The Meanings of Social Media Use in Everyday Life: Filling Empty Slots, Everyday Transformations, and Mood Management

Stina Bengtsson and Sofia Johansson

Abstract

Since their emergence in the early 2000s, social media have continued to increase in popularity, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Even though they have been studied in relation to a wide range of topics, including their role in politics, social relationships, activism, identity construction, and youth cultures, the rise of social media is also connected to a number of less dramatic, yet pervasive, shifts relating to their integration into the mundane practices of day-to-day life. In this article, we explore the uses of social media as part of everyday life, a perspective that has gained less attention in research about social media. We take an interest in how young adults create meaning around their daily practices, involving many different social media platforms. Doing so, we draw on in-depth individual and small group interviews with 67 young adults, aged 18–26, conducted in Sweden during 2019–2021. We approach social media as a joint environment, consisting of a wide range of different platforms traversed by the user. The empirical analysis identifies three significant meanings of social media: filling empty slots, everyday transformations, and mood management. These three different meanings are shaped by different temporal, spatial, and technological characteristics and emphasize the importance of social media use in the lives of the young adults.

Keywords

everyday life, media practice, mood management, ritual, social media

Since their emergence in the early 2000s, social media have continued to increase in popularity, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The term “social media,” in one recent definition described as “digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection” (Burgess et al., 2017, p. 1), is however not entirely clear-cut, but often used as an umbrella term for a range of Internet-based applications, including social network sites (SNS), blogs, microblogs, and video- or image-sharing sites, which allow users to network and distribute their own content. Nevertheless, particular affordances, practices, imaginaries, and business models are associated with this techno-cultural phenomenon, scrutinized by researchers from various disciplines (see, for example, Hunsinger & Senft, 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Sujon, 2021). Social media have, consequently, been studied in relation to a wide range of topics, including their role in politics, social relationships, activism, identity construction, and youth cultures.

At the same time, the rise of social media is connected to a number of less dramatic, yet pervasive, shifts relating to their integration into the mundane practices of day-to-day life, a perspective on social media that has gained less attention in previous research (c.f. Couldry & Kallinikos, 2017). To reach for the smartphone the first thing in the morning to catch up with the latest social media updates, then intermittently checking in throughout the day, only to keep clicking and scrolling right up until sleep sets in, will be an experience familiar to many. Yet we know little about how such humdrum social media routines are meaningful to users as embedded in their situated life experiences.

As an attempt to address the above, this article aims to analyze how social media are made meaningful in everyday life among young adults in Sweden. This will be done by analyzing social media use in everyday life, using a phenomenological approach as a theoretical starting point and...
considering how it relates to (1) the roles social media use play in the organization of everyday life, (2) the different ways of using social media related to these roles, and (3) the tempo-spatial organization of social media use. We take an interest in how young adults, a group where social media use is often pervasive, create meaning from their daily practices around a range of social media platforms. Doing so, we draw on in-depth individual and small group interviews with 67 young adults, aged 18–26, conducted in Sweden during 2019–2021. Following from our empirical analysis, we distinguish between three ways social media is made meaningful in the broader organization of everyday life.

Sweden can be regarded a pertinent case for a study with such an aim, as one of the most deeply digitized countries in the world, where 94% of 16- to 19-year olds and 96% of 20- to 30-year olds use social media daily. In both age groups, YouTube is the most popular social media platform today, followed by Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat among the older ones, and Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok among the younger ones. In the following, however, we address social media as a joint environment (see Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fu & Cook, 2020), consisting of a wide range of different platforms traversed by the user.

Social Media in Everyday Life: A Research Review

Social media have been researched from a great variety of perspectives, but here we focus on cultural approaches to social media. Cultural aspects of social media have been the focus of a great deal of enquiry, relating to novel forms of sociality as well as identity construction, social norms, and self-representation (see boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison & boyd, 2013; Ellison et al., 2009). Similarly, scholars have taken an interest in how social media have permitted networking across distances in geographies and time (see, for example, Baym, 2015; Rainie & Wellman, 2012), enabling large “social supernets” (Donath, 2007) notably capitalized on by celebrities and influencers (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2018; Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Others have pointed to the more inauspicious dimensions of social media use, such as how the upkeep of connections can gain importance at the expense of dialogue (Miller, 2008, 2017; Turkle, 2012/2017).

On a more individual level, questions about how and why people use social media have been a focus within uses-and-gratifications research (e.g., Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Jung & Sundar, 2016; Whiting & Williams, 2013), a research tradition which is, nevertheless, of limited assistance for understanding how social media are experienced more deeply, within everyday contexts, where qualitative and ethnographic studies can provide further guidance. As an example of the latter, boyd’s (2014) extensive research on the “networked sociality” of American teenagers shows how adolescents use a range of social media to construct their identities, manage their social lives, and participate in public spaces, while illuminating the importance of social contexts such as school and family life for shaping their use (see also Bengtsson, 2006; Johansson, 2011; Lewis & West, 2009; Livingstone, 2008; Şot, 2022). In an ethnographic study of the impact of Facebook on the lives of ordinary people in Trinidad, Miller (2011), similarly, underlines geocultural context as key to understanding social media use; an aspect that has been explored further in comparative ethnographies (Costa, 2018; Miller et al., 2016). Facebook, in particular, has also gained specific interest among scholars, where, for instance, its temporal dimensions for specific groups have been explored (Bucher, 2020; Costa, 2018; Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014; Nguyen, 2021), as well as news use in social media (see, for example, Dimmick et al., 2011). Yet, empirical research on social media in everyday life remains relatively scarce, especially when it comes to less explicitly engaged or political forms of social media use. Surveying the field from their position within youth studies, Fu and Cook (2020) point out:

Current research on young people’s social media use tends to revolve around notable and spectacular forms of usage, and usage by specific identity-based groups on specific sites. The everyday social media use of “ordinary” young people […] is less often considered.

