MAKING TIME ONLINE: EXPLORING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR FAMILY CONNECTION

A Thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

Strong family bonds can lead to improved wellbeing and life satisfaction for individuals. Globally, people have assimilated social media technology into their daily lives. Complementary to offline spaces, social media platforms provide spaces where people engage in family life. This body of research explores the use of social media for family relational maintenance across the lifespan. Three papers submitted to peer-reviewed journals form part of this thesis by publication. The first paper was a mixed-methods systematic review of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method empirical studies exploring geographically distributed families' engagement with family practices over social media. By employing a convergent data-based framework, the results of 51 studies were synthesised into four domains: (1) doing family in a social media environment, (2) performing family through stories and rituals, (3) the nature of online communication practices, and (4) privacy, conflict, and the quality of family relationships. Most of the reviewed studies were in a transnational context, so the second qualitative paper aimed to identify Australians' psychosocial and transactional social media family practices. The data from semi-structured interviews with 28 Australians were inductively analysed to identify two themes. The first related to Australian perceptions of time scarcity and how this is implicated in their choice of communication modes: "individuals perceive time is scarce, so they work to maintain relationships efficiently." The second theme explored the tension between people's desire to see authentic self-disclosing behaviour and the need to comply with social media's positive communication norms: "to share or not to share on Facebook, a twenty-first century conundrum." As a response to the emergence of COVID-19 and related lockdowns during the research period, the final paper used qualitative case study methodology to explore the impact of these measures on Australian social media practices for connecting with family and friends. Qualitative Case study methodology using a critical realist perspective was used to

gain insight into three Australian's social media practices before and during stay-at-home measures. Longitudinal data from two in-depth individual interviews using photo-elicitation was thematically analysed to develop three themes. The first two themes identified temporal separation as a factor influencing mode use: "indefinite separation motivates a pivot to audio-visual" and "messaging reduces friction on relationship maintenance". The third theme explored how shared interests can be the foundation of online communication, which in turn can foster closer bonds: "shared interests are the key to sustainable interaction." Three key findings across these papers include: a) understandings of social media as a tool used to strengthen bonds, shape family identity, and accomplish shared tasks; b) insights into the way late adults engage in family social media interactions; and c) the influence of time scarcity on Australians' behaviour in various social media modes. Two practical implications are 1) interventions to promote audio-visual based interactions between grandparents and their young grandchildren to establish and sustain bonds when they are separated by geographical distance, and 2) interventions to encourage parents to establish vicarious interests online with their children for sustainable interactions, which in turn can strengthen bonds.

Keywords: Facebook, social media, family relationships, shared interest.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

This Thesis is entirely the work of Susan Abel except where otherwise acknowledged. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where acknowledged.

Principal Supervisor: Professor Charlotte Brownlow

Associate Supervisor: Dr Tanya Machin

Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

The following detail is the agreed share of contribution for candidates and co-authors in the presented publications in this thesis.

Chapter 3

Abel, S., Machin, T., & Brownlow, C. (2020). Social media, rituals, and long-distance family relationship maintenance: A mixed-methods systematic review. *New Media & Society*, *23*(3). 632-654. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820958717

Susan Abel: 60%

Associate Professor Charlotte Brownlow: 20%

Dr Tanya Machin: 20%

The overall contribution of Susan Abel was 60% to the concept development, article selection, analysis, drafting and revising of the final submission; Associate Professor Charlotte Brownlow and Dr Tanya Machin each contributed 20% to article screening, editing and providing important technical inputs.

Chapter 4

Abel, S., Brownlow, C., & Machin, T. (In preparation). “You've got to group together and have a yarn”: Australian family practices of social media. *Australian Journal of Psychology.*

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The overall contribution of Susan Abel was 60% to the concept development, ethics approval, recruitment, interviews, data analysis, drafting and revising the final submission; Associate Professor Charlotte Brownlow and Dr Tanya Machin each contributed 20% to concept development, data analysis, review, editing and providing important technical inputs.

Chapter 5

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The overall contribution of Susan Abel was 60% to the concept development, ethics approval, recruitment, interviews, data analysis, drafting and revising the final submission; Associate Professor Charlotte Brownlow and Dr Tanya Machin each contributed 20% to concept development, data analysis, review, editing and providing important technical inputs.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ICT	Information communication technology
JBI	Joanna Briggs Institute
MMSR	Mixed methods systematic review
PICo	Population issue/phenomena context
PRISMA	Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Existing research has established family social connectedness is associated with better psychological and physical health outcomes for its members, including enhanced wellbeing and life satisfaction (Denny et al., 2014; Jose et al., 2012). Social connectedness between families who cohabit is facilitated by regular participation in shared activities and open communication (Crespo et al., 2011). Reciprocal support and family communication continue through the lifespan and understanding how relationships are maintained using mediated communication is important as Australia has a residentially mobile population and long-term distance relationships are common. This introductory chapter sets the scene for investigating the use of social media for family communication. It begins by discussing the Australian cultural phenomenon of high residential mobility and how this led to a recent history of family mediated communication. This is followed by a brief introduction to social media and how it is used for mediated technology has long been utilised by Australian kinkeepers to help them maintain family connectedness and social support. Finally, justification for the methodological approaches for each of the three studies is introduced.

Prior to the mid-19th century, Western families were constituted spatially, that is, they spent abundant time together in and around the household working and resting, and the idea of “family ties” were of less importance (Pryor & McKenzie, 2006). However, industrialisation saw families spend less time living and labouring together, as adults worked away from the household and children left for school (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). As a consequence, the family was no longer constituted spatially, but in time, and families began to create shared meaning and “togetherness” through rituals and stories (Gillis, 2002; Mintz & Kellogg, 1989). Today, many Australians not only work or study away from home but also live at a distance from family members resulting in limited face-to-face interaction. This can occur due to divorce (e.g., the 1.2 million children who were assisted by child support in

1 2017 probably live away from one of their parents; Department of Human Services, 2019),
2 employment (approximately 65% of the resource sector fly-in-fly-out workforce are parents;
3 Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia, 2015); military deployment
4 (approximately 58,000 Australian Defence Force employees experience frequent relocation
5 and can be deployed away from home on a regular basis; Atkins et al., 2017; Department of
6 Defence, 2017, 2019), or boarding school attendance (20,927 students in 2020; Stokes &
7 Dunsmore, 2020).

8 Australian adults relocate more frequently than people from most other countries, and
9 almost 20% of the population have moved eight times or more with many family households
10 spatially located (Bernard et al., 2017). Further, transnational migration accounts for almost
11 40% of Australian-based families living at a distance from their family members. Many
12 Australian residents who are overseas-born (36%) have family members who remain in their
13 country of origin (Phillips & Simon-Davies, 2017; Sherrell, 2019) and about 3% of
14 Australian citizens live overseas (Banfield, 2012). Long-distance family relationships are
15 therefore common in Australian society, so family bonds are frequently maintained through
16 mediated communication.

17 The construct of family connectedness stems from the theory of belongingness
18 (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belongingness theory posits individuals are driven to form and
19 maintain long-term social relationships and are reluctant to dissolve them once formed. Blum
20 and Rinehart's (1997) definition of family connectedness, "feeling understood, loved,
21 wanted, and paid attention to by family members" (p.16), focuses on two elements: an
22 affectionate long-term bond and reciprocity in the relationship. Two other important
23 dimensions of family connectedness include a lack of conflict and identification with family
24 values (Brook & Whiteman, 1992). Family connectedness can be likened to the concept of
25 social capital (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital is inward-looking and refers to the

1 maintenance of strong ties between emotionally close individuals from a homogenous social
2 background with a shared identity. In contrast, bridging social capital is inclusive of new
3 relationships and information, which can result in a diversification of group identity and
4 reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). Previous research has identified Facebook as a source of bridging
5 rather than bonding social capital (Steinfield et al., 2008). However, almost 69% of the
6 Australian population are active social media users, and 85% of those users say a key
7 motivation is to keep in touch with family (Despinola, 2018; Yellow, 2020). This paper was
8 written using a broad definition of social media as a group of websites and applications that
9 enable users to create content, share ideas and information, or network with each other
10 (Machin & Abel, 2022)

11 Scholars have begun to explore how previously identified maintenance behaviours might
12 be adapted and enacted on social media. For example, Vitak (2014) explored the relationship
13 between geographic proximity, maintenance strategies enacted online, and the perceived role
14 of Facebook. Vitak found that people who were geographically distant from a friend saw
15 Facebook as an important tool to maintain their relationship. They engaged in a range of
16 maintenance activities such as seeking social support, viewing the friend's profile, and
17 following the friend's social feed. However, social media encompasses a large suite of
18 applications with varied modes, some of which may be better suited and more widely used
19 than Facebook for long-distance family relational maintenance. While there is a body of
20 research for transnational families, there is little research that explores this question in the
21 context of within-country families (Abel et al., 2020).

22 Ellison et al. (2007) include three key elements to define social media. Users can (1)
23 present themselves using an online profile; (2) create a list of connections; and (3) interact
24 with these users and make new connections from other users. Most social media applications
25 afford various communication modes such as text, audio, and audio-visual. Channels of

1 communication can be private or collapsed. In private channels such as WhatsApp or
2 Facebook Messenger, users choose their communication partners prior to sharing
3 information. In contrast, Facebook's default privacy setting displays a user's post to their
4 entire connection list— be they friends, family, or work colleagues (Facebook, 2021). This
5 results in a collapsed context, meaning any information shared may be subject to unintended
6 audiences (Tufekci, 2008). The choice of communication channels used by families may
7 relate to social norms of expression or what behaviour is acceptable in a social context
8 (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Interacting positively, in a cheerful, optimistic and uncritical
9 manner is one relationship maintenance strategy offered by Canary and Stafford (1992).
10 Positive norms of expression are more acceptable across all social media formats, and
11 negative self-disclosures in a collapsed context like Facebook can be met with disapproval
12 (e.g., Vitak and Kim, 2014). Open communication is also valued for maintaining
13 relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Private communication channels such as WhatsApp
14 are considered more appropriate forums for negative or emotional self-disclosure thus may be
15 preferred for family connections (Waterloo et al., 2018).

16 Wolin and Bennett (1984) proposed family rituals support connectedness by fostering
17 and preserving a shared identity. Categories of rituals include celebrations which are often at
18 a cultural level, for instance, religious holidays and rites of passage such as weddings;
19 traditions that are more individual, such as birthdays or family holidays; and patterned family
20 interactions which can be highly individualised routines, for example, daily greetings or
21 bedtime routines. Australians have long used mediated technology to enact family rituals, for
22 instance, daily telephone contact between mothers and daughters (Moyal, 1992). Families
23 that are successful in establishing and maintaining rituals are more likely to have a kinkeeper
24 (Rosenthal, 1985). The gendered role of kinkeeper is often taken on by a woman who works
25 more than others at keeping her family members in touch with each other using mediated

bonding practices (Braithwaite et al., 2017; Rosenthal, 1985). Social media strongly encourages habit formation by providing context cues that nudge ongoing use (Anderson & Wood, 2021). It is likely that social media habits support a kinkeeper's need to sustain their family bonds (e.g., Vancea and Olivera, 2013).

During this program of research, a pandemic of COVID-19 infections struck. As a result of the pandemic, governments around the world implemented stay-at-home measures. Many within-country and national borders were closed (Morrison, 2020). These actions represented a significant disruptor to families' face-to-face practices and potentially nudged families to move some practices online. A life-course perspective provides a strong basis for research into the implications of social media adoption and adaptation within families. The life course perspective takes into account *social contexts* such as changing cultural norms around smartphone use, *historical disruptor events* such as the COVID-19 pandemic, *timing and role transitions* such as children leaving the family home, and *linked lives* or how people's attitudes and behaviours are shaped by intimate networks like families (see Chesley & Johnson, 2014). Understanding how families maintain their connectedness using social media is important because it affords the potential for ongoing connection between multiple generations of families across distance.

The growing body of research surrounding social media for relational maintenance has predominately focused on voluntary relationships such as friendships and romantic partners (Ellison et al., 2014; Machin & Jeffries, 2017). Given social media is an integral part of most Australians' everyday communication, it could be a key communication tool used by families. The program of research will focus on the use of social media as a tool for Australian families to maintain family connectedness.

Aims and Research Questions

The overarching aim of the project was to explore the use of social media as a tool for Australian family relational maintenance across the lifespan. This research addressed a gap in the literature by exploring (a) current patterns of family use of various modes of social media (e.g., video calls, group messages, passive viewing of a Facebook profile) and (b) the types of maintenance behaviours enacted, and experiences of connectedness amongst Australian residents utilising social media to maintain within-country family relationships. Three research questions were proposed:

Research question 1: “What are the current patterns of use of various modes of social media for family relationship maintenance?”

Research question 2: “What types of maintenance behaviours are enacted on social media?”

Research question 3: “How do Australian residents find the experience of using social media meets their belongingness needs?”

The first and second questions required a systematic review of the currently available literature on family relationship maintenance using social media. Given the exploratory nature of the questions and the expectation for limited existing research about using social media for Australian family relationship maintenance, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies were included in the review. The third question of this thesis was also qualitative in nature and focused on exploring the experiences and feelings of Australians towards social media for relationship maintenance.

Three studies were completed. There is currently no research that examines which features of social media (e.g., voice calls, sharing media) are preferred by families for connectedness nor what maintenance behaviours they enact online. A mixed-methods systematic review of the literature identified what is currently known about social media use

1 for family relationship maintenance. After reviewing the literature, semi-structured
2 interviews were conducted with Australian residents who currently use social media to
3 maintain their family relationships. It was not anticipated that adequate information could be
4 gathered about the Australian context from the first study, so these interviews were planned
5 to establish a deeper understanding of the answers to the first and second questions.
6 Furthermore, this study explored Australian residents' thoughts and experiences of social
7 media relationship maintenance. This method was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the
8 research. Finally, the disruptive impact of the sudden implementation of measures to control
9 the spread of COVID-19 prompted the third study to investigate the impact of the measures
10 on face-to-face family practices and social media family practices.

11 This is a thesis by publication where each chapter consists of a study that was
12 published, accepted, submitted, or prepared for publication at the time of submission. An
13 introduction to each of these chapters indicates how the study contributed to the advancement
14 of knowledge of this research area and this thesis in particular.

15 **Study One: Systematic Literature Review**

16 The first research question enquired about the current patterns of use of various
17 modes of social media for family relationship maintenance. The second question asked what
18 types of maintenance behaviours are enacted by families on social media. Current literature
19 on the effect of social media use for family relationship functioning and practices
20 demonstrates mixed results, so the first study provided a narrative synthesis of published
21 peer-reviewed research in this area. As the program of research aimed to explore family
22 relationships over the lifespan and focus on the use of social media as the preferred form of
23 mediated communication, the context considered individuals who engage in family practices
24 at a distance. A mixed-methods systematic review was proposed as a rigorous and transparent
25 methodology that can provide a narrative synthesis that combines findings of prevalence

together with deeper meanings of individual experiences around a particular phenomenon (Lizarondo et al., 2017). The review was registered on PROSPERO (https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/prospero/display_record.php?ID=CRD42019136371) to promote transparency in the process and further reduce the risk of bias in the study.

Study Two: Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews of Australian Residents

As this thesis explored Australian experiences, the second study aimed to further explore the three research questions in an Australian context. That is current patterns of family use of various modes of social media, types of maintenance behaviours enacted, and Australian's experiences of connectedness. This study drew on the findings of the systematic review in the first study. It aimed to investigate the meanings Australians attribute to "keeping up with family" on social media, their online experiences and satisfaction with those experiences, and how people negotiate the potential of constant availability and ambient copresence with their privacy needs. The study drew on the life course perspective, which considers historical changes in human behaviour (Chesley & Johnson, 2014) and role theory (George, 1993) to further examine this phenomenon.

Study Three: Case Study of Australian Residents

A life-course perspective suggests this body of research could not be completed without considering a huge disruptor to face-to-face communication: stay-at-home and lockdown measures introduced to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study provided an exploration of how disrupted family practices and social interaction may have impacted social media practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted before and during enforced isolation measures. Furthermore, the study examined elements influencing engagement with online family practices. Photos were used as interview stimuli and participants' motivations for capturing and sharing the images explored (Emmison & Smith, 2007). See Appendix C for copies of these images

1 **Thesis Structure**

2 This chapter provides an overview of the rationale, aims, and methodology for this
3 thesis. Chapter 2 is a narrative literature review that synthesises the current research on social
4 media for relationship maintenance and unpacks the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis.
5 Chapter 3 includes the first study that explored the first and second research questions "What
6 are the current patterns of use of various modes of social media for family relationship
7 maintenance?" and "What types of maintenance behaviours are enacted on social media?"
8 with a published mixed-methods systematic literature review (MMSR). Chapter 4 includes
9 the interview study, which revisited the first two questions and explored the third question,
10 "How do Australian residents find the experience of using social media meets their
11 belongingness needs?" using a thematic analysis of the data. Chapter 5 presents the results of
12 a case study that considered the research question in the context of a historical disruptor
13 event, COVID-19. Finally, chapter 6 provides a discussion of the main findings of each
14 study, considers how they collectively added to the knowledge of the body of research in this
15 field and offers limitations and further directions for research.
16

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been well established that close bonds with others can facilitate wellbeing and heightened psychological health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The role social media plays in sustaining close relationships across the lifespan was the focus of this thesis. As such, this chapter expands on the concept of family and the life course perspective, along with a discussion of theories of relationship maintenance (i.e., social exchange theory and the need to belong). Additionally, the role of online rituals and the kinkeepers—individuals who take on responsibility for facilitating family connections through rituals, are explored. The chapter then explicates the epistemology taken to make sense of the relationship between social media technology and human relationships (i.e., social constructivist approaches). Next, theories of how people choose between the various affordances of numerous social media platforms and modes to achieve their goals are discussed (i.e., uses and gratification and media richness). Finally, an exploration of the current research into the role social media may currently play in relationship maintenance will be discussed.

Conceptualising Family

It will be helpful to first unpack the concept of *family*, a term with a multiplicity of meanings. Three perspectives, as proposed by Wambolt and Reiss (1989), were relevant to the project. The first perspective is structural, and the research applied Johnson's (2000) definition of the kinship/extended family structure to include relationships between people who are biologically or legally related (e.g., marriage, adoption) or have self-ascribed associations (e.g., godchildren). Most Australian households comprise families with children (60.5%) or without children (37.8%; Qu, 2020). Australia is a multicultural society, and about 38% of adults in these households had been born in other countries such as the UK and Europe (10%) and countries from across Asia (11%). Less than 2% of Australian households are multi-generational, and they are most common in families where one of the parent's countries of

origin is in Asia or Oceania (other than Australia). These statistics capture only families who live together but not the nature of geographically distributed families in Australia. Australians are a highly mobile population due to flexible housing and labour markets and cultural traditions (Long, 1991). As a consequence of this mobility, families often occur over distributed households, and the female-gendered role of family kinkeeper has long been crucial to maintaining extended family interactions over the lifespan (Rosenthal, 1985)

The second approach is functional in nature—what families do and how they do it—for example, families have psychosocial tasks to accomplish, such as educating children. Finally, transactional definitions of family are concerned with how members establish their family identity, maintain their kinship bonds, and establish a sense of the future (see Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993). This thesis investigated how families engage in their functional and transactional tasks over social media

It is possible for families to be structurally intact yet achieve none of the psychosocial functions of the family. Kin relationships are enduring, as they continue to exist even if not nurtured, and the strength of the bonds may vary over time and between members (Finch & Mason, 1990). So, although this thesis adopted a structural definition of family to investigate who is using social media and with whom, the transactional and functional perspectives were critical because we were most interested in how families negotiate their shared responsibilities, manage their kinship bonds, and engage in family practices online.

Co-resident families have long used information communication technologies (ICTs) such as email and mobile phones to manage their individual and communal lives by connecting with members while they are away from home (e.g., Kennedy & Wellman, 2007; Wajcman et al., 2010). As children become adults and relocate from the family home, relationships become geographically distributed over multiple households. ICTs are important tools for completing family tasks such as activity coordination and bond maintenance. For example, they facilitate

1 members checking in with each other (Kennedy et al., 2008). This thesis attempted to consider
2 a broader understanding of social media interaction between family members and their
3 evolving individual and group social roles.

4 Kennedy et al.'s (2008) concept of *networked families,* expanded on by Rainie and
5 Wellman (2012), describes a group of semi-independent but networked household members
6 who each have their own personal technologies with "abundant opportunities for
7 communication and flexibility in their togetherness" (p. 147). A related concept, Kennedy and
8 Wellman's (2007) *networked households* talks about families who spend time together online
9 and share information about their daily lives as well as shared interests to provide "mutual
10 awareness, integration and support" (p. 665). Taipale (2019) extended these concepts to
11 consider *digital families* (which include a multigenerational family diaspora as well as
12 geographically distributed households) and whose members choose mobile personal
13 technology to nurture family relationships. In contrast to the labelling of the networked/digital
14 family, or networked household, this thesis took the position there is no new digitised form of
15 family, but families have simply adopted and shaped the use of social media into their everyday
16 communicative practices as they have done with previous technology such as the telephone,
17 letters, and printed photographs (Horst, 2020). However, similar to Taipale (2019), this thesis
18 also posited the social media connectedness of families as a positive force complementing
19 offline family practices.

20 ***Family Practices: Rituals and Stories***

21 Rituals and the stories families tell about themselves play an essential role in fulfilling
22 several functional family tasks—that of establishing and maintaining a family identity,
23 promoting close bonds, and establishing a sense of the past, present, and future (Wolin &
24 Bennett, 1984). A typology of rituals proposed by Wolin and Bennet (1984) includes three
25 categories: *family celebrations*, *family traditions*, and *patterned family interactions.* Family

1 celebrations are more standardised occasions or holidays from the broader culture in which the
2 family is situated and help to locate the family as a member of their larger culture. These types
3 of rituals include rites of passage such as weddings and annual celebrations such as New Year's
4 Eve. Family celebrations mark the passage of time and the progress of the family through the
5 lifecycle (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). Family traditions are more personalised rituals that
6 may occur irregularly (such as family holidays or family reunions; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).
7 Although the shaping of some traditions, such as birthday celebrations, may be influenced by
8 culture, families individualise them to create their own meanings. This uniqueness helps to
9 promote internal cohesiveness within the family and develop a family identity. Engagement in
10 rituals such as birthday events or family holidays can result in more positive views of family
11 attachments (Crespo et al., 2011). Patterned family interactions are the rituals in which families
12 most frequently engage and are the least consciously planned (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). These
13 types of routines include seemingly mundane actions such as family members choosing the
14 same seat at the dining table each night or a parent reading to their child before saying
15 goodnight. These interactions are opportunities for parents to perform family functions. For
16 example, an emotionally positive night-time reading ritual supports the development of early
17 literacy skills and promotes attachment (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Patterned family interactions
18 help to solidify individual identity within the family group and create a unique mini-culture
19 (Whitchurch & Dickson, 1999). While many rituals are face-to-face, mediated rituals are also
20 valued by families. For example, transnational families use social media to engage in patterned
21 family interactions over a group chat and make video-calls lasting many hours to celebrate
22 birthdays or to connect about their daily lives (e.g., Acedera & Yeoh, 2019; Doty & Dworkin,
23 2014).

24 Rituals are most satisfying and have stronger meaning for family members who are
25 secure in their attachments (Crespo, 2012; Crespo et al., 2011). Family stories about events in

1 the past and planned future events have symbolic meanings. That is, they help members to
2 remember events and make sense of them as a group, which in turn can affirm belonging and
3 strengthen intergenerational bonds (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). For example, re-telling a
4 story about a wedding reception held during a one-in-a-hundred-year-flooding event allows the
5 family to explore their shared experiences, feelings and reactions to the event. Vangelisti et al.
6 (1999) posit the way individuals perceive their relationships is shown through the family stories
7 they tell:

8 When people tell stories about their family, they provide listeners with clues about
9 how they feel about family members and what they think makes for "healthy" and
10 "unhealthy" interaction. The issues they choose to discuss or avoid, the attributions
11 they make about family members' behavior, and the way they position themselves
12 vis-à-vis the story line can reveal interesting information about how they view family
13 relationships. (p. 336)

14 Successful ongoing enactment of rituals is linked to the existence of a family
15 kinkeeper (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). The kinkeeper traditionally coordinates family social
16 activities and maintains family relationships. Gerontologists have found kinkeeping is
17 primarily a female activity (Rosenthal et al., 1981). The role includes maintaining links
18 between cross-household family members using mediated communication, including the
19 telephone, writing, and visiting; organizing and hosting family rituals such as dinners or
20 birthdays; and acting as a mediator during conflict (Rosenthal, 1985). Women are more likely
21 than men to use email for maintaining family relationships (Chesley & Fox, 2012) and for
22 some women, the main motivation to use Facebook is to connect with family (e.g., Gonzalez
23 & Katz, 2016; Plaza & Below, 2014). Although Australian women report using social media
24 more frequently and for longer periods of time than men, it is unknown how much of this use
25 is for maintaining relationships (Roy Morgan, 2018). There is some evidence to suggest that

in a transnational context, family kinkeepers play a role to encourage participation and compliance in mediated rituals (Shaker, 2018; Sinanan et al., 2018). The roles and responsibilities of individuals in a family system are not fixed but a dynamic process that occurs across the lifespan.

