential for meeting requirements/standards. For example, given the fact that 'forms of engagement' was a primary area of investigation for this study, two concerns were addressed in the beginning of the sampling procedure, in which participants had to be both *Facebook* 'active' (having access to a *Facebook* account which they actively used), as well as having the tendency to engage with content ('liking', commenting, sharing etc.), to ensure a saturation of *appropriate* data.

As such, the initial participant was considered as being reflective of potential respondent similarities regarding social media activity and was purposefully recruited in the successful fulfilment of the basic parameters mentioned above. In addition, participants' locations were taken into consideration in regard to the feasibility of researcher travel during the interview process. Thus, the snowball-sampling strategy further assisted in maintaining an approximate 'locality'. Lastly, participants of course had to be the appropriate age for the study (18-30) with respect to the target population 'young adult'. (The guideline definition for 'young adult' is discussed below). As such, ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 30 years old.

Resultingly, from a potential sample of 11, eight participants (4 males and 4 females) from the West Yorkshire district confirmed their participation in the study, all of whom were active, content-engaging *Facebook* users. Due to the rudimentary eligibility-criteria, the gathered participants had varying jobs, levels of education, and interests, with some similarities between individuals (see *Appendices, Appendix A: Participant Demographics*).

Erik Erikson's (1959) eight stages of psychosocial development was used to define what was considered as a 'young adult' (18-40) (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Two fundamental reasons determined this choice. Firstly, each of Erikson's stages of personality development are deemed as being successive, ''as an [sic] hierarchically ordered sequence of stages which progress from initial narcissistic involvement with oneself, through stages of identification and socialization'' (Franz & White, 1985, p.224). Thus, the theory does not view human development in solely biological terms, but, rather, as the *interplay* between an individual's biology and the wider socio-cultural context, developing in 'virtue' and appropriate integration into society.

Although there are multiple criticisms of the psychoanalytic tradition generally (Popper, 1963; Szasz and Kraus, 1990), which are too extensive to cover presently, Erikson's 'stages' can at least be viewed, for the purpose of this study, as serving to provide a pragmatic acknowledgement of the complex relationship between an individual and society – as one kind of explanation helping to highlight behavioural 'trends' and 'themes'. Given this dissertation's emphasis on socio-cultural influences, on the interplay between social media and individuals' news engagement, the theory was deemed helpful.

In addition, each 'stage of personality' – ranging from: 'infancy', 'early childhood', 'play age', 'school age', 'adolescence', 'young adulthood', 'adulthood' and 'old age' – is symptomatic of specific developmental issues and fixations. Through 'adolescence', the individual is conflicted between 'identity-formation' and 'identity-diffusion' (Ochse & Plug, 1986). Then, moving through into 'young adulthood', an individual is then confronted with the challenge of developing close and intimate relationships within society, or else succumbing to isolation (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010).

Although the stage of 'young adulthood' is often discussed with emphasis on romantic considerations (Kerpelman et al, 2012; Shulman & Connolly, 2013), this period of development can nevertheless be deemed as a natural transition from more personal, 'localized' concerns towards an increasing acknowledgement of the public/societal and one's integration

within it. That being said, 'young adulthood' (18-40) was deemed as more appropriate than 'adolescence' (12-18) for the present study, in the sense that a 'young adult' would possibly display more of a proclivity to engage with, and understand, news and politics – hence, a wider societal context. Nevertheless, it was the aim of the study to sample participants who fell into the bottom range of this category (18-30), with greater representation of *younger* audiences (see *Appendices, Appendix A*, for participant demographics), ensuring that this demographic would be commensurable within, and reflective of, current research-sampling discussed previously in the literature review – maintaining the emphasis on 'youths'.

Finally, this study is cross-sectional, carried out over 1-month from May 22nd to June 19th during the 2017 UK general election and campaign period. A 1-month period was chosen to increase the likelihood of a saturation point in the data, to accrue data best representative of the participants' *Facebook* engagement. This also proved appropriate for time and resource constraints.

3.3. Data Analysis

Deductive content analysis was used for the coding of the data. This approach was used because the study aimed to explore, in an in-depth manner and the relationship between, pre-existing themes derived from the literature under a specific political context. A preliminary coding matrix was developed - to guide the analysis - that pertained primarily to themes revealed in previous research (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). As such, it would have been inappropriate to use an inductive approach which may develop themes, through close reading of the data, that may be less supportive of the literature, and so limiting the potential for further in-depth exploration of pre-existing themes (Gray, 2013).

For the process of data analysis, the qualitative analytical software *NVivo* was used. Initial nodes were created in reflection of themes in the literature: *Incidental Exposure, Networks/Filters, Diversity of Perspectives, Distrust of Mainstream News Media, Expression, Disagreement.* In addition: a *Profile* node was created to categorize participants' background and personal information; a *Perceptions & Definitions* node to categorize participants' ideas and perspectives regarding content; an *Engagement* node to categorize participants' engagement with content (again, reflective of themes in the literature such as 'liking', commenting, and sharing); and a *Styles* node to categorize the style and presentation of content e.g. *memes* or *humour* as per the findings in previous literature.

3.4. Ethics

This study complied with the University of Huddersfield's *ethical & integrity policy* by firstly providing the participants with an information sheet to ensure *fully informed consent*. Details regarding their role and how their information would be used within the research project was fully disclosed to the participants prior to their consented participation. A consent form was subsequently provided to the individuals which outlined their *opportunity to participate* and *withdraw or refuse to take part in the project* at any time. The maintenance of confidentiality and security of data was achieved by firstly providing the participants with an alias in discussion of their data, as well as editing and removing data that pertained to personal information in their interviews and on their social media platforms. Collected data was stored within an encrypted file and destroyed upon completion of the project. The researcher remained *impartial* throughout the data collection process in observation of the participants' *Facebook* information and interview statements; no judgement was placed upon the participant to make he/she feel uncomfortable. During the observation of participants' 'activity logs', any information that was irrelevant or seemed private to the participant was ignored. The researcher aimed to ensure that the participants were comfortable by conducting the interviews in a friendly and conversational tone and by allowing the participants to choose the location of the interview process.

3.5. Limitations

This study is greatly limited in its generalizability, affecting the validity of the data. Nonetheless, the study is easily replicable and open to improvement in areas of limitation for future research, which will advance the insights provided by this study. Moreover, the primary concern of the study is to provide rich, in-depth and detailed data. Additionally, due to (a) a decision not to keep a digital copy of the 'activity log', and (b) the inability to collect and track broader *Facebook* content and participant behaviour, the study was unable to provide wider contextual significations as to the algorithmic patterns of *Facebook*'s newsfeed information/content. This factor limits the study's ability to sufficiently, and in a detailed manner, provide data on how *Facebook* acts as a mediator of information and content. Only participant experience can provide minor insights into this area.