Fu and Cook’s empirical starting point, which involves recruiting research participants from a wide variety of backgrounds rather than based on activities around a single social media platform or a specific identity, correlates to an extent with the cross-platform perspective proposed by Boczkowski et al. (2018), who, in an interview and survey study of university students in Argentina emphasize how everyday meanings around social media platforms are socially and comparatively created, with the platforms made sense of in relation to each other, as well as in relation to users’ conceptions of each platform. We align with the approaches described above, taking an interest in how the more mundane social media use, less explicitly concerned with political or particularly notable usage and within a broad range of social contexts, is made meaningful in the everyday lives of young Swedish adults.

Social Media in Everyday Life: A Phenomenological Approach

Everyday life is a loose concept, often used only as a manifest context for media use. In media and communication studies, everyday life has for long equaled time spent at home, with the family, primarily during evenings (c.f. Bausinger, 1984; Hermes, 1995; Morley, 1986). Digital media: mobile and portable, available at any time and in any place, have made such approaches obsolete. As everyday life cannot be defined by a particular time and place, it is more beneficial to understand it both as a setting for media use and
as shaped by media practices, technologies, and texts (e.g., Bengtsson, 2012, 2018; Bennett, 2005; Highmore, 2001; Humphreys, 2018; Moores, 2000; Sheringham, 2006). In this study, everyday life encompasses all times and spaces where people dwell and have access to media technologies, it is not delimited by temporal or spatial categories but should rather be understood as a state of mind, understood from its practices and the power relations that shape them. In this we follow Henri Lefebvre’s and Nicholson-Smith’s (1991) notion of everyday life as that:

[What is humble and solid, what is taken for granted, and that of which all the parts follow each other in such a regular, unvarying succession that those concerned have no call to question their sequence; thus it is undated and (apparently) insignificant; though it occupies and preoccupies it is practically untellable, and it is the ethics underlying routine and the aesthetics of familiar settings. At this point it encounters the modern. (p. 24)]

This way of understanding everyday life takes as its vantage point the perspectives of the single subjects who experience it, and the power relations that frame that experience. Everyday life is hence understood as materially and socially constructed, and organized through its temporal, spatial, and social dimensions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 80). In our attempt to grapple with this “insignificance” of everyday life, as stated by Lefebvre, we use a phenomenological approach, which we have also outlined elsewhere (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2021). Phenomenology takes human existence as its vantage point and explores how human subjects exist and create meaning in their everyday lives in relation to basic categories such as time, space, and sociocultural relevance. Heidegger’s (1927/2010) theoretical notion of “Dasein,” or “being in the world” is grounded in the understanding of human existence as co-existent with the surrounding world and intentional. But Dasein is neither fundamentally free nor fundamentally determined by its context and comports itself in the activities it chooses to engage (Heidegger, 1927/2010, p. 144). Dasein is also related to an individual’s life-world, the subjective world of an individual, as it is perceived through his or her eyes (and other senses). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) enriched Heidegger’s predominantly temporal phenomenology by arguing our existence is also spatially relational, as a “form of perception” (pp. 281ff). The spatial dimensions of phenomenology have been intensely discussed and developed within media research (Bakardjieva, 2005; Bengtsson, 2006; Moores, 2012/2017; Pink, 2011; Scannel, 1996, 2014; Larsen, 2000; Tudor, 2018). Merleau-Ponty studied the embodiment of human existence, which led him to suggest that our notions of time and space must be understood in relation to our bodily consciousness, as part of human practice, and we know from previous research that digital media have profoundly altered how humans experience space (Meyrowitz, 1986; Moores, 2012/2017). To understand how media users perceive social media, we must thus anchor our understanding in their temporal and spatial experiences, their everyday life practices, and the cultural and material context of social media use (adhering to a “critical phenomenology” underscoring the “political and socioeconomic determinants of life and peoples” living conditions, see Desjarlais & Troop, 2011, p. 93, 95, also Couldry & Hepp, 2016). We thus adhere to what Don Ihde calls a “post-phenomenological” approach (Ihde, 1993, 2003) and Van Manen (2016) conceptualizes as “practical lifeworld studies” (p. 23), which direct the phenomenological analysis toward the practices and perception of others.

