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Do young people keep diaries anymore?: Instagram as life narrative

Abstract:

In this article, I ‘trouble’ mainstream moral panics about children’s social media use. Respondents were invited to complete a survey that asks them to reflect on their use of Instagram as a form of diary-keeping. At a time when there is much negativity around young people’s use of social media, I explore how Instagram might be used by young people as a mode of cultural participation. This case study promotes a more nuanced understanding of young people’s everyday life storying and communication practices, and their relationships to certain publics or anticipated readers.

Biographical note:

Kate Douglas is a Professor in the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Flinders University. She is the author of *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory* (Rutgers, 2010) and the co-author of *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation* (Palgrave, 2016; with Anna Poletti). She is the co-editor of *Research Methodologies for Auto/Biography Studies* (Routledge 2018; with Ashley Barnwell); *Teaching Lives: Contemporary Pedagogies of Life Narratives* (Routledge 2017; with Laurie McNeill), *Trauma Tales: Auto/biographies of Childhood and Youth* (Routledge 2014; with Kylie Cardell) and *Trauma Texts* (Routledge, 2009; with Gillian Whitlock). Kate is the Head of the Steering committee for the International Auto/Biography Association’s Asia-Pacific chapter.

Keywords:

Creative writing – diary – Instagram – social media – childhood – youth

Introduction

In May 2017, UK news publication, *The Independent* (and indeed many other mainstream news presses) ran an article titled ‘Instagram Ranked as Having the Worst Effect on Young People’s Mental Health, Report Finds’ (Blair 2017). The article explained that:

The Royal Society for Public Health and the charity Young Health Movement conducted a survey in the first few months of 2017 of almost 1500 young people (aged between 14 and 24) in Britain surrounding their social media usage ... They were asked to score how each social media site impacted a list of 14 health and wellbeing issues including anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep, bullying and ‘FoMo’ (Fear of Missing Out) (Blair 2017).

We are probably all too familiar with the doom and gloom that so often surrounds young people’s use of social media. As Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti summarise, contemporary cultures, particularly those in Western domains, ‘have a deeply contradictory relationship with young people engaging in public modes of self-representation’ (2016: 4). Those unhappy with young people representing their lives and selves online are often concerned about safety (whether physical or emotional): about predators and bullies. Other concerns stem from notions of privacy: too much self-disclosure can (again) be dangerous, but is also self-indulgent and ill-mannered. Discussions about social media use ‘run concurrently with broader cultural discussions around, and constructions of, childhood innocence, and link into cultural anxieties and moral panics around the need to protect children and youth from danger and harm’ (Douglas and Poletti 2016: 5).

Parents and teachers are rightfully concerned with issues of on-line safety, digital footprints, privacy, bullying, social media addictions, and the self-esteem and mental health issues which so commonly arise in discussions of young people and social media. As a parent of three myself – two of whom are teenagers – I share these concerns. Social media seems to open teens up to a plethora of vulnerabilities. But I also want to ‘trouble’ the moral panics that so often surround children’s social media use. Young people’s engagements with social media go beyond many of the assumptions made about this use; social media can be time-consuming, mind-numbing, and damaging, but it can also be creative, empowering, and community-forming. And it can be everything in between. Binaristic debates are not useful here: we need a more nuanced consideration of this fast-shifting creative, cultural terrain.

Research into social media use is highly interdisciplinary, and my area of interest is life narrative studies: the various ways that people tell non-fictional stories about their lives across varied forms and genres. There has been much interest from life narrative scholars on social media as a type of life narrative, and most of this research has been directed towards what we might learn about contemporary life narrative practices and texts from looking at social media (Arthur 2009; Cardell, Douglas and Maguire 2018; Douglas and Poletti 2016; McNeill and Zuern 2015; Morrison 2014; Sorapure 2015). And internet studies researchers and sociologists, for example, have completed research on young people’s use of social media as socio-cultural practice, and looked at behaviours and desires associated with these practices (Boyd 2014; Buckingham

and Willett 2006; Charteris, Gregory and Masters 2016; Kofoed and Larsen 2016; Lapenta and Jorgensen 2015; Marwick and Boyd 2014). What is perhaps missing from this discussion is an analysis of social media textuality *as* life narration: as producing creative texts (though sometimes ephemeral) that, when analysed, will allow us to think further about the ways that young people desire and engage in life narrative via social media.

