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'It is an attitude': the normalisation of social screening via profile checking on social media

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ABSTRACT

Daily life has been pervaded by surveillance, not only in the ways in which information is gathered about us but also in how we perceive and experience monitoring in our everyday lives. Contemporary surveillance and its normalisation hinge on us actively engaging with, negotiating and sometimes initiating an array of monitoring practices [Lyon (2018). *The culture of surveillance: Watching as a way of life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.]. In this context, this article examines young people's understandings and deployment of social media profile checking – that is the practices of covertly looking at someone's profiles on social media platforms to gather and/or corroborate information about this person. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with young people, the article explores how social media profile checking has become taken for granted, not only encouraging surveillance practices as part of social media interactivity but also producing specific understandings of social screening. Combining insights from Foucault and Bourdieu's works, the article argues that the normalisation of profile checking needs to be understood as a specific type of practical knowledge of the social world which is embedded in broader neoliberal governmentalities and legitimises a greater social sorting of interpersonal sociality.

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Introduction

Daily life has been pervaded by surveillance, not only in the ways in which information is gathered about us but also in how we perceive and experience monitoring in our everyday lives. Contemporary surveillance and its normalisation hinge on us actively engaging with, negotiating and sometimes initiating an array of monitoring practices (Lyon, 2018). In short, surveillance has become a 'way of life', not solely exercised as strategies of control and risk management but also as a convenient and playful part of mediated reality and relationships (Lyon, 2018). Everyday modes of engagement with surveillance also interact with 'surveillance imaginaries' (Lyon, 2018) which provide shared understandings, expectations towards and a sense of legitimacy to these practices. These imaginaries are often shaped by media discourses (see, for example, Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2019)'s analysis of the coverage of the Snowden revelations).

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In this context, increasingly pervasive forms of monitoring have permeated personal relationships including family and parenting, romantic relationships or friendships (Andrejevic, 2007; Brooke & Ngai, 2019; Chambers, 2013; Lambert, 2016; Leaver, 2017; Tokunaga, 2011; Trottier, 2012). Research has examined peer surveillance on social media platforms using different terminology to describe these practices including ‘lateral surveillance’ (Andrejevic, 2007), ‘participatory surveillance’ (Albrechtslund, 2013) and ‘social surveillance’ (Marwick, 2012; Trottier, 2012). Social surveillance and recording are not new and did not start with the digital (see Humphreys, 2018). However, these forms of monitoring have arguably been magnified and reshaped by social media platforms’ technological affordances which enable an easier and faster access to large amounts of information, as well as more broadly by the ‘logics’ of social media (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Indeed, interactivity and connectivity on social media platforms are built upon visibility and (self) monitoring (Andrejevic 2007; Lyon, 2018; Marwick, 2012; Trottier, 2012; van Dijck, 2013). It is important, however, to note that these practices are not solely a technological by-product but are embedded in contemporary society and in particular within a pervasive culture of surveillance and broader neoliberal narratives around efficiency, optimisation of relationships, management of risk and individual responsibilisation. As Lyon (2018) pointed out social media surveillance can ‘often seem like a soft set of activities, [and] inconsequential’ but these forms of monitoring ‘contribute to social-cultural transformation’ (p. 4). Some scholars have argued that social media surveillance has played a part in rendering legitimate and routine types of monitoring that were once considered ‘borderline stalking’ (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 228) and in generating a greater sorting of social life and interpersonal sociality (Trottier, 2012). So far, however, research has tended to overlook the ways in which social media surveillance – and in particular profile checking – are inscribed in the everyday, and how these practices have become taken for granted, not only encouraging monitoring practices as part of social media interactivity but also generating specific understandings of social screening.

This article addresses this gap by examining the anchoring of a culture of surveillance in the personal realm via the vehicle of social media profile checking that is the practices of covertly looking at someone’s profiles on one or several social media platforms to gather and/or corroborate information about this person. The article begins by reviewing research on social media surveillance in the context of personal relationships and the emergence and normalisation of monitoring practices as part of wider neoliberal discourses and values. The article then briefly outlines Foucault’s work on power and neoliberal governmentality and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, demonstrating how combining their approaches provides a useful analytical lens to examine the ways in which profile checking practices are inscribed in a practical knowledge of the social world while recognising that these practices are embedded in and co-constituted by broader neoliberal forms of government based on the logics of efficiency, optimisation and calculation. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 32 young adults aged 20–25, this article analyses participants’ practices and understandings of profile checking as a normal part of interactivity on social media. Overall, it argues that the use of social media profile checking in interpersonal relationships has produced and legitimised understandings as well as routinised forms of social sorting.