In our empirical work, we have found inspiration in earlier studies that have approached media use from a phenomenological perspective, such as Maria Bakardjieva’s (2005) ground-breaking Internet Society, in which she studied Internet adoption among ordinary Canadians, and Bent Steeg Larsen’s study of radio users in 1990s Denmark where he for example theorized the distinction between “listening to” and “hearing” the radio (see also Moores, 2012/2017; Pink, 2011). These differences in intentionality among the radio listeners reveal the meaning of the radio in the audiences’ everyday life, and more specifically how it is meaningful in the users’ transformation from the inner (home) to the outer (public) world and how they orient themselves in time. Building on theirs and others’ work, we have approached social media use with a phenomenological toolbox based on the concepts of space, time, and sociocultural relevance (Schutz & Luckman, 1973), being fundamental dimensions of the life world.

Bringing together the (individual) life world perspective and (the sociocultural) everyday life perspective, we also turn to sociologist Erwing Goffman (1974) and his micro-oriented perspective on everyday life. In his magnum opus Frame analysis, Goffman (1974) sees everyday life as a combination of shifting ritual—material and mental—states in relation to which we adjust our performances and practices. Rituals, in their anthropological sense, are characterized by formalized habits, practiced in a specific order, and with a certain transgressive meaning (Bourdieu, 1991; Couldry, 2005; Turner, 1969/1977), but ritual states in everyday life are temporally delimited situations defined by a particular purpose, specific norms, and codes for behavior. In everyday life, we hence negotiate the meaning of a situation in relation to its social characteristic, and the meaning of a particular situation can quickly transform for those who are involved in it. A school lesson is experienced differently depending on if you are the teacher or a pupil (but is still agreed to be a lesson) and a playful wrestling-game can suddenly transform into a dangerous fight agreed by those involved in it, but without any formal decision being made. Social media environments are, accordingly, experienced differently depending on the social shaping of them; their affordances, the content provided and who inhabits them at a specific moment.
Ritual theory has, in media studies, often been used to understand large collective media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992), but it has also shown fruitful to study mundane everyday practices (Bausinger, 1984; Bengtsson, 2006; Couldry, 2002; Larsen, 2000).

The phenomenological perspective as an analytical model hence means exploring how social media use is understood and made meaningful in varied temporal, spatial, and social situations, and how they are not only structured by these situations but also used to actively transform everyday life in ways that matter.

**Notes on the Empirical Study**

The theoretical perspective described above provides a backdrop to the empirical study, where we listened to young adults’ own experiences of when, where, and how they use social media in time and space; how their use of social media relate to the material, social, and cultural frames of everyday life; and how they create and transform these situations by way of the specific social media they use throughout the day. We, likewise, strived at approaching the respondents’ everyday lives with an open mind, ultimately aiming at seeing the world through their eyes. Such an approach follows phenomenological thinking, which methodologically is a way to approach the world and the phenomena within it with “wonder”—creating an “openness to the world and a wondering attentiveness” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 36).

We conducted interviews with sixty-seven 18- to 26-year olds in Sweden between October 2019 and January 2021, interviewing 30 individually and the rest (47) in 15 groups of 2–5 people, as part of a larger qualitative research project examining young adults’ everyday media use, where the individual interviews provided more in-depth personal detail and the group interviews illustrated common expressions and the social interplay in the discussions around different platforms. The respondents were recruited with the aid of student assistants using varied methods, including “snowball sampling” (May, 2001, p. 132), with contacts of contacts acting as “gate-keepers” (see Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999, p. 9) facilitating access to a wide range of geographical locations and social settings, as well as providing acceptance of us as researchers. Thirty-eight of our respondents were female, and 29 were male; the group interviews consisting of people including how and where their (social) media use took place, and why, what content they chose to take part of, and the purposes it filled for the respondents, how different platforms were used in comparison to each other, and how they were viewed in relation to wider social and cultural meanings. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hr and were recorded and fully transcribed. Transcriptions were coded and discussed according to the principle outlined in “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), highlighting the moving back and forth between theory and data, which was adopted for the analysis as a modified version emphasizing the openness of the researcher to new perspectives alongside data generation (Seale, 1999, pp. 91–105). All names have been pseudonymised and details removed so that none of the respondents can be identified.
Social Media as an Everyday Practice

The young adults in general described how they spent a substantial amount of time with social media on an ordinary day, and how these media played important roles in their lives. It was also obvious that different kinds of social media existed side by side and fulfilled different roles, which also varied according to age, gender and class, and between individuals.

In line with national statistics at the time, the most frequently used social media platforms were Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, which almost all of the respondents used every day, followed by YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, which many used regularly and related to in different ways. Others likewise mentioned less commonly used platforms such as WhatsApp, Reddit, Pinterest, and Twitch. As underlined in previous research (Boczkowski et al., 2018), different platforms were used in different ways, and played different roles, necessitating a holistic perspective in order to understand how they interplay.

When asked the broader question of “how they use the media in general” on an ordinary day, the young adults often started to laugh, sometimes embarrassed, and immediately stated that “that’s lot,” “almost all the time,” or “it’s difficult to say,” and after this they started to talk about ways of using social media, where and when they used it (or not), and for what reasons. For these young adults, then, a question about “media in general” was immediately linked to “social media”—reflecting the age group and the deep integration of social media platforms in everyday life in Sweden overall. In the subsequent discussions, we identified three main roles social media played in the lives of these young adults, linked to three different ways of using social media in everyday life: (1) filling empty slots (interval use), (2) everyday transformations (ritual use), and (3) mood managing (emotional use). As ideal types, these categories are mutually exclusive from a meaning perspective, however not in mere everyday practice. In the following, we will describe these three ways of using social media, to then discuss how they can be linked to the broader purpose of social media in young users’ lives.

