Many young people are routinely involved in normalized practices around heavy drinking, which they view as pleasurable, involving fun, and being sociable (Lyons & Willot, 2008). Indeed, hedonistic public displays of heavy drinking, while not the usual practice for all young people or in all national contexts, have become more common in many young people’s lives (Gordon, Hiem, & MacAskill, 2012). While such drinking cultures have traditionally been locally bounded, they are now increasingly mediated through online social networking practices. A burgeoning literature is documenting how young people regularly share stories and photos depicting drinking and drunken behavior on social networking sites (SNS). For example, Beullens and Schepers (2013) reveal the numerous positive references to alcohol use in young people’s social network profiles, while Cook, Bauermeister, Gordon-Messer, and Zimmerman (2012) demonstrate how young adults’ alcohol use is positively correlated with their total number of SNS peer ties, network density, and proportion of emotionally close ties. Although correlational analyses reveal little about causality, they are predominantly interpreted within a public health frame against mounting evidence of the sheer prevalence of young people’s peer-generated alcohol content, which is viewed as producing “intoxigenic digital spaces” (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010, p. 525)—online alcohol-promoting environments—that are potentially damaging to public health (McCreanor et al., 2013). For example, Egan and Moreno (2011) reported that 85% of the male undergraduate profiles they studied contained positive references to alcohol use, and argued that “such frequent references to alcohol on Facebook may encourage alcohol consumption” (p. 413). Further correlational analyses provide a degree of support for such claims, suggesting that greater prevalence of alcohol content on SNS is positively associated with a higher frequency of actual drinking culture, drinking photos, Facebook, attention economy, branded self
alcohol use among young adults (e.g. Stoddard, Bauermeister, Gordon-Messer, Johns, & Zimmerman, 2012).

Such analyses are being supplemented by a concern to understand how young people’s everyday online activities revolve around moral panics that segregate “youth” as a risk to overall physical, social, and mental well-being. Broader public health attention and concern from academia, the media, and policy makers? Why is this happening at this moment, and how does this relate to the “political, economic, and sociocultural changes” (Hall & Jefferson, 2006, p. xiv) of the current time?

Against this broader critical context, we present results from our qualitative study of young people’s drinking and its online display in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). Drawing on focus group data, we apply an interpretative epistemology to understand young Pākehā (European settlers to Aotearoa) and Māori (the indigenous people of Aotearoa) accounts of their online drinking cultures, and in particular their posting of drinking photos. While not wishing to minimize health concerns, our goal here is to explore why young people engage intensively with alcohol related content on SNS. This aim complements the “sympathetic online cultural studies” approach to SNS drinking displays developed by Brown and Gregg’s (2012) “insider” account, where the researchers’ status as “natives” produces a more in-depth, reflexive analysis of the complex cultural dynamics of pleasure and leisure practices. In a context where the “pedagogy of regret” (Brown & Gregg, 2012, p. 357) continues to ensure young people are often represented as foolhardy for engaging in online drinking displays, we draw on our qualitative data-set to explore the meanings young people themselves form in relation to their online social practices, their drinking practices, and related self-displays. Previous analyses of young people’s accounts of drinking to intoxication reveal drinking practices to be associated with pleasure and having fun with friends (Fry, 2011; Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Hackley, & Mistral, 2011), and as involving drunken adventures, caring for one another, and storytelling (de Visser, Wheeler, Abraham, & Smith, 2013; Vander Ven, 2011). Brown and Gregg’s (2012) analysis as participant observers suggests such practices are enhanced and extended through online activities. We were interested in whether or not this finding would be replicated within young people’s own accounts, and additionally in how the online environment produced on SNS might introduce novel dimensions to be uncovered and critically considered.

Moreover, following the impetus of the youth (sub)cultures approach developed in Birmingham’s Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies, we also argue that the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, cited in Hall & Jefferson, 2006, p. x) of the cultural phenomenon that results from rigorously examining young people’s multivalent accounts provides space for a conjunctural analysis. Here we aim to connect our interpretative analysis of why young people engage in online drinking displays to a “general social and cultural historical analysis of the social formation” (p. viii). The key research question becomes extended, moving beyond a straightforward consideration of “why,” to interrogate the broader problematic of why now? That is, why has “online youth drinking” become so prevalent on young people’s contemporary SNS profiles, and why is this attracting such concerted attention and concern from academia, the media, and policy makers? Why is this happening at this moment, and how does this relate to the “political, economic, and sociocultural changes” (Hall & Jefferson, 2006, p. xiv) of the current time? In addressing this broader conjunctural context, we
concentrate on two inter-related factors: the architecture and affordances of Facebook in particular (as the SNS site used most often and most regularly by our participants in regards to drinking and online socializing), and Facebook’s connection to a broader regime of neoliberal selfhood and self-branding. In contradistinction to conceptualizing young people as naive for engaging in drunken self-displays, we argue both of these factors actively encourage an on-going, recursive engagement in online drinking cultures. Moreover, they point to a wider set of power relations in which we are all enmeshed, to a context whereby young people’s complex and contextual accounts of their drinking displays, which we will argue reveal their efforts to continuously enact a “precarious popularity,” become symptomatic of a social order which provides them with a compelling rationality.