Social media interactivity as surveillance

The pervasiveness of digital technologies in everyday life has exacerbated and fed into a culture of surveillance, affecting people's everyday lives but also enabling them to engage with, initiate and negotiate (albeit in a limited way) different forms of surveillance (Lyon, 2018). In particular, social media platforms' infrastructures and technological affordances including persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability (Boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2018) have played a significant role in the emergence and increasing normalisation of surveillance. However, the Western contemporary culture of surveillance is not limited to technological components but is deeply driven by political and corporate ideologies and interests (Zuboff, 2019). Indeed, social media platforms, often presented by corporations as neutral (Gillespie, 2010), are purposefully designed to encourage a culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) while systematically extracting users' data, turning it into commodities and selling it to third-party companies to make profit (Fuchs, 2014; Helmond, 2015). These practices, distinctive features of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019), have now become taken for granted and often are perceived as a trade-off for participation to social media (Gangneux, 2019a; Kennedy, Elgesem, & Miguel, 2017).

Research has shown that users – and young people in particular – are more concerned about horizontal surveillance and the correlated ability to control information about whom is seeing what than top-down forms of monitoring (Boyd, 2014; Raynes-Goldie, 2010; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). Young people deploy an array of strategies to manage their online identities and activities in relation to imagined audiences on social media and negotiate visibility and various forms of monitoring (Brooke & Ngai, 2019; Gangneux, 2019a; Lincoln & Robards, 2017; Marwick & Boyd, 2014). In this way, young people routinely negotiate, initiate and engage with surveillance practices on social media. In addition, institutions such as family, school and workplace also played an important part in disseminating and normalising forms of monitoring including vetting, information gathering practices and social media surveillance (Andrejevic, 2007; Brooke & Ngai, 2019). Young people, for example often learn from family members or/and teachers to expect social media screenings from future employers and to carefully curate their identities online (Brooke & Ngai, 2019; Hedenus & Backman, 2017; Lincoln & Robards, 2017).

In his work, Andrejevic (2007) argued that at the core of surveillance in the personal realm lies the ideal of the enterprise, a model in which we are expected to monitor one another, relationships have become managed, chances for social and economic success optimised, productivity enhanced, responsibility taken, and risks reduced (p. 239). Further, Chambers (2013) pointed out that monitoring practices in the context of friendships or romantic relationships are inscribed in 'today's new ethos of elective intimacy' (p. 139) which emphasises choice, compatibility and mutual benefit. This new ethos not only masks the power and social relations in which these relationships are embedded (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age) but also reinforces understandings of personal relationships as aligned with the logic of the enterprise and driven by principles of optimisation, profitability and efficiency. In this way, the ethos of elective intimacy and the broader logic of the enterprise permeate understandings and practices of friendships across online and offline spaces. For example, in her study of friendships and online filtering, Standlee (2019) examined students' practices of conducting social media investigations of potential friends, in particular with regards to political and social attitudes, to determine whether to continue

a relationship. These practices, she contended, ‘create social and political homogeneity that are viewed as desirable and even essential’ (p. 771). Such practices of filtering are by no mean new and research has long shown that friendships thrive on perceived social similarity (Jamieson, 1998). However, the partial ways in which people present themselves on social media can result in ‘increasingly narrow views of what constitutes sameness and difference’ (p. 782). Standlee (2019) argued that filtering practices reinforce echo chambers within a technologically integrated social environment. While this might be the case, it is important not to overlook how these practices are also reshaping understandings of surveillance in the context of personal relationships.