Life Course Perspective on Roles and Generations

The life course perspective provides a framework to guide research in family systems where members must negotiate to change family roles and their own life tasks in the context of social and historical effects (Elder, 2007). Specifically, for the purposes of this thesis, the life-course perspective was used to consider how culture and technology impact individuals, family-, and cohort-based generations. As people live longer lives, it is not uncommon to have four generations in a family, and each will have varied roles to accomplish within the family—such as socialising children or providing social support (Bengtson, 2001). Within families, an individual's inter and intra-generational relationships become part of their identity (e.g., grandparent/grandchild), and this is important to consider for several reasons. Being able to adjust to new roles and identities can be critical for reducing conflict and improving the quality of ongoing relationships. For example, a parent who has a long-held concept of their role as an educator for their child may struggle to adjust to a student role should their child become the "expert" in the context of internet-mediated communication, which can lead to conflict (e.g., Mesch, 2006). In contrast, some older adults (i.e., .over 65 years old) who rated their digital literacy as inadequate compared to younger relatives found assistance from descendants can facilitate the maintenance of their intergenerational bonds (Quan-Haase et al., 2018). As people age, their close relationships—in particular intra-generational kin relationships such as siblings—become more important to them for social and practical support (Dunn, 2014). Sibling relationships are unique because it is the one relationship that frequently lasts a lifetime and is often a source of support and shared history

1 late in life (Kriss et al., 2014). Given the geographical dispersion of households, social media
2 provides opportunities for facilitating ongoing interactions within and between generations.
3 The idea of social generations was useful for this thesis as it allowed consideration of
4 the impact of technology on different generations. For example, the silent generations' (born
5 1928-1945) first exposure to computers was during their working life as compared to
6 generation x' (born 1965-1980) immersion in digital technology from early childhood
7 (Taipale, 2019). Mannheim (1952) proposed the concept of social generations as a group of
8 individuals of similar age from comparable social circumstances who share a common
9 perspective based on their experience of major historical events in their youth. Popular labels
10 have been attached to these cohorts, such as "baby boomers" (born between 1946 and 1964)
11 and "generation z" (born from 1997 onwards). While Mannheim does not claim generations
12 are homogenous groups (as they will have experienced events from somewhat different
13 perspectives based on location, socioeconomic background, and cultures), they do share
14 similar perspectives. For example, millennials (also known as generation y: born 1981 to
15 1996) expect paid work to be a more fulfilling and meaningful experience compared with
16 earlier generations, and workplace availability of social media can be a useful tool to
17 socialise and retain them (Naim & Lenka, 2018; Twenge & Campbell, 2008).
18 Taipale (2019) refines the generational identity approach and builds on family and
19 cohort identities by considering the impact of life-course transitions on digital media use.
20 That is, while membership of a generational cohort may influence adult adoption and use
21 patterns of technology, one cannot discount the influence of transitional events in later life on
22 an individual's use. That is, the birth of a grandchild, a divorce, or migration can provide the
23 motivation to learn new technology and engage in specific family practices. A common
24 theme in social media research is the difficulties older people have with digital literacy (see
25 Schreurs et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2015). There exists a concept of a *grey digital divide* in

1 which older adults are less digitally capable and are therefore locked out of online social
2 communication (Mubarak & Nycyk, 2017). However, social contexts influence motivations
3 for use and the availability of supportive family descendants can mitigate against digital
4 inequality (e.g., Friemel, 2016). Taipale (2019) posits a dynamic approach in which one's
5 generational identity forms in youth but continues to evolve over the life course through the
6 demands of differing roles and responsibilities. These demands can provide the motivation to
7 adopt and shape the use of digital tools to achieve their relational maintenance tasks.

8 **Theoretical Models for Relational Maintenance**

9 It is well-established that social connection and relationship maintenance are
10 important reasons an individual or family group may use social media as a communication
11 tool. Three theories, social exchange theory, need to belong, and media richness theory can
12 provide a framework for understanding the motivations for using social media as a tool for
13 relationship maintenance.

14 ***Social Exchange Theory***

15 Social exchange theory is a useful concept to examine the maintenance of close bonds
16 as they require communication practices that nurture relationships to the satisfaction of the
17 individuals involved. Social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) argues relationships
18 are formed, maintained, or terminated based on rewards (e.g., social acceptance) and costs
19 (e.g., time taken, effort). Stafford and Canary (1991) built on this approach to create a
20 taxonomy of maintenance behaviours that individuals enact to gain desired features of
21 relationships (e.g., commitment, social support). Behaviours generally held to be applicable
22 over broader relational contexts (friends, romantic, and family) include *positivity*, *assurances*,
23 *openness*, *networks*, and *sharing mutual tasks*. Positivity involves communicating in a way
24 that is open and cheerful. Assuring behaviour indicates a commitment to the ongoing
25 relationship. Openness is the disclosure of thoughts and feelings. Networks involve

communicating about mutual friends and group memberships. Sharing tasks means both parties take responsibility for mutual tasks in the relationship. The five relational maintenance behaviour types are suitable for examining interaction in a social media context—with the caveat that some task behaviours might be more suited to face-to-face communication (Stafford & Canary, 1991). For example, people use Facebook in novel ways to demonstrate their assurances. They may view a friend's profile, or like their post to make the other person feel valued (Marmo & Bryant, 2010). While the use of positivity on Facebook is also linked to more satisfying relationships, networking as a maintenance behaviour is less frequently utilised (Baptist et al., 2012; Dainton, 2013).

When mediated communication is the primary mode of relationship maintenance, open disclosure is more critical than for individuals who can supplement this communication by engaging in offline activities (Rabby, 2007). However, the positive social communication bias that exists on Facebook can be a barrier to the open communication required for relationship maintenance. The expression of positive authentic emotions is perceived as more appropriate than negative across social media platforms (Waterloo et al., 2018). Therefore, benefits for open disclosure on Facebook are not equal for all users—those with lower levels of wellbeing are less likely to benefit from open disclosure (more likely of a negative nature) due to Facebook's positivity bias (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). In contrast to Facebook which is perceived as a place that has a positive, non-confrontational bias, private messaging channels such as WhatsApp allow for more open negative expressions (Matassi et al., 2019; Zillich & Müller, 2019). The first study drew extensively on social exchange theory to explore families' experiences of maintaining commitment and providing social support using mediated communication practices.

Need to Belong

Attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) provide frameworks for understanding close ties. Both theories suggest the need to establish and maintain emotional bonds with others is a fundamental human drive. Bowlby (1969) argued parent-child relationships are stable over time. Ainsworth (1989) found kinship bonds are also relatively stable over time and guided by cultural practices and a history of interaction. However, there may be temporary changes in the quality of relationships due to developmental challenges. For example, adolescence can be a time when parent-child closeness declines as children strive to establish personal identity and autonomy thus conflict can increase (Erikson, 1968). This disruption may only be temporary for families with strong emotional ties, but may persist for families with looser ties or with a history of communication difficulties (Laursen & Collins, 2004). Social media is ultimately another tool families can adapt to develop and strengthen relationships but also to withdraw from or damage them (Stafford & Hillyer, 2012).

Social media platforms facilitate human connection and media sharing over chat (messages), collapsed context (e.g., Facebook), audio, and audio-visual modes which can be synchronous or asynchronous (Jansson, 2016; Machin & Abel, 2022). Research demonstrates that individuals are motivated to use social media to satisfy the need for belonging, and provides an alternative to face-to-face interactions (see Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011; Lenhart et al., 2010). Oh et al. (2014) found supportive social media interactions are related to increased intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and well-being. Indeed most Australians now use social media (71%), with 83% of users say a key reason is social connection (Kemp, 2020; Yellow, 2020). The normalisation of online social practices such as messaging, means frequent and meaningful connections over social media are possible (Marlowe et al., 2017).

1 For people who are isolated this brings an enhanced sense of belonging through feelings of
2 proximity.

3 **Social Constructivist Approach to Researching Humans and Technology**

4 Social constructivist approaches such as *social shaping of technology* contest the idea
5 that technology drives social change (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985). Rather this perspective
6 posits technology is designed and implemented to facilitate certain social options based on
7 political, economic, and social forces (Williams & Edge, 1996). New technologies and digital
8 spaces can in turn reconfigure the relationships between people (Wajcman, 2008). For
9 example, understanding that users wanted to use online communities to spend time in private
10 spaces with other people with whom they shared a common interest influenced Facebook's
11 development of the Facebook groups platform (Facebook, 2017b). MacKenzie and Wajcman
12 (1999) state it is not enough to consider only the social shaping of technology, or only the
13 technological shaping of human relationships because technology and social relations are
14 interdependent. That is, human relationships are inextricably entwined with *artefacts*—things
15 people make. For example, when people generate information about their relationship status
16 on Facebook they create a mediated artefact which indicates their connectedness or
17 separation from another person (Fox et al., 2014).

18 While asynchronous forms of communication such as letters and telegrams allowed
19 the exchange of care at a distance, social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook allow
20 sharing of the minutiae of everyday life through continuous co-presence (Baldassar, 2016).
21 Today, news about a grandchild's swimming carnival medal can be instantly shared via
22 private message instead of a Sunday phone call or a printed photo sent by mail. Technologies
23 are often adapted from the way in which they were originally intended for use. The gendered
24 use of the telephone has long been valued by women for intergenerational contact between
25 mothers and daughters, and grandmothers and grandchildren (Moyal, 1992). The mobile

phone may have originally been presented as a business device, but it was quickly adopted by mothers to organise and surveil their at-home children while mothers were out of the home (Rakow & Navarro, 1993). It may be a misstep to present the affordances of Skype or Facebook Messenger as unique, as perhaps they are part of a technological continuum that continues to shape and be shaped by human relationships.

Affordances of Social Media Technology

People choose modes that best suit their communicative intent based on the *communicative affordances* of each media (Madianou & Miller, 2012). The notion of communicative affordance is the interaction between an individual's perception of the utility of a technology and its objective qualities (Schrock, 2015). For example, while once the birth of a child was advertised in the newspaper today new parents may use the collapsed context afforded by Facebook to share the news with family and friends (boyd, 2010). It is perhaps the affordance of *portability* provided by the smartphone that has allowed people to easily create feelings of co-presence (Schrock, 2015). Smartphones are highly portable, allowing users to communicate from any place they have a telecommunication signal. Portability facilitates the affordance of availability—for example a daughter who receives a push notification that her mother has posted on Facebook may be prompted to respond to her post to let her know she has seen it. But the objective quality of the technology does not determine the response. Even though smartphones offer the potential for perpetual contact, people manage their availability through negotiating social availability obligations, for example by leaving their phones in another room (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016).

Social media incorporates a wide variety of platforms and modes and is a key mediated form of communication for many people. Social media involves the creation and exchange of user generated content that facilitates a connection between communication partners, self-presentation, and self-disclosure (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Most social media

1 platforms allow users to communicate with each other by exchanging text, voice, still or
2 moving images, and by sharing external content (Cowling, 2018). Given that 89% of
3 Australians now own a smartphone, along with the increased accessibility and affordability of
4 broadband in regional and rural areas, more Australians than ever have access to social media
5 (Antonio & Tuffley, 2015; Corbett et al., 2018). Almost all young Australians aged between
6 12 to 24 years of age report using social media (94%), as do 89% of their parents (Statistica,
7 2017; Yellow, 2018). Australians aged 65 or older are also increasingly using social media.
8 Participation increased from less than 4% in 2009 to 43% in 2015 (Australian
9 Communication and Media Authority, 2009, 2016). Indeed, older adults cite keeping in touch
10 with family as the primary reason for social media use (Jung et al., 2017). According to
11 Kemp (2021), the five most used social media platforms for a population of Australians aged
12 16 to 64 years old are YouTube (78.2%), Facebook (77.7%), Facebook messenger (65.4%),
13 Instagram (55.3%), and WhatsApp (38.8%).

14 ***Social Media: Social Capital and Shared Interests***

15 There is a growing body of research which investigates the use of Facebook in
16 relation to the development of social capital (Putnam, 2000). Previous scholarship has found
17 that Facebook activity is not strongly associated with improved bonding social capital, but
18 that it is useful for maintaining weaker ties (Ellison et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2013).
19 Despite these findings, there is evidence that Facebook is an important tool in some families'
20 lives. For example, some individuals perceive that it helps them to find out about the lives of
21 their adult children and grandchildren (e.g., Jung & Sundar, 2016). Over the past few years
22 Facebook has shifted their focus towards creating private spaces for people to interact using
23 text, audio-visual, and audio (Facebook, 2019). Sharing interests and engaging with those
24 interests online can satisfy belongingness needs (Bergin, 2016). Marshall and Bly (2004)
25 found when people shared content online, it was done to demonstrate shared interests and

1 foster rapport. The sharing may be done in a phatic manner, where the content is of peripheral
2 importance, and the act of sharing indicates the sender was thinking about the recipient
3 (Marshall & Bly, 2004). Sharing content can thus create, strengthen, or renew the social
4 bonds between giver and receiver (Bergin, 2016). *Vicarious* interest is considered a
5 manifestation of social support referring to individuals adopting the interests of others
6 (Bergin, 2016). For example, parents might respond to a child's interest in specific activities
7 by displaying interest in upcoming events (Bergin, 1999). Online communities have long
8 been formed around shared interests which builds social capital (see Wellman et al., 2001,
9 2009). Given social support can be experienced from sharing interests, it is unsurprising that
10 people report using Facebook less for social connection and more for participating in special
11 interest groups (Facebook, 2017b).
12 ***Social Media Modes and Methods***
13 Approximately 91% of Australians own a smartphone, and almost all use one or more
14 social media chat services in their daily lives (Deloitte, 2019). A group chat is an ongoing
15 private conversation between known individuals and is considered an appropriate place to
16 disclose emotions (Waterloo et al., 2018). The asynchronous nature of chat is useful for
17 transnational families to share content such as photos (e.g., Cabalquinto, 2019). The family
18 group chat is an important tool that affords kinkeeping, social support, and co-presence for
19 members of all age groups (see Braithwaite et al., 2017; Kamal et al., 2016; Matassi et al.,
20 2019). Families who co-reside do use chat services but it is more valued by members who
21 live apart (Aharony & Gazit, 2016). There is anecdotal evidence suggesting the family group
22 chat is gaining popularity in within-country Australian families (Donoughue, 2019), but as
23 yet there is no research investigating this phenomenon.
24 Audio-visual calls reduce feelings of distance between close ties by facilitating real-
25 time conversations and exchanging images (Longhurst, 2013). This mode is valued by

1 transnational families for everyday communication (e.g., Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). Globally,
2 audio-visual calls have increased in popularity since COVID-19 with platforms such as
3 Facebook, Zoom, and Microsoft recording almost 784 million account holders participating
4 in daily audio-visual-calls (Facebook, 2020; Protalinski, 2020). Since the 1990s, many
5 Australians participated in regular telephone calls to maintain their long-distance
6 relationships (Wilding, 2006). Now, the ubiquity of smartphones means people can be
7 connected continuously (Wajcman et al., 2008). Indeed, the layering of short, frequent
8 communication exchanges using smartphones facilitates an ambient co-presence (Licoppe,
9 2004). In times of need, online social support enhances closeness and is vital for mental
10 health (see Vitak et al., 2011; Yang, 2018). The existing research on Facebook suggests that
11 engaging in pro-social behaviours such as liking a friend's post supplements bonds between
12 close ties, and this is important as close relationship partners (including family members)
13 continue to be the primary providers of social support even when they live at a distance
14 (Rozzell et al., 2014; Vitak et al., 2011).

15 ***Media Richness Theory***

16 The question about which mode of communication to use in any circumstance
17 predates the internet. Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) posits that meaning is
18 most clearly conveyed when there is opportunity for immediate feedback (to clarify any
19 misunderstanding), multiple cues are provided (body language, gesture, and tone of voice),
20 and the focus is personal. In 1986 these modes were—in descending order of media richness:
21 face-to-face, telephone, personal written communications, and unaddressed written
22 communications. In 2021, a plethora of communication applications and features are
23 available, offering a wide range of media richness. For example, less rich forms of
24 communication might include a status update on Facebook (i.e., asynchronous, non-personal,

written), where a richer communication method might be a video call on WhatsApp (i.e., synchronous, includes tone of voice and body language).

Duck (1995) considers that individuals make choices about matching media richness to an objective, and the use of richer media is not always best for the objective. Harwood (2000) found that low richness media (email) was most frequently used for grandparent/grandchild interaction, and a possible motive could be to avoid in-depth communication. Harwood acknowledged this finding could also be a cohort effect as certain generations are more comfortable with written media. Some grandparents report that passively viewing their grandchildren's Facebook enriches their relationships, because the grandchildren shared more about their lives on Facebook than they would over the telephone (Bangerter & Waldron, 2014). Uses and gratifications theory (Whiting & Williams, 2013) is a media use paradigm suggesting people are aware of their needs and actively select the media that best fulfils these needs, leading to gratification. Accordingly, Stein, Osborn, and Greenberg (2016) found that university students who considered themselves strongly connected to their parents still used telephone and text messages as the preferred form of communication with their parents despite the availability of a richer medium—video calls. The theory of media richness was useful to guide question development. It oriented us to investigate whether Australians would prefer to use audio-visual in studies 2 and 3, and if not, what other factors would influence their media choices. That is, while there are many possibilities for connecting and communication available, individuals will specifically select ones that work best for them.

Many commentators perceive social media to have a negative impact on human relationships (people will be lonelier and isolated), partly because they overvalue the meaningfulness of face-to-face interaction and deprecate (less rich) mediated communication (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). However, this deterministic technological approach does not

1 consider the social shaping of technology and that humans have long used artefacts in their
2 relationships to complement in-person interactions. Raine and Wellman (2012) note "In reality,
3 people are not confusing the Facebook screen with the person at the other end of it, just as they
4 have not confused the telephone receiver with the person with whom they were talking" (p.
5 120).

6 **Methodological approach of the thesis**

7 From an ontological position, I would position myself as a critical realist—in that I
8 believe trust exists, but I can only ever see or understand a part of the truth (Braun & Clarke,
9 2006). What this means in terms of this investigation of the phenomenon of family
10 communication using social media, I believe that while there are some common traits to the
11 ways families connect, the meanings ascribed to the practice by the people who perform them
12 will vary. The axiology (Schwandt, 2014), or the values that focus and motivate my research,
13 are rooted both in my fundamental curiosity about how the world works and the high value I
14 place on strong family connections and mutual social support. So I am motivated to understand
15 the value of online family communication practices that might help people achieve family
16 cohesion and strong support networks.

17 The combination of these two approaches (i.e., critical realism and axiological
18 positioning) means this thesis was approached from an interpretivist paradigm as I sought to
19 bring together different perspectives in search of an overall narrative for Australian social
20 media practices (Carter & Little, 2007). The qualitative research questions were designed in
21 collaboration with my supervisors to focus on the topic of interest. The questions allowed for
22 more than one answer or explanation and considered multiple relationships. The research was
23 predominately descriptive in nature – to discover how Australian families are maintaining their
24 relationships over social media (e.g., the first research question asks, "What are the current
25 patterns of use of various modes of social media for family relationship maintenance?").

1 Appropriate research strategies for an interpretivist paradigm approach can include
2 narrative analysis of secondary data, data collection via interviews, and analysis methods such
3 as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A mixed-methods systematic literature review
4 (MMSR) which synthesised both qualitative and quantitative data using a narrative approach,
5 was chosen to bring together many different perspectives on social media use to get a sense of
6 the current state of research in the field (Lizarondo et al., 2017). Thematic analysis was chosen
7 as the appropriate because it is a flexible method which allowed me to explore participants
8 experiences capturing both latent and semantic meanings using an inductive approach which
9 was still informed by a theoretical framework of social exchange theory and need to belong,
10 One of the key differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches is the
11 researcher is situated as a tool in the research. That is, they do not perceive themselves as
12 external to the research. Certainly, for this thesis, my interest in this phenomenon is from
13 personal experience of mediated relationship maintenance; therefore, it was necessary to take
14 this into account when developing the methodological approach. While I assumed a fairly
15 straightforward relationship between language and the participants' meaning, I acknowledged
16 the impossibility of removing my own transnational/multicultural family influences and values
17 from the research, and I acknowledged their impact on the data. This meant my own reflexivity
18 was important to consider throughout the thesis. I also collaborated with my supervisors to
19 code the data and the final themes were the result of many discussions over the course of the
20 project.

21 **Potential Implications of the Thesis**

22 The overarching aim of this thesis was to explore the use of social media as a tool for
23 family relational maintenance across the lifespan. The research aimed to explore the online
24 practices of Australians who are using social media to maintain close relationships, particularly
25 those with their families. The implications of this research may have practical applications for

individuals who live at a distance from their families regarding their social media relational maintenance behaviour. Mediated relationship maintenance is particularly relevant at present as globally people are separated indefinitely from family and friends due to COVID-19 related border closures and travel restrictions (e.g., Wood & Butler, 2020). Even outside pandemic times, research informing interventions for sustaining intergenerational connections may be useful for older adults who wish to maintain close ties with their descendants.

Firstly, Study 1 provided the first mixed-methods systematic search and narrative synthesis of published peer-reviewed research centred on family practices and their patterns of social media use. The study was an example of a mixed-method systematic review approach. An emerging field of enquiry, mixed-methods systematic reviews are growing in popularity as they can provide a more comprehensive synthesis of complex phenomena than single method reviews (Hong et al., 2017, Lizarondo et al., 2017). For example, a well designed and executed review can give a broader synthesis of the evidence by considering qualitative (e.g., people's experiences) and quantitative data (e.g., effectiveness). The protocol for the review was accepted by PROSPERO as an addition to the international database of systematic reviews. While there is a body of work examining transnational families' use of social media, there is a lack of information about Australian's family practices over social media. Research has demonstrated transnational families rely heavily on mediated relationship maintenance due to their limited face-to-face interaction opportunities. Research into how people who have more frequent in-person interaction opportunities use social media for their family practices will add to the tapestry of understanding of family connection. Study 2 built on the data collected in the first study to provide an in-depth examination of Australians' patterns of use of various modes of social media and the family practices in which they engage online. The finding that social exchange theory is highly relevant to family social media communication women through the findings in study informed the direction of the second study by focusing interest on the types

1 of maintenance behaviours used. Finally, Study 3 explored elements—such as the influence of
2 COVID-19 stay at home measures—which influence Australians' engagement with social
3 media-based family practices. Further, studies two and three highlighted the tension between a
4 prediction based on media richness theory that close contacts will prefer richer media (i.e.,
5 audiovisual) and the effects of time scarcity on people's choices (a desire to multitask).

6 As such, this PhD provided an original contribution to the field by systematically
7 examining social media as a communication mode for sustaining close relationships. A better
8 understanding of how social media is being used can contribute to our understanding of human
9 behaviour and contemporary Australian society and the role that social media plays in
10 connecting long-distance family members.
11

CHAPTER 3 – SOCIAL MEDIA, RITUALS, AND LONG-DISTANCE FAMILY RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE: A MIXED-METHODS SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

This mixed-methods systematic review of the literature aimed to answer both the first research question: "What are the current patterns of use of various modes of social media for family relationship maintenance?"; and the second question: "What types of maintenance behaviours are enacted on social media?" The review was registered in PROSPERO and to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no prior systematic literature review exists that aims to examine the same questions (see https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO/display_record.php?RecordID=136371).