When young people use social media apps, they represent their lives and produce creative texts, however ephemeral. Do children keep diaries anymore? In asking this question, I want to use the example of Instagram to consider if, how, and why we might consider Instagram as a contemporary form of diary, filling the gap that once might have been occupied by the paper and pen, lock-and-key diary modes of previous eras. How might Instagram function as a diary-like, creative storytelling medium for young writers? And how might researchers support young people to see what sorts of creative or life narrative practices they can engage in and produce on social media?

Archiving childhood

This pilot project and associated research forms part of a larger collaborative project (with Ashley Barnwell and Kylie Cardell) titled: ‘Australian Childhood Diaries: from the Archives to the Internet’ (2018–20). Our project identifies, analyses, and conserves diary texts written by young Australians. Children’s voices are often marginalised or even missing from historical records of childhood. To address this gap, our project aims to showcase the value of children’s daily accounts – in both print and digital formats – to enhance our knowledge about experiences of childhood. We are collaborating with cultural heritage practitioners and youth stakeholders to collect, index, and curate publically accessible databases of Australian childhood diaries.

As interdisciplinary childhood and youth scholars (such as boyd 2014; Cardell, Douglas and Maguire 2018; Charteris, Gregory and Masters 2016; Kofoed and Larsen 2016) continue to show, working with child-authored texts presents many and varied challenges for researchers that range from ethical, moral, and legal questions to practical, creative and intellectual choices and dilemmas. Central to these questions, for us, is a desire to be inclusive and collaborative – to engage young life writing practitioners in our research processes, to share ideas and diverse understandings of the diary, and to explore children’s creativity when it comes to self-representation.

These questions have led us to the Instagram case study. Our sense, from the research, is that social media apps Snapchat and Instagram are central to the ways that young people communicate with their networks and share aspects of their lives with these networks. But we need to ask these young life narrators to tell us about their practice and what it means to them.

Background: Instagram as life writing

In the twenty-first century, social media has been a primary means by which many young people network with peers and share aspects of their lives. Young people, those aged 25 and under, but particularly teens are the most frequent users of photo-sharing applications such as Snapchat and Instagram.¹ Katharina Lobinger and Cornelia Brantner note that, within social media: ‘photo sharing has become a pervasive routine communicative act’ (2015). Quick and disposable photographs or ‘snaps’ have become an integral part of instant messaging, where the photo conveys at least part of the message communicated. And as Jett Kofoed and Malene Charlotte Larsen observe ‘Photography has become networked due to the fact that most people in highly mediatized societies carry smartphones with cameras which allow them to take photographs wherever they like, and not least, to share the photos via relevant social media apps’ (2016).

Social media has allowed young people to bypass traditional modes of publishing and has offered private and public self-representations, including creative representations of their lives, interests, cultural consumption and production, and so forth. As Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti contend, the internet has become one the most central spaces, if not *the* most significant space ‘for hosting young people’s life narratives during the 2000s’ (2016: 21). More particularly, social media platforms (such as MySpace and blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) have facilitated, indeed coaxed diaristic practices from young people’s use of these platforms.² These sites and apps, the representations they offer and the texts they create, ‘should be considered a type of diary for the digital age’ (Cardell, Douglas and Maguire 2018: 159). Kylie Cardell notes the ways in which we might redefine the diary in light of changing technologies and media sources and uses. Historically, Cardell proposes, the diary has predominantly been thought of as ‘intimate, personal writing ... long associated with private lives, secret knowledge, and the threat (or promise) of self-exposure’ (2016: 4). But in the twenty-first century, the diary is, ‘a diverse and shifting genre ... a performative space, a print genre, a digital platform, a behaviour regime, a smartphone app’ (3). We can think of youthful social media practices as reflecting diaristic desires: to document life, to hide or share secrets, to archive, and perhaps also to destroy information that, in retrospect, you do not want people to read.

At the time of writing (late 2017-early 2018), Instagram and Snapchat, and to a lesser extent, Facebook, are the primary sites on which young people (in Western contexts such as Australia) network and share aspects of their everyday lives with their peers. On Instagram, curated photographs offer a means for constructing a life narrative; over a period of days, weeks or months, a story forms – maybe chronologically, possibly non-linearly. Valeriya Safronova, writing in the *New Yorker*, offers a summary of how Instagram has become a life narrative practice for a generation:

Instagram has become a calling card, a life résumé of sorts: ‘This is me. This is my life. Jealous?’