**Methodology**

Following ethical approval for the study, 24 focus groups (of between 3 and 7 participants) were undertaken with groups of friends. The use of friendship groups addresses some of the power imbalances inherent within research relationships (Wilkinson, 1998), creates a relatively familiar environment for people to share opinions, and enables access to collaboratively constructed meanings and understandings. Participants were recruited using a mixture of snowball and convenience sampling techniques. Interested participants subsequently asked their friends to take part in group discussions, so that friendship groups were determined by participants themselves. As groups formed, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the research objectives. A total of 105 participants aged between 18 and 25 years took part. In total, the research included 64 female participants (61%) and 41 male participants (39%). A total of 12 groups consisted of predominantly Pākehā participants (4 all female, 4 all male, 4 mixed) and 12 of predominantly Māori participants (2 all female, 1 all male, 9 mixed). NZ society has patterns of power relations established through the colonial history of the country. Sampling across Māori and Pākehā groups therefore fundamentally matters to the framing of our study. The life chances, experiences, and relationships of young people in Aotearoa are structured by fundamental differences, whereby patterns of privilege and discrimination favoring European settler populations are inscribed on the contemporary social order (Spoonley & Pearson, 2004). Our sampling also emphasized diversity within each cultural strand so that groups were drawn from both urban and provincial/rural settings and areas of different socio-economic status. Groups were run across 2011 to 2012 by a single female PhD researcher whose ethnicity matched the predominant cultural compositions of the groups (thus either one Pākehā researcher or one Māori researcher facilitated discussion). Groups were held in workplaces, homes, or university rooms. Participants signed consent forms and were assured of anonymity. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Discussions lasted 1-2 hrs, and were video and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Food and non-alcoholic drinks were provided, and participants received a small honorarium to thank them for their time.

Discussions were semi-structured with questions about friendships, socializing, drinking behavior, use of media and SNS, online self-display, and in particular views about displaying photos of drinking and drunken behavior online. Discussions were open-ended, free-flowing, and often broad ranging. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to examine the way participants constructed specific meanings about their socializing, drinking, and social networking. Transcripts were read numerous times and coded using a constant comparative method to derive thematic categories and examine patterns of meaning that arose from specific issues in participants’ talk. These themes were in turn read and re-read to examine discursive constructions, and these ways of speaking were explored across transcripts for consistency and variability.

**Why Drinking Photos? Young People’s Accounts of Drinking, Socializing, and Self-Display on Facebook**

Rather than preconfiguring the objects and sites of study, our interpretative approach was designed to remain open to exploring the varied SNS young people identified as relevant to their lives, and to diverse activities undertaken while online. However, across all our focus group discussions, the predominance of Facebook as the site of choice for young people’s online socializing quickly became apparent. Although intensity of engagement varied, all participants reported using Facebook. This result is broadly consistent with wider research on social networking in Aotearoa. For example, 95% of people under the age of 30 report using an SNS, with Facebook being “clearly the most frequently used social networking site for the large majority of [New Zealand] SNS users” (Gibson, Miller, Smith, Bell, & Crothers, 2013, p. 21). Equally, it quickly became apparent that young people’s activities while on Facebook revolved around a broad, user generated visual culture. That is, in describing its embeddedness within their everyday lives, participants most often and most consistently constructed Facebook as a visual medium with a utility intimately linked to photos and photo sharing across manifold activities. In this sense, Facebook is inseparable from a correlated culture of ubiquitous smartphone use, so that photo taking and routine uploading is a thoroughly normalized, routine, and valued activity:

So like if you’ve been away for the weekend I’m just thinking about the weekend and it’s all over but then everyone posts their own photos of the weekend on Facebook and everyone comments on
it and it’s kind of like just re-living the experience which is really cool cause um you’ve all got that shared kind of experience and everyone comments on things and you all know what happened at the time. (Pam, Pākehā; three females)

Here, the Facebook photo is valued in a dual sense. First for its referential function, as a “marker” for recording and displaying life events (here an “amazing” weekend but also mundane practices), places visited, and people you know. However, Facebook photos are not simply constructed as abstract artifacts for display. Rather they are discursive resources drawn upon in subsequent online conversations, a means for “re-living” shared experience that would otherwise be “all over.” The reference to “everyone comments” is a common thematic concern for young people when they discuss the value of Facebook photography, suggesting a heightened utility for those specific photos that attract the most attention and comments from one’s peers. Photos are not simply beneficial because they provide a means for displaying one’s social life, for making it visible, but also because they simultaneously prompt recursively organized social interaction so that the end result is “you all know what happened at the time.” The temporal and spatial affordances of Facebook photo sharing are emphasized through the construction of photos as catalysts for on-going exchanges that help cement friendship bonds after the fact and in the ensuing physical absence of one’s peers. Thus, photographs, as markers of life events and enablers of reflexive sociality, facilitate a valued form of everyday connection that works to sustain young people’s social relationships across time and space.

Within this wider culture of recursive online socializing, linked to everyday forms of technologically mediated visibility, “drinking photos” become the preeminent form of drinking-related, user generated content for young people, and take on specific meanings and functions. Young people’s accounts of the pleasures of drinking have always invoked identity, storytelling, and socializing as key elements. Stories about drinking and drunken behavior are told and re-told among friends, playing a crucial role in identity construction (McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes, Gregory, Kaiwai, & Borell, 2005) and maintaining friendships (Lyons & Willot, 2008). As with Facebook photography generally, participants’ accounts emphasize that drinking photos “capture” the moment, and draw on the affordances of photo sharing to extend and enhance socializing. Participants’ discussions highlighted that drinking photos are particularly effective at facilitating comments and posts, both in real time and, through leaving searchable and persistent traces of social interaction (boyd, 2010), asynchronously across time as narratives are stored, retrieved, and updated at will.