Social media platforms enable people to ‘research others before they decide whether to invest themselves in a new relationship’ (Miller, 2011, p. 165) and in the context of dating to maximise chances to find a partner. In this way, the normalisation of surveillance practices in personal relationships is also deepened by the expansion of dating websites and apps such as Tinder and the growing commodification of relationships (Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2016; MacLeod & McArthur, 2018). Against this background, users have progressively learnt to bypass the contrived character of the platforms and online presentations and grown ‘reflexively savvy’ in order to avoid deception or being seen as dupe (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 233). In other words, users have internalised imperatives of screening and ‘electing’ and are deploying monitoring strategies to assess ‘the behind the facade reality’ of potential friends/dates (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 233), generating and rendering legitimate social sorting. Social surveillance and in particular profile checking on social media illustrate more broadly the emergence of what Beer (2009) has described as a ‘classificatory imagination’ (p. 998). Combined with sophisticated understandings of the contrived character of online presentations, the classificatory imagination draws on broader neoliberal rationalities based on the logics of efficiency and calculation. That is to say that profile checking not only rely on an active engagement with surveillance but also with imaginaries relying on ideological understandings connected to the model of the enterprise. Research, however, has tended to overlook the ways in which social sorting via social media profile checking is inscribed in and normalised by broader neoliberal narratives about optimisation, efficiency and management. Drawing on Lyon’s work on the emergence of surveillance as a way of life, this article argues that it is essential to examine the complex ways in which surveillance practices but also specific understandings attached to social media profile checking encourage and normalise a greater sorting of social life.

In the following section, I briefly review Foucault’s work on power and governmentality and Bourdieu’s theory of practice and how both lenses can be combined to examine the complex ways in which social media profile checking practices are inscribed in a practical knowledge of the social world while recognising that these practices are embedded in and co-constituted by broader neoliberal forms of governmentalities.

Examining profile checking practices using Foucault and Bourdieu

Foucault’s work on disciplinary power- and in particular his reworking of the metaphor of the Panopticon (1977, 1980) – has often been used to understand surveillance (Manokha, 2018). According to Foucault, disciplinary power relies on hierarchical observation and normalising judgement, which produce ‘a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish’ (1977, p. 184). Foucault understands

surveillance as a power relation working through visibility and based on classification and differentiation. His early work has been repeatedly criticised for overemphasising top down hierarchical forms of surveillance and focusing mostly on the ‘gaze’ of the surveillance (i.e., the watchers) rather than the surveilled (see Haggerty, 2006). While the Panopticon metaphor when deployed in a narrow way can be limiting, Foucault (1980) understands power more broadly as dynamic, disperse, and productive forms of government. These forms of government generate specific ‘regimes of truth’ with which individuals actively engage and that inform how they understand their relation to others and to themselves. In his work, Foucault examined neoliberalism as a specific and dominant form of government of the self and others which actively constructs and diffuse a social fabric in which ‘the basic units would have the form of the enterprise’ (2008, p. 148). In other words, neoliberal forms of governmentalities are constituted by and produce discourses of truth and intertwined subjectivities based on regulatory principles taken from the model of the enterprise, namely competition, differentiation, efficiency, risk management and calculation. Thus, surveillance, its different modes of engagement and the imaginaries attached to it, need to be examined as part of broader neoliberal forms of governmentalities which constitute and normalise it (Gane, 2012).

While Foucault’s work helps to better understand surveillance within the broader power relations in which it is embedded, Bourdieu’s (1984, 1998) theory of practice and his work on social classification provide a useful analytical framework to explore the practical expressions of neoliberal forms of surveillance. Bourdieu’s theory is based on the concept of the habitus which describes sets of ‘transposable dispositions’ produced by ‘conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). The habitus in turn generates practical schemes of perception and appreciation functioning as instruments of reality construction, as principles of vision and division of the universe in which [social agents] act (1998 p. 80). To put it differently, social actors in their everyday practices and interactions spontaneously decode others’ dispositions (or habitus) through their own schemes of perception and appreciation. These processes in turn shape social encounters by ‘discouraging socially discordant relationships [and] encouraging well-matched relationships’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 243). Bourdieu argues that these practices of decoding – which he described elsewhere as ‘practical mastery of classification’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 472) – are embodied forms of practical knowledge of the social space and of one’s place within it, generating sentiments of immediate affinities with people who have similar dispositions. This practical knowledge of the social world, of its implicit rules and social expectations – what appear to be ‘self-evident’ and ‘common-sense’ (1998, p. 56) – is referred to by Bourdieu as *doxa*. According to him, *doxa* is ‘an orthodoxy, a right, correct, dominant vision’ which results from ‘a politically produced relation, as are the categories of perception that sustain it’ (pp. 56–57). In this way, Bourdieu’s theory allows to examine how neoliberal forms of governmentalities are appropriated by social agents and translated in a practical knowledge of the social world and of their position within it. Bourdieu’s work has been very influential in the field of digital and media communications in particular to investigate digital inequalities and the reproduction of social and cultural capital through social media platforms (for an overview see Ignatow & Robinson, 2017) but has been neglected in surveillance studies (except for McCahill & Finn, 2014).