A scroll through a typical feed is likely to reveal improbable images of just the right artisanal pizza, attractive couples drunk in love and eyebrows ‘on fleek,’ all captured in perfect light and enhanced with various editing tools.

Life becomes a never-ending junior varsity ‘Vanity Fair’ shoot, and the pressure among Instagram’s regular users to present idealized images of themselves has only increased as celebrities have inundated the platform with their own envy-evoking posts (2015).

Some estimates have up to 92 percent of US teenagers going on-line every day, and half of these teens are thought to be using Instagram (Safronova 2015). Instagram is a ‘storytelling medium: it engages users in acts of narration through selection, curation, and narration. Instagram’s affordances depend on fragmented (brief) visual/textual content serially uploaded, and a convention of social media culture’ (Cardell, Douglas and Maguire 2018: 160). Aimée Morrison refers to the features and potential uses of apps like Instagram as ‘affordances’ – the types of uses the app allows and encourages from its users (2014: 119). Morrison also refers to ‘coaxing’ – the ways that apps asks for certain types of context and representations from users (119). We can see this happening on sites like Instagram in which certain norms for self-representation emerge strongly (though shifting rapidly).

The pilot study: Instagram, life writing and publics

Methodology

The pilot study consisted of an on-line survey from which we wanted to find out more about whether our young respondents used Instagram like a diary.³ The aim of the pilot was to test the survey questions and see what preliminary insights we might gain from the responses to enable us to take this research further.

The methodological approach has its foundations in interdisciplinary life narrative studies and internet studies; its precedents include studies such as Kofoed and Larsen (2016) who surveyed adolescents to consider the methods and motivations behind Snapchat use. Kofoed and Larsen’s is a youth-centred study: its methodologies open and reflexive to the responses from the youth respondents, and this was something that the present study was also committed to. I do not want this to become another example of adult surveillance of youth cultures, but, a genuine consideration of the new ways that young creators are contributing to life narrative texts and practices.

I am interested in the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of young people’s use of Instagram: the life narrative texts produced, what motivates their production, and how young people use this life narrative platform, for instance, what characterises young people’s use of Instagram? What sorts of texts are produced? What sorts of life narrative or diaristic practices and desires are evident? As noted in previous research, young people have made significant contributions to life writing over centuries:

While technologies have made self-representation, through varied cultural modes, has been happening for as long as people have lived ... self-representation and the telling of stories from life are powerful components of and drivers of human communities and cultures. What differs across time and context is the extent to which the writing practice is self-directed – a private activity where the process is driven by the need for self-understanding in the individual – or public-directed, where a life writer records

their life and what they seen around them with a real or imagined audience in mind (Douglas and Poletti 2016: 5).

Many young people have a desire to tell stories about their lives and share these stories with publics; Instagram is a vehicle for exploring this desire. What new behaviours and desires are motivating young people's self-representation on Instagram? How might these new practices come to influence life narrative scholarship?

Sites like Instagram and Snapchat have communication as one of their main functions: a means for live chat and storying. But Instagram also affords users with a (potentially) static page to post, annotate, and leave photographs that will tell a story about their lives. Much self-conscious curation of the self happens on Instagram. In looking at examples from young people I want to consider the types of creative self-curation that young people engage in when representing aspects of their life narrative on Instagram.

'Mains' and 'Privs': anticipating audiences and positioning privacy

The pilot study was a qualitative questionnaire, and the subjects were 10 adolescents, located in Adelaide, South Australia, aged 15 to 16 years. Though this is a small sample that can only offer limited insights, this size is appropriate for a pilot study that might lead into other research. The participants were recruited through the project's Facebook group. Five participants identified as female, five as male. Most of the participants (70 percent) had been using Instagram for more than two years. The survey questions were numerous; in the interests of brevity and focus, this discussion considers the different types of Instagram accounts that these young people use and how they engage these accounts to tell stories about their lives. These accounts become new subgenres of youth life narrative for our consideration.