Due to the vastness of the 'activity log' content, and the rather limited time of the interviews, there was a frequent selection process involved when it came to content and information

discussion. This leaves room for some observer bias. However, it must be noted that the observer strived to remain impartial and include a thematic variety of information and content that the participants had engaged with, throughout the data collection process.

Lastly, although a necessity in trying to understand the data, the interpretation provided in this study is questionable, but the present study is easily replicable and is open for repeat testing, further interpretations, critique and re-evaluation. The theory put forward in this study can be considered under a constructivist perspective in regard to its paradigmatic and contextual factors as well as the researcher's interpretation of the data (Stewart, 2010). Additional theories may differ but possibly triangulate and contribute, not to further 'explanation' (quantitative) but, to further *understanding* (qualitative).

4. Results

4.1. Introduction

This section will be data-theory driven. Much of the gathered data is heavily context dependent, and so it was decided that providing continual analysis and interpretation throughout, in relation to previous research, gave much more insight into the data. Furthermore, the data is rather rich and, understandably, may raise varying questions for the reader which may not pertain to the concerns outlined so far. Accordingly, the data has been provided with a discursive narrative that reflects that of the literature review, with the aim of staying close to the primary themes.

4.2. Incidental Exposure

There is a substantial body of research which suggests that youths' social media news reception is predominantly determined by *incidental exposure* (Boczkwoski et al, 2017; Craft et al, 2016; Fletcher and Neilsen, 2017; Svenningson, 2015; The Knight Foundation, 2017). The results from this study strongly support this notion. Throughout the interview process, the participants were continually asked how they came across news content on *Facebook*. Participants consistently used statements such as 'it popped up' to describe their reception of information; a few participants declared that, otherwise, they wouldn't come across news either on their phone, or in general:

> I don't really go into a lot of news on my phone. I don't know, unless there's something on Facebook that crops up which is obviously news related and I'll read it off there, but I don't really go and search for news on my phone. (David, 30, Builder's Merchant Employee)

> The only news that I see is if it's on Facebook just scrolling down. (Helen, 22, Assistant Weddings Coordinator)

What was identified was a form of news reception that was, as Boczkowski et al (2017) have suggested, homogenized within participants' general immersion and engagement with *Facebook*. Firstly, take Ben (24, Sales Assistant), who claimed that his news exposure was greatly determined by, ''the fact that I'm on Facebook and I'm flicking through it and I'm

literally immersing myself in Facebook''. In discussing her news reception, Frances (24, Beauty Therapist) similarly stated, ''I use Facebook lots, and lots, and lots. That's probably…my main [news source], Facebook''. Consequently, news engagement was situated, as Alhabash & Ma (2017) have identified, within a plethora of other uses and motivations that characterized most of the participants' *Facebook* activities:

> I also like to see what my friends are up to, my family – look at photographs if they've put any of their family on or friends. I do like to look at and debate about spiritual things on Facebook as well…yeah. Oh, I also…like animal things on Facebook, and I think you keep abreast of the news more on Facebook rather than I probably would on the news. (Emma, 29, Domestic Cleaner)

This form of reception was emphasized by a few of the participants' slightly disinterested tones toward the news, such as Ben who confessed, ''I never really put the news on to actually watch it''. None so was this truer than it was for Helen, who was generally apathetic toward the news and, throughout the 1-month period, did not consume a single piece of news content, or anything that pertained to politics such as the general election, or any wider public events outside of her personal life. Nonetheless, Helen claimed *Facebook* was where she primarily received news. This former point is to simply highlight the significance of the participant's incidental exposure – it must not be overlooked that several of the participants such as Frances, Emma, Colin (29, Personal Trainer), Adam (24, Teaching Assistant), and Gemma (30, Private Tuition), all displayed a keen interest in the news.

In reflection of previous literature, mobile phones appeared to be significant factors in determining this form of engagement, which seemingly proliferated the sense of immersion and exposure to *Facebook*'s 'newsfeed' and associative content, due to mobile phones' ease of access and immediateness (Boczkowski et al 2017; Chan-Olmsted et al, 2013; Svenningson, 2015):

> It's easier access I guess, and it's sort of because it's on a…wall like either a friend's wall. Also, your news feed on Facebook, it's easily accessible. So, it might be something that I'm not even looking at, but it might crop up and you think 'oh right, I'll read that'. (Frances)

Through discussion with the participants, it appeared that they were significantly dependent upon their mobile phones, which appeared to be ever-present within their daily activities, as Ben said, ''the phone's kind of just like an extension of you now''. As such, this engendered a form of habitual device and *Facebook* engagement, in which the participants were much more likely to be incidentally exposed to content. Many of the participants claimed to check their mobile phone and subsequently *Facebook* first thing in the morning, even upon awakening:

> I probably check my phone first thing on a morning, I'll get the kids breakfast and I'll have a quick flick through my phone. (Frances)

> On my phone I would wake up and check on my Facebook and read messages or anything through there and check my email. (Gemma)

For a couple of participants, this sense of habituality was so strong as to be an occasional absent-minded routine, such as Ben, for example, who confessed to accidently engaging with *Facebook* rather 'unthinkingly':

> Sometimes I'll close Facebook…and think 'oh, I'll go to Instagram', but then forget that I wanted to go to Instagram and go on Facebook, even though I've just come off it and I've seen everything, because it's just a habit to tap at that certain app…Sometimes you just click on it just as a habit, just to see what's going on and I don't even read half of it most of the time.

Similarly, Adam acknowledged a sense of 'unintentionality' or lack of 'direction' in his behaviour, declaring it as, ''just terrible time wasting, really. It's just kind of scrolling up and down and kind of hoping to find something interesting''. Again, regarding *Facebook,* David expressed a similarly dismissive tone, proclaiming, ''I don't find it beneficial'', but still nonetheless suggested using the medium and engaging with content daily.

4.3. Social Networks/Filters

It must be discussed, though, how the participants were incidentally exposed to content *within Facebook*, providing much more insight regarding the specifications of associative sources overlooked by previous research. All the participants received their content incidentally from,

what previous research indicates as, networks/filters constructed by a combination of *Facebook* sources (Hermida, 2012; Gritckova, 2016; Marchi, 2012). The current study supports the findings of Hermida et al (2012) and Marchi (2012) who indicate that these networks have a significant social orientation, with 'friends' and 'peers' being fundamental sources of youths' *Facebook* news information.