Filling Empty Slots

The most common way to talk about social media among the young adults was in fact to down-play their importance in the structure of the day. This was primarily done by negating the idea of a fixed and focused time and space devoted to social media use. A common discourse among the young adults was how they use social media not because it is important; they just pick up the phone when they have nothing else to do, when a gap in time appears. Dimmick et al. (2011) have identified this kind of temporality in relation to news use in digital media, which, they argue, is conducted in the interstices of time. Nguyen (2021) has underlined similar findings in relation to Facebook Live, which he claims is used in smaller and larger “down times,” that is, times while people are recovering from mental unhealth. In these states people use Facebook live to regain strength to come back to the general flow of everyday life and social media (here Facebook) is hence used to fill empty slots in time, but also to recover strength, while awaiting life to start again. Most of our interviewees of course do not suffer from the kind of mental states that Nguyen describes (even though several of them were open with current and former periods when life had been hard on them) and do not need to use social media to overcome “down times.” Despite this, they did talk about social media in similar terms; to fill empty time-slots: when waiting for the train, sitting on the bus, queuing for something, or waiting for the toast to pop-up from the toaster: a kind of interval use. As mentioned, this way of talking about social media characterizes them as unimportant, as something that one can have, but can also do without. Penelope (19), working in a preschool while deciding what she wants to study, exemplifies this aspect of social media use:

I rarely think: “now I’m gonna get on Instagram to keep myself updated about world events. It’s more like I check what’s happening, what people do, and just scroll for a bit because I’ve nothing better to do, I’m just waiting.”

Another common way of characterizing social media use is as a parallel activity, used simultaneously with another task in order to feel less lonely, for example keeping YouTube on while preparing food, when eating (on your own), or before going to bed. This is another kind of interval use, where the interval is social instead of temporal. Letting social media fill an empty gap in life, when someone, according to our social norms and conventions, should have been there, such as at mealtimes, is a way of ordering everyday situations when living, or being, alone. Maria (20), who has left her home-town to study political science at the university, uses YouTube in this way, as a routine practice while for example preparing dinner:

I mainly go on YouTube to pass the time, and sometimes I’ve vloggs and stuff like that on the computer just in the background, because I’ve got nothing to do. Like when cooking or doing something like that.

Rufus (18), who goes to the gymnasium and lives with his parents in a small town, always uses YouTube for the same purpose while having breakfast:

I check YouTube a lot on my mobile, because it’s so easy to bring along and watch at the same time. So, as soon as I wake up I put on a video, which I watch while I eat breakfast. I don’t know why I do it, but I use [social media] almost too much maybe, all the time. . . . Because I always want something on.

This kind of interval use is characterized by popping up in the interstices in time (c.f. Dimmick et al., 2011), when there is nothing else there to fill them with. These interstices are
often too short to watch an episode of a TV series or a film and take place in spaces that cannot be taken in possession (such as when standing on a crowded bus). It is hence spatio-temporally fluid. The respondents described it as a kind of un-reflected use, where the content is subordinate to the purpose of killing time and keeping loneliness away. This kind of interval use is hence experienced as tech-independent, it is not most important which platform they use in the temporal interstices—instead it is the purpose of fighting monotony and social emptiness that gives it meaning. An important characteristic, however, is that it tends to expand in time, if the temporal interval has a loose ending point. Many respondents, hence, described how they often open their phone for a quick check and find themselves still scrolling their social media an hour, or more, later.

The young adults often initially described this kind of interval use, opposing temporal and social vacancies, as *the only* way to use social media; to fill the empty spaces in time, helping to fight boredom and monotony. This tempo-spatial organization, however, also requires a life characterized by a high level of tempo-spatial flexibility. Many young adults lead such lives in Sweden today; the youngest go to the gymnasium with relatively high levels of flexibility in the organization of time and space, one third of all youth are students in higher education and have an even more notable spatio-temporal freedom to organize their lives. However, not everyone shared these experiences of tempo-spatial flexibility and independence, for instance Penelope, whose preschool work meant social media use during work-hours was strictly forbidden:

> I usually work between eight to four, and then I don’t use my phone or media at all. But on my way to work I’m on the bus for around 35 minutes, and then I go through everything. Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat [...]. After that I don’t use the phone during the day, maybe just checking the time or sending an sms if it’s important. On the bus home I sit with my phone for 30 minutes and do the same thing as in the morning, checking what’s going on, what people are posting, if something has happened.

Beatrice (25), a university student who at the time of the interview had a summer job as laboratory assistant, had also witnessed how her adult working life changed her social media habits:

> Now when I’m working, 8-5, kind of, we’re not allowed to use our mobiles in the lab. I can only check the phone when I go to the toilet or during a break. So, my phone use has gone down, drastically. And then I cycle to work so I can’t do lazy commuter surfing anymore.

It is hence highly contextually dependent how the empty slots in daily life are organized, and heavy practices of interval use were more common among those who adhered to a typical youth-oriented lifestyle, with lots of flexibility and temporal independence.