As Cardell, Douglas and Maguire note, there is a trend towards young Instagram users, particularly young women, having more than one Instagram account: 'mains' and 'privs' (2018: 162). The 'Priv' (sometimes referred to as a 'finsta' or 'fake insta', 'spam' or 'backwards' account) would have smaller number of followers and the intention of more intimate interactions and disclosures.⁴ Priv accounts assume a sympathetic audience, and promise a less-constructed self and life narrative. But inevitably, young people, like all other life writers, write for an anticipated readership (whether by choice or compulsion). And yet, there is something potentially very exciting and rebellious about the Instagram Priv that marks it as a new mode of creative life narrative practice. It offers a 'hack' to Instagram norms that Instagram has (not surprisingly) embraced (Instagram allows users to switch easily between two accounts). This is 'a strong example of the ways that young people are driving changes to social media apps' (163). It is useful to consider they ways that young social media users, as creative practitioners, might deploy mediums like Instagram to suit particular desires for telling and sharing life stories.

Findings

In the pilot study, half of the respondents stated that they had two Instagram accounts. These two life narrative texts are thought to do or achieve something different for the producer. When asked about the number of followers they have on their main versus private accounts, the numbers were starkly different. On the main Instagram, the number of followers ranged between 100 and 850. For private accounts the number of followers ranged from 25 to 120. The diversity in these numbers prompts some fascinating interpretations. For instance, these number could be broken down further to, for instance, show if those with the largest number of followers on the main account are the same people with the highest number of followers on the so-called 'Private' accounts. The high versus low number of followers on each of the account types suggests that young people are using them differently (however the platforms might be coaxing the users to respond). But the boundaries between private and public might be difficult to control and maintain, for instance, as friendship networks evolve, anticipated audiences shift, and if conventions around Priv accounts change.

The notion of what is private and what is public is a key issue for this study. As Laurie McNeill and John Zuern argue, 'definitions of 'public' and 'private' remain highly contested terrain' (2015: xi). And, for instance, as Lapenta and Jorgensen note,

One of the characteristics of the Internet era is the way it changes the modalities for public and private life. The Internet extends the public sphere with online services and an infrastructure in which life and practices are recorded, made trackable and shareable (2015).

Privacy is 'no longer a social norm' (Lapenta and Jorgensen 2015). Thus, young people experience notions of private and public life very differently to previous generations, and as a result, overly simplistic, even traditional notions of private and public lives prove insufficient. And this may complicate the Priv, and users' sense of control over it. It creates paradoxes such as the propensity for mass- (and possibly over-) sharing of information about the self, then radical deleting practices that erase any trace of (for instance) the fourteen-year-old self by the fifteen-year-old self. In their (focus group) study of teens' use of Facebook, Lapenta and Jorgensen found that their participants principally used social media to share information about their lives and activities and were 'very conscious about protecting their image/self-representation and flow of information amongst their peers, friends and family, whereas potential privacy risks related to the state or to private companies received limited attention' (2015). In other words, notions of privacy extended to families and peer groups, but not much further; privacy is principally about 'personal empowerment and control' (Lapenta and Jorgensen).

The pilot survey asked, 'If you have more than one account, how do you use these different accounts?'. The responses were as follows (all answers are presented verbatim):

One is for all of my friends and one is for closer friends
 Backwards and main
 One's more personal
 One's a fan account and the other is for friends to see what I'm up to
 One includes many of my friends. The other is just my friendship group

As previously discussed, the value of the Priv is that it allows for the construction of different selves: one more public (larger school or social networks) and one more intimate and everyday. As Felicity Duncan notes, teens tend to move away from apps or sites that they think adults are using, hence the movement away from Facebook, towards Instagram and now Snapchat, ‘young people are actually transitioning out of using what we might term broadcast social media – like Facebook and Twitter – and switching instead to using narrowcast tools – like Messenger or Snapchat’ (2016).⁵ At a time when young people are being constantly cautioned about digital footprints, the Priv account makes sense: it potentially allows young users to let down their guard (if only a little) and share different types of photographic stories than they might do more publically. For instance, one of the respondents in the survey suggested that while they posted photographs in their ‘main’ account once a month, they posted in their Priv account at least once a week.