Over the course of the month, the majority of the participants overwhelmingly suggested that 'friends' and family were consistent sources of *Facebook* news, frequently making comparable claims such as: ''that was shared by someone on my friends list'' (Adam), ''it was a friend of mine who shared the thing, shared the article'' (Ben), and, ''it was actually my wife again that posted it on my timeline'' (Colin). Notice the emphasis on 'again' in Colin's statement which refers to previous sourcing from the same person. This was the case not only for his spouse, but also regarding contact with his 'druid teacher': ''she's my teacher at druid college and she'd put this up'' (Colin). This was the case for a few of the other participants – often receiving their news from a familiar 'friend' or family member. This often led participants, such as Emma, to source the same news institutions as a consequence of her *Facebook* friend's news habits. She was asked if there was any particular reason why she frequently engaged with content from *The Independent*, to which she responded, ''No, I think it's because…one of my friends that shares that quite a lot''. Supplementary to sourcing from 'friends' and family, participants also frequently sourced their news content from *Facebook* 'groups', 'pages', and 'forums' by 'liking' / following them (Van Wyngarden, 2012). These groups ranged from: (1) *professional & independent institutions*, (2) *political commentators/public figures*, (3) *user/fan groups*, and (4) *interest groups*.

Firstly, several of the participants mentioned following or 'liking' a few professional institutions for their news content, for example: *The Telegraph*, *Sky Sports*, *HBO Boxing*, *I Paper*, *Live Darts*, *The Huddersfield Examiner*, *BBC*, *Metro*, *The Guardian*, and *The Canary*. Adam was also found to be following and receiving news from the American conservative political commentator *Ben Shapiro,* as well as the British political activist and *Breitbart* editor-in-chief *Raheem Kassam*. Also, both David and Frances followed the far-right political activist *Tommy Robinson*. But, in support of Edgerly et al's (2016) findings, user-generated pages and interest groups were much more commonly found to be 'liked'/followed and engaged with throughout the participants, more so than mainstream sources.

Adam, Ben, and David, all being interested in sports, frequently sourced sports news content via user/fan generated pages and forums throughout the 4-week period such as: *Leeds United Away Days*, *Away Day Bible*, *Leeds Bible*, *This is Anfield*, *Give Me Sport*, *Progress Wrestling Fans*, *The Football Community*. Frances followed *The Traveller Movement* and *The People's Assembly Against Austerity,* and Emma, being spiritually inclined, followed and received informational content via a group entitled *The Gypsy Goddess.* Emma also 'liked' several groups relating to animal welfare, receiving informational content and updates regarding missing and ill-treated animals frequently, such as: *Animal Search UK*, *Untold Stories* and *PETA*. Helen also followed groups which, like both Ben and Emma, lined up with and kept her informed of her interests and hobbies such as *Love Vintage* and *Steven Brown Art*, just to ''kind of see if anything new comes up''.

It was determined in the literature review that previous research has remained relatively unclear regarding the relationship between sources within networks. The findings in this study provide some indication. The participants appeared to engage with professional news content through user/fan and interest groups, as well as 'friends', which served as *intermediaries* in the dissemination of this information. However, these groups appeared to provide perspectives on the news information that they shared, and a general *commentary* to news events overall.

For example, the page *Cabinet of Millionaires* was a frequent source of news content and engagement for Gemma. This page appeared to share links to online news media such as *The Independent, The Guardian,* and *Indy100,* for example, but with an accompanying comment; as well as posting user-generated content like music videos, which provided commentary on political events such as the general election campaign. Gemma described the group, providing some indication to its style:

> It's always got a slightly jokey slant to it, but it's got a heavy sort of 'this is what's going on' kind of thing. So, it's light hearted, but [with] a really kind of heavy undertone to it about what's going on in politics...His songs I wouldn't say are so jokey – not so jokey – but they have a kind of real strong message. So, like the last song he released was about, you know, 'Why are you avoiding our questions?' – you know, how [Theresa] May tends to avoid answering questions in like parlimentary question time.

The notion of commentary was further exemplified in the fact that a few of these groups encouraged discussion between users, as well as some primarily functioning as *forums*. For example, both being interested in politics, Colin and Gemma followed *The Labour Party Forum,* an independent unofficial page for users with a wide range of views to discuss and debate issues and policies. Moreover, Adam displayed frequent news sourcing and engagement with a group called *Wingy Boxing,* a closed-group dedicated to discussing boxing, which he claimed, ''is a particularly good group because it's quite well vetted and…you'll have a lively heated discussion''.

Moreover, as noted, these groups frequently shared user-generated content. Many of the items were frequently image-based, simple, lacking in detail and information, ideological, and controversial. These images were often humorous, a style which the participants displayed a distinct fondness for (Mor et al, 2015; Van Wyngarden, 2012; Vraga et al, 2014). The items were often mocking, satirical, and rather comedic, which many of the participants agreed with in their descriptions of them: ''it was just funny'', and, ''I was laughing my head off at it'' (Ben), ''it's funny more than anything'' (David). These memes, nonetheless, as Vraga et al (2015) have similarly identified, appeared to be politically mobilizing for a few of the participants who didn't necessarily have strong political interests. These included David and Helen, as well as Ben who claimed memes were one of the reasons he became interested in the general election campaign, in politics:

> I wasn't really bothered about politics…It's a strange one really – which came first, my interest in politics or my interest for memes?

Of course, much of the participants' engagement with this content was incidental, via their networks. So, we can in some sense consolidate the findings of Schafer et al (2016), Bode (2017) and Valeriani and Viccari (2017), along with the research of Vraga et al (2015), suggesting that incidental exposure can potentially mobilize youths toward the political, but that memes and humorous content can possibly increase the likelihood of such instances, proliferating the process.

4.4. Diversity of Perspectives/Sources

This leads us to investigate the motivations as to *why* the participants selected and engaged with some of these sources for news and what they valued about them – as there are already some indications being revealed in the discussion. Firstly, Bowe and Wohn (2016) identified that engagement with news through networks led to *diversity of perspectives*, and further research indicates that this could be a fundamental motivation, or at least a perceived value in youths' social media news engagement (Gritckova, 2016; Marchi, 2012; Svenningson, 2015).

In the final interview of this study, the participants were questioned regarding their values of *Facebook* news engagement, and, reflective of the existing literature, they suggested the platform provided alternative perspectives on news events, mediated through discussion and commentary of news content on the platform. Emma stated, ''you've got people's points of views…which kind of gives you an alternate view point rather than…what the media are feeding you''. Additionally, Adam, in discussing one of his primary interest groups/news sources on *Facebook,* claimed, ''it's good because…you're pooling a lot of news sources but…that's being sort of critiqued by people who are really kind of invested in the sport''.