Combining insights from Foucault and Bourdieu allows to recognise the normalisation of social media profile checking as a *specific type of practical knowledge* of the social world

(a doxa) which is profoundly embedded in *broader neoliberal governmentalities*, in turn legitimising routinised social screening in the personal realm.

Methodology

This article draws on empirical data collected during 32 in-depth face-to-face interviews with young adults aged 20–25 ($n = 19$ women and 13 men) between October 2014 and October 2015. The research examined the meanings that young people ascribed to social media platforms as well as their uses of the platforms in relation to the different contexts of their everyday lives. The research explored more specifically the ways in which young people deployed as well as understood practices of peer monitoring and profile checking through social media platforms. Participants were recruited via posters and leaflets in university campuses and youth venues in Glasgow and using snowballing techniques. Among participants, 12 were studying, 10 were combining study and work, eight were working, one was unemployed, and one was in training. A large proportion of them ($n = 28$) were undertaking or had completed an undergraduate course which gives an indication of participants' relative privilege and class position. It is important to highlight that the study captured the experiences of a limited and specific population of young people and therefore its findings cannot be generalised to all young people (see Gangneux, 2018 for a detailed overview of the sample). All participants used Facebook (albeit more or less actively) at the time of the interview and a large number were also active on Instagram ($n = 21$), Twitter ($n = 20$) and/or Snapchat ($n = 14$). Interviews lasted approximately between one hour and one hour and a half. In the second part of interviews, participants were asked with their consent to log into their Facebook accounts and in particular to their Activity Logs and Search Histories. The former were used as prompts to elicit discussion about their engagement with Facebook drawing on specific examples from their recent activities while the latter were set much later in the interview to provoke specific discussions on searching and profile-checking practices. Both prompts were devised to generate thick data regarding young people's understandings of social media and encourage them to reflect upon their practices (see Gangneux, 2019b for a discussion on the use of digital prompts in interview settings). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and the data generated encoded using thematic analysis (see Gangneux, 2018 for a comprehensive overview of data analysis).

In the following sections, I begin by exploring the narratives of risk management associated with social media profile checking in the context of flat share and study. I then examine the deployment of profile checking as part of prospective friendships and romantic relationships, arguing that it has led to a more pervasive doxa (practical knowledge) of screening in the realm of personal relationships. The last section analyses the ways and extent to which social media profile checking has become normalised both in practice and in discourse.

Strategies of risk management: getting 'background' information

Social media profile checking was repeatedly reported by participants in the context of flat-sharing. In these situations, checking someone's profile was described as appropriate and sensible in order to be 'on the safe side' and to gauge the trustworthiness of prospective

flatmates. Eva, for example, described how she looked up the person she had to share a flat with prior meeting her:

Like the first time I went to university and I was assigned a flatmate so like I'm going to be living with this person so it'd be nice to know, you know I might investigate that [social media profiles] a little bit. (Eva, 25)

Interestingly, Eva used a terminology associated with security checks and described her practices as 'investigating' someone before offsetting it by 'a little bit'. In a similar situation, Annie (21) reported looking up the Facebook profile of a friend of a friend whom she had agreed to host for a few days. She explained that although she trusted their mutual friend, she had to 'find out about her through Facebook' before sharing her living space with her. These practices which can be understood as 'vouching' – the transferring of trust via horizontal forms of surveillance (Westcott & Owen, 2013) – were largely based on assessing social cues and forms of social sorting. Dylan (23), for example, looked up prospective flatmates' social media profiles prior to meeting them and reported seeking for information about where they were from and what topics/where they studied. Luke (21) who had looked up his flatmate's profile on Facebook explained how doing so made him 'more confident' as he knew from her profile that they shared a similar sense of humour and taste in music. Others described looking at pictures but also information about schools, workplaces, friends, and more broadly information about what people had liked (e.g., pages) and what they 'were like' (e.g., posts, frequency of posting, topics of posts, writing styles, etc.). These practices were often referred by participants as getting 'background' information as part of an *informal* process of vetting. Benjamin, for example, explained:

We were looking for a new flatmate and we were on Facebook, we just wanted to know, it is not so much that you would use that against the person but it is kind of ... to know a bit of background you know, like kind of ... preparing yourself for whatever person might be coming in. (Benjamin, 25)

Benjamin here carefully rationalised profile checking and the circumstances under which he perceived it as acceptable by emphasising the fact that he would not 'use it against the person' and would only look for 'a bit of background', distancing himself from these practices.

The risks associated with sharing a living space were constructed in terms of safety/trust but also as 'social risks' connected to social embarrassment. This is reflected in Benjamin's account of using social media profile checking as a way to 'prepare yourself for whatever person might be coming in'. Other participants also perceived profile checking as necessary to manage and reduce social risks when meeting new people in the context of sharing a space or working together. Emma, for example, would routinely check people's profiles on social media platforms:

I generally do that *every time*. Just for example now for the group project, because usually I don't feel very confident in group projects ... it is much easier to do ... to think by yourself and *to do this at home*. I wanted to see what sort of people I will be working with so I just looked at their profiles. Not very deeply, just to see who they are, where they are from and I didn't manage to see what they are studying because not all of them has stated what they are studying. (Emma, 22, my emphasis)

Emma described checking people's social media profiles as a systematic way to be more confident prior meeting them. Emma's account resonates strongly with Standlee (2019)'s description of filtering practices as 'doing homework' and Miller's (2011) ethnographic work on Facebook in which he found that the platform provided 'a buffer' which helped users to find out information about people without requiring any awkward or embarrassing face-to-face interactions (p. 165). Participants adopted a very proactive attitude towards managing social risks and used social media profile checking to gather information about people before meeting them, something that most justified as having to share a living space or work together.

Overall, participants' accounts of profile checking and what they described as background information in the context of flat-sharing and study were deeply embedded in and rationalised using neoliberal narratives putting a strong emphasis on one's responsibility to proactively anticipate and manage one's safety and perceived social risks. In this context, the majority of participants understood profile-checking as a legitimate strategy for managing risks. However, this was not the case of everyone. Luke, for example, felt that it was somewhat 'deceptive' while Benjamin described it as 'a borderline thing to do', demonstrating the existing tensions within the normalisation of these practices. While risk management narratives also appeared in the context of other relationships such as friendships or romantic relationships – these were often supplemented by more prominent narratives around the imperatives of compatibility and 'elective intimacy' (Chambers, 2013).

The doxa of screening: looking for 'an instant click'

In the study, a large number of participants described looking up dates and romantic interests on social media platforms to find out information about them, form a first impression and gauge common interests. Aaron, for example, checked his date's Facebook profile to find out more about her prior meeting her:

When I met with my ex-girlfriend – I obviously didn't know her prior to that – so I added her on Facebook and I looked up to see what books she was into, what films she was into ... just so I could create a conversation, create interests and discuss interesting topics because obviously you don't want to come across as boring and to have nothing to talk about. (Aaron, 20)

Aaron described profile-checking practices as a way to gather talking points at the beginning of a relationship and to feel more confident but while doing so also assessed shared interests and compatibility prior meeting her. The assessment of 'shared interests' (or taste) and formation of first impressions is a part of continuous processes of social classification which is inscribed in a practical knowledge of the social world (Bourdieu, 1984). Charlotte openly discussed using cues such as pictures or posts to form first impression about prospective dates:

I remember going on a date with someone who I haven't met before and I found him on Facebook (laughs). It is really interesting yeah when I think about it ... like it is quite strange because like the way you kind of ... , it would put you completely off surely if there were anything like any pictures or anything like that would just give a bad impression. Put you off straight away. (Charlotte, 23)