The review was submitted to the journal "*New Media and Society*" in June 2020 and was accepted for publication in August 2020. *New Media and Society* is a Sage journal and has an impact factor of 4.18 (2020). The citation for this article is:

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This paper adds to the published academic literature, and this thesis in several ways. It rigorously uses the mixed-method systematic methodology provided by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Lizarondo et al., 2017) to provide a review of the existing literature on the use of social media for long-distance family relationship maintenance. The study identified the breadth of research around transnational families but a paucity of information about social media use by within-country families. Finally, in contrast to other research that identified collapsed context social media as predominately useful for bridging social capital but not bonding, this study identified that families included Facebook as one of their maintenance tools for family bonds. For all supplementary material related to this study please see Appendix A. It is presented following in its final published form.

Review Article (Invited Authors Only)

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Social media, rituals, and long-distance family relationship maintenance: A mixed-methods systematic review

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Abstract

For families with limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction, social media can be a vital communication medium to help shape the family identity, maintain bonds, and accomplish shared tasks. This mixed-methods systematic review of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method empirical studies published between 1997 and 2019 uses a convergent data-based framework to explore how long-distance families engage in family practices using various modes of social media. Fifty-one papers were synthesized into four domains: (1) doing family in a social media environment, (2) performing family through stories and rituals, (3) the nature of online communication practices, and (4) privacy, conflict, and the quality of family relationships. Given the value of patterned routines to families, research into the role of family kinkeepers is suggested. Finally, families use chat (messages) extensively for both assuring behaviour and conflict resolution so further investigation of the impact of this asynchronous mode is recommended.

Keywords

Ambient co-presence, family practices, family rituals, mediated absence, mixed-methods meta-synthesis, social media

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Introduction

Mutually supportive families play a vital role in the psychological and physical health of members and can lead to heightened well-being and life satisfaction (Denny et al., 2014; Houltberg et al., 2011). Participating in family rituals has been shown to strengthen bonds between members (Crespo et al., 2011). However, families who are geographically or temporally separated have limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction. This review considers how distanced families use social media to engage in family practices which shape their family identity, show their affection, and fulfil their roles (Morgan, 2011).

Families whose members live even short geographical distances from each other may face limited possibilities for in-person contact. The experience of temporal distance varies widely. For example, some parents may work away from home for 2 weeks each month, while Filipino migrant mothers are often separated from their children for years at a time (Madianou and Miller, 2011). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many families have experienced temporal distance due to government-imposed control measures such as stay-at-home and social distancing restrictions (World Health Organization, 2020). Given the subjectiveness of distance, for this research a *long-distance* family is defined as one in which the members expect to sustain their kinship ties despite limited face-to-face interaction (Stafford, 2004).

Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2004) posit three perspectives to define different types of family features. The *structural* view considers who is in the family. The *functional* (accomplish shared tasks), and *transactional* (generate a family identity and facilitate bonding) views are practice-oriented perspectives which consider what families do, and how they do it. Globally, most people report that connecting with family is a key motivation for using social media (Whiting and Williams, 2013).

Social media encompasses the websites and applications through which users create content, share information, and interact (Machin, 2018). Scholars have begun to explore how previously identified maintenance behaviours in relationships might be adapted and enacted on social media. For example, Vitak (2014) investigated the relationship between geographic proximity, maintenance strategies enacted online, and the perceived role of Facebook. Vitak found people who were geographically distant from a friend considered Facebook a vital relationship maintenance tool.

Modes of communication using social media could be conceptualized as audio (synchronous auditory), chat (asynchronous text-based), audiovisual (synchronous audiovisual), and *collapsed context* (Jansson, 2016; Tufekci, 2008; Vitak, 2012). Context collapse refers to the idea that an individual's social media posts are accessible to multiple unintended audiences (Tufekci, 2008; Vitak, 2012). People modify their tone and self-presentation when communicating with people from different groups in their lives (e.g. close friends or employers). Facebook's default 'friends' audience makes user posts visible to all friends, thus collapsing these disparate groups into a single group (Facebook, 2020; Vitak, 2012).

To continue their family practices, long-distance families have used a variety of tools (i.e. letters, telephone calls, video tapes, emails) with varying degrees of satisfaction (Wilding, 2006). While social media may be considered an extension of these media technologies, the smartphone's affordance of *portability* has transformed

long-distance family practices (Madianou, 2014; Schrock, 2015). Licoppe (2004) suggests the ubiquity of smartphones has led to a form of 'connected presence' in which individuals make shorter, more frequent, and less formal communicative gestures. These gestures fulfil a phatic function, in that the act of communicating is more important than what is said (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005). Connected presence does not mean that individuals are always available. People navigate the affordance of availability to control how they can be reached (Schrock, 2015). An illustration of negotiating accessibility is turning off 'active' status in Facebook Messenger but leaving the smartphone connected to the Internet.

Research on the effect of mediated communication on family functioning and practices demonstrate mixed results, which is perhaps unsurprising given the breadth of the family structures and contexts examined (Carvalho et al., 2015; Hertlein, 2012). Considering the global uptake of social media, this study aims to provide a narrative synthesis of published peer-reviewed research on family practices over social media. The context is not restricted to any particular family structure (e.g. parent-child) nor stage-of-life, but considers how individuals engage in family practices from a distance. This review poses the following research questions:

> *Research Question 1.* What are the patterns of social media use by long-distance families?
> *Research Question 2.* What family practices are engaged in over social media?

Method

Design

This review followed the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for mixed-methods systematic reviews (Lizarondo et al., 2017). In addition, the lead researcher found no current reviews on the topic when consulting the following databases: PROSPERO, MEDLINE, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, and JBI Database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation Reports. A qualitative PICo (Lockwood et al., 2015) defined inclusion criteria where P represents population (long-distance families), I is the phenomenon under study (social media), and Co is the context (relationship maintenance).

Data collection

An initial search of the Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection and CINAHL identified keywords from titles and abstracts of relevant articles and index terms used to describe elements of the PICo. These keywords were refined after consultation with a specialist research librarian. The search strategy incorporated four concepts to maximize the capture of relevant articles: (1) families, (2) social media, (3) reasons for distance, and (4) relational maintenance communication. To take into account differences in thesaurus terminology and indexing, search terms were modified by database.

In May 2019, identical results were obtained by three independent reviewers who simultaneously searched the following academic databases using the keywords and subject

Table 1. Keywords and subject headings.

Population	Phenomena of interest	Context
"family", "parent", "long-distance", "transnational", "divorce", "military", "deploy*", "separat*", "incarcerated", "elderly", "migrant", "FIFO", "international", "cross-residential"	"social media", "ICT", "communication technology", "social technology", "Facebook", "Facetime, "Skype", "smartphones, "tablets"	"communication", "relational maintenance", "relational maintenance", "commitment", "connect*"

headings presented in Table 1: Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, CINAHL, Scopus, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, SAGE journals, Social Sciences and humanities, Web of Science, Wiley Online Library. Google Scholar was searched with the same terms to increase the comprehensiveness of the search, and the first 200 articles screened (Haddaway et al., 2015).

Following the search, 1408 citations were loaded into Mendeley referencing software and duplicates removed. Two independent reviewers assessed the titles and abstracts of 1088 records against the review inclusion criteria: (a) published between 1997 and 2019, (b) available in English, (c) a population of long-distance families, and (d) explored the use of social media for family relationship maintenance. The timeframe was chosen based on the emergence of the first social media website, SixDegrees.com in 1997 (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Two independent researchers assessed the full text of the remaining 272 articles against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. A further 221 studies were excluded as they did not match the inclusion criteria. Any disagreements between the reviewers at each stage of the selection process were resolved by discussion.

Data assessment

Prior to inclusion in the review, two independent reviewers assessed the studies for methodological validity using the standardized critical appraisal instruments (Lockwood et al., 2015; Munn et al., 2015) from the JBI SUMARI system (Munn et al., 2019), as presented in Table 2. All 51 articles were retained regardless of the quality appraisal, as they were deemed significant to the aim of the review (Pope et al., 2007). The quality appraisal procedure revealed minor differences in the quality scoring of the articles. Any disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion with a third reviewer. Two mixed-method studies did not provide sufficient information regarding data collection or analysis and could not have the article quality assessed.

Methodological congruence for the qualitative studies indicated high dependability, although credibility of some studies was weakened by the lack of any statement of ethics, statement on the cultural or theoretical location of the researchers, or their possible influence on the results of the study. Thus, the confidence in the output of the meta-synthesis, graded according to the ConQual score (Munn et al., 2014), lies between moderate and strong. Figure 1 describes the inclusion process according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA; Moher et al., 2009).

Table 2. Assessment of qualitative and quantitative components of studies.

Questions		Yes	No	U
		Responses (*n*)		
Critical Appraisal Checklist for Quantitative Research (Munn et al., 2015)				
1	Was the sample frame appropriate to address the target population?	8		
2	Were study participants sampled in an appropriate way?	8		
3	Was the sample size adequate?	6	2	
4	Were the study subjects and the setting described in detail?	8		
5	Was the data analysis conducted with sufficient coverage of the identified sample?	6	2	
6	Were valid methods used for the identification of the condition?	7	1	
7	Was the condition measured in a standard, reliable way for all participants?	7	1	
8	Was there appropriate statistical analysis?	6	2	
9	Was the response rate adequate, and if not, was the low response rate managed appropriately?	8		
Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research (Lockwood et al., 2015)				
1	Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?	49		
2	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?	48	1	
3	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data?	48		1
4	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data?	48	1	
5	Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results?	48	1	
6	Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically?	17	34	
7	Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice-versa, addressed?	7	41	1
8	Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented?	46	3	
9	Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, and is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body?	12	37	
10	Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis, or interpretation, of the data?	49		

Note. U = unclear.

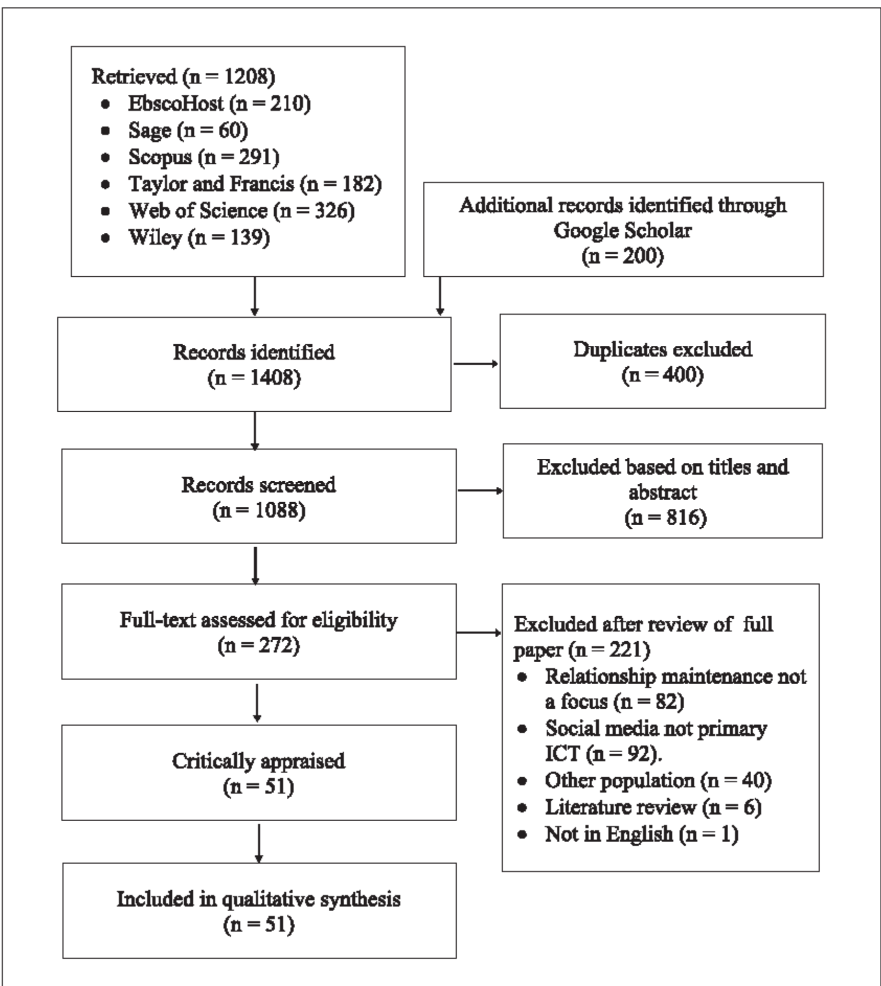

Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart for article inclusion based on initial search (May, 2019).
PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews.

Results

Data extraction

As both quantitative and qualitative research can address the research question, the researchers used a convergent data-based integrated approach. After repeated examination of included studies, results from quantitative reports were *qualitized* (narrative syntheses of quantitative data results; Lizarondo et al., 2017) and findings were extracted by a single reviewer using the standardized data extraction tools in JBI SUMARI. Only findings matched with an unequivocal (directly observed) or credible (plausible interpretations logically inferred from the data) verbatim were extracted.

Table 3 presents an overview of the 51 studies. The studies were conducted between 2010–2019, and analysed data from approximately 4292 global participants (the exact

Table 3. Summary of articles included in the review.

Author(s) year	Participants	Participants' cultural background	Context	Method				Instruments
				Cr.	*L.*	*Qn.*	*Ql.*	
Acedera et al. (2018)	N=80 migrant wives and their left-behind partners	PHL	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Acedera et al. (2019)	N=30 migrant wives and left-behind husbands	PHL	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Ahn (2017)	N=30 migrant mothers	KOR	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Bacigalupe and Bräuninger (2017)	N=22 international students	NS	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews, focus group
Barakji et al. (2018)	N=460 American and migrant university students	USA	Transnational families	x		X		Questionnaire
Barrie et al. (2019)	N=60 parents and their adult children	USA	In-country long-distance families	x			x	Interviews
Brown (2016)	N=33 migrant workers	PHL/IDN	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Cabalquinto (2018a)	N=6 migrant adult children	PHL	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Cabalquinto (2018b)	N=26 migrant workers and their left-behind family members	PHL	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews, photo elicitation, field notes
Cabalquinto (2018c)	N=26 migrant workers and left-behind family members	PHL	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews, photo elicitation, field notes
Cabalquinto (2019)	N=21 migrant workers and left-behind family members	PHL	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews, photo elicitation, field notes
Chib et al. (2013)	N=42 migrant workers	PHL/IND	Transnational families	x		X	x	Questionnaire, focus group, interview
Clayton et al. (2018)	N=22 mobile workers, n=11 family interviews	GBR	Work	x			x	Interviews
Doty and Dworkin (2014)	N=649 parents of adolescents	USA	In-country long-distance families	x		X		Questionnaire
Francisco (2015)	N=75 migrant workers and left-behind family members	PHL	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews, focus group, observation
Gonzalez and Katz (2016)	N=336 Latino or Hispanic parents and their children	NS	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Gordano Peile and Ros Hijar (2016)	N=25 Spanish speaking young adults	ESP	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews, field notes
Harper et al. (2017)	N=10 homeless adults	GBR	Homelessness	x			x	Interviews, Communication design exploration
Hsu (2018)	N=18 working holiday adults	TWN	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Ivan and Hebblethwaite (2016)	N=13 grandmothers	ROU / CAN	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Kalavar et al. (2015)	N=70 adults n=20 focus group (60–85 years)	IND	Transnational families	x		x	x	Questionnaire, focus group
Kang (2012)	N=53 migrants	CHN	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Kelly (2015)	N=5 Grandparents and grandchildren	AUS/GBR	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews, participants diaries, observation
Lam (2013)	N=12 migrant or in-country workers	CHN	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Lim and Pham (2016)	N=60 university students	IND/VNM	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews, media diary, media deprivation
Madianou (2014)	N=13 migrants	PHL	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Madianou (2016)	N=13 migrants	PHL	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

Author(s) year	Participants	Participants' cultural background	Context	Method				Instruments
				Cr.	*L.*	*Qn.*	*Ql.*	
McClure et al. (2015)	N = 186 parents of toddlers	USA	In-country long-distance families	x		x	x	Questionnaire
Nedelcu (2017)	N = 101 migrants	ROU	Transnational families		x		x	Interview, participant observation
Nedelcu and Wyss (2016)	N = 39 migrants	ROU	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews
Neustaedter et al. (2015)	(3) N = 84 participants	CAN	In-country long-distance families	x			x	Questionnaire
Nishitani (2014)	N = NS migrants	TONNE	Transnational families		x		x	Interview, participant observation
Ohashi et al. (2017)	N = 12 adults (21 - 38 years)	JPN	In-country long-distance families		x		x	Interviews, scenarios of use, re-enactments
Platt et al. (2016)	N = 239 migrant workers	IDN	Transnational families		x	x	x	Questionnaire, interviews
Plaza and Below (2014)	N = 111 migrants	TTO	Transnational families	x		x	x	Questionnaire, interviews
Pustułka (2015)	(1) N = 37 migrant mothers (2) N = 40 migrant parents	POL	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Quan-Haase et al. (2018)	N = 41 adults (65 + years)	CAN	In-country long-distance families		x		x	Interviews
Rea et al (2015)	N = 10 military spouses	USA	Work	x			x	Interviews
Riain (2015)	N = 36 Irish adults and their migrant partners	IRL	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Ryan et al. (2015)	N = 73 migrants	FRA/USA	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Sandel (2014)	N = 23 American and international students	USA	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Shaker (2018)	N = 25 migrant women	IRN	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Share et al. (2017)	N = 36 parents	POL	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Shiau (2015)	N = 12 exchange students	TWN / USA	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Sinanan et al. (2018)	N = 31 adults	AUS/MYS/JPN	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Smith et al. (2012)	N = 19 university students	USA	In-country long-distance families	x			x	Interviews
Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz (2019)	N = 26 adults (30 - 70 years)	USA	In-country long-distance families	x			x	Interviews
Thulin and Vilhelmson (2017)	N = 780 adults (20 - 29 years)	SWE	In-country long-distance families	x		X	x	Questionnaire, interviews
Yang (2018)	N = 28 university students	USA	In-country long-distance families	x			x	Interviews
Yoon (2016)	N = 38 migrants	KOR	Transnational families	x			x	Interviews
Zhao (2019)	N = 28 international students	CHN	Transnational families		x		x	Interviews

Cr: cross-sectional: L: longitudinal; Qn: quantitative; Ql: qualitative; N: total sample; PHL: Philippines; KOR: Korea; NS: not specified; IND: India; GBR: United Kingdom; ESP: Spain; TWN: Taiwan; ROU: Romania; CAN: Canada; CHN: China; AUS: Australia; VNM: Vietnam (1) First study; (2) Second Study; (3) Third study; TONNE: Tonga; JPN: Japan; TTO Trinidad; POL: Poland; IRL: Ireland; FRA: France; IRN: Iran; MYS: Malaysia; SWE: Sweden.

number of participants cannot be stated as one article did not declare the number of participants and a figure of 7 was interpreted; Nishitani, 2014). Most studies employed cross-sectional designs (30) and the rest were longitudinal (21). Qualitative methodologies were preferred (49) over quantitative studies (2), with some mixed methods designs (6). Researchers predominately chose to collect data using interviews (47); sometimes in combination with other methods such as media diaries (17). Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires (8). Transnational families were the most common context (38) followed by in-country long-distance families (10), separation due to work (2), and homelessness (1).

Data synthesis

Findings were reviewed and aggregated into categories based on similarity in meaning. These categories were further pooled together into four synthesized findings as presented in Figure 2: (1) doing family in a social media environment; (2) performing family through stories and rituals; (3) nature of online family communication practices; and (4) privacy, conflict and the quality of family relationships.

Findings

The following section discusses four broad themes identified in the data. The first theme, *doing family in a social media environment* describes how individuals engage in functional and transactional tasks by selecting different modes of social media for various tasks. For example, families participate in bonding activities through the use of audiovisual calls or group chats. This theme includes a discussion of barriers to success, such as restricted Internet access, lower socioeconomic status, or limited digital literacy (Gonzalez and Katz, 2016; Nishitani, 2014). The second theme, *performing family through stories and rituals* explores how families display geographic resilience in recreating face-to-face rituals over social media. The third theme, *nature of online family communication practices* considers how long-distance families engage in communication practices to nurture or gain desired features of relationships (e.g. commitment and social support: Canary and Stafford, 1992). The final theme, *privacy, conflict and the quality of family relationships* explores how individuals control their social identities and negotiate in-group conflict. The evolution of these themes is displayed in Figure 2.

Doing family in a social media environment

Families are not committed to any particular social media site or feature. The following section discusses how individuals use the affordances of audiovisual, audio, chat, and collapsed contexts such as Facebook to engage with family practices or 'do family' (Bacigalupe and Bräuninger, 2017; Gordano Peile and Ros Hijar, 2016; Hsu, 2018). For example, synchronous methods such as voice or audiovisual calls over Skype might be used for leisurely conversations, and asynchronous methods such as Facebook or chat used for phatic communication or sharing tasks (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019; Madianou, 2014). *Digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) consider perpetual connectivity a

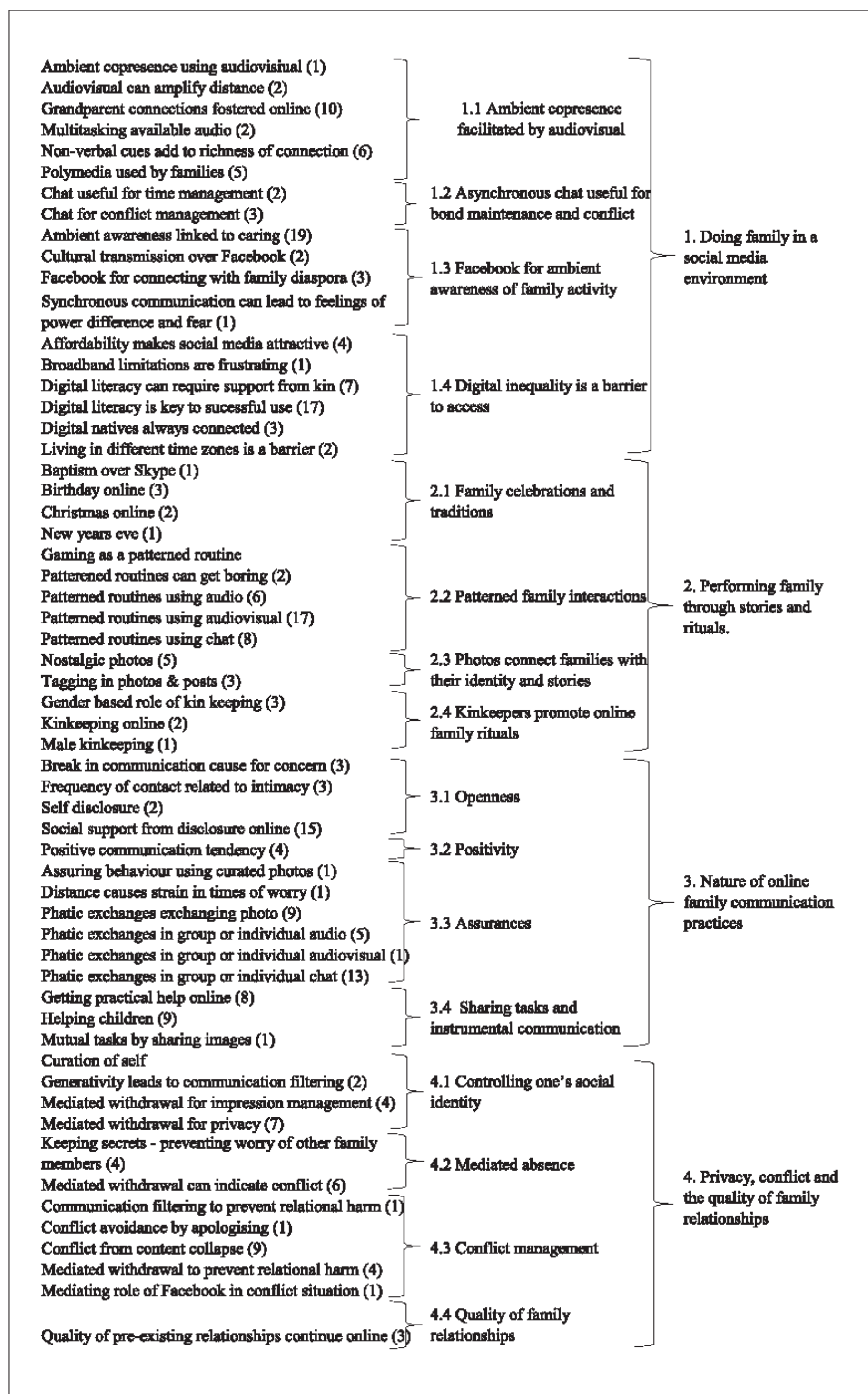

Figure 2. Results of the meta-synthesis.

natural state, and their daily routine includes regular checks of the status of other members of their social network (Madianou, 2014, 2016; Sandel, 2014). This 'always-on' culture does not always lead to emotional reassurance. For relationships that are in distress, it can create further conflict, mainly through increased opportunities for surveillance (Madianou, 2016).