However, drinking photos are not simply valued as an effective subset of Facebook’s visual culture in general, but rather generate specific forms of social and identity work that are particularly pertinent for young people:

[Interviewer] But you know how you post photos on Facebook, what sort of photos?
Tara Oh mainly photos of when you’re [pause] out, out going drinking because generally that’s when everyone gets together and that’s when the camera comes out. So you get heaps of drunk photos.

[slight cut in extract]
[Interviewer] . . . do you upload them at the time or the next day?
Tara [The next day.
Dylan [The next day.
Jane The next day, you’ve got to look through them first. Decide if they’re ok [and the ones you don’t like of yourself you delete.
Tara: [Delete the ones you don’t like.
Dylan And the reason why we, I think the reason why we have the drinking photos is because it makes your life like more fun, so you’re always doing something, [throws arm wide] like the colours [and Tara: [It’s like when you amp it up as well.

(Pākehā; four females)

Tara’s initial reaction highlights the social nature of Facebook’s photographic culture in general, and links the peer socializing associated with drinking to the prevalence of drunken images. However, Dylan’s intervention at the end of the extract is particularly revealing, as she emphasizes drinking photos make your life “more fun” and constitute displays of autonomous action: “you’re always doing something.” Throughout our data there are always structural power relations in play producing important differentiations in experience. In this example, Dylan’s articulation is, in one sense, inseparable from the earlier exchange revealing the intensive self-monitoring work “required” of young women in particular for producing “successful” self-displays through drinking photos. This reveals an acute awareness of being the subject of scrutiny, and points to a gendered power relation regularly repeated in our data and in relation to digital photography generally as well as to drinking photos specifically. However, Dylan’s intervention equally reveals a general theme prevalent across our groups, one that relates to why drinking photos are posted. This constructs drinking photos as producing specific forms of value realized through “authentic” displays of “always” being engaged in autonomous action directed toward gratification and enjoyment online. This value is both visually mediated and specifically social: drinking occurs in the company of one’s
friends and connotes a “successful” social life. This is explicitly linked in other instances of our participants’ talk to displays of drinking and partying in the “right” places.

Young people’s differentiated experiences of drinking, pleasure, and self-display fundamentally matter, and we will pursue this further in the following section. For now we wish to track the specific nature of drinking photos, further elaborated upon at the end of the extract. Intriguingly, while throwing her arms wide Dylan continues with “like the colours and,” but is over-spoken by Tara who re-enters and ends the exchange with “It’s like when you amp it up as well.” These statements initially point to the embodied pleasures of alcohol consumption associated with socializing when drunk. That is, to drinking experienced as a “calculated hedonism,” as a “controlled loss of control,” which is well documented in the drinking literature (e.g. Measham, 2002). This is key to amplifying, rather than simply facilitating, positive affect and successful socializing. Equally, however, Tara’s specific terminology provides a concise, metonymic vignette central to our interpretation of young people’s accounts generally. That is, it directly calls to mind Senft’s (2008) definition of micro-celebrity as a strategy for self-presentation that “involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using techniques like video, blogs, and social networking sites” (p. 25).

This does not mean that drinking is the only context, or form of consumption, in which “amplified” SNS sociality and popularity occurs, nor that it is the most important context for all young people. However, drinking photos are particularly effective “amplifiers” of sociality and popularity on SNS. This is because drinking as a uniquely embodied experience tied to positive feelings, heightened affect, and enhanced socializing, often linked to social events, becomes coupled—as drinking cultures shift online—with authentic displays of sociality and popularity. Depictions of drinking with one’s friends can, when successful, provide particularly powerful connotations of having fun, being social, and being popular, while simultaneously avoiding creating the perception that the user is overtly, explicitly, or “falsely” seeking to create these impressions. Participants were often derivative of anyone posting content in an overt, overly explicit attempt to gain attention. Drinking photos connote a “real,” visible social life while facilitating online connections and recursive feedback, and therefore carry less risk of being socially sanctioned by friends in this regard. The heightened risk of exposure to “outside” moral judgments reinforces this sense of transparency and self-disclosure “within” the peer-group, that is the sense of real disclosure of the authentic self to the young person’s peers despite the broader risks this involves. Within a culture of routine photographic documentation, where the worthiness of photographic events and the traditional truth claims of photography can become troubled through the sheer volume of digital imagery now produced daily, this marks drinking photos out as distinctive. Young people’s accounts emphasize their particular value as accessible and pleasurable mechanisms for actively performing “amplified,” “authentic” forms of sociality, visibility, and popularity.

These aspects of value clearly emerge as positive factors across young people’s complex, contextual accounts. However, the above extract also identifies drinking culture on Facebook as a complex and contradictory terrain, involving attempts at maximizing visibility as a means for enhancing sociality and popularity that are juxtaposed against self-censure and a requirement to actively manage self-displays. The references in the extract to uploading practices that occur “the next day,” once decisions have been reached about whether or not photos “are ok,” is one indication of how (in this instance) young women are knowingly attempting to navigate the incongruous pressures involved in their day-to-day lives. The intensity of the practices surrounding the uploading of drinking photos reported in this particular group is suggestive of the contradictory, dilemmatic space young women occupy in contemporary drinking cultures, where they are both exhorted to be “up for it,” sassy, and independent and yet censured should they appear to “drink like men” or act like “drunken sluts” (Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2013, p. 184). However, simultaneously, this is one indicative example, from a plethora of references to peer-related practices prevalent across our groups, which reveal the generally precarious nature of the online popularity that can be achieved through photographic drinking displays. This is expressed as a need for young people to constantly and recursively monitor their own self-representations and those of others, especially friends. Perhaps due to the value young people ascribe to visibility, these processes involved comparatively little recourse to “technical” solutions like adjusting privacy settings to limit exposure. Rather, such practices revolved around routine practices of strategically choosing images to upload, and of correlated practices of tagging and un-tagging images uploaded by others. Here, young Māori discuss these issues:

Ben  If there’s real bad photos I’ll just go and untag myself.