While Charlotte felt uncomfortable with doing it and talking about it, she also recognised that the practices had an impact of the outlook she had on the relationship. For Dylan social media profile checking became a way of ‘avoiding deception’ and maximising chances of success by sidestepping ‘blind’ dates. The study also found some evidence of gender differences with regards to profile checking in the context of dating in that young men tended to describe profile checking in more sexualised and visual ways than young women which is in line with existing research (MacLeod & McArthur, 2018). Here the practices of profile checking and screening were inscribed in a broader tendency of commodification of relationships (Hobbs et al., 2016). Existing research on digital dating has shown that this type of dating, often based on putting forward visual and presentational cues for others to quickly assess, reinforces social sorting based on class, race or education (Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Schmitz, 2017). While digital dating apps have deeply reshaped the ways in which people date and meet new people, it has also affected the ways in which personal relationships are understood more broadly.

In that respect, participants reported checking people’s social media profiles in the context of prospective friendships in a way not dissimilar to digital dating. Participants described partaking in profile checking as means to form or confirm impressions and to get a sense of whether they will ‘get along’ with prospective friends. In this context, social media profile checking practices were acting as a ‘proxy of knowledge’ (Standlee, 2019, p. 782) about prospective friends and in particular with regards to perceived taste and political attitudes. Importantly, it also reinforced routinised forms of social sorting upon which decisions to continue and/or put effort and time in relationships were made. Indeed, some participants discussed these practices as a way of optimising and assessing future relationships, in turn, avoiding investing time and emotions in relationships that were perceived ill fitted. Participants used social media profile checking as means to access what was often described as getting a ‘general overview’, a ‘head up’ the ‘headlines’ or a ‘glimpse’ about someone – either prior meeting new people or after a first meeting. Lucy (24), for instance, explained that she would look up friends of friends’ profiles prior meeting them ‘just to get an idea of who’s coming’. As for Dylan, he described checking people’s profiles and pictures on Facebook and Instagram to get ‘a grasp of what the persons are [and] to see if [he could] get along with them’. Participants reported looking at a range of information and social cues on others social media profiles including pictures, hometowns, schools, workplaces and interests, tones and frequency of posts, writing styles, content shared and so forth. Eva, for example, was not only interested in looking at pictures but also at the content of people’s posts, their ‘likes’, their writing styles or the links that they shared:

I’ll have a look at ... mostly the things that they’re saying. Err ... you take maybe a quick browse to a couple of pictures, I just mostly look through what they posted or shared or liked or whatever because you kind of feel that you can get an impression of what the person is like based on what they are interested in. (Eva, 25)

Eva’s impressions were formed by the accumulation and correlation of different information and social cues found on people’s profiles. She was conscious and well aware of the contrived character of self-presentation online and would try to assess others’ characters by looking at a range of visual, textual and activity-based information. Similarly, Natalie (20) discussed how she would form opinions of people based on how often they posted

on social media platforms as well as on the content of what they shared/commented on. This type of examination to assess 'the behind the facade reality' of potential friends (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 233) was even more apparent when David described looking up someone's social media profiles after meeting that person at a party:

I think he added me, and I looked him up and I realised he had Twitter as well, so I followed him on Twitter. But now I get more of an idea of what he is like, on Twitter he will make hashtags to make jokes, and I quite like that, people using Twitter for jokes, so I'll probably get along with him. I know what kind of person he is; I know what kind of music he likes because he always posts pictures of it on Instagram. And I know that he is also politically in line with me as well which makes me like him even more because he is talking about things I agree with in a humorous sort of way. (David, 24)

In doing so, David clearly looked for similar interests and shared ways of engaging with social media platforms as well as alike views with his prospective friend. David formed his impression in a very sophisticated way crosschecking social cues and using different platforms to assess the character of his prospective friend. David not only looked at markers of taste such as music or sense of humour but also at politically-oriented posts, likes and retweets. These latter types of content were often used by participants to assess the political orientation of prospective friends and effectively acted as social markers (see analysis of the relation between class habitus and political opinions, Bourdieu, 1984).