Ambient co-presence is facilitated by audiovisual. In the transnational context, 86.8% (33/38) of studies found that families used audiovisual calls to share everyday interactions. Audiovisual communication provided non-verbal cues which facilitated the development of more 'natural' grandparent-grandchild ties; allowed absent adults to view the growth of children; and parents to scaffold conversations for very young children (Bacigalupe and Bräuninger, 2017; Cabalquinto, 2018b; Francisco, 2015; Ivan and Hebblethwaite, 2016; Kalavar et al., 2015; Madianou, 2016; McClure et al., 2015; Nedelcu, 2017; Pustułka, 2015; Riain, 2015; Share et al., 2017; Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2019).

Ito and Okabe (2005) suggest some transnational families use video calls over many hours, known as *ambient co-presence*. This shared virtual space mimics the experience of being together in the family home where one might not be in direct communication with others, but tangentially aware of others. Also known as *open connections*, some families connect via Skype over hours, sometimes 'all day' to share their everyday lives (Neustaedter et al., 2015). In this practice, individuals peripherally observe their communication partners while attending to their own daily routines (Acedera and Yeoh, 2018; Brown, 2016; Cabalquinto, 2018b; Francisco, 2015; McClure et al., 2015; Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016). Also widely reported is the use of video for *direct co-presence*. These calls involve conversing or sharing activities, with an emphasis on family group calls for rituals such as Christmas and birthdays (Ahn, 2017; Bacigalupe and Bräuninger, 2017; Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016; Neustaedter et al., 2015). Conversely, people sometimes avoid contact using audiovisual mode as its relative richness and immediacy can increase feelings of homesickness (Acedera and Yeoh, 2018; Clayton et al., 2018). Other individuals avoid audiovisual in favour of audio so they can simultaneously engage in other activities without breaching a perceived communication etiquette of facing the camera (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019).

Regular use of audiovisual modes for open or direct communication was a behaviour found only in the transnational context. Of the 13 studies of in-country long-distance families, only eight reported any audiovisual use, and only for two purposes: rituals such as weddings, and conversing with small children.

Asynchronous nature of chat useful for bond maintenance and conflict avoidance. Chat has grown to be one of the dominant forms of mediated communication for families, both co-resident and long-distance (Ling, 2012). This is due to its facility for phatic communication, and that people can discretely chat when engaged in other tasks. Long-distance families perceive that chat minimizes intrusions into communication partners' time and compensates for global time differences (Acedera and Yeoh, 2018; Fingerman et al., 2011; Kang, 2012). Individuals often select chat as a communication mode for emotionally charged conversations. It can reduce confrontation by allowing people time to

consider and moderate their responses (Barrie et al., 2019; Harper et al., 2017; Zhao, 2019).

The *family group chat*, characterized by frequent messages comprising text, photos, and other content is used by long-distance families to affirm their relationships (Brown, 2016; Cabalquinto, 2019; Doty and Dworkin, 2014; Kang, 2012; Ohashi et al., 2017; Platt et al., 2016; Sinanan et al., 2018; Yoon, 2016; Zhao, 2019). There is evidence the family group chat is used by co-located families as a communal diary shaping collective memories (see Chan, 2018; Karapanos et al., 2016) and to share phatic messages to promote bonding (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012).

Facebook for ambient awareness of family activity. Facebook's collapsed context is useful for the family diaspora, particularly for grandparents who use Facebook to stay connected to family members' everyday lives (Barrie et al., 2019; Ivan and Hebblethwaite, 2016; Madianou, 2016; Nedelcu, 2017; Quan-Haase et al., 2018; Rea et al., 2015; Shaker, 2018). The followed individuals feel more emotionally connected to distant family members who regularly interact with their posts, even if they do not directly communicate (Plaza and Below, 2014). Absent mothers monitor children's Facebook accounts to gain information that will inform the parenting advice they deliver over Skype (Cabalquinto, 2019; Chib et al., 2013; Madianou, 2014). This type of surveillance can be perceived as care and concern (Yang, 2018) but is not always welcome and can cause conflict particularly when older adults attempt to exert control (Chib et al., 2013; Madianou, 2016; Nishitani, 2014).

Sharing photographs on Facebook is a highly valued feature (e.g. Ahn, 2017; Cabalquinto, 2019; Ohashi et al., 2017; Plaza and Below, 2014; Quan-Haase et al., 2018; Sinanan et al., 2018). Family tagged their absent members in Facebook posts to include them in celebrations and nostalgic photographs (Cabalquinto, 2018c, 2019). Young adults actively used Facebook to share their lives with family and simultaneously implemented privacy features to hide posts that could damage their desired self-presentation to family authority figures (Smith et al., 2012; Yang, 2018; Yoon, 2016). For those with strained parent–child relationships, communication via Facebook was valued for its semi-public nature. For example, all posts or interactions with parents are viewed by others in their friend lists, thus protecting young people from parental judgement (Harper et al., 2017).

Digital inequality is a barrier to access. For some individuals, access, cost, and digital literacy remain barriers to successful social media communication. Both time zone differences and poor broadband connectivity frequently pose challenges to use of synchronous media such as video calls (Gordano Peile and Ros Hijar, 2016; Ryan et al., 2015; Sandel, 2014). Digital inequality can be evident in restricted access to social media applications by governments, or when the low socioeconomic status of the left-behind family means technology is unaffordable (Cabalquinto, 2018a; Shaker, 2018). Some degree of digital literacy is necessary for the comfortable use of social media, and without this knowledge, individuals can be left behind (Smith et al., 2012). While connecting with family was a key motivator for older people to purchase technology and learn to use social media (Gonzalez and Katz, 2016; Hsu, 2018; Kelly, 2015; Lam, 2013), the financial and practical assistance of their digital native kin was the key to successful use (Bacigalupe and

Bräuninger, 2017; Gordano Peile and Ros Hijar, 2016; Kalavar et al., 2015; Ohashi et al., 2017). Even with assistance, there was some evidence of a disconnect between the desires of an older generation for video and audio calls and their children's preference for asynchronous communication (Barrie et al., 2019).

Performing family through stories and rituals

Family rituals are events or activities that contribute to the establishment and preservation of a family's identity (Wolin and Bennett, 1984). The memories of these rituals are included in family stories to create a shared identity (Crespo et al., 2011). The following section discusses the ways that families engage in three types of rituals online: *family celebrations* include cultural holidays such as Christmas and rites of passage such as weddings; *family traditions* are less culture-specific activities such as birthdays and family holidays; and *patterned family interactions* are everyday routines such as shared meals, greetings, and household activities (Wolin and Bennett, 1984).

Family celebrations and traditions. Families call each other using audio and audiovisual, send messages and content, and share information on Facebook to celebrate rituals such as Christmas (Cabalquinto, 2018c; McClure et al., 2015; Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2019). The virtual co-presence of absent members via audiovisual calls is encouraged for special events to facilitate emotional connection (Neustaedter et al., 2015). Absent family members are tagged in Facebook posts about these events to create and maintain shared family values (e.g. Cabalquinto, 2018b, 2020; Yang, 2018). These adaptative continuances of family rituals do not provide the same satisfaction as being physically present with each other but do help members to feel connected (Bacigalupe and Bräuninger, 2017).

Patterned family interactions. Long-distance families have developed highly individualized patterned routines designed to work over social media. The routine may be as simple as a daily wakeup call, yet the repetitive nature of the act provides meaning and value to the relationship (Acedera and Yeoh, 2018; Ohashi et al., 2017). Daily greetings via chat or Facebook accompanied by photographs of everyday items cultivate intimacy and positive affect (Clayton et al., 2018; Sinanan et al., 2018; Yang, 2018). Many transnational parents report satisfaction in a routine of regular assistance with their children's homework activities using audiovisual platforms (Brown, 2016; Chib et al., 2013; Nedelcu, 2017; Neustaedter et al., 2015; Platt et al., 2016). Types of open connection routines include family music sessions, virtual cooking, or sharing a meal (Cabalquinto, 2018a; Francisco, 2015). Grandparents value the routine of game playing online to establish a sense of familiarity and connectedness with their distant grandchildren (Kelly, 2015; Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2019).

However, these types of rituals not only require a high level of commitment, but also the ability to adapt routines so they do not become tedious or meaningless (Wolin and Bennett, 1984). Some families report constant communication about mundane everyday life can become repetitive and boring, and consequently, ties are weakened (Acedera and Yeoh, 2018; Ahn, 2017).

Photos connect families with their identity and stories. Photographs have long been used as artefacts to construct continuity in relationships by invoking nostalgic recollection of the stories that bind them (Merolla, 2010). Family members today share photos with social media to recall their stories about people in their networks, their rituals, and to imagine the possibility of seeing each other again (Cabalquinto, 2020; Sinanan et al., 2018; Zhao, 2019). Shared images add emotion and ambience to communication, and foster a sense of connectivity (Cabalquinto, 2020; Ohashi et al., 2017; Plaza and Below, 2014; Quan-Haase et al., 2018). The flow of images allows for an ambient awareness of the family diaspora (Plaza and Below, 2014). Photographs are also a source of inspiration for direct communication (Madianou, 2014; Sinanan et al., 2018; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2017; Yang, 2018). For example, amusing photos might prompt shared and private discussions between family members (Cabalquinto, 2018c; Yang, 2018).

Kinkeepers promote online family rituals. Wolin and Bennett (1984) proposed that families with high levels of commitment to completing rituals have members who exert control over other family members to ensure compliance with the repetition and continuity of rituals. Rosenthal (1985) found the role of *kinkeeper* involves completing tasks such as initiating contact, encouraging members of the family group to interact, maintaining contact with distant kin, organizing family rituals, encouraging member participation, and facilitating caregiving. This gendered role has traditionally fallen to women, and women are also maintaining contact and intimacy online (Shaker, 2018). However, men do take a role in online kinkeeping by facilitating regular participation in the family group chat (Cabalquinto, 2020; Shaker, 2018; Sinanan et al., 2018). Some kinkeepers reported their primary motivation to use Facebook was to keep in touch with the family diaspora, and allow their children to become familiar with their distant kin (Gonzalez and Katz, 2016; Plaza and Below, 2014).

Nature of online family communication practices

The following section discusses how long-distance families engage with four communication practices identified by Canary and Stafford (1992) to maintain their relationships. (1) *openness* or the disclosure of thoughts and feelings, (2) *positivity* characterized by open and cheerful communication, (3) *assurances* or assuring behaviour indicating a commitment to the ongoing relationship, and (4) *sharing tasks* where both parties take responsibility for mutual tasks in the relationship.

Openness. Families who use any mode of social media to regularly share their emotional triumphs and tragedies can experience social support, emotional connection, and reduced homesickness (Bacigalupe and Bräuninger, 2017; Brown, 2016; Kalavar et al., 2015; Lim and Pham, 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016; Platt et al., 2016; Pustulka, 2015). Frequent open communication is linked to increased feelings of intimacy and care and makes time spent apart more tolerable (Barakji et al., 2018; Cabalquinto, 2018c; Gonzalez and Katz, 2016; Kang, 2012; Shaker, 2018; Thulin and Vilhelmson, 2017). Close families can engage in very frequent communication and inexplicable breaks can trigger immediate concern for the well-being of the disconnected family

member (Bacigalupe and Bräuninger, 2017; Barrie et al., 2019; Francisco, 2015; Shiau, 2015; Smith et al., 2012).

Positivity. Families display positive communication behaviour through a myriad of methods including cheerful photographs, messages, posts, conversations, the use of cute emojis, Facebook likes, and GIFs (Cabalquinto, 2020; Ivan and Hebblethwaite, 2016; Rea et al., 2015; Shiau, 2015; Yang, 2018; Yoon, 2016). Individuals filter their communication to remove worrying information that might concern distant family members (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019; Ahn, 2017; Cabalquinto, 2018b; Pustułka, 2015; Rea et al., 2015). For example, a resident parent may only share happy, or ordinary stories about their children with the absent parent (Ahn, 2017), a daughter might suppress feelings of frustration with her parents to keep conversations cheerful and uncritical (Cabalquinto, 2018b), parents hide illnesses and their problems from children (Pustułka, 2015), and spouses fail to address conflict in favour of keeping the peace (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019; Ahn, 2017; Rea et al., 2015). However, there are risks associated with habitual positivity at the expense of openness as it can lead to superficial communication, emotional distance, and weakened ties (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019; Ahn, 2017).

Assurances. Assurances form an important part of families' daily routines (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019; Lim and Pham, 2016; Ohashi et al., 2017). Often these short calls and messages to say hello, share everyday trivia, or to ask about unimportant things fulfil a phatic function (Chib et al., 2013; Pustułka, 2015; Rea et al., 2015; Zhao, 2019). Even hearing sound over an open web-cam without any direct communication provides assurance the relationship exists (Francisco, 2015; Zhao, 2019). Assurances on Facebook can take the form of liking posts and making comments about 'missing' the individual who posted them (Madianou, 2016). Some individuals share family members' images and posts on Facebook as a display of valuing the other person and their ideas (Cabalquinto, 2019). These repeated and frequent actions mimic a virtual 'tap on the shoulder' reminding the other party the relationship exists and that it is important (Ito and Okabe, 2005).

Sharing tasks and instrumental communication. In a transnational context, social media is frequently used for instrumental communication by absent parents to engage in such tasks as supporting left-behind children to complete homework, providing discipline, or advice (Ohashi et al., 2017). Other organizational tasks completed over social media include organizing remittance of money and goods (Brown, 2016; Cabalquinto, 2020; Chib et al., 2013; Francisco, 2015; Madianou, 2016; Platt et al., 2016), practical care and assistance for distant family members (Cabalquinto, 2018a; Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016; Plaza and Below, 2014; Shaker, 2018), and sharing recipes (Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016).

Privacy, conflict, and the quality of family relationships

The frequent sharing of information does however on occasions lead to concerns regarding privacy and can lead to conflict within the relationships. The following

discussions reflect some of the tensions associated with relationship maintenance via social media.

Controlling one's social identity. Individuals disclose specific information to control their social identity (Petronio, 2002). The balance of maintaining kinship ties, preserving privacy, and managing impressions in a collapsed context such as Facebook requires careful organization. Some individuals – particularly young adults – perform impression management by accepting friend requests from senior family adults, then restrict that person's access to their newsfeed, or restrict their visible activity by removing tagging privileges of friends (Ohashi et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2012; Yang, 2018; Zhao, 2019). People manage their identity by sharing prudently curated photos, or carefully preparing their physical appearance before direct video communication to deliver an impression of success and well-being to the family (Shiau, 2015; Sinanan et al., 2018).

One of the methods used for managing privacy is to withdraw from communication via *mediated absence* (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019; Cabalquinto, 2018a). People may use broken technology as an excuse to avoid offending family members (Nishitani, 2014; Pustułka, 2015). Communication approaches using synchronous modes such as audio are ignored; individuals choose respond via asynchronous messages (Harper et al., 2017; Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2019). Parental questions and curiosity may be seen as burdensome or interpreted as a form of control and thus children may avoid contact to ease this perceived pressure (Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016; Shiau, 2015; Zhao, 2019).

Conflict management. Conflict occurring between family members online is often flagged by a *demand–withdraw sequence*. This sequence occurs when an individual attempts to contact a communication partner about an issue and the partner avoids discussion (Caughlin and Vangelisti, 2000). The demander can see their communication partner's online activity, sometimes in multiple applications, yet the demander does not get any response to their communication requests (Acedera and Yeoh, 2018, 2019; Chib et al., 2013; Harper et al., 2017; Hsu, 2018). In close relationships where frequent contact is normal, this withdrawal can be used to punish the demander for a transgression. For example, a wife refuses to answer her absent husband's audio calls for 3 days because she is angry with him (Ahn, 2017) or a father refuses to talk with his left-behind daughter until she obeys her mother (Cabalquinto, 2018a). The rejection of attempted contact can be a cause for hurt, irritation, or sorrow for the demander (Ahn, 2017; Barrie et al., 2019; Madianou, 2014; Shiau, 2015; Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2019).

When social media is the only method of contact and the relationship is in conflict, mediated absence can cause great anguish. For example, the distressed husband who suspects his absent wife of having an affair and can see she is active online but she ignores his many attempts via multiple channels to contact her (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019). Conflict can also occur when an individual's post or status on Facebook leads to arguments between the individual and absent family (Barrie et al., 2019; Nishitani, 2014; Yang, 2018). For example, an 'always-on' status on Facebook alerted a parent to the fact that her son had dropped out of school (Madianou, 2016). Negative emotional responses such as shame can also ensue from misunderstood posts, such as the parent who

incorrectly interpreted an image to accuse their son of smoking illicit drugs (Storch and Ortiz Juarez-Paz, 2019).

Discussion

This systematic review provides a narrative synthesis of published peer-reviewed research focusing on long-distance family practices over social media. Two research questions were posed to better understand the patterns of social media use and the family practices in which they engage. The first research question concerned what patterns of social media are used by long-distance families, and the second what family practices are engaged in over social media. This analysis identified that the use and practices of social media varied depending on the specific focus of the interactions. For example, when considering only social media platforms, people co-mingle their choice of platform or mode according to the practice they are engaged in at any time. Families maintain an ambient awareness of each other's lives by monitoring activity in collapsed contexts such as Facebook. They frequently connect using various social media modes such as audio and audiovisual calls, and share media and messages in individual and family group chats (e.g. Bacigalupe and Bräuninger, 2017; Neustaedter et al., 2015). These rituals are not considered substitutes for face-to-face interaction, but for families with limited opportunities to see each other, they help maintain the family identity and relationships (e.g. Cabalquinto, 2018a; Ohashi et al., 2017). While patterned routines can be fulfilling, they require an ongoing time commitment. One of the less explored aspects in this body of research is the role of the family kinkeeper in promoting participation in online activities.

In contrast, families with relationships in distress use social media to minimize their contact in a way that does not break the bonds of kinship. They quietly 'unfriend' family members (Barrie et al., 2019) or claim their mediated withdrawal is due to broken technology (Nishitani, 2014). Chat is valued as a medium for emotionally charged conversations and conflict resolution. Communication can be slowed down in chat so messages can be carefully curated, and withdrawal is easy (Lam, 2013; Madianou, 2014). Chat is increasingly the preferred method of communication for teenagers (Rideout and Robb, 2018), thus understanding how this cohort negotiates their relationships over chat may well be an important future direction for research.

Limitations and future directions

Despite efforts to create a comprehensive review, there are limitations. The social media landscape changes quickly, and consequently some findings may be quickly outdated. For example, youth engagement in Facebook appears to be shrinking (Kemp, 2019) and thus grandparents may find it more challenging to use this collapsed context to gain ambient awareness of their grandchildren's lives.

Much of the literature comprising this review (38/51 studies) relates to transnational families. For transnational families, it is clear that open audiovisual connections were used frequently by migrants and their left-behind family (e.g. Cabalquinto, 2018c). Yet, the existing within-country studies reported no instances of this activity.

Future studies could investigate if this practice does exist for within-country families or whether other activities fulfil this need for bonding. The relative lack of information around in-country long-distance family use of social media represents a significant gap in the literature.

The need to understand social media's role in maintaining relationships among long-distance families has become critical, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has resulted in millions of families unexpectedly navigating separated relationships, their regular family practices disrupted. With no indication as to when they may be able to meet face-to-face again, social media now becomes a potential medium to maintain their bonds. For these individuals, learning to nurture ties, negotiate conflict, and fulfil family functions using mediated communication has never been more important. To better understand these maintenance behaviours facilitated by social media, the explicit and frequently pivotal role of the kinkeeper should be further explored. This will allow better understanding of the nuances underpinning the often delicate negotiation of managing long-distance family relationships.

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CHAPTER 4 – "YOU'VE GOT TO GROUP TOGETHER AND HAVE A YARN": AUSTRALIAN FAMILY PRACTICES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

This qualitative study aimed to further explore the three research questions from a need to belong perspective in an Australian context: "What are the current patterns of use of various modes of social media for family relationship maintenance?"; "What types of maintenance behaviours are enacted on social media?"; and "How do Australian residents find the experience of using social media meets their belongingness needs?"

The second study drew on the findings of the mixed methods systematic review in the first study. The context for most articles reviewed in the first study was transnational (38/51 studies), and the two studies that pertained to Australian families were also concerned with transnational relationships. Findings of the review suggest some activities that are highly valued for connections between transnational families are under-researched in an in-country family context. For example, frequent interactions using open audio-visual connections are common amongst migrants and their left-behind families, yet this behaviour was not reported by in-country families. This study aims to investigate the gap in the literature relating to in-country family use of social media for family relationship maintenance. The data for this qualitative study came from semi structured interviews with 28 Australian residents who used social media to connect with their families.

While the purpose of this study was predominately descriptive and considered how different experiences of technology might intersect with roles and social media family practices, thematic analysis is theory-bound, so the research questions were mapped against a theoretical background, and to dig deeper into the findings of the MMSR (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Some MMSR findings related to influences on family use of social media warranted further exploration: *roles* (e.g., being a parent compared to a child), *stage of life* (e.g., retired and no longer interacting with technology on a daily basis), *smartphone portability* and

negotiation of privacy, and *impression management*. The interview questions for this study can be found in Appendix B. Questions 1 and 2 were designed to explore more about the impact of a person's role and stage of life on their social media-based family practices. Question 3 attempted to gain a thicker description of the types of media people used dependent on their roles (e.g., were they using rich media such as audiovisual with children?). Question 4 explored differences in social media use based on the person's stage of life and tried to tease out generational differences (e.g., for some participants, the internet has 'always' existed and how did this impact their use), and we wanted to find out if established habits might play a part in how people used social media. The MMSR indicated social exchange theory is a useful framework to explore the phenomenon under investigation. Questions 5 and 6 were oriented towards examining the intent of social media use (e.g., were people maintaining positive interactions and avoiding conflict?). Family practices such as rituals seemed to play a large part in transnational family life online. Question 7 explored the use of online rituals for co-located Australian families. Another finding of the MMSR was that kinkeepers played an important role in maintaining family connections, so Question 8 investigated what role they play in Australian family social media use. Given the portability and uptake of smartphones in Australia, it was appropriate to investigate in questions 9 and 10 how Australians negotiate their privacy and impression management.

This study is currently in preparation for submission to the "*Australian Journal of Psychology*." *Australian Journal of Psychology* is a Taylor and Francis journal and has an impact factor of 2.316 (2020). See Appendix B for all supplementary material related to this study, including interview questions. The study is unaltered from the submitted version and is thus presented according to the style requested by the journal.

This paper adds to the published literature by offering an insight into the influence of time scarcity on the way that people use social media for relationship maintenance. Further, it

reinforces that in an Australian context, the need to belong, rather than the need for support, is the motivation for intergenerational contact. Further, the study finds that older adults are not locked out of digital connections with their families due to a grey digital divide but use new technologies with support from their digitally literate relatives as they need it. Further, while this study confirmed open video connections are not relevant to Australians, time invested by adults in audio-visual calls with small children did appear to result in closer bonds with the child as they age. Finally, the ongoing tension between communicative positivity bias and honest negative disclosure means Australians are conflicted about the role of Facebook as a relationship maintenance tool.