However, in addition, there is some research which identifies that youths distrust mainstream/traditional news media (Banaji & Cammaerts 2015; Marchi, 2012) and, as Madden et al's (2017) research indicates, *diversity of perspectives* potentially placates and appeases this sense of distrust. Supporting, and rather significantly, several of the participants in this study expressed distinct tones of distrust when asked for their opinions about traditional news media. For example, Adam, in regarding mainstream news media said, ''First thing [that] comes to mind…is how kind of difficult it is to find the truth''. Additionally, Colin bluntly stated, ''[It's] full of b****cks because I know how biased it actually is''. Consequently, when asked how they think 'news' *should* function, all the participants indicated a desire for information 'transparency', claiming it should be unbiased and as factual as possible. For example, Colin said, ''it should be transparent. It should be the whole background of it, the whole element of it…Tell the whole story, not a part of the story''.

Reflective of Madden et al's (2017) indications, *Facebook* appeared to provide these participants with a mix of sources and perspectives, and (as per the discussed networks/groups) *commentary*, which potentially constructed a broader background of information and fuller

understanding of the news, quite possibly in appeasement of their suspicion of mainstream outlets. These groups also seemed to provide the participants with a much stronger sense of involvement and participation, even 'congeniality' (hence trust), in contrast to mainstream news media which may seem somewhat disconnected and inaccessible – indicating a desire to be much more engaged with news than simply consumption. For example, in discussing user/fan groups, Colin stated the following:

> I find them more reliable for my kind of news than mainstream, because… obviously I'm following them independently as a go to source or a friendly figure if you like. You can feel more engaged with them than you can like a major newspaper. (Colin)

This was also indicated in Gemma's discussion regarding the group *Cabinet Of Millionaires*:

> He's not a political group, he's a one-man army, but I met him on a bus going down to a protest against war down to London…the Syrian war. This guy is an absolute legend.

Moreover, there appeared, in the activity of a couple of participants, photographs which inferentially, by participants' claims and the quality of the images, were captured by citizens. There was one image which was engaged by both Emma and Gemma in the data collection period. This image, captured by a non-professional (seemingly a citizen), was a photograph of Jeremy Corbyn which reportedly provided information of Corbyn's activities surrounding the Manchester Arena terrorist attack. Emma provided context to the image:

> It's the fact that Jeremy Corbyn went to…the vigil last night in Manchester and he didn't turn up with an entourage or security, he just turned up to pay his respects to the victims. Whereas, he could have made it a political thing and said 'look at me I'm going to show my respects…maybe you'll vote for me now', but he didn't, he went in there quietly and it was just actually just a random person that took his photograph.
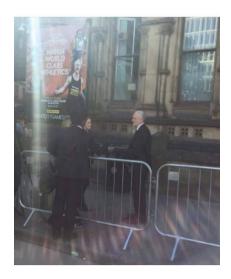
Figure 1: Jeremy Corbyn at Vigil. (Anon, 2017)

Gemma described how she came across it and, in a sense, reappropriated the image for her own means, further suggesting that the person who shared the image was the photographer:

> It came up in the Labour Party Forum which is a group I'm a member of, and the post was posted by a member of the group and it was one that they'd taken, so it wasn't something they were sharing…it's one he's taken, he took it…I asked him permission if I could share it and he said 'yeah'. So, I had to download the picture, copy his words and then repost it, and that's exactly what I did.

Examples such as this, despite their infrequency, further reflected and supported participants' distrust of traditional news media. It appeared as though the participants sometimes perceived this content as being more trustworthy, more real, as providing a genuine sense of insight, of *transparency*; *Facebook*, in one sense, cutting through the mass-media news narrative. Take the following example: Adam discussed how he was informed of the Manchester Arena terrorist attack directly from a *Facebook* 'friend', allegedly, preceding all professional coverage of the incident. In Adam's description there was an implicit suggestion of mainstream news media suppression, which social media e.g. *Facebook*, again, undermined:

> I think it was about quarter to eleven. This was a post from a friend of mine about the terrorist attacks that happened in Manchester last night and I…saw the post, Googled Ariana Grande and then I found out only through Twitter – no official media outlet – that there had been a loud bang, there's been an explosion. So, of course, with it being at Manchester arena it sounded slightly, sort of, you know, ominous…All I really got

was a load of, kind of, live Twitter reactions from…some of the people who I presume who were there or…people who had lived in Manchester who had heard…something or…whatever. So, there was nothing official at that point.

However, a couple of the participants, Ben and Emma, still considered these alternative sources as being 'biased', recognizing that their interest groups were significantly orientated toward their own perspectives; despite their un-acknowledgement of this fact, this was true for most of the participants, reflected in statements such as: ''it's kind of a similar opinion'' (Ben), ''it's…exactly my views'' (Emma). Frances, for example, shared her opinion on user/fan groups referring to one of her primary sources of political news during the general election campaign, *Cabinet of Millionaires:*

It's always biased, always biased…They've always got an agenda behind it. So, the Cabinet of Millionaires…he has the same political views as me, he stands on the same position [as] me, he attends the same protests as me…He's just speaking my speak and I know that, I'm not oblivious to it.

Similarly, Ben suggested that interest groups can, ''be quite biased for what you think, how you want to perceive something''. But, in addition, he also claimed, ''it can be something that you don't want to read. I think it works both ways really''.

What was significantly evident in this study was that the bulk of participants' followed-groups were synchronous to their *interests* and, as such, their *perspectives*. Many of the participants frequently implied that they followed certain groups and engaged with selected content *because they aligned with their own opinions* – as Gemma additionally remarked regarding *Cabinet of Millionaires*, ''he's feeding what I'm interested in''. These results are markedly supportive of the literature which indicates youths' migration to familiar perspectives; one such interpretation is that for those participants who had a keen interest in politics and a distinct sense of political identity, such as Colin, Gemma, Adam, Frances, and Emma, they aimed to confirm/authenticate their own political opinions (Bowe and Wohn, 2017; Weeks et al, 2017).

But, this fails to ignore those participants that didn't have strong interests in politics, such as Ben, David, and Helen. An arguably more accurate and simplistic interpretation is that this goes to show that interest groups are, first and foremost, exactly that: *interest supplements*.

Which, over the data collection period, appeared to keep the participants up to date through notifications, but also as forms of *personal expression*: a reflection of a user's identity on *Facebook*. Thus, it is unsurprising that, engaged within the context of news, these groups could be easily considered as ideological and markedly reflective of the participants' own beliefs.