Kimo  Yep.

[Interviewer]  You what?

Ben  Untag myself, sit there and untag myself.

Erena  That’s what you usually do on a Sunday or something.

Ben  [laughs] Sunday morning ritual.

Erena  You go to someone’s [pause] like will upload their photos and you just go through and untag.

[Interviewer]  All of them? Or just the

Ben  [Not all of them just the bad ones.
For young Māori, the issue of self-representation always elides with forms of ethnically coded “group image” to intensify concerns over online representations in specific ways (an issue we analyze in detail later). Yet the “ritual” referred to here is one specific example of a prevalent form of discussion distinguished by its co-constructed imperative to put in significant amounts of work to strategically manage self-presentation. Distinctions are regularly drawn between “good” and “bad” drinking displays, where “bad” doesn’t necessarily discount intoxicated displays, but involves the failure to manage the “controlled loss of control” (Measham, 2002) associated with drinking, as in unflattering appearances or embarrassing situations (“puking in the bush”). Notwithstanding the close links young people draw between self-disclosure, drinking displays and authentic sociality, this imperative toward remaining in control of the body and its online display is equally significant. The brief reference to people being “inconsiderate” points to a wider issue: the conflicting imperatives involved in realizing the benefits of drinking displays are resolved as an integral part of maintaining forms of technologically mediated social connections within the peer-group. That is, attempts at strategic self-management largely depend on successfully developing relationships, intimacy, and trust online, where what counts as a “good” drinking photo is co-constructed among friends, and where “friendship” is practiced through sharing (or not) photos:

**Jane:** I had this friend once who had a really really bad photo of me. You could see up my dress and she tagged me in it.

**Lo:** Oh my god that is so disgusting I would have gone psycho.

**Jane:** [And I was like please delete it like that’s really inappropriate and it was shocking and then she put an image over it of a love heart, no a star which made it even worse because it was so obvious.

**Lo:** But who does that? Like why? Why would you put a photo?

**Tara:** You know they’re not going to be happy.

The participants’ discussion of an “up skirt” shot reflects the gendered nature of these practices, and the intensity of the young women’s reactions cannot be disentangled from sexual power relations that constitute young women as subject to gendered regulatory scrutiny. The extract simultaneously demonstrates how friendship groups generally co-construct “appropriate” photos and photo sharing among themselves as a part of developing intimacy and trust, which become key to developing positive self-displays and to sustaining sociality. This sense of co-constructed intimacy and trust also contributes to the “authenticity” of peer-sanctioned drinking displays. This does not mean that “bad” drinking photos were never posted by friends, but where such occurrences happen they put a degree of stress on friendship relations or indicated a lack of close friendship altogether. What emerges, then, as young people develop and sustain friendships through online drinking cultures are complex, contextual, co-constructed frameworks of evaluation for the “appropriateness” of drinking photos. These frameworks invoke specific normative values that are often occluded in mainstream commentaries which construct young people’s drinking displays as foolhardy, such as self-disclosure, transparency, visibility, authentic sociality and popularity, positive affect, intimacy, and a willingness to “have each other’s backs” in the associated forms of particularly active self-management which drinking displays necessitate. However, the resistance to “up skirt” shots in the extract equally demonstrates a limit to these young women’s investment in self-disclosure, sociality, popularity, and attention as key normative values or ideals. This points to a wider analytical issue prevalent in the data as a whole: a refusal/evasion, or reluctance, among some participants to engage fully with normative online values and drinking practices as we have described them thus far. This ambivalence is the subject of our next section.

**Intersectional Complexity and Differentiated Experiences: (In)visibility at “The Outback”**

In the previous section, we outlined why participants produce and value drinking photos. We identified a general set of themes that link drinking photos to socially orientated forms of self-display on Facebook associated with peer-driven pleasure and leisure practices. Drinking photos act as important markers of life events, while simultaneously being particularly effective at facilitating online social exchanges and drawing attention from one’s peer-group.
They enact valued forms of authentically “amplified” sociality, visibility, and popularity for young people. Yet, while these thematic concerns cut across the data-set, young people also articulated a wide range of differing perspectives toward drinking as a pleasure and leisure practice, and toward the forms of enhanced sociality and visibility they associate with drinking photos. Such differentiation, we argue, is related to forms of social and cultural “located-ness” that are not easily amenable to straightforward interpretation. That is, participants’ social locations in terms of issues like occupation, ethnicity, gender, and class produce forms of intersectional complexity (see Nash, 2008) that result in differing engagements with the normative framework young people associate with drinking as a site of pleasure, leisure, and online self-display.

In order to illustrate this issue, we focus on three discussion extracts in a group with five Māori (three female, two male) and two Pākehā (one female, one male) members. We concentrate on the Māori participants, all of whom were employed in health and education programs working with rangatahi (young people). During discussion it emerges that these participants, due to their specific social location as Māori youth workers employed by the local iwi (tribe), feel themselves to be role models for a younger generation of Māori. All were drinkers and regular Facebook users, and the exchanges we concentrate on here relate to their attitudes toward drinking, and being seen, at a prominent local night-club and music venue (“The Outback”). The club is first mentioned as part of a general discussion of drinking and its relationship to Facebook:

**Connie** Yeah they [bars/clubs] have their own pages and you can “like” it and then once you’ve liked them then [pause] when they send out events and notifications then because you’re part of it, it comes up in your notifications. So like The Outback is having a quiz night or something and or else you know come before 11pm on Saturday and all girls get a free cruiser. Little deals like that and stuff. That they send out to everybody.