### Everyday Transformations

If interval use was often the first immediate description among the young adults, when asking for more details about their daily habits other pictures emerged, revealing a different way of approaching social media compared with the liquidity of interval use: social media use as an everyday ritual. Ritual use of social media was particularly evident in the morning and when starting the day, when the young adults described a systematic, deliberate, and tempo-spatially delimited media practice. Nathalie (19), a woman in a group of currently unemployed friends in a mid-size town, explained how she used social media in the morning (and evening):

> The first thing I do when I wake up is to go on TikTok, and then I might stay there for half an hour, then I go on Instagram for half an hour, then Snapchat for half an hour. Then I have like an hour and a half to wake up. I guess it’s a routine that I have almost every day, apart from the weekend.

> M: So there’s a certain order . . . ?

> Yes, and before I go to bed I also go through all the three social media that I have. So it’s like a routine, in the morning and in the evening.

Nathalie’s account, humorously recognized by her friends in the group, also emphasizes the perceived importance of social media for catching up with what has happened during the night, when one has been sleeping and cut off from the flow of information and social events, which was repeated by other respondents. Pierre (18), a student at the gymnasium in Southern Stockholm, had a similar way of organizing his morning routines:

> The first thing you see when you wake up are the notifications. I start the app with the most notifications. I hardly have time to wake up before I’m on Snapchat and start scrolling and checking who’s written to me. After I’ve been on Snapchat I go on Instagram and scroll quickly, and then I check if I’ve had any messages there.

Another woman, Lily (25), gave an elaborate description of her morning ritual with social media, where she lays in bed, drinks coffee that her fiancé has brought her, a fixed time slot that lasts for half an hour while she takes part of the latest happenings and updates on social media:

> Well, my partner wakes me up before he’s going to work. So he wakes me up around half past eight. With coffee! And then I just have to stay in bed, haha. [...] I do it every morning. And I check my mail, and if I’ve had an sms I reply. I check Facebook, check my work’s Facebook. Well, I just scan everything, for around half an hour, I guess.

Some also described a similar ritualistic use of social media in the evenings, where it is, in a similar way, used to end the day, before going to sleep and closing off the world.
This kind of social media use is profoundly different compared with interval use. Everyday transformations are temporally and spatially fixed, provides stability and takes place in a specific place (in fact, often in bed) and during a specific time (from when one wakes up in the morning, and a delimited time from there) and hence is essential in starting the day for the young adults. It also differs from interval use as it is tech-specific, it is clearly described what social media the respondents use, and often also in what specific order. The ritual use of social media is, furthermore, transitional in its character; it transforms the respondents from uninitiated sleepers to updated social creatures ready to meet a new day. In this sense, it has a lot in common with earlier rituals of news use, as described by Bausinger (1984) and Steg Larsen (2000), and can also be compared to the ritual of reading a book or magazine before going to bed.

**Mood Management**

The young adults, furthermore, linked different platforms and content to specific experiences—for example, describing Instagram as a space for “inspiration” and lifestyle guidance, and TikTok as a platform for “having a laugh” (c.f. Boczkowski et al., 2018)—adjusting their social media practices according to the mood they were currently in, or looking for. In a similar way to how other media, such as television or music, can be used for purposes such as relaxation or an escape from everyday dullness, the respondents described how their social media habits could be aimed at achieving certain moods or feelings, for example, to “relax for a few seconds.” Others, similarly, emphasized how different platforms would add “fun,” “a good feeling,” “an energy kick,” or “a bit of pep.” Such responses highlight social media as a potent tool for “emotional self-regulation”; a function of media use previously analyzed in depth in relation to music listening (see DeNora, 2000, pp. 21–45).

As noticed in earlier research (e.g., Fu & Cook, 2020; Turkle, 2012/2017), social media can in many ways also cause feelings of unease and can be experienced as causing stress and pressures to live up to cultural expectations. In this study, respondents repeatedly linked their social media use to negative experiences too, such as stress, a negative body image, and pressures to buy expensive clothes or make-up. This duality is exemplified in the following conversation, where Alicia (24), in conversation with her friends around content they meet in social media, explains how travel and food accounts on Instagram caused feelings of stress resulting from comparisons with her own life:

Yeah, I follow close friends, but so many other accounts, too. [...] Like, some travel influencers. I get a lot of food and travel in my feed, but... Instagram, it can be more stressful than inspiring.

M: How do you mean, that it is stressful?

A: Well, I can feel like: “Oh how great, they’re on this trip! Why aren’t I travelling?” Or if I see friends having a picnic or something, then I think: “That seems fun, why didn’t I take the initiative to a picnic?”. It’s like everyone is doing so much, and it’s like: “I’m not doing anything, and my life is really boring.”

Similar recounts of feeling pressured by unachievable ideals were brought up in other interviews—often with the female respondents—and had sometimes prompted adjustments of the “world” the users met in social media. One group of female friends explained how they had started to “unfollow” certain influencers because their seemingly perfect lives made them uneasy, whereas Freya (24), a young woman working as a care assistant and spending a lot of time on Instagram, explained how, for her, a conscious method for avoiding feeling “pushed down” was to unfollow not just celebrities but also previous classmates and all other contacts she felt inspired “the wrong feeling.” One way of addressing such feelings was, hence, to deliberately transform one’s social media spaces into more comfortable environments to inhabit (c.f. Goffman, 1974, also Bengtsson, 2006), illustrating a form of struggle over the control of the spatial and experiential dimensions of different platforms, comparable to how young users grapple to create self-representations and identities online (boyd, 2014), although here concerning the environment itself.