4.5. Social Context and Expression

It is at this point in the discussion that some consolidation of the findings must be posed, to understand what the general pattern of the participants' *Facebook* news engagement appears to be. Before doing so, it will be necessary to highlight some of the main themes of participants' engaged-content, and what the main forms of interaction were. This will aid further analysis of the results, and, from here, a fuller interpretation can be provided considering what has been discussed so far. Firstly, the most prevalent themes of 'news'/information that were engaged with were (considering participants' networks/ selected groups) interest orientated: Ben, Adam, and David all receiving sports updates; Ben additionally receiving music updates; Gemma and Colin receiving political updates; Helen and Frances receiving more socially orientated updates; and Emma receiving spiritual and animal welfare updates. Additionally, regional news was occasionally engaged with amongst some of the participants. But, most significantly, news regarding the UK general election campaign and recent terrorist attacks were the most prevalent news themes throughout the 1-month period, amongst all the participants (Helen not included).

The findings support previous literature which finds 'liking' as a significant form of engagement amongst youths on *Facebook,* as a form of self-expression, which appeared to have multiple functions (Bowe and Wohn, 2017; Gritckova, 2016; Mor et al, 2015). For example, participants frequently 'liked' or 'reacted' to another user's posts to express their support and in turn reflect their own beliefs: ''I'm just 'liking' it to say 'yes I'm with you''' (Emma), ''I just 'liked' it to…show that support…for him'' (David); even sometimes commenting to assist another user in a debate: ''I felt he needed some support'' (Colin). A few participants went as far as to say that they were helping people to be 'informed' in regard to the general election (Van Wyngarden, 2012). Through assisting other people, participants were additionally expressing their own beliefs, even going as far as trying to influence other users' perspectives (Mor et al, 2017). Take Colin, for example, who frequently engaged with content concerning the general election to, ''help people see the other side'', claiming, ''[I] tried to give a different aspect on it, a different turn to sort of try and help people not just be tunnel

visioned''. Emma gave similar reasons regarding her engagement with animal welfare content, claiming, ''I try and share it so that – maybe make people aware''.

One image, 'liked' by Gemma, was styled in a rather satirical and critical manner of Theresa May's absence at a live TV debate during the 2017 UK general election campaign. Gemma provided context to the image:

> It was just after the TV debate which, obviously, Theresa May didn't attend. We watched that and it was just a bit of, you know, a bit of a laugh really. The fact that this is exactly what it was like, all the other main party leaders were there and she wasn't and so, you know, it's…like she was hiding, really, and I really liked what it represented.
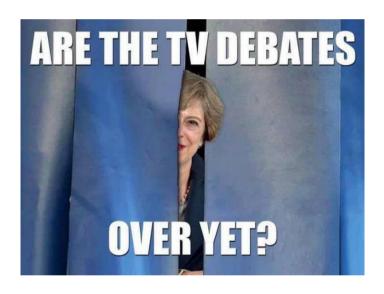

Figure 2: Theresa May. (Cabinet Of Millionaires, 2017)

Gemma was a passionate Labour Party supporter during the general election campaign. Clearly, examples such as the image above reflected and indirectly expressed Gemma's own political opinions. Gemma frequently shared content from *Cabinet Of Millionaires*. The group appeared to function as a 'mouth-piece' for her own political ideology (hence her confessions that such groups lined up with her own perspectives); a way for her to engage in a highly charged and disagreeable debate through a secondary 'commentator', engaging with another user's pre-existing content (Van Wyngarden, 2012) and using humour as the primary mode of expression (Vraga et al, 2015).

Although the literature has identified memes as significant forms of youths' news (political) engagement, the research is still rather limited in suggesting exactly how. In this study it was identified that many of the participants claimed that they didn't find memes necessarily *valuable* regarding news engagement (the general election specifically), and it was clear the participants didn't regard them as 'news', but instead suggested that they were merely a means of entertainment. But, in the wider context of the participants' engagement, memes appeared to function as, exemplified in the case of Ben, a form of social 'lubrication', a way by which to engage in a dialogue (Gasser and Cortesi, 2015) with difficult topics within a social environment. Simply, these forms of content reinforced and affirmed the participants' own perspectives, expressing them to others. For example, in discussing the anti-conservative meme below, Frances said, ''it reflects an aspect of truth *I* feel'', and, ''it kind of reinforces something that's sitting in with myself at the moment''.

Figure 3: VOTING CONSERVATIVE (Blogspot, n.d.)

In addition, surprising results were obtained in contrast to previous literature. Madden et al's (2017) findings indicate that youths are less likely to comment and share news content on *Facebook*. But, on the contrary, commenting and sharing were found to be significant forms of engagement for the participants in this study. Content frequently functioned as a 'spring-board' for commentary and further discussion. For example, Frances 'shared' the following *Metro* article regarding Emily Davison. Frances discussed the article surrounding the context leading

up to the general election. Again, it's apparent in Frances's statement that the text functioned as a form of expression by which to communicate her own beliefs. But, she also commented on the text as she was unsure of who to vote for, desiring to engage other users in a debate to get their opinions on the matter:

> I put this on vote day because I think it's annoying when people don't vote because they can't be bothered to vote – when people died so that women could vote…I also said that I was unsure of who to vote for because I didn't have a candidate for UKIP where we live, which is what I would have voted for if there had been a candidate…and then I just put what I thought and why I was confused this time and…I knew it would start a debate, but that's sort of what I wanted because I quite like to talk about it.

It's 104 years to the day since Emily Davison died for women's right to vote

She became a symbol of women's emancipation when she died of her injuries after throwing herself under the king's horse.

METRO.CO.UK | BY NICOLE MORLEY

Figure 4: 'Emily Davison died for women's right to vote' (Morley, 2017)

Mainstream news content on *Facebook*, as such, was engaged with much in the same way as a meme would be; the article condensed into a 'snapshot' and frequently accompanied by a comment from a friend's or 'liked' group's own (often ideological) perspective on the piece. In the following example, a news article concerning the Manchester Arena terrorist attack was used as a platform for humour by another user. Ben described the content and the additional user comment connected with the image:

> They shared an article about, obviously, a lot of Muslims marching to the Manchester arena to show support for the terror attack victims…They're holding banners that say,

'We heart MCR', which is, obviously, shortened for Manchester, and some guy, however, like it's not a funny subject, but he said, 'I didn't realise My Chemical [Romance] was so big in the…Muslim community', which I just thought was absolutely hilarious. It's good that he can actually have a bit of a laugh in, obviously, dark times.

Figure 5: 'A city united against terrorism'. (LADbible, 2017)

The important point to note here is that, although the primary content was an article, Ben, nonetheless, gave significant focus to the secondary content connected, in which he even confessed, ''I didn't actually look at the article itself''.