**John** Ladies free night.

**Connie** Yeah ladies free night.

**Wikiwira** Five dollar pizza and a jug.

**Connie** Yeah yeah yeah that kind of thing. That just gets sent to notifications.

**[Interviewer]** And do those posts encourage you to go to those sort of places if they’re having good deals or good things?

**Connie** Um yeah cos’ if it wasn’t for that I wouldn’t know about it. If it wasn’t for Facebook I would have no idea.

Interactions between users and branded pages for bars/clubs are common across the data-set, and here three Māori participants demonstrate the sort of familiarity with this form of commercial content prevalent across the groups. The Outback’s presence on Facebook is not seen as problematic. Rather, The Outback’s marketing content is drawn upon and shared in developing participants’ social lives without critical reflection, in the process producing economic value for both the club and Facebook. The realization of this form of value involves the active promotion of drinking as a routine part of socializing in prized leisure time (Carah et al., 2014; Nicholls, 2012), further highlighting why drinking content is so prevalent. “Liking” The Outback acts as a marker of taste, and results in The Outback connecting with the user in the same way a friend would, through the same channels and affordances users appropriate to maintain social connections, and thus “when they send out events and notifications then because you’re part of it, it comes up in your notifications.” This intensive marketing activity is a normalized part of social life. Users are routinely “invited in” to ever more intimate relationships with The Outback as a branded space of alcohol consumption.

While this type of branded relationship is generalized across our data-set, when the discussion turns to consider The Outback’s role in facilitating forms of visibility through Facebook photo sharing it begins to reflect a series of thematic elements more specific to this particular group:

**Connie** And I know that a lot of my friends are hard out into photos in town and because clubs take photos in town they’re straight away Sunday morning they’re on.

**Hariata** Straight on there aye.

**Connie** They’re on The Outback page waiting for the photos to be uploaded to tag everybody in them [pause] yeah yeah yeah well my friends are freaks so you know. But yeah, they love Facebook photos and stuff, so that’s what they do.

Here, drinking photos are initially constructed in a similar fashion to our previous analysis. The Outback, in employing a photographer who posts selected photos on Facebook, provides a valued service. Indeed, to be “captured” by The Outback’s professional photographer is to be seen partying with one’s friends in the “right” place. In profiling young people drinking in a favored space of consumption, The Outback accentuates the forms of sociality, popularity, and micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008) associated with young people’s accounts of their own drinking photos. However, Connie shows both a familiarity with these processes and simultaneously distances herself from them in suggesting it is her friends, light-heartedly referred to as “freaks,” that value The Outback’s photography as opposed to herself. The reasons for her reticence become clearer as discussion over The Outback’s nightlife photography unfolds:
Henare It’s probably one reason why I stopped going out aye.

Connie Yeah.

Wikiwira Cos’ of the photos aye bro.

Henare Yeah those camera dudes are “huh what are you up to boy”? [mimes taking a photograph].

[slight cut in extract]

Henare It’s kind of good knowing that too so like you don’t get too smashed in town aye like knowing that there’s a photographer around it’s like oh nah bro. I’ll have a water before I have my next drink or]

Wikiwira ]Yeah.

Hariata Hard. Always have a water.

Henare Off home if I’m too smashed. I’ll catch you up.

Wikiwira Drink between drinks.

Hariata Check yourself in a toilet and check yourself.

This exchange inverts the positive “values” generally ascribed to drinking photos by constructing the enhanced visibility afforded as problematic rather than beneficial. Henare states that the routine photography now associated with nightlife has stopped him going out altogether (a view reinforced by Connie’s “yeah”). The regime of visibility associated with Facebook drinking photos generates power dynamics difficult to avoid whether or not one ascribes to the dominant values youth associated with visibility, and regardless of individual decisions over profile content. Facebook thereby produces imperatives for self-monitoring and self-control that extend beyond the management of one’s profile, in effect delimiting possibilities for moving through the city center without fear of unwanted exposure. The ability to participate on equal terms in the pleasurable consumption associated with nightlife is called into question. Not only is little worth placed on narrating the self through consumption and self-display, photographers are constructed as viewing participants with pre-constituted suspicion. When drinking in town with a photographer present, this necessitates unavoidable self-monitoring work that “intrudes” into everyday socializing: involving avoiding becoming intoxicated, leaving town if feeling too drunk, and recursively managing appearance. Nightlife photography is experienced as burdensome. Facebook facilitated drinking displays lose their sense of precarious duality, becoming primarily associated with risk rather than both risk and opportunity for “amplified” socializing.

The participants’ status as youth workers needs to be borne in mind here. Their occupations involve providing advice to young people on manifold activities, including problematic drinking or under-age drinking, which clearly leads to heightened self-reflexivity around their own drinking and drinking-related self-displays. We found similar issues in Pākehā groups where a variety of contextual factors produced similar forms of heightened self-awareness, for example when young people had recently taken on a professional job such as becoming a lawyer and wanted to produce an appropriate “professional image.” Thus, Pākehā participants varied in their enthusiasm for drinking-related self-displays, and were aware of potentially negative outcomes and surveillance by employers and others. However, they never spoke of avoiding town altogether due to photography, or of photographers as viewing them with a sense of suspicion, or of the associated visibilities involved with such a concerted emphasis on risk. This variation across Pākehā and Māori accounts suggests ethnicity may be a key factor. Structural power relations seem to be in play that act to ascribe—in fashion similar to gendered power relations and “gender identity” as observed earlier—“ethnic identity,” belying the concern with self-narration, self-production, and individuality associated with Facebook.