“You’ve Got to Group Together and Have a Yarn”: Australian Family Practices of Social Media

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Abstract

Strong family bonds can lead to improved wellbeing and life satisfaction for individuals. This paper contributes by analysing the social media family practices of 28 Australians using semi structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify two patterns of talk around this topic: (a) Individuals perceive time is scarce so they work to maintain relationships efficiently and (b) to share or not to share on Facebook, a twenty first century conundrum. The latter theme explores tensions between authentic self-disclosing behaviour and social media's positive communication norms. Key findings were: contrary to the stereotype of digitally challenged older adults, they are active participants in family social media interactions; time invested in audio-visual calls with small children resulted in closer long-term bonds with older relatives; and Facebook plays a valued role in family bond maintenance. To conclude, promoting early interaction with young descendants using social media can sustain familial bonds over distance.

Keywords: social media, group messaging, shared interest, co-presence, intergenerational contact

"You've Got to Group Together and Have a Yarn": Australian Family Practices of Social Media

Introduction

Supportive social media interaction is related to increased intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and well-being (Oh et al., 2014). People report they are motivated to use social media to "catch up with family and friends" (Yellow, 2020, p.4). The main focus of research on the intersection of Australian family relationships and social media has focused on intergenerational kinwork (e.g., Sinanan & Hjorth, 2018). A gap exists in the literature regarding the affordances of different modes of social media for the enactment of family relationship management behaviours.

Researchers often consider family from three perspectives (Wambolt & Reiss, 1991). Structural definitions are based on group membership (e.g., parents and children) and make distinctions between families of origin, families of procreation, and extended families. The psychosocial and transactional perspectives are practice oriented and consider what functions families perform and how they do it, such as educating children, or creating a family identity and emotional ties (see Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1993). The present paper uses the structural definition of family to distinguish contact between individuals and their immediate, or extended family members.

Attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) are valuable frameworks for understanding family practices. They describe the human need to establish and maintain satisfying emotional bonds with others. Satisfying relationships are associated with positive interactions, open self-disclosure, mutual assurances of care and affection, spending time with common friends, and sharing of mutual tasks (Canary & Stafford, 1992). In order to successfully negotiate relationship maintenance using social media, it is likely that individuals match their behaviours with acceptable social

communication norms in different platforms and *modes* (i.e., group expectations for the tone of communication in the mode; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Social media encompasses a broad array of platforms, each with various modes including audio, audio-visual, text, and collapsed contexts such as Facebook (see Kapoor et al., 2018). Positive communication behaviour is most easily enacted using social media, as a positive expression norm exists across platforms (Waterloo et al., 2018). In contrast, negative toned self-disclosure behaviour is less acceptable in Facebook as a strong expectation of positivity exists (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). To avoid social sanctions for negative emotional disclosure on Facebook, users are likely to engage in targeted disclosure to specific audiences (Vitak & Kim, 2014). That is, they might choose to modify their communication expressions on Facebook and restrict confidences to other platforms such as WhatsApp where their audience can be better targeted (Waterloo et al., 2018; Zillich & Müller, 2019).

About 71% of Australians report having a Facebook account (Kemp, 2019) but the uptake of Facebook by older adults (older than 65 years) continues to lag behind younger generations (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Quan-Haase et al (2018) found older adults are not disconnected, but they are less likely to engage in a wide range of social media and less likely to use their smartphones to do so. Generational differences have been highlighted in terms of use and experience with technology. Although the silent generation (born 1928-1945) is often posited as being less digitally literate, influential technological innovations that influenced their communication include landline telephones and typewriters (Barrett, 2010). Many individuals from this generation learnt to use computers in their work life (Randall et al., 2015). Baby boomers (born 1946-1964) also started to use computers at work, and email became an accepted form of communication later in their work lives (Barrett, 2010). Generation X (born 1965-1980), were exposed to more information than previous generations as they were early adopters of the internet when it became available for the public (Brosdahl

& Carpenter, 2011). Generation X women were early and keen users of mobile phones for remote mothering. Millennials (born 1981 – 1996) had frequent exposure to the internet from their youth and used it for entertainment and social interaction (Bolton et al., 2013). Apple's iPhone was introduced in 2007 and the user-friendliness of its applications meant that by the time this study's youngest cohort, Generation z (1997 – current) were teenagers, the smartphone was the primary tool used to connect to the internet (Goggin, 2009). A unique experience for the generation z cohort is that mobile internet access, social media, and constant connectivity have always existed (Dimock, 2019; Prensky, 2001). This study considers how the different experiences of technology might intersect with roles and social media family practices.

One family role which has adapted to new technology is parenting: Australian mothers have used mobile technology to remotely surveil and support their at-home children since the early 1990s (Rakow & Navarro, 1993). Now, the portability of social media accessed by smartphone further impacts the capacity of parents to care for their children over distance ("portability of care"; Baldassar, 2016). Parents can provide emotional and moral support; and establish co-presence with cohabiting and distant children (Baldassar, 2016; Sinanan & Hjorth, 2018). Bengtson (2001) posited that "longer years of shared lives" (p.4) between generations meant multigenerational relationships are increasingly important for family members well-being and support. Kneidinger (2014) found Facebook is useful for perceptions of increased intergenerational contact. Older relatives who followed the daily lives of their younger family members felt the quality of their contact improved. However, not all families experience positive relationships. Approximately 20% are characterised by long-term conflict and this can also play out over social media (Bengtson, 2001; Fox et al., 2014). Social media thus plays a critical role in both maintaining intergenerational contact and mediating conflict (e.g., Acedera & Yeoh, 2019).

The affordance of portability provided by the smartphone has resulted in constant availability online and ambient copresence (Licoppe, 2004; Schrock, 2015). Almost all Australians now access social media on their mobile phones (Yellow, 2020). Mobile internet access blurs the boundaries between presence and absence, which can lead to perceived pressure to be responsive to others (Matassi et al., 2019). Families have a social norm of reciprocity in that they need to respond to each other's communication approaches, but the need to belong may clash with the need for privacy and personal space (Stafford & Hillyer, 2012). Research has found young people in Western cultures negotiate their privacy in nuanced ways (Clark, 2013). For example, tension can occur when living-away-from-home adolescents perceived their parents were surveilling them on Facebook and for dependent teenagers while they negotiate their smartphone use with inexperienced parents learn their smartphone use (Clark, 2013; Yang, 2018). This tension can dissipate when the teenager restricts Facebook content available to their parents, or parents accept their changing role and recognize the child's autonomy and emerging adulthood (Ball et al., 2013; Yang, 2018).

Although there is a plethora of research regarding transnational family practices over social media, less attention has been paid to the behaviour of within-country family practices (see Abel et al., 2020). This study aims to develop understandings of what Australians mean when they use social media to "catch up with family." As such, the study is guided by the following research question:

RQ: What psychosocial and transactional family practices do Australians engage with using social media?

Method

Participants

This study employed a semi structured individual-interview design to talk to Australian residents about using social media to connect with family. Ethical approval was

granted by the host university before data collection took place. Interview participants were recruited to provide in-depth experience and perspectives about the phenomenon under investigation (Braun et al., 2009). The study used a convenience sample based on the strategy of theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The population was conceptualised around individuals who use their social media accounts to connect with immediate and extended family members. Interviewees were recruited to provide insider positions reflecting various family roles, generational cohorts, and stages-of-life (some with dependent co-resident children and some with adult children who lived in residences other than the family home). Participants were recruited via advertising on the researchers' personal Facebook and Twitter accounts, and the host university's student survey site. No novel data was gained in the final interview and recruitment was ceased (Small, 2009). The 28 participants were aged between 19 and 81. Each participant's demographic information is summarised in Table 1. Pseudonyms were allocated to de-identify participants and their contacts.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Parent	Grandparent	Child demographics	Household members other than children	Education	Profession
Generation z (born 1997 – current)								
Olivia	F	19					Grade 12	University student
Hannah	F	19				Parents	Grade 12	University student
Millennials (born 1981 – 1996)								
Jessica	F	27				Parents and 2 siblings	Bachelor degree	Administration staff
Emily	F	32	Y		3 co-resident U18	Partner	Diploma	University student
Victoria	F	33	Y		1 co-resident U18	Partner	Diploma	University student
Kayla	F	34				Partner	Grade 12	Small business owner
Jennifer	F	34				Parents	Diploma	University student
Brandon	M	39	Y		1 co-resident U18, 1 non-resident U18	Extended family	Trade	Tested welder
Generation x (born 1965 – 1980)								
Amy	F	40	Y		1 non-resident		Diploma	Business centre manager
Nicole	F	44	Y		2 co-resident U18	Partner	Bachelor degree	Bookkeeper
Amanda	F	45	Y		3 co-resident U18	Partner	Diploma	People and Culture Specialist
Angela	F	46				Partner	Bachelor degree	Actor/Media business owner
Kelly	F	49	Y		2 co-resident U18	Extended family	Diploma	Small business owner
Lisa	F	51	Y		2 co-resident U18	Partner	Diploma	Fire fighter

Name	Gender	Age	Parent	Grandparent	Child demographics	Household members other than children	Education	Profession
Heather	F	51	Y		2 co-resident	Partner	Bachelor degree	Small business owner
Melissa	F	51	Y		2 non-resident		Grade 12	Community radio liaison officer
Angela	F	51	Y		1 non-resident, 1 co-resident U18	Partner	MBA	General manager health sector
Tiffany	F	53	Y		2 non-resident	Partner	Diploma	TAFE teacher/assessor
Monica	F	54	Y		1 non-resident		Bachelor degree	Small business owner
Baby boomers (born 1946 – 1964)								
Michael	M	56	Y		2 co-resident U18	Partner	Grade 12	Small business owner
Cynthia	F	66	Y	Y	4 non-resident	Partner	Doctorate	University academic (retired)
Diane	F	67	Y	Y	1 non-resident	Partner	Grade 10	Small business owner
Denise	F	69	Y	Y	4 non-resident		Bachelor degree	Senior secondary teacher
Patricia	F	71	Y	Y	3 non-resident		Grade 12	Administration manager (retired)
Robin	F	72	Y	Y	3 non-resident	Partner	Bachelor degree	Social worker
Silent generation (born 1928 – 1945)								
Carol	F	76	Y	Y	4 non-resident		Diploma	Primary teacher (retired)
William	M	76	Y	Y	2 non-resident		Bachelor degree	Veterinarian (retired)
Ruby	F	81	Y	Y	4 non-resident	Partner	Grade 10	Medical receptionist (retired)

Note. “U18” indicates the child is under 18 years old

Data Collection

Semi structured interviews were conducted with 29 participants between February and May 2020. Interview records for one participant were lost due to equipment failure so only 28 participants' data were included in this study. The open interview questions focused on the types of social media individuals used; their motivations for doing so; and issues around privacy and availability online. The 28 interviews lasted between 23 to 69 minutes, with an average duration of 35 minutes. The audio recordings of each interview were transcribed in full and participants were given the opportunity to read and provide additional feedback. Two participants provided further clarification which was incorporated into the data analysis. In presented extracts, […] indicates some text has been removed to improve readability.

Data Analysis

A critical realist perspective was employed to locate and make sense of the participants descriptions of engaging with family over social media (Willig, 2001). Critical realism theorises an independent truth is possible but unreachable as each individual has a different perspective and locatedness (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Further, Milner (2007) suggests researchers acknowledge how their cultural realities and experiences impacts their interpretation of participants' voices. This is important as researchers' perspectives are reflected in the findings of studies. Researchers for this study share common cultural experiences with some participants, in they belong to generation x cohort and connect with their families using social media. Milner also cautions about the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and care has been taken not to reify the stereotype of a digitally illiterate silent generation.

Salient themes were developed using an inductive and data-driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2016). Following data collection, the three researchers first listened to the interview audio recordings and then read the transcriptions to become familiar with the data.

Notes about patterns in the data were then coded against the original transcripts in subsequent re-readings by the lead researcher. After consideration of the meanings of these patterns and the broader social context which might impinge on these meanings, themes were developed in consultation with the other two researchers.

Findings

Analysis of participant's experiences of social media identified two themes, each with two subthemes (see Table 2). Time—or the lack thereof—was a continuing motif throughout participant's interviews. Thus, the first theme identified was *Individuals perceive time is scarce, so they work to maintain relationships efficiently*. Every participant had a Facebook account and believed it was time effective for managing their family connections. The second theme stems from ongoing tension that exists for participants between keeping their own Facebook content positive yet wanting to see authentic disclosures from loved ones: *To share or not to share on Facebook: a twenty first century conundrum*

Table 2

Description and Examples of Themes

Themes and subthemes	Description	Example quotes
Theme 1: Individuals perceive time is scarce so they work to maintain relationships efficiently		
Time is valued and we are willing to give more time to closer contacts	Audio is the preferred communication mode for close contacts as it facilitates the perspicacious listener to discern if their contacts are making authentic self disclosures.	"Yeah, so extended family is usually Facebook Messenger or mobile calls. I prefer to actually connect where I can hear somebody's voice and I can hear their emotion. I can hear if- they can tell me on Facebook that they're doing really well, or in Messenger or text that they're going really well, but I know when I get on the phone with them, they're not." (Amanda)
	Audio is also preferred as the listener can multitask.	"I don't have a lot of time to make phone calls. Most of my phone calls I'd make while driving." (Nicole).
	Audio-visual calls are mostly restricted to communication with small children due to their limited patience and social communication skills. Spending the time to get to know the child when they are young leads to greater emotional connections when they are older and more capable of using less rich communication modes	"Sometimes they'll talk to her and they'll be like, "Oh, she's gone." She's upstairs. She'll just run off. But she, I think, having had over the younger years, having built up the relationship that she has with them, it means that she's now really comfortable talking to them. When you only see people twice a year and it's like you might just talk to them on the phone briefly for five minutes, which is awkward. It just takes a little bit of time to warm up and be like, oh, yeah, these are my grandparents and they love me. Whereas I feel like we've just spent our whole lives almost together." (Victoria)

Themes and subthemes	Description	Example quotes
We value our own time and breaks in reciprocity hurt	Messaging is the mode of choice for regular family relationship maintenance as it is perceived as less intrusive on one's own time and more respectful of other's busy lives.	"So if I've got a question to ask then I text so that gives the person the opportunity to think about it and respond. Also knowing that people are busy and they can deal with it when they're able to, particularly when they're working or whatever." (Ruby)
	There are limits to our patience and social communication norms suggest when people delay responding to text messages it can be hurtful and offensive.	"I think 48 [hours] is the limit probably. I think it's better to do it within a day - even if you just write a message "I can't talk now, give you a call back tomorrow or text you back tomorrow." You've acknowledged it - to me it's the acknowledgment, that receipt that you've got it and even if they don't respond for another four days, at least they've acknowledged it and it's on their mind. Because I've done that too where you just go "Oh my God, I forgot!" I've sent them a message saying "I'll get back to you tomorrow and then you forget." I get it, we're all so freaking busy these days." (Monica)
Theme 2: To share or not to share on Facebook, a twenty first century conundrum		
Family roles and generational cohort influence Facebook use	Generation z may not use Facebook to share their own lives but will assure their family of their love by liking their posts	"My aunties and uncles are the ones that are consistently just sharing things on their Facebook or recipes and just stuff like that. I see a bit of that and they do like every photo that I upload, but I'm not - on social media platforms, [...] Facebook I'm not really active on my own timeline, but I use it to let them know that I can see it."" (Jessica)

Themes and subthemes	Description	Example quotes
	Where Millennials, and generation x were once excited by sharing their lives on Facebook, they are more likely to only share special events	"Before, I used to - I mean in the last few years, I've - I just really cooled my jets about what I posted on Facebook and I wasn't that interested. I like to - I still look at it every day, probably several times a day. I scroll through things people post and a lot of it doesn't interest me and I'm not - I only post things when there is a milestone or we're doing something fun. The day to day stuff is pretty boring so I've not probably - that interested in sharing that stuff." (Angela)
	Baby boomers and silent generation follow family online but have reservations about posting for security reasons	"I've got some photos there, I posted some photos before, but I'm, I guess I'm sort of, I'm very conscious about sharing my information and my data and security and things like that. So, I use it minimally to stay in touch with my family." (Diane)
Tension between positivity bias and the desire to see open disclosure on Facebook	People want their contacts to authentically disclose, but Facebook's positivity bias means they think their negative disclosures are unacceptable	"Everyone puts up [...] the best show reel as opposed to the yukky stuff [...] Nobody wants to see the yukky side. Well, I mean everyone's interested in it and when people do they go, "Oh thank God I'm not the only one that goes through that". But nobody really wants to see it, or when they do they go "What are you putting that up for?", or "There's so much negative stuff, I only want to see the good stuff." (Monica)
		"I don't air my dirty laundry, for want of a better phrase, on Facebook. I think there's some things that you just don't do." (Amanda)

Individuals Perceive Time is Scarce, so They Work to Maintain Relationships Efficiently

Notably, all 28 participants accessed social media with their smartphones and there was little distinction made between using an application to make an audio call or their telephone service provider. For in-country communication, a participant's choice of application sometimes depended on the quality of their internet connection or the intended recipient's preference, but mostly seemed to be continued use of whatever application they had recently used with that communication partner. For contacts who were overseas, participants always used social media messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Messenger. As the cost of their internet connection was fixed regardless of this overseas contact, they considered communication using these applications free of cost. Generation z participants indicated they did not have the telephone numbers of their close contacts saved to their phones as they had always used social media applications to connect. Hannah stated, "We mostly use Messenger, just because all of our friends are on it without having to find out their numbers."

The oldest participant at 81, Ruby, contrasted the immediacy of contemporary communication with the telephone exchange of her youth in the 1950s when operating hours were limited and calls were booked and connected some hours later: "So present. If I want to contact you, you're right there, whereas before it depended on the time." Ruby did not have a home telephone until the late 1970s, yet this did not stop her from staying in touch with her mother: "I would make sure that I would call Mum from a public telephone at least twice a week…because I just knew how much it meant for her." Other participants such as Lisa continue long-standing family rituals of leisurely Sunday family phone calls:

> To me Sunday was like, ring family and see how they are because you know everyone's busy during the week and then Sunday is usually the chill out time in the

> afternoon. I always remember Mum doing that. She'd grab a beer and a packet of cigarettes and she'd go and sit on the phone and call everyone. She'd be on the phone for hours you know calling everyone. (Lisa)

Time is Valued and we are Willing to Give More Time to Closer Contacts

Many participants continued to highly value the richness of audio calls for close family contacts because the audio cues and silences allowed them to discern meanings and feelings more accurately.

> I do appreciate audio cues because a sentence can be so different in the way that you say it, and through text, you've got emojis, but that's a poor excuse for facial expression. You've got – you lose the subtext of what the person's trying to say. If there's a hesitation, you're not going to see that on text. You're just going to see the sentence. So I prefer calling to texting. (Olivia)

However, audio is not only perceived to be time consuming, but its immediacy is intrusive. Participants generally reserved audio calls for close contacts and managed time using two approaches: they sent messages to set up appointments for audio calls, and multitasked by engaging in another task (often driving a car) when talking.

> I'll send James a text message and he will ring me at his convenience because they're busy. I very rarely ring them, because I don't know what times they're doing – so busy. (Carol)

Still, audio was not always preferred and some of millennial and generation z participants say they (or their friends) actively avoided audio calls in preference to messages: Jennifer says "I'm very much that person like, oh my god, you could have sent me this in a text. Like, why are you ringing me?" Jennifer prefers the asynchronicity of messages because she can delay her response to a message and carefully curate her message. Some participants like Heather reported similar behaviour from their generation z children:

> Occasionally I'll try to ring him, but I usually get more of an immediate response if I text. Then sometimes I'll ring them, and the phones just ring out and then I'll text and I'll get a reply straightaway.

Even though audio-visual calls can provide a richer experience than audio, they require undivided attention and are reserved for long distance family communication; when participants or their family were travelling; or for intergenerational contact with young children who lived at a distance. The preference for audio-visual with small children stemmed from a desire to monitor the changes in the growing child and for the child to remember what the adult looks like. As Diane says, she liked to be able to connect with her grandchildren "because they grow quickly, we use Skype, for visual sort of communication". The children's lack of experience with social communication can result in chaotic sessions. Cynthia says her interaction with her grandchildren "doesn't last too long because it's a bit crazy." Some participants reported their adult children scaffolded the grandchildren's conversations by prompting. Others said they were content to be copresent and watch the child play rather than talk. While Jessica's regular contact with her niece doubles as an act of support for her sister (so her sister can do housework while the child is occupied), Jessica valued the ongoing familiarity this created with her niece:

> It's good, because she recognises […] me and my mum whereas she'll see my brothers and she's kind of like – she knows they're in the family but not quite who they are. Whereas she knows me by name. I think it really helps, because otherwise – even photos don't really do the same justice.

The practice of audio-visual communication did not persist once children grew older. Three grandparents reported turning to Instagram, Facebook, or the family group chat to follow and connect with their adolescent and older grandchildren. The price of exploiting the richness of audio-visual is time. Participants emphasised the social norm of visually attending

to one's communication partner therefore multitasking is unacceptable. One participant, Olivia describes her preference for audio over audio-visual because she wants to engage in another task while talking:

> Nothing that requires high brain function but just something with my hands, and I feel like when you're in a face-to-face conversation with someone and they start checking their phone it's like the rudest thing. If they just start answering someone else's – it feels really rude!

Messaging, valued for its asynchronous nature, was used by all participants with their family members regardless of co-habiting or living at a distance. They felt messaging did not impinge on the other person's time as an audio call might and that responses were at the other person's leisure. Family group chats were utilised more with family who were not co-resident. Participants coordinated face-to-face events, made "chit-chat" about their everyday lives, shared and images, media, and information about common interests.

> We communicate in a group chat on WhatsApp primarily, and that's just generally sharing photos and jokes and links and whatever else, and just a how're you going through the week. We've always had, yeah, like a family group chat on WhatsApp. (Steph)

The group chat's function was more about being connected as a family than allowing for emotional self-disclosure. For self-disclosure, participants generally changed to a one-to-one space. Denise's response is typical:

> Yeah, it's mainly keeping in touch. It's nothing important. If I really want to do something private, I'll go to a private Messenger account of Julie if I want to say something to her but not everyone.

As opposed to Facebook, messaging applications seem to be reserved for closer contacts. Jessica says, "The closer my friends are, the less I contact them on social media and

then the more I contact them through […] messages.” Messaging throughout the day was also favoured by some participants like Angela who leveraged their shared interests to create an ambient copresence while her partner was away from the house:

> We also send messages to each other because we’ve got some shared interests and if I see anything, I think he’ll like, I screen capture it and send it to him. Just forwarding – yeah, forwarding little messages in that way kind of keeps you connected throughout the day.

However, most participants reported interaction via message with their cohabiting spouses or children was mostly functional like Monica’s with her son: “When he’s out I’ll send him a message to say, ‘What time are you coming home?’ or ‘Can you grab something at the shop?’” Participants also found text-based communication useful for family with whom they are close relationally, but distant emotionally. For example, Angela and her mother have little to talk about and she finds messaging ideal to fulfil her filial obligations:

> I think the messaging is actually quite convenient because you can do it when it’s good for you. You can send a bit of information but you don’t have to be hanging around the phone thinking, “We’ve got nothing to talk about.”

Participants used patterned routines to express their care and affection. Denise provides ongoing to support to her daughter with a daily message: “I text her in the morning and say have a good day or hang in there, give her encouragement.” Monica contacts her sister regularly to provide emotional support: “The process of just chatting about day-to-day stuff is my checking in and she knows that.” Generation x participants have embraced messaging as a tool for parenting their children from a distance and in a way that is not too intrusive on their children’s time. They share informational media such as recipes and news articles, survey their location and provide advice. For example, Heather says:

> I will communicate with the kids if I have something that I want to get them to look at a later date, like something, just as an example, if I get some sort of Facebook article about drug use or party drugs or something like that that I think it might be worthwhile them just having a look at that. I would send that on Facebook message so that they can look at it if they choose to at their leisure.

We Value our own Time and Breaks in Reciprocity Hurt

Most participants (other than those from the silent generation), expected a response to their messages within a "reasonable" time. The upper limit was approximately 48 hours from receipt. Participants were cognisant of the "busyness" of their communication partners and would usually make excuses for why a response time would be longer.

> Okay, personally I don't expect somebody to respond instantly but I'd give them 24 to 48 hours to respond to a message – obviously if it's not urgent. But yeah, I just think okay, just because they've read it doesn't mean they're available to respond to it right then but I think it's rude not to do it within a 24 to 48 hour timeframe. (Monica)

Some silent generation participants conceived their position in their children's lives was almost periphery and were grateful for being included (e.g., Ruby said "I love to hear what they're doing but I think, oh, well, they wouldn't be interested in what I'm doing. But that's not right, I know that's not right.") but they were far more confident in their important place as close contacts and friends in their sibling's lives (as reflected in Robin's daily contact with her siblings via Messenger).