At the same time, the majority of participants were acutely aware of the limitations of forming first impressions using social media profiles:

Sometimes people post a lot of things but we meet up and they are quiet and sometimes it would be the other way around [...] so it doesn't always give you a good indication, yeah because they post about the person that they want to be so I don't tend to ... assume too many things (Emma, 22)

Like Emma, most participants used social media profile checking as a way to have a first idea about someone but not necessarily a definitive one. Interestingly, even though participants were aware of the limitations of these practices, checking someone's social media profile had become a normal – implicit or sometime explicit- part of starting relationships which fed back in complex ways into these relationships. Alex was the most open about social media profile checking and how these practices reshaped his approach to initiate friendships:

I think it is a good thing about social media that kind of breaks the ice between people, you know it is just back then when you did not have anything you had no clue what kind of people you meet. [...] Say you go to uni, you just don't know anyone but now with social media you can go onto people's profiles and see what they are interested in, what they do and that kind of breaks the ice a little bit and you feel like, it is almost like an instant click with someone. (Alex, 24)

Alex's description of profile checking as a way of obtaining 'an instant click with someone' reflects the underlying mechanisms of the enterprise that have permeated understandings of relationships (i.e., efficiency, optimisation, compatibility) as well as the normalisation and routinisation of social screening by looking for cues prior meeting people. Social media profile checking was clearly framed by some participants as a way of optimising relationships and avoiding deception. For some, it had become a form of practical knowledge ensuing from the pervasion of the logics of the enterprise in personal relationships.

Nathan (22) really expressed this imperative by explaining that he felt that his social media profile checking ‘skill’ (which interestingly he described as ‘Facebook stalking’) was not ‘good enough’ and that he should generally try to know and find out more about people.

The normalisation of profile checking: ‘it is kind of cool’

Some participants like David and Alex perceived profile checking in the context of personal relationships as useful and positive whereas other participants were much more reluctant to admit conducting these practices. This demonstrates that although profile checking might be routinely conducted, it was not necessarily normalised in discourse or seen as socially acceptable. Outside flat-sharing and study, profile-checking was often described as ‘being nosy’ or ‘voyeuristic’. Practices and perceptions of voyeurism have a long history in the Western world, however, both have arguably been reconfigured by new information and communication technologies as well as by the popularisation of reality television from the 1990s onwards (see Calvert, 2000), blurring the lines between surveillance, mass consumption and entertainment. Participants’ perceptions of profile checking reflected these broader transformations.

The legitimacy of profile checking was almost always constructed around notions of spontaneity and mildness to distance these practices from representations of ‘stalking’. Participants were careful to distinguish between ‘seeking for’ (perceived as creepy) and just ‘seeing’ information already ‘publicly available’. Annie, for example, emphasised how she would ‘just quickly look at pictures’ and ‘not scroll through all their things.’ In the same line, Connor (22) explained that he did not ‘dig into [people’s] history’ but only checked someone’s profile whenever he ‘noticed’ a person posting on his newsfeed. Participants had complex feelings towards profile checking which triggered guilt and self-depreciation (e.g., ‘I should have better things to do’) but also pleasure and a certain fascination as Amy explained:

At first I was a big snoop, and I liked to spy on people but I tried to stop it because *it made me feel bad*. But I do *enjoy* having a good snoop at people. (Amy, 22, my emphasis)

Amy’s account coincides with Koskela (2006)’s description of the ‘voyeuristic fascination’ of looking and the ‘moral landscapes’ of surveillance (p. 155). This is also reflected in Molly (20)’s understanding of profile checking: ‘you know you *can* do it, there is *nothing wrong with it*, it just *looks weird*’. Molly’s intuitive understanding (or practical knowledge) of profile checking exposes the dual character of these practices, i.e., the discrepancy between understandings of profile checking as legitimate (‘there is nothing wrong with it’) and perceived social norms.

Importantly, social media profile checking was also perceived by some participants as ‘fun’ and ‘cool’. For example, Olivia described it as ‘friendly stalking’ and as ‘kind of cool’:

It [looking up people] is kind of cool, like I know things about people, not things that I couldn’t know from asking but maybe I wouldn’t ask people but find out from Facebook. Just like what people are up to and just like generally keeping track from people, it is what I call like stalking it is not maybe in a creepy way but just like to see what people are up to in a nutshell. (Olivia, 23)