In this sense, these young Māori participants’ reticence to engage in online display cannot be disentangled from broader, problematic representations of Māori in general. Research in Aotearoa has consistently demonstrated that mainstream media reproduce damaging stereotypes of Māori as a threatening “other” (Abel, 2013). Moreover, this specific response to nightlife photography is one example, from a range of others, which reveal an acute awareness among Māori participants of explicitly being “Māori” in a manner with no counterpart in Pākehā discussions. This points to an attentiveness to living within a post-colonial context whereby Māori become subject to forms of over-lexicalization that consistently mark them out as Māori, in contrast to Pākehā identities exnominated or rendered “invisible” in a Westernized culture beyond naming (Moewaka Barnes, Taiapa, Borell, & McCleanor, 2013). Thus, young Māori may not be afforded the same opportunity as their Pākehā counterparts to exercise a “disembedded” “freedom” in narrating the self through consumption. In being over-lexicalized and (pre)constructed as a problematic “other,” young Māori with a drink in their hand are to a degree negatively pre-judged before they exercise lifestyle choices, and are therefore disproportionately over-exposed to risk when negotiating online socializing. Māori, then, can never be “invisible” in the same sense as Pākehā, nor “freely” “visible” in narrating their identities in the “neutral,” individuated fashion Facebook purportedly provides. Their freedom to reflexively forge a sense of self is always-already contingent, and the choice to disengage becomes a coherent strategy for sustaining a positive sense of self.

This group provides a particularly clear explication of their specific rationalities for disengagement, however, comparable forms of reluctance toward drinking-related self-displays were evident in other Māori groups. Yet such views are not generalizable across all Māori participants. Other
young Māori demonstrate great enthusiasm for drinking photos. It is the way ethnicity intersects in a complex fashion with other dimensions of identity that seems to determine this variability. For these particular participants, it is their social location in terms of their class/occupational status as peer educators and role models, employed by their local iwi (tribe), which appears most relevant. Rather than the example being representative of Māori, it is representative of an intersectional complexity that is generalizable across the data-set, including to Pākehā participants.

While such caveats are vital, this particular group’s close relations to their iwi suggests their rejection of Facebook drinking photos may be tied to broader struggles. That is, their account gestures toward calling into question the dominant forms of value enacted within contemporary sites of consumption, to a rejection of the dominant values young people generally ascribed to drinking-related self-displays on Facebook as we described them in the previous section, and suggests a move toward more culturally specific “values” and differentiated modes of being. Facebook’s design as a site of self-promotion has played “an important role in spreading (American) social norms into other national user communities” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 57). Our participants’ accounts hint at such norms themselves being contested.

This is a complex issue, requiring greater space for explication than is available, but ties to iwi clearly speak of collective, culturally specific forms of selfhood that often sit it in an antagonistic relationship to dominant, individuated Western/American norms of the self as reflected in Facebook’s affordances and design. At the same time young Māori, in being technologically literate and often highly engaged users, seek to appropriate those self-same affordances to their own ends.

**Why Now? Facebook Drinking Photos, the Attention Economy, and the Branded Self**

Investigating young people’s accounts of drinking and associated self-displays on Facebook reveals important dimensions of pleasure, visibility, popularity, and the maintenance of sociality occluded in mainstream, health-orientated research on SNS and drinking. Our analysis also highlights the ambivalences and complexities that emerge when young people negotiate drinking-related leisure practices and their relationship to Facebook from specific social and cultural “locations.” However, in this section, we expand the analysis further, by considering how the dominant values of “authentic” sociality, visibility, and popularity young people associate with drinking photos become symptomatic of the current social order, as opposed to indicating a generational shift associated purely with “youth.” While cognizant of the risk of (re)producing our own form of reductive analysis, we argue that young people’s accounts take on an aspect of instrumental rationality in the contemporary conjuncture, and therefore—as opposed to demonstrating a youthful “naivety”—reveal important dimensions of the power relations structuring the formation of “self” online in the current moment. There are two factors we wish to highlight here. The first is the architecture and affordances of Facebook as the dominant site for social networking in Aotearoa (and elsewhere), which to date have been largely overlooked in the drinking literature analyzing online sociality. The second is the way Facebook’s structure is itself inter-related to broader sets of power relations structuring the “self” which it both reflects and reinforces.

Facebook’s architecture and affordances reflect the general characteristics of networked publics—persistence, replicability, searchability, and scalability—usefully outlined by boyd (2010). However, van Dijck (2013) has compellingly argued that Facebook’s specific user interface and software protocols are inscribed with an imperative toward “sharing” in mind. Indeed, van Dijck (2013) suggests that the global success of Facebook is tied to its ability to actively perpetuate a specific version of “sharing” as an evolving, expanded social norm. In this respect, Facebook’s design has collapsed “two different types of coding qualities” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 46) while developing a marketing ideology that elides distinctions between them. The first is “connectedness” as the directing of users to “share information with other users through purposefully designed interfaces” (pp. 46-47). Users can create profiles, join groups, post, share, and tag photos, comment, and use chat or video functionality. Additionally, features such as News Feed, the Wall (now “Timeline”), and status updates become means for instigating and channeling social interaction. Underlying such features are the actions of algorithms like “EdgeRank” which filters data and governs what appears in the News Feed. The second set of coding features relates to “connectivity” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 47), whereby Facebook’s design facilitates sharing user data with third parties using features such as Open Graph and the Like button. This expanded notion of sharing has been progressively normalized by Facebook. It is coded into its interface, crafted in its terms of service, and reinforced through marketing campaigns that seek to align it with user interests (van Dijck, 2013).