When participants were communicating with a romantic partner or someone with whom they were less certain of their relationship status, being *left on read* was an anxiety provoking situation. Olivia explained:

> So it means that you've sent a group of messages or just a message with a question or an open statement, and then the person reads the message and then doesn't respond, so you're left on read. With some people it's a real dick move.

Messaging can be used as a social shield to avoid confrontation. Some participants like Angela employed left on read as a mediated absence approach to conflict resolution. She says employing a withdrawal communication strategy is useful to help her diffuse potential conflict with her mother:

> I've done that to my mum a couple of times when she's annoyed me. I just say, I need some time out and then she sees that I've read her message, but I don't reply.

These descriptions of family contact centre around the value placed on time and reciprocity. They indicate that regular mediated contact with family and friends continues to be a practice of assuring each other of their affection, sharing tasks, bond maintenance. While these accounts are not too dissimilar to the traditional use of the telephone or email, Facebook's collapsed context offers a slightly different medium.

To Share or not to Share on Facebook, a Twenty First Century Conundrum

While all participants had Facebook accounts, none of them reported this as a primary form of family communication. Instead, it was a relaxed way to keep in touch with the life events and rituals in the lives of their family and a platform to assure them of their care by responding to posts. Participants' social media use seemed to be influenced by their roles and cohort membership. For example, generation x mothers reported confidently posted photos of their children to celebrate their birthdays. In contrast silent generation mothers were often conflicted about what kind of content was acceptable to post (in the eyes of their children), or whether their lives were too boring to share, or their honest disclosures would not be acceptable.

Family Roles and Generational Cohort Influence Facebook use

The Generation z participants have moved away from using Facebook for identity development or blogging and use it to assure older relatives of their affection. Thalia says, "As for updating your life and sharing things, that happens on Instagram". They use Facebook for assuring behaviour towards family, and as a contact directory. Generation z show affection to their relatives by reacting and responding to relative's Facebook posts. Olivia reports setting up notifications of close family's Facebook activity: "I get a message if Mum's posted and then I go in and like her post".

For these generation z participants, Facebook's critical use is the ability to identify new acquaintances. Thalia says, "If you've met someone new at uni, you can just look up their Facebook and message them directly rather than trying to find their phone number somewhere." This behaviour is not restricted to the generation z cohort. The youngest of the millennials, Jessica, does not know her sister's telephone number and is not at all concerned. They keep in constant contact using modes of Facebook Messenger—text, audio, and audio-visual.

There is a perception that Facebook is a public space and therefore less desirable for interaction with close contacts. Thalia has a hierarchy of communication modes with her family: she would post on the Facebook wall of a distant contact, use a private Facebook message for closer contacts, and reserves audio calls for her closest relationships. The other generation z participant Olivia, concurs. She considers her mother a close contact and prefers to contact her directly:

> I like telling her the stories rather than her finding out about them on Facebook, because, I don't know, I think that's our relationship and I like the fact that we're so close.

Millennial participants like Brandon wanted to see original and personal content from

their contacts rather than reposts or memes: “Because I like seeing the real stuff, I don’t like to see just memes and funny stuff”. Selection of a Facebook profile pictures is one of the ways participants established their family identity. Brandon’s profile is an image of him with his two children and he says he feels “really good when I look at my picture of myself and my kids.” However, the millennial and generation x cohort all reported posting far less content to Facebook than they did a decade ago. While previously they had updated their statuses and shared content such as photos and memes, they no longer feel the need. Instead, they used Messenger to connect with family and friends, and private Facebook groups to express their feelings. Jessica’s comments were typical about the change in use:

> I’ve sort of dwindled and my use of my actual timeline on my Facebook wall has stopped, so I don’t really…if I go on to my Facebook wall, there’s not really many things that I’ve uploaded. I may have put up like a photo, but I don’t really – I haven’t posted just a general status update in a really long time, because most of the things that I do on that platform now are speak to people on Messenger or just scroll through my timeline to comment on what other people have done.

Many reported only posting about special events on their timelines. However, these irregular posts may be enough contact for families to feel they are familiar with each other’s lives. Participants believed increased exposure and intermittent contact through Facebook could rekindle friendships with family members. Amanda says she is now closer with her cousin “since we’ve been friends on Facebook, I definitely feel more connected to her”. Heather keeps in touch with her aunt through Facebook:

> I wouldn’t sort of normally ring her or have that much to do with her but we comment on each other’s Facebook quite a bit. Look, I probably wouldn’t have lost touch with Jan but it would be the odd random catch-up phone call or email whereas now, you get that regular – even if you don’t make any comment, you can still see what they’re

> up to and you feel more connected with them. Then when you do contact them, it's less awkward because you have had that sort of regular little bit of contact.

Baby boomers and silent generation cohorts follow their family online but often have reservations about posting. These participants used Facebook groups to organise face-to-face events, and they followed relatives. The connection through Facebook was considered somewhat superficial, but nonetheless important. Ruby says:

> You find out a fair bit of what families are doing, which is great, I love that. Yes, and I suppose my question sometimes for myself is that "Am I sharing enough of my life with others? There seems to be a bit of disconnect, you're not actually in their little space when it's on social media, on Facebook and that. I guess I'm a person, a bit of a touchy-feely person who loves that real personal contact with people.

Participants were concerned about what they could post on Facebook, and who could see their Facebook data. They were less concerned about access by "big tech" than the friends they had chosen to add to their Facebook friend groups. Facebook's collapsed context audience combined with a perceived positive social communication norm meant many participants were conflicted about what was appropriate to post.

Tension Between Positivity Bias and the Desire to see Open Disclosure on Facebook

Across all cohorts participants considered sharing too little personal information, or too positive information inauthentic, but posts which were perceived as too intimate or too negative were inappropriate. Some participants like Carol felt that no personal emotional information was suitable content for Facebook:

> I think if it's something very personal, I wouldn't put it on it for a start. I'm always – would talk to somebody and meet – that's why we text and let's have a chat about something. I don't put any really personal stuff on. I would make sure I never did that.

Almost all participants believed it was inappropriate to post provocative content (such as religious or political views). Participants did not want to offend relatives but tried not to interact with contentious posts. Monica finds many more Facebook friends interact with her personal posts about her life than her environmental posts because they want to avoid conflict (if they disagree with her) or want to avoid being aligned with her views:

> I find personal stuff on my personal page – Tom's uni or whatever it gets a lot of attention and a lot of likes and a lot of comments, a lot of interaction. But I put anything on there that's a politically – or some issue-based post and people will either not interact at all or I know some who don't like it.

The positive social norm of Facebook is not a concern for some who simply enjoy the feel-good aspect of Facebook and believe private spaces are a more appropriate arena for negative emotional communication. Tiffany says:

> It's a bit of a good news thing. None of us are real big on those sort of posts where "Oh my god I've just had the worst day[…] So it is a bit of a – I suppose that's sort of a filtered look at life, social media. I probably don't share everything, but I think it is, for us it's a bit of a good news platform whereas we still would connect via a phone call or face-to-face if possible if there was a big issue.

The apparent conflict between happy and authentic is demonstrated by others like Angela who considers Facebook impressions of other people's overly perfect lives dishonest:

> I also find that I just have started to feel it's a bit of a fiction. I know from seeing a couple of posts from people I went to high school with, they're always posting pictures of their gorgeous children and then when something goes wrong, I'll – if I hear from them for something, they tell me about this disastrous story of their life and someone on drugs and all this is going on and I think I would never have know that

> from looking at your posts. Not in a million years. So they just have this front that they like to show to people and so then it makes me feel a little suspicious of it all.

Participants frequently used social media to assure relatives of their affection. For example, Angela sends her aunt regular photos as "a bit of a reminder that we're thinking about her, even if she's far away." Heather posts photos of her children on Facebook for their birthdays to show her love:

> Like, for Jake and Mac's birthday, I might put up a picture, a couple of pictures, a baby photo and a current photo and say happy birthday to them […] I guess for me the parent shows them that I'm proud of them or I'm acknowledging them or whatever, but it makes me feel good.

Some people reported being conscious about how Facebook might use their data for advertising or other purposes. Cynthia says she is "conscious about sharing my information and my data and security and things like that. So, I use it minimally to stay in touch with my family." However, most participants had minimal concerns about Facebook knowing their business and like Tiffany, were only concerned about phishing:

> It doesn't really worry me because I honestly think if someone wants to find out stuff about you, there's other ways. People can track into – people can hack into anything. I'm just pretty careful about what I click on and what I share.

Many participants described a reluctance to post personal information on their feed because their Facebook audience was "public" or "the world" and preferred to use Facebook Messenger for communication. This was despite having the ability to explicitly curate their audience using Facebook settings. Only two participants curated their audience by changing their post settings or removing unwanted Facebook friends. No participants reported having activated end-to-end encryption on Facebook Messenger. Baby boomer Patricia has concerns about Facebook as an overseer, "I don't probably talk a great deal about anything personal

because it can be picked up and used." Even those participants who posted infrequently, identified Facebook as a tool used for their relationship maintenance behaviours such as assuring interactions, communicating with mutual contacts, and sharing a family identity. All participants struggled to negotiate the fine balance between positivity and authenticity on the platform.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the psychosocial and transactional family practices Australian's engage with using social media and the modes they use to do so. Findings confirmed in-country families sometimes used social media similarly to that of transnational families (Abel et al., 2020): Facebook is for keeping in touch with the family diaspora; and patterned routines such as regular messages between group and individuals create ambient copresence. Unlike many transnational families who use audio-visual communication as part of everyday life, in-country family mostly limit use for communication with small children. Two themes were identified in the findings: (1) Individuals perceive time is scarce, so they work to maintain relationships efficiently; and (2) To share or not to share on Facebook, a twenty first century conundrum represents a tension which exists between Facebook's positivity norm and a desire to see open disclosure. These are discussed in the following section.

Despite having more leisure time than ever before (Robinson & Godbey, 1997) people choose to manage their tasks—including relationship maintenance—using tools that mitigate against a perceived scarcity of time. The results of this study confirm the Wajcman's (2008) position that communication using smartphones can increase individual's perceptions of control over their time. While mobile internet's portability could consume time due constant availability (Schrock, 2015), individuals creatively manage the time they spend communicating. They use asynchronous modes of communication for everyday

communication, and only invest in time-consuming modes (like audio) for closer relationships. That is, individuals feel they have more control over the time spent on relationship maintenance using social media because it can be delayed, scheduled, and performed from anywhere.

People control time by choosing modes that allow multitasking. For example, they will choose audio rather than audio-visual so they can complete a habitual background task such as driving. Alternately they engage in multiple simultaneous message threads—post in one chat, while waiting for someone else to compose a reply in another. It is generally accepted that when people multitask, the quality of cognitive attendance to both tasks is degraded (Baron, 2008). It is likely that social engagement is compromised by lack of attending to the conversation. However, Wang and Tchernev (2012) found multitasking can be emotionally gratifying for those who engage in the behaviour as can make them feel entertained or relaxed. Talking while driving can potentially meet both emotional and attachment needs. It makes the drive more entertaining and facilitates connection with family and friends. However, driving is not a low-grade cognitive task and declines in attention to this task while talking are reflected in legislative attempts to restrict multitasking in this environment (National Roads and Motorist's Association [NRMA], 2017). Simultaneously engaging in multiple text conversations was a behaviour only reported in the generation z cohort. Communication by text or social media is preferred form of communication for 51% of 13-17 year old adolescents so it is likely that simultaneous messaging with multiple contacts is a behaviour that is likely to persist (Rideout et al., 2010).

People are respectful of other's busy lives and accept delays to their communicative approaches: but there are limits to their patience. Participant's communication partners are expected to respond within a reasonable length of time (about 48 hours). The idea of being left on read is anathema to most people. A form of *ghosting* (when one person ceases all

communication with another without providing an explanation), this behaviour seems most common and problematic for younger adults who are developmentally in a stage of life where they are seeking intimate relationships (Tannen, 2017, Erikson, 1968). Silent generation participants are the most considerate cohort of the time demands on their relatives. This is despite close bonds with family being more important to this cohort due to their shrinking social networks and in the case of siblings, their shared childhood experiences (Dunn, 2014). This relaxed attitude could be attributed to their youthful experience of lengthy delays in communication and limited access to telecommunication technology. Generation x parents were notable for their benign surveillance of their children and anticipation of frequent contact. As found in previous research, an inexplicable break in that contact was often cause for concern (e.g., Barrie et al., 2019). Like their own parents, generation X parents also perceive their children to be more time poor than themselves and have consequently embraced the use of messaging rather than audio to minimise their impact on their children's time.

Back in the age of blogging, Emily Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2004) wrote:

> It's no wonder that distinctions between healthy candor and ''too much information'' are in flux and that so many find themselves helplessly confessing, as if a generation were given a massive technological truth serum.

This conflict between authentic self-disclosure and too much information has yet to be resolved. It was clear that tension arises from an expectation that users display their authentic selves on Facebook, but only within the bounds of a positivity norm (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). The results of this study supports previous research which identified positive toned posts receive more reactions from online friends, and negative content on Facebook is perceived as less appropriate (Bazarova, 2012). In a semi-public bounded space like Facebook, the audience comprises individuals from different aspects of a user's life such as

friends, family, acquaintances, and colleagues. Conflicting role expectations from such a heterogeneous audience meant users modified their self-expression to suit social communication norms. While it seems that most people consider Facebook as a semi-public space, their motivations for use do seem to differ by stage of life. While the millennials and generation x in this study no longer use Facebook to share content about their everyday lives but instead post information only about special events, the baby boomers and silent generation users are trying to use the platform to passively stay in touch with their younger descendants' lives. In contrast, generation z use the platform to assure older relatives of their affection by liking their posts and also find value in Facebook as a directory for new acquaintances to build their bridging social capital (Vitak & Steinfield, 2011). The finding that private spaces such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups were preferred for authentic negative personal disclosures aligns with the findings of Waterloo et al (2018) that such expressions are more welcomed by a singular and known audience, or an unknown audience with a common interest.

There are potential uses of this study for community and aged care health workers. Given the value placed on time, it is significant that adults are willing to invest in spending exclusive time over audio-visual with their small child relations. This activity can be perceived firstly as an intergenerational act of support for the child's parent—because the child's attention can be captured so the parent can do something else. Secondly, it allows the distant adult to establish their relationship with the child through virtual copresence. Time invested when the child is small seems to be rewarded as they grow because the child understands the kinship bond and remains familiar with that adult's face and voice. Finally, Facebook offers a tool for the broader family diaspora to retain connectedness and a group identity through the sharing of family celebrations (such as birthdays and anniversaries), and ongoing assuring behaviour (reacting to and commenting on relative's posts).

Limitations and Future Research

The wide-ranging age of our participants allowed us to explore in-depth experiences and attitudes towards social media across the lifespan. This study should not be read as a comprehensive account of Australian families. While the sample comprises predominately women, with only two male voices, this is perhaps appropriate to the population as the role of maintaining kin relationships using mediated communication is usually a female role (Rosenthal, 1985). While the experiences this group of participants has shared will not reflect all practices of Australians from other cultural backgrounds it is reassuring that the findings are supported by research grounded in other cultures and contexts (e.g., Abel et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This case study offers an insight into influence of time scarcity on the way that Australians use social media to connect with family. It reinforces that need to belong, rather than need for support, motivates multiple generations to maintain contact. The study found that older adults, rather than being isolated due to issues of digital literacy or access, are included in their family's communication practices. They are motivated to learn and use new technologies, and their family members value them by providing technical support when they need it. Time invested by adults in audio-visual calls with small children seemed to result in more comfortable and familiar interactions when the child was older. Finally, the ongoing tension between communicative positivity bias and honest negative disclosure means individuals are somewhat conflicted about the role of Facebook as a relationship maintenance tool. They retain it for its facility as a shared diary of important family events, records of rituals and nostalgic images, and to lightly touch the lives of their family diaspora.

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CHAPTER 5 - "IT'S PROBABLY THE MAIN WAY WE KEEP IN TOUCH": SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CONNECTION LIFELINE THROUGH COVID-19 AND BEYOND

The third study aimed to clarify the impact of COVID-19 measures on social media practices and capture some of the nuances of practice that may otherwise be missed. Specifically, this qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to answer the second and third research questions: "What types of maintenance behaviours are enacted on social media?"; and How do Australian residents find the experience of using social media meets their belongingness needs?"

In March 2020, the Australian government forbade residents from travelling overseas, asked people to stay at home, and enacted social distancing measures such as limiting the number of participants at gatherings (Morrison, 2020). The ban on international travel has had a significant impact on Australian residents' ability to see overseas family and friends. Approximately 36% of Australian residents (both permanent and temporary) are overseas-born, and 3% of Australians usually live overseas (Banfield, 2012; Phillips & Simon-Davies, 2017; Sherrell, 2019). Globally, Australians move more frequently for within-country relocations, often for education or employment, and this can result in geographical distance between families (Bernard et al., 2017; Clark, 2011). Lockdowns have affected families, including the 1.2 million Australian children who live apart from one of their parents (Department of Human Services, 2019). It is probable that lockdowns and border closures mean many parents and children were forced to use mediated communication to enact online family practices. Friendships usually conducted face-to-face have also occurred online during this period. After interviews were completed for the second study, several participants who indicated in their feedback that COVID-19 had significantly impacted their social media practices with family and friends were reinterviewed to explore their current practices. The

1 follow-up interviews were conducted after participants had been released from lockdown, and
2 all three chose to be interviewed face-to-face. This study is currently in preparation for
3 submission to the "*Australian Journal of Psychology*." *Australian Journal of Psychology* is a
4 Taylor and Francis journal and has an impact factor of 2.316 (2020). See Appendix C for all
5 supplementary material related to this study, including interview questions. The study is
6 unaltered from the submitted version and is thus presented according to the style requested by
7 the journal.

8 This case study adds to the published literature by offering a unique insight into
9 family practices during COVID-19 lockdowns. Despite vaccine rollouts, there is no imminent
10 expected end to rolling stay-at-home measures imposed by governments globally, so there
11 will be continued interest in exploring ways individuals can find social support and maintain
12 their relationships at a distance. Further, this paper provides an insight into the value of
13 sharing interests online to experiences of belongingness.
14

"It's probably the main way we keep in touch": Social media as a connection lifeline through COVID-19 and beyond

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Abstract

"Stay-at-home" measures instigated to contain the spread of COVID-19 have disrupted face-to-face interactions with friends and family. Using qualitative case study methodology, three Australian's social media practices were examined before and during stay-at-home measures. This study adopts a critical realist perspective to gain insight into elements influencing engagement with social media practices and online relationship maintenance. Longitudinal data from in-depth interviews using photo-elicitation was thematically analysed to identify three themes: (a) Indefinite separation motivates a pivot to audio-visual; (b) Messaging reduces friction on relationship maintenance; and (c) Shared interests are the key to sustainable interaction. Findings show lockdown-enforced distance disrupted regular communication modes and promoted a desire for the relative richness of audio-visual communication. Secondly, shared interests are fundamental to sustainable online communication, which can foster closer bonds. To conclude, interventions which highlight the value of vicarious interests for social media interaction may promote stronger intergenerational relationships.

Keywords: case study; copresence; COVID-19; Facebook; group messaging; family relationships; shared interest; social media; WhatsApp

"It's probably the main way we keep in touch": Social media as a connection lifeline through COVID-19 and beyond

Introduction

Since 2020, many people unexpectedly found themselves physically isolated due to measures undertaken by governments to control the spread of COVID-19 such as country border restrictions, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing (World Health Organization, 2020). Research exploring psychological outcomes through COVID-19 stay-at-home measures suggests people felt lonelier, but their perceived social support increased (Luchetti et al., 2020; Tull et al., 2020). One way loneliness was mitigated was in retaining close contact with loved ones (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Mediated communication has been used as a coping strategy for loneliness (Koh & Liew, 2020) with people spending more time on social media sites due to lockdowns (Ruggieri et al., 2021) which also helps in maintaining their social connections. (Koh & Liew, 2020).

COVID-19 measures have necessitated ongoing quarantine and rolling periods of lockdown in countries around the world. Research has shown that during stay-at-home measures, incidences of mental health distress increased therefore, people require tools to manage their social isolation (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2020). During the pandemic people were more likely to provide social support (such as grocery shopping) to those in their close networks (Politi et al., 2021). Attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and the need to belong (Baumeister &Leary, 1995) provide frameworks for understanding these close ties and the reasons that people are compelled to offer such support. Both theories suggest the need to establish and maintain emotional bonds with others is a fundamental human drive. Family and close friends have long been sources of online social support (Lam, 2013). The key impacts of indefinite stay-at-home measures on close relationship interactions are twofold: people's primary form of contact must shift towards mediated communication and secondly, the prospects for face-to-face

interaction with close contacts are indeterminately delayed.

While being unable to visit friends or family may be an extraordinary situation for people who live in the same country, for transnational families it is a familiar situation. There is a body of scholarship examining transnational families' use of mediated communication to stay connected when they live apart (see Madianou & Miller, 2011; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Wilding, 2012). However, less is known about how in-country families connect. A systematic literature review by Abel et al. (2020) identified there were few studies investigating how Australians use social media to maintain their in-country family and friend relationships.

Social media platforms can facilitate human connection through the different types of activities over modes such as chat (messages), collapsed context (e.g., Facebook), audio, and audio-visual (Jansson, 2016; Machin, 2018). Research demonstrates individuals are motivated to use social media to satisfy their belongingness needs, and social media provides a rich communication medium to supplement face-to-face interaction (see Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011; Lenhart et al., 2010). Oh et al. (2014) found supportive social media interactions are related to increased intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and well-being. Indeed, most Australians now use some form of social media (71%), with 83% of users reporting social connection is their primary motivation for use (Kemp, 2020; Yellow, 2020). The normalisation of online social practices such as messaging, implies frequent and meaningful connections over social media are possible (Marlowe et al., 2017). In times of need, online social support can enhance closeness and aids in improving mental health outcomes (see Vitak et al., 2011; Yang, 2018). For people who are isolated – both physically and emotionally, social media can bring an enhanced sense of belonging through enhancing feelings of proximity. Extended periods of lockdown during COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to examine the role of social media in Australians' practices of family and friends.

It has been well established that some practices such as engaging with shared interests

online can satisfy belongingness needs (Bergin, 2016). Online communities such as Facebook groups are built around connecting people with common interests (Kapoor et al., 2018). Marshall and Bly (2004) found people shared online content with others to build social capital—thus, demonstrating their shared interests and building rapport. This type of sharing may be done in a phatic manner, where the content is of peripheral importance, and the act of sharing indicates the sender was thinking about the recipient (Marshall & Bly, 2004). Sharing content can play a role in creating, strengthening, or renewing the social bonds between giver and receiver (Bergin, 2016). Sometimes another's interest is adopted solely as a form of social support (vicarious interest). For example, a parent might respond to their child's interest in drama by displaying interest in upcoming theatre events (Bergin, 1999).

Open disclosure is an important and valued element in intimate relationships (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004). The messaging mode of social media is considered a socially appropriate place to disclose positive and negative authentic emotions (Waterloo et al., 2018). Research into family group chats has demonstrated messaging others is an important tool for kinkeeping, social support, and establishing co-presence for members of all age groups (see Braithwaite et al., 2017; Kamal et al., 2016; Matassi et al., 2019). Families who cohabit do use chat but it is more valued by members who live apart (Aharony & Gazit, 2016). There is anecdotal evidence suggesting group chat is gaining popularity in within-country Australian families (Donoughue, 2019).

Audio-visual calls can also reduce feelings of distance between close ties by facilitating real-time conversations with live images of the participants (Longhurst, 2013). This mode is valued by transnational families (who rarely had face-to-face interaction) for everyday communication (e.g., Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). In contrast, the review by Abel et al. (2020) found in-country families rarely used audio-visual other than for grandparent and young grandchild communication and sharing life-events. However audio-visual use has increased

markedly since COVID-19 emerged with platforms such as Facebook, Zoom, and Microsoft recording almost 784 million account holders participating in daily audio-visual calls (Facebook, 2020; Protalinski, 2020). Motivations for and barriers to use this rich mode of communication in the Australian context are unknown. COVID-19 measures resulted in the abrupt cessation of face-to-face communication; therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of these measures on Australian social media practices for connecting with family and friends.