The terminology that Olivia used – such as ‘not in a creepy way’, ‘keeping track of people’ and ‘kind of cool’ – illustrates the normalisation of social media profile checking not only

in practice but also as part of a broader surveillance imaginary. In addition, social media profile checking was described by some participants as fun in the context of existing friendships. For example, during her interview, Natalie recalled how she checked her friends' Facebook profiles to find embarrassing information and play tricks on them. James discussed similar experiences of profile checking:

There have been times where for fun I went on someone else's page and went to the photos, and then if you click back you'll then see the first photo, like the first year since they've joined Facebook. [...] I'll do that just for fun. (James, 22)

These accounts illustrate how profile checking was not only embedded within risk management and optimisation imperatives but has also been re-appropriated by young people and normalised as fun and 'cool' in the context of personal relationships. The playful appropriation of profile checking as part of friendships participates to the broader normalisation of surveillance practices in a similar way than the playful 'tagging' function on Facebook and other platforms normalised and reshaped perceptions of Facial Recognition Technologies (Ellerbrok, 2011, see also Koskela & Mäkinen, 2016). Thus, the normalisation of profile checking takes place within neoliberal narratives *as well as* through playful everyday engagement with surveillance.

Furthermore, some participants put an emphasis on how profile-checking was connected to the logic of social media and their design. Benjamin, for instance, described scrolling and looking at people's Facebook profiles 'without even explicitly thinking about it'. Alice stressed the effects of the design of Facebook with regards to profile checking:

It is so easy I think to just ... like if someone associated with one of your friends posts a status and someone writes a comment and then it is so easy just to click on their names and go onto their pages and find out who they are, what they are up to; and then it is just sort of a domino effect, you end up like someone half way across the world, and you are like 'what am I doing?' I think everyone has done it at some point. (Alice, 22)

Other participants used terms such as 'flicking', 'scrolling down', 'clicking on' or 'browsing', illustrating how the design and features of social media platforms affected participants' uses of the platforms and normalised them as sites of peer surveillance. Tellingly, Poppy (21) explained that profile checking was what 'Facebook was for' while other participants characterised it directly as 'Facebooking' reflecting not only on the acknowledgment of profile checking but also the normalisation of these practices through the platform. As Bourdieu pointed out 'words make things, because they make the consensus on the existence and the meaning of things, the common sense, the doxa accepted by all as self-evident' (1998, p. 67). Profile checking has become to be described as 'Facebooking', a practice understood and commonly conducted and taken for granted by the majority of participants. This illustrates the solidification of a new type of practical knowledge (or doxa) embedded in the platform's imaginary and use as Benjamin explained:

It [profile checking] is just a thing that you do. We almost like *automatically* go and try to find out about that person and whatever. It is like you want to touch things, you cannot just look at a phone you want to take it in your hands, it is the same thing with Facebook, you just want to look up the person and see what the person looks like although it doesn't really matter, it is like *an attitude*. (Benjamin, 25, my emphasis)

The attitude outlined by Benjamin indicates the emergence of a practical knowledge described as ‘automatic’ that is constituted and legitimised by neoliberal discourses around compatibility, efficiency and management, by ideas around mass consumption and entertainment as well as by the technological affordances provided by the platforms, in turn reshaping practices *as well as* understandings of social screening as appropriate and legitimate in personal relationships.

Conclusion

Drawing upon in-depth interviews with young people, the article has demonstrated some of the ways in which social media profile checking has become taken for granted, not only encouraging surveillance practices as part of social media interactivity but also normalising understandings and routinised forms of social screening. Combining insights from Foucault and Bourdieu’s works, the article has contended that the normalisation of profile checking needs to be understood as a specific type of practical knowledge of the social world (a *doxa*) which is embedded in broader neoliberal governmentalities based on compatibility, efficiency and risk management. In this way, social media profile checking reshapes understandings of the part social sorting plays in the constitution of relationships, what Benjamin has faultlessly captured in describing profile checking as not only something that people do but as an attitude. This broader attitude reflects an active engagement with surveillance practices – the doing of profile checking – as well as with ‘surveillance imaginaries’ (Lyon, 2018) i.e., understandings and normative expectations with profile checking. This in turn lays the groundwork for the solidification of routinised forms and specific understandings of social screening in the personal realm. While the study provided in-depth insights on the understandings and practices of social media profile checking for a population of urban educated middle-class young people, more research is needed to explore whether other populations of young people engage with and understand profile checking in similar ways.

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