It was suggested in the review of the literature that previous research appears to indicate that youths use social media more as a means for providing social understanding to news, and less as a space for the consumption of news. In support of this notion, it has become evidently clear through this discussion that *Facebook* functioned less as a space for the consumption of news *information*, but rather news *commentary*; providing social context/understanding and, resultingly, *personal expression* (Van Wyngarden, 2012). This was exemplified by the fact that participants frequently claimed they didn't read the texts: ''[I] didn't actually read this'', or suggested only reading parts (Boczkowski et al, 2018; Boczcowksi et al, 2017), and had already heard about the event elsewhere, instead choosing to engage more so with the associated user commentary: ''it was more about the actual comment'' (Ben).

Fundamentally, *Facebook* was not primarily engaged with as a news outlet, hence participants' multiple reasons for engaging with the site, but as a space where the participants engaged with a *variety of information* within a social environment (Boczkowski et al, 2017), alongside various uses and motivations (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Describing the value of *Facebook*, Gemma said:

> you can see from one thing to another, you can see…something that's happening in another country, to then seeing something…that your neighbour might be up to…and celebrity life. You can see everything really.

Of course, when news is engaged within this context alongside other types of information, this has potential significant implications on how young audiences define/perceive news. Contemporary research identifies youths' current definitions of news as amorphous (Cortesi and Gasser, 2015; Madden et al, 2017), and the findings derived from this thesis are reflective of this: all the participants gave vague, relatively all-embracing definitions of news. The following are a few examples:

> just a form of getting information…whether that's misinformation or…correct information depends [on] where you find your source of media news from…it's a source of information to put it bluntly. (Colin)

> The release of information. (Adam)

> Information that is informative to the individual, from either an educational, political, or social interest background. (Frances)

These definitions appeared to be reflective of (as previously discussed) the participants' general desires and perceptions of *how news should function*: as *transparent*, free from manipulation e.g. bias, as a potential consequence of their distrust of mainstream news media. But, as recent research also stipulates, this may also be reflective of participants' conflation of news and social media information and characteristics (Cortesi and Gasser, 2015; Gritckova, 2016; Madden et al, 2017), in which news information is situated and engaged within *Facebook*'s newsfeed in parallel to additional forms of content. Of course, the participants often referred to some professionally curated content as, for example, a 'news article'. But, in parallel to this,

participants frequently engaged with user-generated and non-professional content via interest groups to be similarly informed. This may indicate that news, for youths, is less about a certain *category* or *type* of information, but much more analogous to the personal *process* of engaging, gathering, evaluating, and incorporating a variety of information from multiple sources, which may even go beyond *Facebook*.

Svenningson's (2015) research suggests that youths engage with *Facebook* news as a past-time, and that 'real news' is consumed elsewhere. Much in the same manner, in this study *Facebook* appeared to function as a supplement, an *intermediary*, prior to and proceeding participants' news consumption elsewhere, through additional news media, that possibly placates their distrust of mainstream news media. Participants were being made *aware* of an event firstly through *Facebook* and then seeking additional information through other media; or engaging with content, a news event, in a social manner on *Facebook* usually after hearing about it elsewhere. Ben, for example, said:

> If I want to actually think about something important and I want to research it, I'll actually physically go out and search it so I can find my own information rather than, like, tramming through Facebook seeing what other people have to say about it, which, obviously, I do because I want to see other people's, like, opinions on it.

Similarly, Frances gave an example in light of the London Bridge terrorist attacks, claiming she may see a user's post on *Facebook* then use the television to be further informed: ''someone might have put, 'oh it's horrible, my thoughts are with the families involved in London', and I wonder 'oh what's happening?', and I'll put the TV on to get more information''.

It was stated previously that Adam and Colin were the only two participants who used their laptops as opposed to their mobile phones to access *Facebook*. Using their laptops, it appeared that for Adam and Colin, the role of *Facebook* as an intermediary was much more *immediate,* as they indicated further news-information-seeking practices online that directly proceeded or was simultaneous to their engagement on *Facebook*. Colin frequently mentioned researching *Facebook* content further, through search engines such as *Google*, for example, much more than any of the other participants, apart from Adam who claimed:

> I'll usually see something on Facebook and then I'll probably read that article, search

for what that article's discussing, find another article, usually random, see if there's any discrepancies and then I'll go on and then I'll try and find some obscure website usually, and I don't know who it's been made by or if there's any political slant on it, but I'll usually find some obscure website that probably runs a small profit, if anything [laughing], and then I'll read that and see what they say. (Adam)

This calls into question the role of devices, and the environment in which those devices are used, in affecting various forms of engagement. Although unsurprising, participants often suggested engaging with content in various locations and contexts. For example, David, in regarding when and where he used *Facebook,* said:

If I've got a minute spare then I'll…look at it if I'm bored at work, then I'll have a check up, see if there's anything there…quick flick through…Or if [I'm] at home and I'm waiting for the kids that have gone to bed then I'll have a quick look through. Or if telly's a bit boring then I'll put it on then. (David)

Although the research is limited in what it can propose here, it's reasonable to suggest that these differing environments influence certain levels of engagement, which in some circumstances, in David's case at work, quite possibly limits an individual's attention to content and so restricts possible further news practices external to *Facebook*. In the case of Adam and David, it may be stipulated that using a laptop, quite possibly at home, is a more deliberate engagement with news as opposed to the instantaneous click of the *Facebook* app 'snatched' between daily activities.

4.6. Disagreement

Lastly, it must be discussed what consequences engaging with news through diverse perspectives and commentary had on the participants' own expression, whether such engagement engendered positive and fruitful discussion with news such as the general election campaign. When it came to disagreeable or counter-attitudinal content on *Facebook,* surprising results were obtained. Previous literature indicates that, in instances of political engagement, youths are prone to self-censorship on *Facebook* (Vraga et al, 2015), their expression 'restricted' by their networks (Bowe and Wohn, 2016) in fear of 'context-collapsed audiences' (Beam, 2017). Vromen et al's (2016) research found similar behaviour, and, pertaining to the

UK, gave some indication of what results were going to be possibly gained in this present study. However, in contradiction to this body of research, many of the participants showed a keen desire to enter and start debates, sometimes even arguments, as well as commenting on content with derogatory and contentious remarks – displaying an intentional willingness to do so: ''I was fishing for a reaction'' (David) – specifically regarding political affairs, such as the general election campaign.