Some respondents were very clear when describing how they actively created different social media spaces as mobile mental states they could activate whenever needed. Daniel (26), a hairdresser who talked a lot about the difficulties he had faced as a homosexual in a conservative immigrant environment, used Instagram as a space to enter when he needed to feel better, something he had created by following only people he considered “uplifting” and who made him happy.

Freya, the care assistant referred to earlier, who similarly talked openly in the interview about her earlier problems in life and how she currently disliked her work and colleagues, used Instagram for similar purposes, as a mobile space to enter when the place she was currently in felt unbearable:

M: So you feel strengthened by that, then...?

Yeah, and I need that... I mean, I really like animals for example, and on Instagram someone might care about cats a lot. But then I get to work, and there it’s like “oh, cats should be shot” and “cats should be run over,” and “cats should...” And then I say to myself: “Just think about those people on Instagram, think about them instead.” So, it’s sort of a rescue for me. Otherwise I’d go crazy at work! I need to know there’s something else.

Using social media in this way, furthermore, could involve making choices around which specific app to select for
achieving a desirable mood, as illustrated by Jennifer (23), a student of popular music production:

I’ve no phone for work so I get everything in my phone, all the mail from school, on Facebook there are a lot of messages that are important, and Instagram . . . Sometimes stuff I don’t want to reply to. So I navigate . . . “ok, which app is safe?” [laughter] and “which app gives me anxiety?” That’s why TikTok has been really nice, because I know that no one wants to get hold of me there. (Jennifer, 23)

Perceiving TikTok as a “safe” space on her mobile, where she could feel secluded and enjoy entertaining content, Jennifer’s description illustrates how her social media use involves the navigation between different emotional states, again highlighting social media as gateways to a portable mental space constantly at hand, used to transform everyday situations from pressing and uncomfortable to desirable experiences. Similar experiences of TikTok as a “safe space” have been explored by Şot (2022).

Using social media for mood management occurs at specific occasions that are not necessarily planned beforehand, but are clearly defined from an experiential point of view. Such use is temporally limited and defined by the feelings it prompts. Feelings drawn from social media, however, have a more prolonged temporality, expanding beyond the mere custom of use. The young adults’ practices described above, of adjusting the content of one’s social media according to the emotional state one wants it to provide, and deliberately choosing between different social media apps to fulfill this purpose, also constitute an intentional way to make sure one has access to the proper kind of emotional space when that is needed. Mood management with social media can, therefore, involve some planning beforehand and as such has an extended temporality, and the uses of it is temporally defined as it takes place in well-defined situations when emotional support is needed. It is also technologically specific, as the young adults deliberately select which apps and platforms to turn to, to get the required emotional support in a specific situation. Finally, as an everyday practice, this way of using social media is also more content-dependent than the other uses.

**Conclusion: Everyday Meanings of Social Media Use**

The three identified meanings constructed from using social media are spatio-temporally different, but also different in how they relate to technological diversity, the role of the content provided by social media, and the way it relates to the broader fabric of everyday life. These identified purposes of, and ways of using, social media, are by no means exclusive, and they are to be seen as ideal types of experiences and hence not always as practices clearly distinguishable from each other in daily life. They do, however, direct attention to the different roles social media hold in everyday life, and the purposes people have with their use of social media. We have already touched upon the similarities between the transformative morning and evening rituals around social media use and news rituals identified in analogue media landscapes. Even though the young adults in this study did not often talk about traditional news in relation to their social media use, their way of approaching social media in the morning have many similarities with such habits. It is a temporally and spatially restricted practice, conducted in a specific place with specific attributes, and is conducted in an ordered manner. Along with traditional news rituals, this way of using social media also has information as its main purpose. There are of course many aspects that differ between traditional news rituals and the ritual of social media use: the kind of content provided, the news values, the sources, senders, and styles of communication. But from a broader user perspective, these two practices have many things in common, serving a felt need for relevant information about the world as a way of getting ready to meet the new day. Ritual social media use is hence also directed toward the wider public, even though the topics discussed and the “news” values ordering discussions in social media are different from those in the news media.

Filling empty slots with social media is very different in spatio-temporal terms, as it is not restricted in time and space but takes place in micro-temporal interstices in everyday life—even though a common experience is also that temporal intervals can expand and occupy much more time than initially intended. This way of using social media is meaningful as a kind of continuous update of existing information, but also as a way of maintaining contacts with friends and family. Communicating with and updating people in the closer circle of contacts is maintained throughout the day and is the kind of use that many describes as dominant in between mornings and evenings. This does not only have to do with restrictions conducted by the broader framework of everyday life (such as school, work) but also as this form of use is socially organized. Some of the unemployed interviewees also adjusted to this kind of everyday structure, even though they would not necessarily need to (a kind of morally organized use pattern also found in analogue media landscapes, see also Bengtsson, 2012). Interval use of social media, likewise, relates to aspects of connectivity where media industries have taught audiences to constantly share and update their followers about their smaller and larger deeds and doings. Interval use can involve updating oneself of ongoing events and happenings but appears more related to keeping connected to close others, friends, and family.