This “expanded” imperative to share is a governing dimension of Facebook’s overall architecture. Moreover, this imperative acts in a technological environment planned to produce visibility as a scarce resource. On Facebook, technologically mediated visibility becomes a reward contingent upon skilfully navigating the user interface. This operates in relation to Facebook’s design as an algorithmic architecture. Bucher’s (2012) work is pertinent for understanding Facebook in this regard. Her analysis of EdgeRank reveals that Facebook does not produce an environment constituted, as is often assumed in debates over Facebook drinking displays, through the “threat of an all-seeing vision machine” (Bucher, 2012, p. 1164). Rather, the “threat” Facebook produces is invisibility, constituted through “the constant possibility of disappearing
and becoming obsolete” (p. 1164). Not everything, or everyone, makes it into the News Feed as a device for channeling interaction and attention. Here Bucher (2012) argues that one of the best means for making it into the News Feed is to post photographs that attract as many Likes and comments as possible. In this way, users can obviate “the possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough” (p. 1171). “Reading” how algorithmic processes structure life online is a notoriously difficult exercise given that the proprietary nature of the software rules out direct access to the relevant code. We are also not arguing that such technological factors determine what users do, in a narrow, straightforward, or simplistic fashion. Nevertheless, we argue Bucher’s (2012) insights are crucial for understanding what is at stake when young people choose to post drinking photos, which are considered valuable by them precisely because they attract the volume of comments and Likes that Bucher’s (2012) analysis suggests is necessary to instigating and maintaining a visible “presence” on the platform. This “presence” is an achievement linked to maximizing the benefits of Facebook as a means for enhancing sociality. Thus, for those young people who wish to cultivate a strong “presence” on Facebook, choosing to actively engage with drinking photos takes on a rational dimension, becoming revelatory of an experientially earned form of tacit, intuitive knowledge and skill valuable to navigating the interface in order to maintain everyday sociality.

Moreover, such “technological” factors both reflect and reinforce societal power relations. The most important facet of this inter-relationship relates to how the relentless push to make oneself “visible” on Facebook becomes tied to dominant forms of value in the new “attention economy” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 62). This is not simply a matter of Facebook’s own revenue streams whereby “connectivity” allows for the free flow of data to third parties, essential to extracting surplus value from the “labour” provided by users (see Fuchs, 2010). Rather, producing a socially connected self and attaining exposure equally generates value for the user in a new regime of the self focused on gaining and maintaining attention and popularity. These facets of value constitute a monetizable asset in their own right within an economic environment where viral marketing is de rigueur, and where companies “want to seek out influential people or recognize prevalent trends” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 62). Facebook creates a “space” where people strive for popularity while enabling its precise quantification and measurement. This leads to Facebook generating a self-perpetuating “popularity principle” (p. 13):

[T]he more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect with you. (van Dijck, 2013, p. 13)

The cultivation and maintenance of online social networks this principle implies has become central to employment prospects in an age where professional occupations come with an expectation that personal connections can and should be leveraged for commercial gain (Gregg, 2011). Indeed, Marwick (2013) reports an instance of an employer seeking to make themselves look “savvy” simply for “hiring a well-known social media user” (p. 186). Thus, Baym (2015) has argued for a new category of immaterial labor, she terms “relational labour” (p. 15), which can be used to describe how the fostering of personal relationships and the maintenance of an income, or even the creation of a career, have become increasingly closely linked.

This rise in a culture of self-promotion, focused on the “free” and possessive individual, has a governmental dimension (see Rose, 1999) which Hall (2011) describes as a crucial element of a broader neoliberal conjuncture. This aspect of the current moment is further analyzed by Hearn (2008) who argues that subjects are now exhorted to (re)create themselves as “brands” in order to project an on-going, potent image of autonomous subjectivity. Such strategically crafted selves have become necessary to negotiating the consequences of the rollback of the welfare state. They have become an essential part of living productive working lives under a post-Fordist, globalized, and unpredictable form of corporate capitalism which holds subjects individually accountable for their biographical projects of self-creation. Here ability has become associated with visibility, so that Hearn (2008) argues, “the ‘reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens) has become an explicit form of labour under post-Fordist capital in the form of ‘self-branding’” (p. 197). As the capacity to command attention increasingly becomes a “proxy indicator” (p. 208) of personal ability, “those in quest of a personal brand are encouraged to expose their bragables in every avenue available to them” (p. 205). In an age that continually “hungrers for anything that feels authentic” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 3, original emphasis), transparency and self-disclosure, that is “the detailing of one’s everyday life for others’ consumption” (p. 60), become central to the self-branding process. Indeed, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues self-branding ultimately relies on an extended logic of authenticity. No longer simply a matter of developing a genuine relationship to an “inner self,” authenticity must be performed relationally and supposedly without artifice: “to be authentic to yourself, one must first be authentic to others” (p. 80). At the same time, there is a somewhat paradoxical demand placed upon individuals to remain in command of self-disclosures, visibility, and self-representation (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2013). The result is a new ethic of precarious self-care, that is a new governmental logic of entrepreneurial selfhood that takes on a particular urgency “in a political climate where individuals are expected to maximise their interests as a condition of self rule” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 476).