One of Gemma's *Facebook* friends had created a comment-thread, asking for advice on who to vote for in the general election. Gemma commented, suggesting Labour. Another user also responded, criticizing the Labour Party with what Gemma considered as false information. From here, a highly charged debate had ensued. As Gemma described:

> I sat for a minute and I thought 'no she doesn't know anything about politics. That's a load of sh*t.' So, I just put a comment underneath, 'completely and utterly disagree with this unfactual information, please research'…and then this woman kind of started on at me…so we got into this whole kind of, you know…bit of a debate, and then another guy jumped in. I think he was a bit of a 'Corbynite', but he jumped in a bit further down that conversation and started spamming her with like statements of fact.

In another circumstance, Ben came across a clip from the *BBC*'s *Question Time*. Jeremy Corbyn attended the show in the lead up to the 2017 general election for questioning by the audience members. The clip focussed on a question put forward by a man who asked Jeremy Corbyn, ''Would you allow North Korea, or some idiot in Iran, to bomb us?''. Ben said he'd already watched the show prior to his encounter with the video on *Facebook,* but, in responding negatively to the video, engaged with the piece simply to comment with a derogatory remark:

> I just commented saying, 'you've got to feel sorry for this guy, he's obviously retarded'…I actually saw this particular clip on the BBC News before…I just felt the need to kind of comment and just say how stupid this guy really is.

The present thesis deemed it necessary to conduct more research pertaining to youths' news engagement on social media outside of the currently American dominated literature. This has proven to be a crucial stipulation, as results have been identified quite to the contrary of contemporary American research. As Mor et al (2015) hypothesized, more demographically

varied research may identify differences in political engagement on social media, across countries, due to possible differences in 'political climate'. The 2017 UK general election was evidently a very passionate topic amongst the participants (excluding Helen), which captured their interest throughout the 1-month data collection period. This was exemplified by the fact that participants Ben and David were the two lesser politically interested amongst the group, yet, during the 1-month period, they displayed frequent engagement with associated content, often expressing fervent opinions.

Throughout the 1-month period, most of the participants during the interview process often displayed agitated, frustrated, upset, and negative reactions towards political topics – as per the examples above. These emotions appeared to be proliferated by heightened pressure and threat of terrorist attacks around the time of the interviews – Manchester Arena bombing (22nd May 2017) and the London Bridge terrorist attack (3rd June 2017) – which was a common topic amongst the participants, often discussed and engaged with in connection to the general election campaign. When asked what they considered to be the most important political issue at the time, half of the group said terrorism, some also mentioning immigration associatively. Adam said the following:

> We have an immediate threat of terrorism, but I feel as though if a government were committed to getting a real grip on terrorist threat…it would be logical to think *that* government would also be committed to nurturing a healthy culture.

However, as Vraga et al (2015) stipulates, participants' personal sensitivities and proclivities towards disagreement must be taken into consideration. A few of the participants noted the potential for disagreement on *Facebook*, even bullying, noting a distinct distaste for this type of engagement – nonetheless, these participants still showed an enthusiasm for expressing their opinions. Consequently, several of the participants, such as Emma, focussed on the need for positive discussion and debate as opposed to argument:

> I feel quite often you do get attacked for your viewpoints on Facebook. I would say if you're not quite a strong character I suppose you can actually feel bullied into trying to think a certain way by other people, whatever it might be…on the news especially…like the politics thing…I don't mind hearing what other people have got to say, but for some reason when I say something they try and take my ideas away from me and come up

with logical solutions to why I shouldn't be voting the way I'm doing…I don't really think that's how it should be. It's good to have a discussion and put your viewpoints across, but to attack people over their viewpoints…I don't agree with that. (Emma)

It has been an oversight of this study in being able to determine whether the participants experienced the sense of 'context-collapsed audiences'. If they did, this didn't seem to affect their expression. The appropriateness of political engagement on *Facebook* must be considered. User/fan governed pages and interest groups appear to release information that is predominantly commentary based, often characterized by distinct 'voices'/perspectives, which can be ideological and contentious. This content already has the potential to initiate a hostile atmosphere and set the grounds for a, somewhat, degenerate discussion. Youths use this content to communicate their own beliefs and enter a dialogue with others, in which, as we have discussed, *personal expression* is a fundamental motivation in constructing social context for news. These groups correlate to a user's interests, and as such they fulfil a secondary role of reflecting a user's identity on *Facebook*. Consequently, if a user's sense of personal expression is challenged, a user could subsequently deem this as a threat to their personal identity on *Facebook*. The user may be much more inclined to respond defensively, and maybe even inappropriately, in which personal expression becomes an *imperative* at the potential sacrifice of developing *social understanding*.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how young adults engage with news on *Facebook*, adding to the existing literature on youths' social media news engagement. It was determined that previous literature was significantly dependent on participant reports e.g. interviews, as a primary method, without direct observation of youths' *Facebook* news engagement. This has resulted in research that lacks specific details regarding, for example, content and associative sources (network) specifications. It was also identified that the literature is largely constituted of American research. The current thesis aimed to address these issues by providing an additional supporting method e.g. observation of participants' *Facebook* 'activity logs', in juxtaposition of qualitative semi-structured interviews, within the context of the UK 2017 general election. Findings have been ascertained that, for the most part, support and consolidate the previous literature, and provide much needed clarification and detail regarding the *how* of youths' *Facebook* news engagement.

Firstly, the research found that incidental exposure was the primary means of youths' *Facebook* news reception. This appeared to be predominantly determined by youths' habitual device (mobile phone) routines and *Facebook* 'checking', along with *Facebook*'s newsfeed patterns. These incidents were 'streamed' to, and, in one sense, 'filtered' and controlled by the participants through the construction of 'networks' e.g. friends and 'liked'/followed groups – which consisted largely of user/fan and interest groups.

Some participants claimed these 'networks' provided a diversity of perspectives/sources to their news engagement, which appeared as an alternative to their general distrust of mainstream news media. However, it was more apparent that these networks predominantly functioned as *interest supplements*, keeping the participants up to date with their interests via notifications, and subsequently as forms of *personal expression* of the participants' *Facebook* identities/profiles. Consequently, engaged within the context of news, these groups aligned with the participants' own beliefs and perspectives. Most of the participants chose to engage predominantly with image-based content e.g. memes – which were often humorous, satirical, and even contentious and ideological – significantly pertaining to the UK general election campaign and current terrorist attacks.

The participants engaged with content primarily through 'liking' patterns, as well as comments and sharing; indicative of *personal expression*, appearing to reflect their own beliefs, ideas, and ideologies; as a means of commentary, indicating a type of engagement that develops social context/understanding of news events. As such, mainstream news content was often read impartially, or not at all, and engaged with much in the same way as memes. Most of the participants showed a willingness to be disagreeable, and sometimes purposefully contentious, provocative, and even offensive, which infrequently led to arguments with other users concerning challenging and heated issues, such as the UK general election campaign and terrorism.