Laurie McNeill and John Zuern use the term ‘auto/curators’ to refer to the ways in which life narrative becomes visible through the various decisions we make on social media – from what we post, who we follow, to what we ‘like’ (2015: xvi). I asked our survey respondents questions about the quantity and type of content they posted on their Instagram.⁶ Despite most of the respondents having been on Instagram for over two years, most users cited having only ‘7-20 photos’ on their main account. However, those users who suggested that they had a Priv account, four respondents cited between 22-35 photographs on this account with one user suggesting they had 150 photos on the Priv Instagram. So, it seems fair to speculate that Priv accounts might be a more conducive space for diary-like storytelling amongst smaller publics. There is something about a Priv account that prompts a higher quantity of postings and this is likely in anticipation of the public that the user is anticipating sharing with. The Priv public is thought to be a receptive public: more like-minded, and perhaps less likely to judge if more personal disclosures are made, or if the friend posts often. It is also likely that the Priv account allows for more creative expression as young people seek to construct and share a life narrative, in sharing photographs of selves, lives, and ‘likes’. Young Instagrammers are able to experiment with sharing diverse types of information, and offering different levels of disclosure.

The stories we tell: Instagram, creative assemblage and erasure

When asked about the type of photographs they post on (their main) Instagram the highest ranked response was ‘Photos of friends’, the second was ‘travel photographs and photographs of places’. The higher-ranking for these categories of photos does indicate that this is a life narrative, locating the self and identity within culture and within relationships. As Madeline Sorapure reminds us, on-line self-representation is, by nature interactive (2015: 268) The interactivity here includes sharing photographs between users, tagging and so forth. There are also dedicated apps to pair with Instagram that allow young people to juxtapose and overlap multiple photographs together to tell a story (such as Flipagram and Picollage). Such sites encourage modes of auto-assemblage where different mediums work in tandem to construct a life story.

When asked about the type of photos they might post on a private account, responses were:

Random pics and more pics of myself and my life
Personal photos
More personal photos
Pets and poems and rants
Lots of photos of my friends and I being crazy. Private jokes that only we will understand. Lots of everyday stuff

The commitment to, or insistence on ‘the random’ is eternally fascinating because it is unlikely that these photos, shared with peers, are at all random. But the recurrence of the word ‘personal’ is important, suggesting that Priv accounts are constructed as, and assumed to provide, a more intimate, trusted space to share ‘private jokes’, ‘pics of myself and my life’, ‘photos’, ‘everyday stuff’. The language here, around readership and content, and around habitual practice, speaks strongly to the conventions of the diary genre – of a text we might connect with every day or week to document and validate our existence through the sharing of everyday information about our life.

When asked ‘Are there any kinds of photos you would not post?’, four respondents referred to ‘inappropriate photos’, two referred to ‘revealing’ photos and one said ‘nudes’. The other two responses were ‘one’s that’ll make other people offended or uncomfortable’ and ‘photos that my friends wouldn’t approve of’. There is a pattern here regarding these users’ awareness of propriety and of the genre of life narrative they are engaging in – the limits of self-representation now. And perceived readership is important to this discussion. It would be fascinating to take these questions further in future research – to think about the extent to which the Priv, as a trusted space, shifts ideas about privacy and propriety and the limits of the form. For example, what are the ramifications when the conventions of the Priv are transgressed? Is there something more ‘priv’ than the Priv, for instance, Snapchat, in which conventions differ again, and if so, how are these spaces deployed differently by users?

When asked ‘Is there a reason why you would only have a certain number of photos on your account at any given time?’:

Done thing
I don’t know
So I keep my Instagram relevant
Aesthetic
I like to have quite a few photos on my private account but not as many on my public account. Most people I know do the same. People delete photos from their public accounts that are no longer important to their lives or are embarrassing.

When asked, ‘Have you ever deleted photos from your Instagram? If yes, why?’ Four answered ‘no’, the other responses were as follows:

Yes I don’t want new friends to see photos of me in year 7
I delete photos all the time so my feed stays fresh
Outdated
Didn’t like them anymore

Yes because I don't like the way I look

Yes because it's photos that aren't important any more

So, it appears users often delete photos to meet form and peer-group conventions. Again, we can see the sorts of self-curation (where chosen or imposed) that young Instagram users engage in. As noted,

young Instagram users have come to use the app and its storying tools to perform and construct content that reflects an awareness of their publics and the potential implications of content sharing. Many teenaged users adhere to cultural norms, patterns and aesthetics for Instagram: you should only display six photos at a time (all other photographs should be deleted), or you should not have any photos older than six months on your feed (Cardell, Douglas and Maguire 2018: 162).