Mood management with social media, instead, relates to more existential aspects of the lifeworld, where the young users turn to social media in order to create a certain feeling that is needed in particular everyday situations, situating them in a place in the world where they want to be—although it can also involve negative experiences. This kind
of social media use for emotional purposes, thus, relates to one’s own personal well-being in connection to social media and the management of close and distant others to create the right kind of emotional space when that is existentially needed.

Finally, this analysis has shown that the ubiquitous and sometimes “invisible” use of social media is specific in many ways: it is technologically specific as different social media apps are given different meanings in the young adults’ everyday lives, but also in relation to the different kinds of content they provide, as well as geocultural frameworks, which is an intriguing avenue for deepened future research. It is also specific, as highlighted in the article, as it is characterized by varied use patterns that create distinctive meanings in the everyday life of young adults.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article is based on research funded by Östersjöstiftelsen/The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

ORCID iD
Stina Bengtsson https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6903-141X

Notes
1. https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/digital-economy-and-society-index-desi.
2. https://svenskarnaochinternet.se/rapporter/svenskarna-och-internet-2021/sociala-mediator/youtube-facebook-instagram-sociala-medier-som-anvants-most-det-senaste-are/#oversikt-sociala-mediarevandning.
3. https://svenskarnaochinternet.se/rapporter/svenskarna-och-internet-2020/sociala-mediator/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIUtPIPL-7wIVQaOyCh0gdAEQEAAYASABEgI7R_D_BwE.

References
Alhabash, S., & Ma, M. (2017). A tale of four platforms: Motivations and uses of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat among college students. Social Media + Society, 3(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117691544
Archibald, M. M., Ambagtsheer, R. C., Casey, M. G., & Lawless, M. (2019). Using zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: Perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919874596
Bakardjieva, M. (2005). Internet society: The internet in everyday life. Sage.
Barbour, R. S., & Kitzinger, J. (1999). Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups. In R. s. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.), Developing focus group research: Politics, theory and practice (pp. 1–20). SAGE.
Bausinger, H. (1984). Media, technology and daily life. Media Culture & Society, 6(4), 343–351. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344378400600403
Baym, N. (2015). Personal connections in the digital age (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
Bengtsson, S. (2006). Symbolic spaces of everyday life. Nordicom Review, 27(2), 119–132.
Bengtsson, S. (2012). Imagined user modes: Media morality in everyday life. International Journal of Cultural Studies, 15(2), 181–196.
Bengtsson, S. (2018). Sensorial organization as an ethics of space: Digital media in everyday life. Media and Communication, 6(2), 39–45.
Bengtsson, S., & Johansson, S. (2021). A phenomenology of news: Understanding news in digital culture. Journalism, 22(11), 2873–2889.
Bennett, A. (2005). Culture and everyday life. SAGE.
Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor.
Boczkowski, P., Matassi, M., & Michelstein, E. (2018). How young users deal with multiple platforms: The role of meaning-making in social media repertoires. Journal of Computer-mediated Communication, 23(5), 245–259. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy012
Bourdieu, P. (1991). Language and symbolic power. Harvard University Press.
boyd, d. (2014). It’s complicated: The social lives of networked teens. Yale University Press.
boyd, d., & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. Journal of Computer-mediated Communication, 13(1), 210–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x
Bucher, T. (2020). The right-time web: Theorizing the kairologic of algorithmic media. New Media & Society, 22(9), 1699–1714.
Burgess, J., Marwick, A., & Poell, T. (Eds.). (2017). The SAGE handbook of social media. SAGE.
Costa, E. (2018). Affordances-in-practice: An ethnographic critique of social media logic and context collapse. New Media & Society, 20(10), 3641–3656.
Coulndry, N. (2002). The place of media power: Pilgrims and witnesses of the media age. Routledge.
Coulndry, N. (2005). Media rituals: A critical approach. Routledge.
Coulndry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). The mediated construction of reality. Polity Press.
Coulndry, N., & Kallinikos, J. (2017). Ontology. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of social media (pp. 146–159). SAGE.
Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). Media events: The live broadcasting of history. Harvard University Press.
DeNora, T. (2000). Music in everyday life. Cambridge University Press.
Desjardins R., & Troop C. J. (2011). Phenomenological approaches in anthropology. Annual Review of Anthropology, 40, 87–102.
Dimmick, J., Feaster, J. C., & Hoplamazian, G. J. (2011). News in the interstices: The niches of mobile media in space and time. New Media & Society, 13(1), 23–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461448103633452
Donath, J. (2007). Signals in social supernets. Journal of Computer-mediated Communication, 13(1), 231–251. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00394.x
Ellison, N. B., & boyd, d. (2013). Sociality through social network sites. In W. H. Dutton (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Internet studies* (pp. 151–172). Oxford University Press.

Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., & Steinfield, C. (2009). Social network sites and society: Current trends and future possibilities. *Interactions Magazine, 16*(1), 6–9. https://doi.org/10.1145/1456202.1456204

Fu, J., & Cook, J. (2020). Everyday social media use of young Australian adults. *Journal of Youth Studies, 24*(9), 1234–1250. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1828843

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Publishing Company.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1927/2010). *Being and time*. Suny Press.

Hermes, J. (1995). *Being and time*. Routledge.

Higmore, B. (2001). *Reading women's magazines. An analysis of everyday media use*. Polity Press.

Humphreys, L. (2018). *Connection or disconnection? Two generations in Sweden discuss online sociality*. In C. von Feilitzen (Ed.), *New media, place and mobility*. Bloomsbury Publishing. (Original work published 2012)

Ihde, D. (1993). *Postphenomenology: Essays in the postmodern context*. Northwestern University Press.

Ihde, D. (2003). *Postphenomenology – Again*. Department of Information and Media Studies.

Jerslev, A., & Mortensen, M. (2018). Celebrity in the social media age: Re-negotiating the public and the private. In A. Elliot (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of celebrity studies* (pp. 157–174). Routledge.

Johansson, S. (2011). Connection or disconnection? Two generations in Sweden discuss online sociality. In C. von Feilitzen & P. Petrov (Eds.), *Use and views of media in Russia and Sweden: A comparative study in St. Petersburg and Stockholm* (pp. 273–300). Södertörn Academic Studies.

Jung, E. H., & Sundar, S. S. (2016). Celebrity in the social media age: Re-negotiating the public and the private. In A. Elliot (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of celebrity studies* (pp. 157–174). Routledge.

Kaun, A., & Stiernstedt, F. (2014). Facebook time: Technological and institutional affordances for media memories. *New Media & Society, 16*(7), 1145–1168.

Larsen, B. S. (2000). Radio as ritual. *Nordicom Review, 21*(2), 259–274.

Lefebvre, H., & Nicholson-Smith, D. (1991). *The production of space* (Vol. 142). Blackwell.

Lewis, J., & West, A. (2009). “Friending”: London-based undergraduates’ experiences of Facebook. *New Media & Society, 11*(7), 1209–1229. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342058

Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: Teenagers’ use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society, 10*(3), 393–411. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808089415

Marwick, A. (2013). Status update: Celebrity, publicity & branding in the social media age. Yale University Press.

Marwick, A., & boyd, d. (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, 17*(2), 139–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856510394539

May, T. (2001). *Social research: Issues, methods and process* (3rd ed.). Open University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behaviour*. Oxford University Press.

Miller, D. (2011). *Tales from Facebook*. Polity Press.

Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S., & Wang, X. (2016). *How the world changed social media*. UCL Press.

Miller, V. (2008). New media, networking and phatic culture. *Convergence, 14*(4), 387–400. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856508094659

Miller, V. (2017). Phatic culture and the status quo: Reconsidering the purpose of social media activism. *Convergence, 25*(3), 251–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856515592512

Moores, S. (2000). *Media and everyday life in modern society*. Edinburgh University Press.

Moores, S. (2017). *Media, place and mobility*. Bloomsbury Publishing. (Original work published 2012)

Morley, D. (1986). *Family television: Cultural power and domestic leisure*. Routledge.

Nguyen, D. (2021). Can’t wait to feel better: Facebook Live and the recalibration of downtime intending to the body. *Media, Culture & Society, 43*(6), 984–999. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211003458

Pink, S. (2011). Multimodality, multisensoriality and ethnographic knowing: Social semiotics and the phenomenology of perception. *Qualitative Research, 11*(3), 216–276.

Rainie, L., & Wellman, B. (2012). *The new social operating system of networked individualism*. MIT Press.

Scannell, P. (1996). *Radio, television and modern life: A phenomenological approach*. Blackwell.

Scannell, P. (2014). *Television and the meaning of ‘Live’: An enquiry into the human situation*. Polity Press.

Schutz, A., & Luckman, T. (1973). *The structures of the life world*, orig. ca 1950 (trans. RM Zaner and HT Engelhardt). Heinemann.

Seale, C. (1999). *The quality of qualitative research*. Sage.

Sheringham, M. (2006). *Everyday life: Theories and practices from surrealism to the present*. Oxford University Press.

Şot, I. (2022). Fostering intimacy on TikTok: A platform that “listens” and “creates a safe space.” *Media, Culture & Society*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443721104709

Sujon, Z. (2021). *The social media age*. SAGE.

Tudor, M. (2018). *Desire lines: Towards a queer digital media phenomenology* [Doctoral dissertation, Södertörn University].

Turkle, S. (2017). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books. (Original work published 2012)

Turner, V. (1969/1977). *The ritual process, structure and anti-structure*. Aldine.

Van Manen, M. (2016). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Routledge.
Whiting, A., & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research, Vol.*, 16(4), 362–369. https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-06-2013-0041

**Author Biographies**

Stina Bengtsson (PhD, University of Gothenburg) is a professor of Media and Communication Studies at Södertörn University. Her research interests include the mediatization and datafication of everyday life and how it shapes meaning-making and everyday practices.

Sofia Johansson (PhD, University of Westminster) is an associate professor of Media and Communication Studies at Södertörn University. Her research interests include media audiences, young people and news, celebrity cultures, and uses of social media in everyday life.