The emphasis on carefully managed forms of “authentic” sociality, visibility, and popularity that emerges across young people’s complex, contextual accounts of drinking photos
cannot be disentangled from these developments. In negotiating the complexities of drinking cultures, they develop values and skills for self-management, sociality, and self-display that resonate with the dominant imperatives now placed upon all individuals to brand the self. Facebook’s architecture, in evolving to produce a competition for visibility/popularity, reflects and reinforces these shifts. This points to why “online youth drinking” on Facebook has assumed a particular form through the “visible” proliferation of drinking photos. While not being reducible to new governmental rationalities, young people’s accounts again take on a critical aspect of instrumental reason in an attention economy (van Dijck, 2013) linked to the “branded self” (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013) as a dominant mode of selfhood. To put this in the terms outlined by Willis (1977), young people “learn to labour” through their engagement with drinking displays, or more specifically they learn forms of immaterial labor that produce a “networked subjectivity” (Côté & Pybus, 2007, p. 95). The contemporary conjuncture is a social formation where the values young people articulate are not only advantageous, but also—versely—where one of the risks to be negotiated involves avoiding the threat of a “failed” self tied to a specific form of social marginalization, a failure to “connect” and “network” correctly. This is associated with the inverse of being able to successfully perform sociality and popularity within contemporary sites of consumption, with a lack of so-called “soft” or communicative/self-representational skills increasingly valued in a job market interested in applicants’ entire social lives (Baym, 2015; Gregg, 2011), and with forms of invisibility rather than over-exposure. As a prominent site of consumption, “drinking online” becomes a key site of self-display where any failure to produce an authentic, socially acceptable, popular self carries with it forms of risk which are rarely recognized when young people are critiqued for posting Facebook drinking displays as a means for enhancing their socializing and visibility.

Precarious Popularity: Facebook Drinking Culture as Symptomatic of the Regime of the Branded Self and Its Contestation

Facebook drinking photos are increasingly attracting attention. Academic literature has chiefly focused on the negative health outcomes of emerging online cultures of intoxication, while mainstream media and policy discourse tends toward a “pedagogy of regret” (Brown & Gregg, 2012) associated with segregating “youth” as a problematic other. In contrast, we have analyzed why young people choose to engage in drinking displays, exploring how different groups of young people navigate and contest the affordances of online drinking cultures. We have argued that young people’s Facebook drinking culture is related to the central importance now placed on sociality and self-promotion in the current conjuncture, which are linked to dominant forms of value creation in the new attention economy. Here, visibility forms a general governmental imperative reflected in, and reinforced by, Facebook’s architecture and affordances. Indeed, Facebook is a technological environment where visibility constitutes an achievement rather than being a given, and its architecture facilitates the collapsing of “connectedness” into “connectivity” (van Dijck, 2013), thereby routinely exposing young people to incessant commercial influences that encourage drinking through the act of exercising their lifestyle choices.

Young people’s own accounts of drinking photos, while differentiated, consistently reveal dimensions of value that reference enhanced forms of “authentic” sociality, visibility, and popularity. While it would be a mistake to reduce them to strict instrumental logics, we argue these thematic concerns take on an important aspect of instrumental rationality in being more-or-less coherent responses to dominant, neoliberal governmental imperatives. These imperatives create an impetus toward networking/sociality, popularity, visibility, and self-display in a conjunctural moment where the “required” biographical project of self-realization cannot be disentangled from the branded self (Hearn, 2008). Continually (re)forging a “popular” identity and on-going economic success have become intimately interconnected (Baym, 2015; Gregg, 2011). The drinking photo is an accessible and pleasurable means for young people to perform a precarious popularity in a neoliberal, globalized economy where popularity is a dominant value key to generating wealth, and where negotiating uncertainty is increasingly unavoidable. Both visibility and invisibility carry with them forms of risk and opportunity.

To contend that young people’s drinking-related self-displays take on an aspect of instrumental reason is not to argue that all young people are equally engaged in the process. The variability we found across young people’s accounts is equally significant. We have argued it is related to forms of intersectional complexity. Despite being interpellated as disembedded individuals “freely” forging a sense of self, subjects remain socially located in ways that influence their willingness and ability to engage in consumption and associated forms of self-display as a mode of self-realization. Structural power relations intersect in ways that continue to influence subjectivity and agency, and therefore—by implication—the associated life chances now increasingly bound up with branded selves. The opportunities and risks associated with drinking-related precarious popularity are unevenly distributed. The move to disengage made by some Māori participants, who in Aotearoa’s contemporary colonial context can never be “visible” or “invisible”/anonymous in the same sense as their Pākehā peers, speaks to these processes, as do other factors like occupational status and gendered power relations. Furthermore, some young Māori’s disengagement from drinking photos, or young women’s
objections to particularly sexualized images, reflect how intersectional complexity signals, alongside forms of differentiated experience in which identity is ascribed in problematic ways, a broader calling into question of the dominant regime of the branded self. Such forms of strategic disengagement may be linked to an evasion or resistance to this regime, as well as to alternate forms of positively valued individual and collective selfhood particularly pertinent in post-colonial contexts like Aotearoa. They thereby become tied to broader forms of social antagonism, to a process Skeggs and Loveday (2012), in their discussion of audience responses to reality television, have termed “struggles for value” (p. 472). They suggests online drinking cultures remain deeply ambivalent. They are simultaneously disciplinary and dynamic. It is in this sense that young people’s complex, contextual accounts become fully symptomatic in the current conjuncture. They not only reveal crucial aspects of the dominant regime of the branded self, they also point to its contestation.

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