Method

Research Design Overview

A qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013) was undertaken using semi structured interviews. Ethics approval was granted by the host university before any research took place. Case study methodology is ideal for capturing the meaning participants assign to their experiences and to explore how this can provide insight to better understand specific phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) The researchers also shared the experience of being separated from loved ones during stay-at-home measures thus, enriching this study as it provided a better understanding of the need to maintain bonds without face-to-face communication thus facilitating a shared perspective and knowledge of social media methods. This shared perspective facilitated a sensitive research approach.

This study is part of a larger project investigating social media-based family communication practices. Participants responded to an advertisement which was placed on the researchers' Facebook newsfeeds and the host university's student survey site. Following the first round of interviews, three participants who provided feedback that COVID-19 stay-at-home measures had significantly impacted their social media practices were invited to participate in a second set of interviews to allow for an in-depth case study examination of their experiences. Re-interviewing participants during stay-at-home measures meant researchers were able to capture some of the nuances that would otherwise be missed. The three participants demographic

information is outlined in Table 1. There is evidence suggesting gender plays a role in online kinkeeping (Kamal et al., 2016), so this groups experiences as women maintaining their relationships are highly relevant. Pseudonyms were used to de-identify the participants and their families. Data was gathered between March and May 2020.

Table 1

Demographics of Three Participants

	Ashlee*	Rachel	Liz
Work status	Employed	Student	Retired schoolteacher
Identified gender	Female	Female	Female
Age	40	49	76
Marital Status	Single	Single	Widowed
Education	Diploma	Diploma	Teacher's certificate
Children living at home	0	2	0
Children	1	2	4
Cultural identity	Australian	Australian / Māori	Australian
Living situation	With housemate	With parents, brother and nephew	Alone

Note *All names are pseudonyms

Data Collection

Two separate interviews were conducted with each participant: the first interview was conducted pre-COVID lockdowns, with the second interview conducted between seven to 11 weeks after the first interview but during COVID lockdowns. In the first interview participants were asked questions focusing on (a) their use of social media to connect with their families and friends; (b) whether their online practices had changed over time; and (c) if they had any social media-based family rituals. The follow-up interview focused on any changes that had occurred.

Participants were specifically asked whether the quality of their relationships had been affected by the exclusive use of mediated communication during lockdown. The six interviews lasted between 24 to 70 minutes, with an average duration of 32 minutes. This research used photographs as interview stimuli, a method known as photo elicitation (Emmison & Smith, 2007). Participants were asked to provide a selection of images they had previously shared on social media platforms with their family or friends (e.g., they had posted it on Facebook or shared it in a family group chat). In total 27 photos were provided. Informed by Kindberg et al. (2005), we explored participants motivations for capturing and sharing the images. Questions asked included (a) What does this image represent to you and why have you chosen to talk about it today? (b) What was your intent in sharing this image in your social media, and what response did you receive when you did so?

Data Analysis Strategy

This qualitative case study thematically analysed the data (Cedervall & Åberg, 2010). A critical realist framework was used to locate and make sense of participant's perceptions of their experiences of social-media communication with close contacts (see Willig, 2001). Critical realism remains focused on the "reality" of the material yet acknowledges the ways people make sense of their experiences, and that social contexts in turn influence their meaning making (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Firstly, the audio recordings were transcribed, then the lead researcher familiarised herself with the data by listening to and re-reading the interviews prior to coding descriptive elements of the data. The same process was followed for both interviews. Codes included motivations which drove different types of behaviour, perceived impact of COVID-19 on participant's practices, and desirability of rich (or less rich) communication modes for different purposes. Themes were developed by the lead researcher in collaboration with the other two authors to best answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The analysis is first presented on a descriptive level reflecting each informant's unique communication practices

with social media before and during lockdown. Secondly themes identified across both datasets are then provided representing key patterns of important issues and meanings.

Participants

Participant 1: Liz

Liz has been widowed 12 years and lives alone in regional NSW. She and her husband James had four children, all of whom are now adults living in Sydney. At the first interview, Liz reported little interest in social media, a reluctance to use messaging applications due to data privacy ("I have this feeling that Messenger's out there in the open a bit") and expressed a preference for telephone calls with her children. Prior to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, Liz engaged predominately in face-to-face social interaction with her local close social contacts. Liz also expressed an aversion to audio-visual communication. She had unsuccessfully tried to use Skype when her youngest son's family was living in London. Unfortunately, her grandchildren did not enjoy it, nor participate because "It was boring to them to sit there and look at a screen and talk to somebody."

Liz created a Facebook account about five years ago but only posted when she felt her current activity might be "interesting" to others. While her contributions were restricted to travel photos, she enjoyed following her grandchildren's newsfeeds. Liz was not confident to negotiate social media technology and believed people "disappeared" from her newsfeed. Her self-ascribed lack of digital literacy was of no true concern to Liz and she said, "I don't need a lot of social media, but it's very handy." Technical support from one of her sons helps her to use technology as she needs it (such as installing Zoom).

The most striking result to emerge in the second interview was Liz's transformation into an active social media user during stay-at-home measures, and her participation in several innovative friendship rituals to combat social isolation. For example, Liz and a friend learned to play bridge online and competed twice weekly against local and international competitors. Not

only did she turn to online bridge, but she then judged this activity interesting enough to share on Facebook. Despite her active social interaction online, a challenge faced during stay-at-home measures was the lack of physical contact. Liz said: “It’s a sad thing when you’re on your own. You don’t get anybody’s hug. A hug or have - just no personal contact with people.”

The loneliness imposed by physical isolation meant Liz’ need for social contact outweighed her privacy concerns about social media. Liz began to use social media in a number of ways: often participating in a group chat with friends, posting on Facebook, using Zoom to see and talk with her family, and joining an online social version of her regular card game.

Participant 2: Ashlee

Ashlee, in contrast to Liz, was already an avid social media user with family before lockdown. Ashlee lives in regional NSW and her two brothers and her daughter Jordan live in other towns across the state. Ashlee’s parents have spent the past few years travelling Australia in their motorhome. Due to state border closures, they were unable to return to their hometown and did not know when this situation would change.

Ashlee’s social media use was skewed towards private spaces. She frequently used Facebook Messenger to communicate with Jordan. Ashlee engages with her gym’s private Facebook group to give and receive social support, and in her family Facebook Messenger group chats. Ashlee’s does not think that overly personal information should not be shared on Facebook: “You don’t want to put stuff up that shows I’m having a bad day because then it’s like everyone’s pitying me.” On the other hand, she is frustrated by friends who deliberately obscure difficult experiences and says, “One of my friends in particular, she’s had a lot of troubles with her kids. But as far as Facebook goes, she has a perfect family, and everything is happy.”

Ashlee does not believe the collapsed context platforms of Facebook or Instagram are suitable for communication with close contacts. She wants emotional authenticity in her

interactions and struggles to find the right tone for her posts between Facebook's positive social norm and authentic open disclosure: "It's a really fine line, so I just – I generally don't use it." Ashlee is passive in these contexts, for example she follows Jordan's Instagram feed but does not comment. Jordan's posts would elicit a reaction to the post from Ashlee which in turn might lead to direct messaging between them.

Participant 3: Rachel

Rachel maintains multiple group chats with her co-resident children and parents, and her distant relatives. Rachel shares a home in Brisbane with her two teenaged children, her parents, her brother, and his son. Her ex-partner Adam lives in the Philippines. Rachel and Adam use a WhatsApp family group chat to co-parent: "every other day, very regularly" as Adam has not been able to return to Australia since lockdowns measures began.

It is vitally important to Rachel that Adam maintains a connection with the children. To this end she often sends him photos of the children so he can see them growing and changing, or to make sure he knows about specific life events: "Jacob's first day of school - I'll take a photo and send it and say, 'He's so big now! Hasn't he just shot up!'" Rachel acts as a kinkeeper by encouraging her children to communicate with their father. Fulfilling this role for her children and their father requires an effort to virtually share their daily life and encourage the children to engage with the family group chat. For example, for Adam's birthday she said to the children "I want to…make sure that you make a fuss." Despite her encouragement, Rachel and Adam are the most active participants in the group chat and the children observe, but rarely comment. Overall, WhatsApp is a cornerstone of Rachel's daily communication with family and friends. She uses all modes frequently for social contact and co-parenting with her ex-partner.

Like Ashlee, Rachel also avoids personal disclosures on Facebook. Rachel does not like the collapsed context: "I've got no control whatsoever about who's seeing what, and who's reposting what." Through her business contacts, she accepted many friend requests from people

whom she would consider acquaintances, not friends. Rachel does not want to risk offending these people by unfriending them, so she planned to announce she had been hacked as an excuse to delete her account and then create a new user account with people she considered friends rather than acquaintances.

Findings

Several themes were identified across the participants' data (see Table 2), including (a) A pivot to a novel mode—audio-visual—requires disruption and indefinite separation: (b) Indefinite separation motivates a pivot to audio-visual, and (c) Shared interests are the key to sustainable interactions.

Table 2

Description and Examples of Themes

Themes	Description	Example quotes
Indefinite separation motivates a pivot to audio-visual	Grandparent/grandchild audio-visual communication occurs it is often chaotic. When it is a novel mode of communication, the push to try it requires a major disruption to regular communication habits and indefinite separation.	But the kids just get so excited, and they want to talk, and you can't hear what they're saying because [brother]'s kids are talking, and then my other brother's kids are talking. So everyone's going 'Nanny! Nanny! Poppy! (Ashlee)' Then over Easter, because we didn't get together for Easter, we actually did a Zoom meeting on Good Friday in the afternoon. (Liz)
Messaging reduces friction on relationship maintenance	Messaging is a valued family practice that facilitates family rituals, ambient copresence, parenting roles, and family identity. Messaging complements audio communication and is not preferred for intimate disclosure	It’s probably the main way we keep in touch and see the kids grow up. We don’t really talk on the phone all that often. Only if we – it’s only if we really need something, or it’s not sort of just to catch up if that makes sense. (Liz) She rings – like if she’s got a problem, she rings. I mean, she rang the other day and she’s like 'All right, I’ve got 15 minutes can I talk to you? I need to talk to you about this, this and this.' So she’s like ‘dah-de-dah’ and I’m like 'OK, so you feel better?' And she goes 'Yeah, thanks. Bye! Love you!'(Ashlee)
Shared interests are the key to sustainable interaction	Developing vicarious interests can ease communication in strained relationships and with adolescents. Repeated social interaction around shared interests can strengthen close ties	Sadie can then tell Nanny and Poppy about what she did at school, and her mother will put up pictures of first day at school and artwork and stuff like that that she’s brought home. But then mum can actually have a conversation with her. (Ashlee) The common thing is the kids, yes and worrying about where Mum and Dad are and how they are and if everything's okay with them. (Ashlee)

Indefinite Separation Motivates a Pivot to Audio-Visual

Australians generally have limited use for audio-visual communication: for grandparent/ grandchild communication at a distance, and when relatives are holidaying or resident overseas (e.g., Sinanan & Hjorth, 2018). Ashlee's parents fell into the former category and cherished their regular Facebook Messenger audio-visual talks with their grandchildren. Ashlee's mother only agreed to leave her hometown when her sons promised she could maintain contact with her young (under 12 years old) grandchildren: "They said 'Mum, it'll be fine, we can video chat, there are ways that we can still keep you connected.'"

In contrast, Liz' family had established face-to-face family rituals (comprising regular visits between households). While Liz had limited experience using Skype to talk to her grandchildren when they lived overseas, prior to lockdown she had never used it with her in-country grandchildren because "I go down and see them regularly, I don't find the need." Lockdown was a major disruptor to family rituals and when her family could not visit her over Easter, they used Zoom to celebrate the ritual online. There had been previous occasions when the family did not visit Liz, but they had never used audio-visual communication before. Her loneliness during stay-at-home measures was one of the reasons she was motivated to try the technology again. It is possible that another driving force to celebrate the ritual online was possibilities for face-to-face interaction were indefinitely postponed. Certainly Rachel, with no imminent prospects of seeing Adam, often used audio-visual rather than audio to talk with him because: "Sometimes I just want to see what he looks like."

When Liz and her friends' regular Friday afternoon social gatherings were halted indefinitely, they had "Zoom parties". While the disruption and isolation has nudged Liz towards audio-visual, it seems unlikely that the shift will be a permanent change of habit as she does not truly enjoy this mode, and learning to turn-take has been challenging:

> It was a bit awkward at the beginning because one of the girls kept talking and then somebody else would try to say something, and we didn't know what to do. So we'd go, "Who wants to speak?" So, we'd wave our hand and speak. It's quite fun, we have a drink at five o'clock and we do it for half an hour. An hour is sort of too much.

In contrast to Liz, Ashlee's family had previous successful experience with audio-visual contact including grandparents and grandchildren. They even increased the frequency of their calls during their separation during lockdown. However, they also experienced challenges with conversational turn-taking. Sessions can be chaotic due to the grandchildren's emerging social communication skills. When all participants' microphones are active, Zoom switches to the input triggered by noise which results in frequent focus changes making conversation difficult. The main barrier to easy communication using this mode in Ashlee's case is the young children's emerging skills with turn taking and social communication.

Messaging reduces friction on relationship maintenance

Before COVID-19 Liz did not message using social media due to privacy concer's: "I'd just rather send somebody a text message than use Messenger. I have this feeling that Messenger's out there in the open a bit." However, lockdown disrupted Liz' regular cues for social interaction. Where a friend's birthday would normally have signalled a celebration in a café, this became impossible. Physical isolation at home was the impetus required for her to get technical help from her son to start a Facebook Messenger group chat with her friends. During lockdown a friend's' birthday prompted a virtual celebration with each member of Liz' group chat sharing an image of their glass of wine paired with a piece of cake.

Ashlee and Rachel were already long-term family group chat users. Their motivations included creating ambient copresence by sharing messages and photos of everyday life, fulfilling parenting roles, and for their families' identity. When Ashlee's parents began

1 travelling about three years ago, it prompted the family to engage in regular group chat
2 messages.

3 Well, we use it all the time. I would say probably every second day, because mum and
4 dad are travelling around Australia in a caravan, so that's how they keep in touch with
5 the grandkids basically.

6 The family share audio-visual messages from the children, videos, images and
7 messages. Photos of members' daily lives are a vital element of the chat, with more than 700
8 shared images in the thread. The grandparents share photos to stay connected with family,
9 and so the grandchildren remember what they look like. Ashlee says:

10 I think Mum sends a lot of stuff because she's so worried that the kids won't know
11 who she is. So yeah, it's her way of keeping – and they put stuff in there of where
12 they've been and what they've seen and what fish Dad's caught, or you know.

13 Ashlee thought her mother liked to share old photos of herself with the grandchildren
14 to express her identity as a loving grandmother. Images shared with Ashlee's parents become
15 a valued nostalgic record of events and how the children are growing. The grandparents
16 regularly printed updated images of each grandchild to place in a frame that sits on the wall
17 of their motorhome. This act was perceived by the child's parents as an expression of care for
18 their children. Ashlee perceived her mother shared an image of the collage on Facebook to
19 demonstrate her care for the grandchildren, but this action had an unexpected outcome. The
20 collage image led to a lively family group discussion about whether the largest printed photo
21 indicated the subject was the favourite grandchild. Ashlee commented about the incident:

22 Yes, so we have to send her regular photos, updates. I think it was my sister-in-law
23 that commented about 'Looks like you're not the favourite anymore, Jordan'. Mum's
24 like "No, that's not what I meant!" She's like, "It was just the orientation of the
25 photo!" and Jordan's like "Yeah, yeah, sure Nanny, sure."

Sharing pictures in the group chat was a way of subtly creating a new family narrative. For example, Ashlee shared a cute image in the group chat of her nephew wearing an arm cast to gently remind her brother that he is also fallible as a parent (because the boy had an accident and broke his arm when Ashlee's brother was responsible for his safety). This was in retaliation for an oft repeated family story about an accident Jordan had years earlier while in Ashlee's care.

Rachel uses images to develop a narrative about her family and to include her ex-husband in the children's daily lives:

> Well, I think it's important that even though we're not together, we still have some link to each other as to what we're doing. Even though Adam's not here on Sunday, I still wanted him to see that even though he's not here, we went out as a family, the three of us, to the park. It was a beautiful day because I took a photo.

Images can be used to negotiate family roles. Rachel demonstrates the family care for Adam by sharing in the group chat images of supplies they had sent him. At times Rachel will chooses an image to elicit a parenting response from Adam. For example, she shared a photo of their sullen-looking children on an outing so Adam would contact them to coax them into being more cheerful: "I was getting frustrated and then I tagged it over to Adam, you deal with them then!"

Messaging is considered a family practice that does not replace, but rather complements other modes of communication. Prior to stay-at-home measures (when they had conflicting work schedules), Ashlee and Jordan's daily practice was to message rather than audio call because they could send and reply at a time which suited them. When Jordan first moved out of home Ashlee spent many hours providing parenting advice. For example, Jordan would send her a photo to ask "Do you reckon this still looks all right? Do you reckon this food's okay? Is my chicken off?"

1 Once established, messaging seems can stick as a regular communication habit. Even
2 though Jordan was at home during lockdown, their habit of light-hearted messaging
3 continued, and Ashlee noted she continued to receive messages from Jordan such as “Mum,
4 what’s for dinner?” Ashlee preferred to discuss important matters with Jordan using audio as
5 text-based communication sometimes led to misunderstandings. She noted:

6 Because she sort of starts to text something and I’ll come back with an answer and she
7 says “No, you don’t understand”. I said “Well ring me!” Because you lose the ability
8 to actually emphasise different things like that – yeah, it can lose – it can get lost in
9 translation in text

10 **Shared interests are key to sustainable interactions**

11 Shared interests are one of the keys to maintaining ongoing friendships and
12 communication online (Wellman, 2002). All three contributors shared multiple expressions of
13 shared and vicarious interests to sustain their interactions with close contacts. For example,
14 Liz and her friends share an interest in competitive games such as bridge and mah-jong. The
15 shared interest gave them something to discuss online. Repeated social interaction with this
16 interest also facilitated close friendship bonds which during lockdown, were maintained by
17 Liz using Zoom parties and group chat. Ashlee’s family and extended family maintain a
18 tipping competition group chat (pick the weekly winning rugby league team). Ashlee says
19 this competition “gets a fair bit of conversation.” Even though she rarely posts, Rachel checks
20 her Facebook newsfeed regularly and shares mutual interest content with her brother via
21 message. She says that occasionally when they are talking face-to-face:

22 If one of us expresses an interest, I’ll say, or he’ll say, “Yeah, I’m going to find that
23 link and send it to you again” just to finish that conversation. He just sent me a link
24 today about what he thought was an injustice about something or other. We'll do that
25 all the time.

Vicarious shared interests can ease communication in strained or distant relationships. Liz’s youngest son contacts her less frequently than her other children, and she attempted to engage his interest by sharing images on Facebook of his favourite surf beach. Despite active family group interactions, Ashlee had few shared interests with her brothers. Her relationship with them was somewhat strained due to a past incident. However, Ashlee adores her nieces and nephews, and determined to be part of their lives by babysitting. Her brothers’ primary focus is their children, so Ashlee often shared images of the children to the family group chat, and actively responded to her brothers’ posts about their children. By developing a vicarious interest in her brothers’ interests (i.e., their children) and performing face-to-face supportive actions (she recently helped one brother move to a new house), Ashlee believes she had begun to rebuild her sibling relationships: “I think we've built back up again, but the kids have always been the focus. That's always been what we can talk about.”

Shared interests are not only helpful for managing communication in strained relationships, but also engaging teenagers and family identity development. Usually, the only messaging between Rachel and her children was of an instrumental nature for example “Can you come pick me up early?” The children are participants in the group chat and see their parent’s posts but rarely respond.

> I know that they've seen it, because I mention it to them later and they say, “Yeah, I saw that.” I can see that they're smiling about it, so it's just that - I don't know whether it's just a teenager thing.

During stay-at-home measures, Rachel’s daughter created a new group chat focussed on a puppy gifted to them by Rachel’s ex-sister-in-law. The new group chat included Rachel, her daughter and mother, her brother’s ex-partner and their children. Rachel participated in this puppy-devoted thread for several reasons. Firstly, it eased communication with her brother’s ex-partner by drawing her into their family-group. Secondly, it provides the group

with a common interest to encourage participation from the teenaged children. Finally, it demonstrates to Rachel's nephew (who is co-resident with Rachel's family while his mother lives at a distance): "I like it because it shows my nephew as well that his mum is part of our lives." Rachel's daughter is far more active in this group than her own family group chat, probably because she is keenly interested in her puppy:

> She actually engages. She'll add the photos and do all of that in a way that she's not contributing to family group chat…because it's about the dog. She knows that her father is not interested in the dog whereas we're very interested in the dog.

These descriptions by participants of developing vicarious interests suggest vicarious interests can be successfully used as tools in achieving goals such as identity development and strengthened family bonds.

Discussion

The objective of the study was to present an overview of how COVID-19 stay-at-home measures affected participants' social media practices with family and friends. In accordance with previous research, the findings showed audio-visual was valued for grandparent/grandchild relationship maintenance (e.g., Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016; Nedelcu, 2017). Motivations to use audio-visual in this context were also similar and included grandparents seeing the children grow and change, and for the grandchildren to remember their grandparent's features. Audio-visual was not a regular communication mode for these families and while the disruption caused by COVID-19 measures prompted uptake, there were barriers to continued use of this technology. Finding ways to keep small children engaged was one issue. The other was audio difficulties caused by noisy participants or their struggles with turn-taking. A lack of complaints about audio issues in the transnational communication literature suggests that negotiating turn taking in audio-visual calls is a skill developed with practice (Abel et al., 2020). Perhaps transnational families who report using

1 audio-visual constantly (e.g., Neustaedter et al., 2015) have repeated the task so many times
2 the experience just seems easier (Wood, 2019). Possibly technology has not entirely caught
3 up with users' needs, and until this issue with audio is resolved, audio-visual will remain a
4 preferred method of communication only when face-to-face opportunities are limited.
5 Private channels of communication in the form of group chats and Facebook groups
6 for are preferred for communication with family and friends. This finding is consistent with
7 Karapanos et al. (2016) which suggests private channels facilitate opportunities for intimate
8 communication, along with a heightened sense of presence. Open disclosure of emotional
9 information is a key online communication practice for long-distance relationship
10 maintenance (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Waterloo et al., 2018). One participant's initial
11 distrust of messaging applications and a preference for SMS appeared to support previous
12 findings that the latter is perceived to be more reliable and private (Church & De Oliveira,
13 2013). However, her subsequent enthusiastic engagement with group chats supports the
14 findings of Matassi et al. (2019) that late adults (60 years and older) are using messaging
15 applications to connect with their age peers.
16 In accordance with Bergin's (2016) work, this paper shows engaging with shared
17 interests online served belongingness needs. The findings of this study were consistent with
18 previous work showing people acquire interests and goals from others to whom they feel
19 socially connected (Walton et al., 2012). For example, Rachel's interest in her daughter's and
20 ex-sister-in-law's interest in their dogs created common ground. In a group chat context, it
21 fostered the bond between her ex-sister-in-law and the extended family. Findings also
22 supported research which show vicarious interests can lead to social support and strengthened
23 family bonds (Bergin, 2016). For example, Ashlee's active expressions of interest both on
24 and offline provided conversation opportunities and showed care for her brothers' families.
25 In trying to gain an understanding of the impact of these online practices on close

1 relationships, one finding is significant. Patterns in the data demonstrated that distance—
2 whether geographical, temporal or emotional—increases the importance of online
3 communication. Ashlee's group chat with her family was foundational to their family
4 practice due to her parents' geographical distance and the strained relationship with her
5 brothers. For transnational families like Rachel's the family group chat can be vital to keep
6 the absent member in her children's daily life. (Acedera & Yeoh, 2018). Liz never used social
7 media with her friends until she could not see them in person—isolation prompted group chat
8 to become a daily feature of their communication. This result aligns with the transnational
9 literature where extended absence from close contacts increases the importance of mediated
10 communication (e.g., Francisco, 2015).