The shame or embarrassment we might feel reading a childhood diary or looking at awkward family photos becomes more immediate on Instagram. There are trends emerging towards particular types of curation, practices and norms for what is included, excluded, and deleted from Instagram at this cultural moment. And of course, these trends mean that young users are responding to the cultural templates set down by their peers or by celebrities. These are self-conscious users – aware of the potentially negative consequences of circulating their self-image, and deeply aware of the ways in which this life narrative practice is a part of their identity construction.

However, there are significant cultural-historical implications in such practices, because it feels as though young people are, increasingly, leaving little trace of themselves and their personal histories. This could be triggered by the sorts of (previously mentioned) moral panics around digital footprints. If many young people are choosing to delete photos from their Instagram, or post very few photo, this might reflect a fear of leaving an unflattering or incriminating digital footprint and the consequences of doing so. As Duncan notes: 'Having grown up with these platforms ... students are aware that nothing posted on Facebook is ever truly forgotten, and they are increasingly wary of the implications' (2016). Teens engage in complex management of their self-presentation in on-line spaces; for many college students, platforms like Snapchat, that promise ephemerality, are, as Duncan argues, 'a welcome break from the need to police their online image' (2016). Duncan explains this shift:

Increasingly, young people are being warned that future employers, college admissions departments and even banks will use their social media profiles to form assessments. In response, many of them seem to be using social media strategically... [for instance, by using] multiple profiles. They carefully curate the content they post on their public profiles... and save their real, private selves for other platforms (2016).

But there are consequences for the increase in ephemeral modes and self-erasure. For instance, in May 2017, 22 people, most of them teenagers, were killed in a bomb attack on the Manchester Arena, following a concert from pop singer Ariana Grande. In this, and in other instances of mass tragedy affecting young people, social media sites become spaces for communal mourning and remembering. As Scaachi Koul notes,

It's a natural urge to try to understand the lives of people who die senselessly...The internet has provided a surprisingly intimate glimpse into the lives of many of the victims of the Manchester attack [...] Teenage girls rarely get control, not in life, and certainly not in death. Teenagers document their lives... because it gives them a kind of agency over their own narratives... The very things we throw back at teenaged girls as noxious self-indulgences, from selfie to the recording of daily minutiae, are the things we look for when unexplained tragedy hits (2017).

In such instances, we are grateful for the traces left behind. The documents of young people's lives that reflect their cultural engagements, desires, and fears, are crucial in informing our understanding of young people's histories more generally.

Conclusion

A small, pilot study like this one can only yield very limited results, but our goal is to open a conversation about the ways emerging social media practices might be considered forms of creative and empowering diary practice for young people, and to build some methodologies for future life narrative research. In this pilot research on Instagram, there were many instances where the texts and practices produced were diaristic, offered insights into norms and trends forming around these practices, and revealed some of the goals and desires inherent within Instagram practice. For instance, the wide use of the Priv account reveals the ways in which young people use Instagram creatively to engage, construct and present different aspects of the self for the different audiences anticipated. The other major trend was curation in the form of deletion: usually deleting old photographs from the account that were perceived to be embarrassing or 'out of date'. As I have argued in this paper, the implications of such practices are that they potential erase aspects of young people's cultural history (which has consequences for the individual and for collective youth cultures).

At a time when there is much doom and gloom associated with young people's use of social media, particularly in relation to the potential dangers of these practices, the survey questions (and responses) did not take up such issues, choosing instead to investigate and reveal aspects of the life narrative practices engaged in. But since social media forms and trends shift rapidly, future research must consider more dynamic ways to gain data, for instance, focus groups. Of the many other studies that I read on young people's use of social media, I was persuaded by those who used a mix of surveys and focus groups to engage with young people. I have a fifteen-year-old daughter and when I talked to her about this survey, she, with suspicious tone, asked 'what exactly is it that you are trying to find out?' (My sense that her tone was suspicious might relate to my own insecurities about researching from the outside, and my research being an imposition). Focus groups might make our aims more transparent to our respondents and allow them to engage with us more directly and openly, and perhaps drive the questions in productive and youth-centred ways.