Overall, *Facebook* was engaged with, less as a news outlet but, as a space for developing *social context* and subsequently *personal expression*; as (for most of the participants) an *intermediary,* complementary to, prior and proceeding, participants' news engagement through additional media.

This study needs much further replication to increase the validity of the findings pertaining to the UK especially, but also across countries with differing political contexts. It also needs to be investigated what consequences this form of news engagement has in regard to conventional news engagement values e.g. understanding of regional and world events, political knowledge, and even citizenship, for example. One oversight of this study has been the profiling of the participants' personal sensitivities and beliefs (in any truly effective way) towards debate and disagreement as well as how knowledge is best sought. This is one area of potential interest which may prove fruitful in understanding how youths conduct themselves within a political-social context and their news-information seeking practices. Although not a primary focus of this study, *Facebook*'s newsfeed algorithms appear to be a factor of significance and so, to understand in much more depth the relationship between incidental exposure and network/filters, and the dissemination of various types of content, this needs much more research.

In addition, it would be beneficial for future research to investigate two areas of potential interest: *news literacy* and *media literacy*, in regard to the form of engagement observed in this study. For example, to investigate the relationship between distrust of news media and subsequently developing *social context/understanding* of news, and degrees of knowledge regarding news institution practices. Additionally, to determine the correlation between youths'

varying levels of understanding and proficiency in media practices relating to this form of engagement. In general, it would be helpful for future research to conduct a much more systematic investigation of the relationship between devices, *Facebook*, and external news media, and youths' various combinations of these practices, as well as youths' understanding of news information, to understand how they potentially affect various forms of news engagement, and with what consequences.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Career	Education	Hobbies/Interests
Adam	Male	24	Teaching assistant	University (BA Performance for Stage and Screen)	Acting, Film, Music, Boxing, Politics
Ben	Male	24	Sales assistant (stove shop)	College	Music, Video Games, Movies, Sports, Playing Guitar
Colin	Male	29	Army (retired), Personal trainer	High School, Level 2 Gym Instructor, Level 3 Personal Training	Gardening, Spirituality, Debating (politics)
David	Male	30	Builders' merchant employee	High School	Sports, Darts, TV, Films, Family
Emma	Female	29	Cleaning business (owner)	High School	Spirituality, Nature, Socialising
Frances	Female	24	Beauty therapy business (owner)	College (MVQ Level 2 Beauty Therapy)	Family, Walking, Cycling, Shopping, Dining
Gemma	Female	30	Private tuition, Midwifery	University (BSC Hons Midwifery), PGCE, QTS	Writing, Reading, Travelling, Permaculture, Politics, Spirituality
Helen	Female	22	Assistant events coordinator (weddings)	University (BSc Psychology, MSc Child Psychology)	Weddings, Crafts, Interior design, TV, Films, Documentaries

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

<u>Preamble</u>

[permission to record]

[Consent form signing]

<u>Section 1 – Profiling</u>

[**The following questions are to be asked on the first interview only**]

[Age will be included in profile. Name will be left anonymous.]

Could you please tell me a little bit about your education, career and current occupation?

What are your interests and hobbies?

Are you a member of any group, club, or organisation?

How involved are you with your community? (Community groups, conservation, meetings etc.,)

What types of media do you engage with on a daily basis? Please discuss and provide examples.

What types of media do you prefer to engage with? Please provide examples; describe your experience with this/these media.

What types of media do you find most useful/beneficial for you and how so? Please provide example; describe your experience with this/these media.

What are some of the reasons you engage with these different types of media? What are your main interests and motivations behind your engagement? Tell me about some of the things you like to do i.e., watch, read, and listen to, via said media. Please provide recent examples and discuss.

- Most used/Preferred medium.
- Television
- Radio
- Newspaper
- Laptop
- Phone
- Other

Which device would you say you use most often to access Facebook, and why? Describe your experience with this device to access Facebook.

Section 2 (Main Set) – Activity Log Discussion

[**The following questions will be asked on all interview occasions, with reference to the participant's *Facebook Activity Log***]

Please show me what content you have looked at (read, watched, links clicked on etc.,) this week.

How did you come across this [these] item[s]?

- Friend
- News Feed
- Tagged etc.,
- Other

What were your reasons/motivations for selecting this [these] item[s]?

Describe you experience with this item. Discuss and share your thoughts and opinions on this [these] item[s].

- Item content
- Item style
- Informative/entertaining etc.,
- Objective, bias, unsupported, relevant

How did you engage with this item on Facebook?

- Liked
- Shared
- Commented on

Did you engage with this [these] item[s] further, in ways I have not mentioned, either through Facebook or by other means? If so, how and why?

- Youtube & Blogs etc.,
- Discussion
- TV, Radio, Newspaper (other media outlets)

What were your reasons/motivations for engaging with this [these] item[s], and the way in which you did so?

Which items were most interesting to you and why? Discuss.

Section 3 – News Discussion

[**The following questions will be asked on the final interview only**]

Could you please describe to me your experience with news; what news is like, what it involves etc., Please give some examples.

Could you please describe you experience with television, newspaper, and radio news; what these media are like/involve. Please provide examples and share your thoughts and opinions.

How would you define news?

How do you think news *should* function and why? (standards & values etc.,)

How do you usually access news? Please discuss and provide recent examples.

Are there any other ways in which you engage with news other than Facebook? If so, how and what are your reasons? Please discuss and provide recent examples.

What types of news are you interested in and why? Could you please provide some examples of news you have recently watched, read, listened to etc., that you found interesting. How did you engage with this/these news i.e. how did you hear about it, which medium/media, did you discuss it with friends/family etc.?

[If YES to the previous question] How does Facebook news function/contribute to your additional news consumption? Please provide an example.

Could you please describe to me your experience with news not curated by a professional news institution (i.e., user-generated content). Please provide examples and share your thoughts and opinions.

- Comparison to professionally curated news
- Do you actively seek it?
- How? Which media?
- Style and content
- Informative, valuable, objective, entertaining etc.,

Has user-generated news ever been valuable/informative for you? Please provide an example and discuss your thoughts.

Have you ever had a negative experience with user-generated news i.e.., false information etc.? Please provide an example and share your thoughts and opinions.

Are you interested in Politics?

To what extent and in what ways do you engage with politics?

What party did you vote for on June 8th and why?

What do you feel were the main political concerns/policies? In other words, what communal, regional, and global problems would you like to be addressed and why?

What, from the following options, would you say is the most important issue?

- Economy
- Terrorism
- Nuclear
- Changing international relations

- Other (provide answer)

What was the main way in which you kept informed of the general election? Please provide examples.

How did Facebook and other social media function for you regarding the election? Please provide examples.