We need to also think about Snapchat. All our respondents in this survey said they also used Snapchat and I suspect that many use the two apps in tandem to achieve different things, for instance, in making different types of texts, constructing different versions of the self, and engaging with diverse publics. On Snapchat, 'online

expressions are *not* automatically recorded or archived, content cannot be duplicated (unless receiver takes a screenshot or if sender saves a copy to the phone's camera roll before sending)' (Kofoed and Larsen 2016) So, as Kofoed and Larsen note, 'Young people share photos frequently ... On Snapchat young people often employ a higher level of self-disclosure and have reduced self-presentational concerns compared to other social media platforms' (Lobinger and Brantner 2015).⁷ Is Snapchat, with its 'playful and dialogical exchanges' through selfies (Kofoed and Larsen 2016), life narrative? The presence of the curated self-image which assumes some symbolic significance. Snapchat's wide use as a means for adolescent self-representation and self-disclosure makes it of interest to us. The ephemeral texts produced, and the seeming anti-archival impulse it reflects is something is something that demands further investigation.

Our goal is to work *with* young people on this project, rather than making this a project *about* young people. Life writing is something most people have an 'urge' to do (albeit differently). So, I want to advocate for young people's right to do so without fear and without reproach. In considering these life narrative practices and the texts they produce, we must go beyond the binaries so often associated with studying childhood and youth – in which child/youth subjects are either spectacular or troubling—to consider the nuances of their life narrative practices. In doing so, we may learn something new about how young people might draw upon diaristic self-representation and life narrative for a plethora of different reasons and potential outcomes.

Children have the right to remember and preserve their heritage, the right to do so on their own terms (with adult support and protection), and to do so variously, considering trends, cultural and technological developments. If we do not support our people to do so, we are going to lose children's stories and thus heritage as so many young people are erasing their digital footprints and creating only ephemeral life narrative texts. I hope that this case study will promote a more nuanced understanding of young people's everyday life storying and communication practices, and their relationships to certain publics or anticipated readers.

Endnotes

1. As Gry Hasselbalch Lapenta and Rikke Frank Jorgensen note, 'the notion of 'youth' is often used in policy-making, in media accounts and in business development as symbolic constituents of the future student, consumer, employee, citizen as well as the transformation of social and organizations norms of the internet era' (2015). When young people produce or consume internet texts and technologies, labels such as 'Generation Y', 'Millenials', 'The Net Generation' and 'Digital Natives' have been used to connote the difference between youth engagement and the engagement of older age groups (Lapenta and Jorgensen 2015).
2. Of course, things change very quickly on the internet. As Cardell, Douglas and Maguire note
 In 2003 Madeline Sorapure published an article in the journal *Biography*'s then landmark special issue 'On-line Lives' about on-line diaries and sites. She revisited this article for the 2015 'On-line Lives' special issue and in the new article she explains how of the thirteen on-line diaries she referenced in the original article, 'only four are still online, and only one... has current entries' (2018: 267).

Almost all the hosting sites are now gone. But as Sorapure explains

of course, these online diary sites have disappeared because of the intense popularity of other online venues for self-representation ... The proliferation of social networking platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest – provides a range of venues, genres, mediums, and communities in which to perform acts of self-representation (2018: 267).

3. This research was conducted with the approval of the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee, Project Number 7539.
4. Tellingly, most of the available information about these accounts comes from web safety sites and articles promising to provide parents some insight into the secrets and subterfuge inherent in young people's social media use, for example, *The Guardian* reports on 'Finsta' in an article clearly aimed at parents of account holders as does the parenting website *Kids Privacy* in 'What parents need to know about Finsta/Spam Accounts'.
5. This is not to say that teens do not have Facebook accounts, they do; they just do not use them as much as they use Snapchat and Instagram (in that order).
6. According to Lobinger and Brantner, there are three reasons why young people share photos: '1. Sharing photos in order to talk about images; 2. Sharing photos in order to communicate visually; 3. Phatic photo sharing' (2015).
7. As Lobinger and Brantner suggest

Snapchat is a site for intimacy in that pictures of double-chins, ugliness and self-exposure are shared... Instagram where the pictures tend to be more polished, neat and perfects'. Snapchat, with its 'high-frequency interactions' is more conducive to visual conversations or messaging than what we might normally think of as life narrative. In fact, 'adolescents do not refer to Snapchat as 'sending a photo' as much as they refer to the act of 'sending a message'... has taken over the function of IM or text messaging (2015).

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