11 Finally, three factors seem to determine engagement with these practices: thoughts
12 around public vs private disclosures; life stage of participants; and shared interests. In
13 accordance with our 3 informants' reluctance to disclose personal information on Facebook,
14 Bazarova (2012) found intimate public disclosures were less acceptable than confidential
15 intimate disclosures. The unwillingness of adolescents in this study to engage in family group
16 chats is in agreement Aharony and Gazit's (2016) finding that importance of the family group
17 chat to adolescents is lowered when parents are more active in the chat. This adolescent
18 behaviour aligns with the idea that adolescence can be a time when parent-child closeness
19 declines as children strive to establish personal identity and autonomy (Erikson, 1968).

20 **Limitations and future research**

21 The aim of this study was to provide a rich description of the experiences of three
22 Australians who used social media before and during stay-at-home measures. All contributors
23 were digitally literate, had access to mobile broadband, and social media so it is possible that
24 people from other socioeconomic backgrounds may have different experiences due to limited
25 accessibility. Although generalisability of the findings was not an aim, the results

1 corroborated some findings of previous research into social media relationship maintenance
2 such as the perceived etiquette for private and public disclosures and preference of audio-
3 visual for the grandparent/young grandchild connection (see Bazarova, 2012; Nedelcu, 2017).
4 As humans domesticate social media technology to play an ever-increasing role in everyday
5 social life, the affordance of vicarious and shared interests to online social support warrants
6 further research interest.

7 **Conclusion**

8 This case study shared three Australians' experiences of social media before and
9 during COVID-19 stay-at-home measures. It provided insights into the practices they found
10 enjoyable and meaningful to maintain their family and friend relationships. This case study
11 offers a unique insight into family practices during COVID-19 lockdowns. There is no
12 imminent expected end to rolling stay-at-home measures by governments globally, so there
13 will be continued interest in exploring ways individuals can find social support and maintain
14 their relationships at a distance. For people who live alone and are vulnerable to loneliness
15 without opportunities for face-to-face contact, social media can present a lifeline of social
16 support. Finally, the functional approach of this paper contributes to research by presenting
17 an intriguing insight into the value of shared interests to belongingness online.
18

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16 **CHAPTER 6 - GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

17 Many people in countries such as Australia have woven social media technology into
18 their everyday lives. It may be difficult to imagine (or remember) life before Facebook; when
19 returning holidaymakers printed copies of their photographs, and Mum shared the family
20 news during Sunday afternoon telephone calls. Although social media has been in existence
21 for almost a quarter of a century, discussions in scientific literature and popular media
22 continue to posit it as new technology and compare it with "traditional" communication
23 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Tariq et al., 2021). The moral panic approach taken by journalists and
24 some social scientists has led to suggestions that social media will negatively affect family
25 life (presumably by tempting people away from presumably higher quality face-to-face

activities), and warnings against "excessive" use (see review by Kapoor et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2018). Boase and Wellman's (2006) synthesis of the literature demonstrated that social media does not comprise a separate world full of disembodied relationships that only exist online. Just as people using the telephone usually know the person belonging to the disembodied voice in their ear, most users also interact with people they know over social media. This body of research found no qualitative difference between family relationships enacted offline or online. Like Taipale (2019), who posited the virtual and the "real" as complementary spaces where individuals spend time with each other, this body of research found families engage in different activities in different modes, dependent on their communicative intent. This thesis provided a rich description of how people have adapted to using this space for their family lives, and how satisfactorily it meets their need to belong.

This chapter situates the findings of the three studies within the original research questions. Contributions made to the literature about family life online are then discussed. Finally, future research directions, limitations of this body of research, and implications for research and practice are detailed.

Aims and Research Questions

The overall aim of this body of research was to explore how people engage with social media to maintain their family relationships across the lifespan. Mediated relationship maintenance has become more relevant over the past eighteen months as COVID-19 mitigation-related measures have caused indefinite separations for many families. Furthermore, given the way people have assimilated social media into their everyday life, the virtual world has become a complementary space alongside face-to-face spaces where people regularly interact with their close contacts. This thesis specifically investigated how families negotiate their shared responsibilities, maintain their kinship bonds, and engage in family practices using the affordances of social media. The program of research developed a broader

understanding of social media interaction between family members in the context of their evolving individual and group social roles across the lifespan. Furthermore, when considering the geographical dispersion of extended family households, the research explored the opportunities provided by social media to facilitate ongoing interactions within and between generations.

The following three research questions were posed to gain an understanding of the phenomenon:

RQ1: What are the current patterns of use of various modes of social media for family relationship maintenance?

RQ2: What types of maintenance behaviours are enacted on social media?

RQ3: How do Australian residents find the experience of using social media meets their belongingness needs?

As there was no existing review on this topic, a mixed-method systematic literature review was initially conducted to discover existing research related to the first two questions. Firstly, the academic literature was searched using terms related to “family”, “social media”, “distance,” and “communication.” Then the Joanna Briggs mixed-method systematic methodology was applied to synthesise the data from 51 qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methodological papers (Lizarondo et al., 2017). After analysis of the data, four themes were developed. The first, “doing family in a social media environment,” described how individuals engage in functional and transactional family tasks by selecting different modes of social media. The second theme, “performing family through stories and rituals”, explored how families displayed geographic resilience in recreating face-to-face rituals over social media. The third theme, “nature of online family communication practices,” considered how long-distance families engaged in mediated communication practices to nurture or gain desired features of relationships. The final theme, “privacy, conflict, and the quality of family

relationships," described the methods individuals used to control their social identities and how they negotiated in-group conflict. Given transnational families are often separated for extended periods and have no option other than mediated communication for their everyday interaction, their mediated family practices are of interest to social scientists (e.g., Wilding et al., 2020). Indeed, almost three-quarters of the included studies in the review related to transnational families. The review found family rituals such as patterned family interactions using open audio-visual connections were only found in a transnational context. There was limited information about family interaction between members who were co-located in the same country.

Consequently, the second study aimed to identify social media-based family practices of Australian residents whose family members were co-located in the same country. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 28 participants about their experiences using social media to connect with families. Respondents' interview data were analysed by applying a social constructivist perspective to develop two themes. The first theme identified perceptions of personal time poverty influences how Australians use social media technology: "individuals perceive time is scarce, so they work to maintain relationships efficiently." A key finding here was time invested in audio-visual calls with small children resulted in closer long-term bonds with older relatives. The second theme was concerned with understandings of Facebook's prevailing norms of positive communication tone and self-disclosure: "to share or not to share on Facebook, a twenty first century conundrum." The conflict lies in people's desire to see authentic self-disclosure from their contacts on Facebook, yet they disapprove of both negative authentic self-disclosure ("no dirty laundry") and positive inauthentic self-disclosure (which they perceive obfuscate difficulties in the poster's life). Despite this challenge, the study found even mere exposure to a family member's posts and intermittent direct contact through Facebook could rekindle friendships

and strengthen bonds. Further, contrary to the stereotype of the grey divide, which prevents digitally challenged late adults from joining virtual communities (e.g., Mubarak & Nycyk, 2017), the study found late adults are active participants in family social media interactions. While they are not as confident as their younger relatives about their digital skills, they are positive about their ability to use social media in multiple platforms and access technical support from their descendants as they need it. This narrative is similar to findings by Quan-Haase et al (2018), and Friemel (2016) who emphasise late adults can succeed in using technology on their own terms.

After the interviews for the second study were completed, three participants who reported their social media practices had been impacted by COVID-19 stay-at-home measures were invited to participate in a qualitative case study to investigate the impact of this abrupt cessation of face-to-face interaction and indefinite separation from loved ones. Longitudinal data was collected through two individual semi structured interviews using photo elicitation. The data was situated within the context of restricted face-to-face interaction opportunities due to COVID-19 and considered using an inductive thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2016). After analysing participants' talk around the topic of social media practices, three themes were developed. The first theme concerned the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on movement and face-to-face interaction: "indefinite separation motivates a pivot to audio-visual." The first study observed transnational families use audio-visual to facilitate ambient copresence, yet families who could see each other face-to-face more frequently did not use audio-visual modes. This case study explored lockdown-enforced disruptions to Australians' regular communication modes and how this promoted their desire for the relative richness of audio-visual communication. The opportunity to interview participants twice meant meanings initially attributed to participants' responses during the first interview could be discussed. The revaluation of comments about Facebook

1 posts and appropriate channels for authentic self-disclosure led to development of a second
2 theme related to private channels of communication facilitating open disclosure and a
3 heightened sense of copresence: "messaging reduces friction on relationship maintenance".
4 The final theme, "shared interests are the key to sustainable interaction" explored how
5 engaging in vicarious and shared interests online with other family members strengthened
6 connections. The following section presents the findings of the three studies as answers to the
7 three research questions.

8 **Patterns of Social Media Use**

9 In answer to the first research question "What are the current patterns of use of
10 various modes of social media for family relationship maintenance?" the three studies in this
11 thesis identified that all modes of social media are used by families for connection and this
12 depends on the behaviours they are enacting (e.g., social interaction, emotional disclosures,
13 support). Social media modes are conceptualised as audio, chat, audio-visual, and collapsed
14 context (e.g., Facebook). Previous literature had indicated that collapsed context was more
15 frequently used for interacting with weaker ties than for maintaining close bonds (e.g., Vitak
16 et al., 2011), yet many people report that they use Facebook to "keep up with family"
17 (Yellow, 2020). This task is often the responsibility of the family kinkeeper, a gendered role
18 usually held by women (Rosenthal, 1985). The first study found the motivation to use
19 Facebook for some women is to engage with their kinkeeper role by keeping in touch with
20 family, and to ensure their children maintained a connection with the family diaspora.

21 Results from the systematic literature review demonstrated that Facebook is a
22 valuable tool for people to monitor their relatives' activity to maintain an ambient awareness
23 of each other's lives. This awareness sometimes informed the content of parents' subsequent
24 audio conversations with their children and helped grandparents to feel more connected with
25 their grandchildren's lives. This adaptive behaviour can be explained by the drive to build

1 and maintain close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People demonstrate their
2 affection by liking, responding to, or reposting their relatives' posted content. This is in line
3 with Canary and Stafford's (1992) finding that the behaviour most enacted over social media
4 is assuring behaviour. Interestingly, the *followed* (those who were recipients of their relative's
5 interest) also feel more emotionally connected to those relatives, even if they do not interact
6 directly. This is useful to build understanding of why people may say they use Facebook to
7 "stay in touch with family" and follow family members online but have reservations about
8 sharing their own content.
9 The first and second studies identified that families use Facebook to engage in
10 adaptive family practices in the form of online rituals that maintain shared values (e.g.,
11 posting a birthday message for a child so other family members can congratulate them) and
12 appreciate Facebook as a repository of shared memories (primarily photographs) about these
13 rituals (Wolin & Bennet, 1984). These images add emotion and ambience to communication
14 and foster a sense of connectivity, such as tagging family members in an image of a shared
15 holiday. Further, in line with Merolla's (2010) conceptualisation of relationship maintenance
16 in con-copresent relationships, these shared images are intended to conjure up a nostalgic
17 recollection of the stories to which they relate, and to invoke the possibility of seeing each
18 other again. The first study identified that when conflict occurs in the Facebook space, it is
19 often due to misunderstandings about the content of posts. In line with Erikson's (1968)
20 model of psychosocial development, where adolescence is a time when children strive
21 towards autonomy, conflict can occur when children interpret their parents' benevolent
22 surveillance as efforts to control them, rather than offerings of care and concern. The first
23 study also identified that for relationships in distress, communicating in a semi-public space
24 such as Facebook is perceived to be a safe option as social communication norms dictate a
25 generally positive tone.

Role theory suggests people have a set of prescribed behaviours they perform relative to their place in a relationship. For example when a woman is communicating with her mother in the role of daughter, she will likely communicate and present herself differently to when she is in the role of friend to her peers, or interacting in the role of employee (see Yerby et al., 1995). Consequently, interacting in Facebook's collapsed context means people are very aware of adjusting the social identity they present across multiple audiences (for a discussion of collapsed context see Vitak, 2012). The systematic literature review found that many young people prudently curate their content and implement privacy features to hide posts that could damage their desired self-presentation to authority figures such as parents. This finding fits well with the family communication privacy management (CPM) theoretical perspective (Petronio, 1991) as children can misinterpret parental interest as perceived privacy invasions and consequently act to grant or deny access to information. CPM predicts that adolescents will control their privacy by using a cost-benefit analysis to modify the content they post online to conceal or reveal personal information (Petronio, 2013). The second study identified young adults creating multiple separate accounts on platforms such as Instagram to facilitate differentiated self-presentation for their peers, parents, and employers online (for further discussion of this phenomenon, see Kang & Wei, 2020).

Group chats are characterised by frequent text messages, often with content attached. The systematic literature review found chat is used frequently for phatic communication. People are commonly enacting Canary and Stafford's (1992) assuring behaviour to let their family members know they are thinking of them, and to assure family of their importance in the sender's life. Another popular use of the group chat is its function as a communal diary (often heavily laden with images of the family) for shaping collective memories. In contrast to audio-visual, group chats are highly valued by co-located families as well as transnational families.

1 Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) positions face-to-face communication as
2 the richest medium and people's preferred form of communication. Audio-visual
3 communication would be the next richest (offering immediate feedback, visual and audio
4 cues, personal interaction, and body language). It was of interest to the current research to
5 discover if people preferred the richness of audio-visual in the absence of face-to-face.
6 Indeed, transnational families highly value audio-visual as a form of communication and
7 frequently use it to share their daily lives, creating an ambient copresence. Some talk for
8 many hours, over dinner, during celebrations, or while helping children with homework.
9 Others keep the connection open "all day" while the disparate parties go about their daily
10 routines and peripherally observe each other on the screens. In contrast, families co-located
11 with more regular opportunities for connection primarily use audio-visual in two contexts:
12 communicating with family members located overseas or intergenerational contact with
13 younger grandchildren (often less than 6 years old). The case study indicated a temporary
14 interest in this mode when COVID-19 restrictions were in place, but audio-visual is no
15 substitute for face-to-face interaction.
16 Since the 1990s, Australians have regularly called each other to maintain their long-
17 distance bonds (Wilding, 2006). Now, the ubiquity of smartphones means people can be
18 connected continuously (Wajcman et al., 2008). Indeed, the layering of short, frequent
19 communication exchanges using smartphones facilitates an ambient co-presence (Licoppe,
20 2004). Therefore, it was unsurprising that all three studies found audio was a preferred mode
21 of communication for engaging in open disclosure as a maintenance behaviour. People
22 believe audio cues such as tone of voice allow them to more accurately discern another's
23 meaning and feelings. The Western perception of time scarcity meant audio held an
24 advantage over audio-visual modes as users can engage in other tasks while talking to their
25 communication partner (e.g., folding laundry).

1 ***Time Scarcity Influences Choice of Mode***

2 Australian perceptions of time as a finite resource and social media communication as
3 a method of mitigating against time scarcity was a pervasive theme in studies two and three.
4 Rudd (2019) proposes feelings of time poverty are more common in cultures like Australia,
5 where time is viewed as a straight line and measured by a clock rather than event-based.
6 Rudd notes perceptions of low time affluence are more acute for women, working parents,
7 and well-educated professionals. Therefore, this issue of time scarcity is relevant to many
8 participants in studies two and three (see demographics tables in these chapters). While this
9 thesis is not the place for a lengthy discussion of time and culture (for more information see
10 Szollos, 2009), perhaps people from cultures who perceive time as being more abundant are
11 more likely to use open audio-visual connections than Australians (as the former may not
12 believe audio-visual communication is costly).

13 Social media can influence perceptions of time affluence as it can facilitate time
14 deepening behaviours (e.g., substituting text for talk, multitasking). Research has found
15 giving away time to others (in the form of spending time talking with them) can help boost
16 feelings of time affluence—an effect driven by enhanced self-efficacy (Mogilner et al.,
17 2012). Study two found people established a hierarchy of modes to use for interactions with
18 their contacts, and this hierarchy also related to the time required for communication. For
19 close contacts, people spent time using many forms of social media to connect—collapsed
20 context, private messages, group messages, audio calls. For acquaintances or less close
21 contacts, they might react to Facebook posts or restrict their contact to messaging. Both
22 activities are asynchronous and can be done at convenient times. As mentioned in previous
23 paragraphs, audio is the preferred mode for intimate disclosures, and many people devoted
24 regular time to this activity with close contacts. One explanation for synchronous
25 communication with close contacts is giving away time boosts feelings of time affluence. An

1 alternate explanation is that Australians consider time as precious and giving it to their close
2 contacts is an expression of care. Although, as noted previously, people often multitasked
3 when talking, therefore they are not devoting exclusive time to their loved ones.

4 Perceptions of time shortage sometimes lead individuals to engage in behaviours that
5 might harm them or others, such as talking while driving. While this behaviour can
6 potentially meet both emotional and attachment needs, driving is not a low-grade cognitive
7 task and declines in attention to this task while talking are reflected in legislative attempts to
8 restrict multitasking in this environment (NRMA, 2017).

9 Approximately 91% of Australians own a smartphone, and almost all use one or more
10 social media chat services in their daily lives (Deloitte, 2019). Studies two and three outlined
11 how people have learnt to manage their availability on social media by delaying responses to
12 messages, allowing audio calls to go to voicemail, or turning off notifications of their
13 availability in applications. Acknowledgment of the value of other people's time scarcity was
14 evident in the way that people scheduled their audio calls. They considered audio intrusive on
15 other people's time so often sent a message prior to calling to ensure it was convenient.
16 Overall, it seems clear people are shaping technology use to work in a way that helps them
17 maintain their relationships in a timely manner. The varied use of social media modes is
18 inextricably linked with the behaviour enacted when using them, therefore many family
19 practices have already been described in this section. However, a broader discussion of
20 family interaction is outlined in the following paragraphs.

21 **Family Interaction Using Social Media**

22 The second research question asked: "What types of maintenance behaviours are
23 enacted on social media?" This thesis was concerned with what families do on social media,
24 and how they do it. That is, how families accomplish psychosocial tasks such as providing
25 each other with emotional support, and transactional tasks such as maintaining bonds and

1 shared identity (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004). To accomplish these tasks, the first study
2 identified families engage in rituals to establish and maintain their group identity, then tell
3 stories about these events to shape their collective memories. While social media is often
4 considered as a separate, virtual space (Kennedy et al., 2008) and time spent engaging in
5 "virtual community" is often considered to be at the expense of more authentic "real life"
6 relationships (Turkle, 2015), the three studies found that people considered interaction in
7 private and collapsed context social media spaces, as complementary to their interactions in
8 real world spaces. They experienced almost seamless transitions between virtual and offline
9 spaces and considered both essential to their family relationships. One key aspect which
10 differentiated the social media space was the potential for avoiding conflict more easily. For
11 example, the second study identified "mini ghosting" or "leaving someone on read" (where
12 one reads a message but does not reply) as a method of showing displeasure by
13 demonstrating to the communication partner a message has been seen and ignored.

14 One of the most common relationship maintenance behaviours identified by Canary
15 and Stafford (1992) enacted over social media was assuring behaviour. Most Australians
16 have a Facebook account (79.9% of the Australian population; Kemp, 2021) and although
17 many people assert they are conflicted about what is appropriate to share on Facebook, it is a
18 space where people show their affection for family members by reacting to (e.g., liking) or
19 commenting on their posts. People also frequently engage in phatic communication (contact
20 about nothing in particular to show they are thinking of the other person) using all social
21 media modes. For example, individuals tag each other on Facebook, send images in group
22 chats, and share content they consider the other person might be interested in.

23 The type of social media use is influenced by an individual's role in the family as well
24 as their generational cohort. The first study discussed how kinkeepers (often middle-aged
25 women) found social media valuable. Facebook is used for keeping in touch with the family

1 diaspora, the family group chat useful for co-ordinating family rituals, sharing stories, and
2 nostalgic images to strengthen bonds and consolidate the family identity. The second study
3 found Australian parents (and especially generation x mothers) surveil their children's lives
4 online, post content about them, and share content with their children through messaging and
5 audio. For the most part they perceive this is acceptable to their children and parents expect
6 to continue their contact as their young adult children establish their own households. The
7 third study found adolescents were reluctant to engage in the family group chat which is
8 appropriate to their developmental stage of establishing personal identify and autonomy
9 (Erikson, 1968). However, it seems possible to encourage adolescents to engage if adults can
10 incorporate a child's interest as part of the chat (vicarious interest; Bergin, 2016). Finally, the
11 second study found late adults who had accepted their changed roles and non-central position
12 in their adult children's lives seemed less pressured than younger generations about receiving
13 responses to their communicative approaches and were often content to be part in the family
14 group chats or follow family members on Facebook without posting any content themselves.
15 Kin keeping is still a gendered role and more women engage on social media than
16 men (Rosenthal, 1985; Yellow, 2020). Participants in studies two and three were mostly
17 female, many of whom shared anecdotes of husbands and fathers who avoid using Facebook
18 or the family group chat. However, women worked to include these men by allowing access
19 to her social media account or telling them stories and showing photos. Likewise, study two
20 demonstrated that late adults who cannot manage to attain the digital literacy required to use
21 this technology are often supported by their descendants who might take screenshots of
22 Facebook content and share photos with them in person. Across all age groups there was a
23 perception that individual lives are more interrelated because of ongoing contact.

1 **Need to Belong Rather than Need for Support**

2 The third research question asked: "How do Australian residents find the experience
3 of using social media meets their belongingness needs?" Online communities have long been
4 formed around shared interests to build social capital (see Wellman et al., 2001, 2009). Given
5 social support can be experienced from sharing interests, it is unsurprising people report
6 using Facebook less for social connection with strangers and more for participating in special
7 interest groups such as closed family groups (Facebook, 2017a). Family support was offered
8 and received through private channels including face-to-face, audio, and private messaging.

9 However, it seemed clear in studies two and three that social media was more about
10 satisfying Australian's need to belong rather than need for support. Mostly Australians
11 seemed to engage in online activities that were aimed at being part of an ingroup. For
12 example, by sharing photos and stories in a group chat to foster their shared identity, making
13 positive communication approaches to each other, assuring each other of their affection, and
14 enjoying rituals such as and the stories about those memories.

15 **Reflexivity**

16 As an Australian member of a multicultural and transnational family, I have brought
17 to this research a keen interest in discovering the potential value of social media to
18 maintaining family relationships across the lifespan. Maintaining close relationships with
19 family and good friends is important to me and I have devoted many hours towards achieving
20 this goal. I regularly incurred telephone bills worth thousands of dollars in the 1990s by
21 calling my partner when we were working in different countries. Over past decades, a
22 significant reduction in the cost of internet connections paired with more affordable
23 smartphones and a wide variety of social media applications, means more people I care about
24 are available online. In contrast to my use of email and telephone in the 1990's, I perceive the

low cost of social media use and portability of the mobile phone has allowed me to maintain closer relationships with absent friends and family.

Two factors motivated my interest in this research. I have moved house over 40 times as an adult and am currently maintaining homes in two countries. It seems likely that I will end up living at a distance from one or more of my children when they leave the family home. I wanted to know how I can keep in touch with them and their potential families in the future. During the course of my PhD research, the COVID-19 virus became a pandemic and consequent border closures meant my husband was unable to return to Australia. Therefore, I wanted to discover and implement the social media activities other people had found helpful to maintain their family bonds.

It soon became clear from the first two studies that social media use for family practices was related to developmental stages. As with the findings of the second study that young adults often react to their relatives' posts to show affection but were less likely to post content on Facebook, my children frequently liked mine and my husband's posts but never shared content. Also, in accordance with findings from the first study, my adolescent children had private Instagram accounts but did not want their father or myself to follow them on this platform.

Analysis of the third study's data made it clear that indefinite separation made audio-visual more attractive, and certainly my husband's absence made our children more open to committing to the adaptive family ritual of audio-visual chats about daily events at the dinner table. Further, study three's exploration of the value of vicarious interests to sustaining close relationships prompted me to encourage my family to consider how they could develop shared interests. One of the outcomes of this consideration was establishing a collaborative family Spotify playlist to which each member adds a weekly soundtrack. Now we listen to each other's music and have something to playfully argue about in the family group chat.

My perspective is heavily influenced by social shaping of technology (see MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985, 1999) in that technological innovations such as social media and smartphones are inextricably linked with society and culture. For example, the mobile phone was initially developed with a target market of business customers, however it was quickly co-opted by women who used it in creative ways to remotely parent their children (Rakow & Navarro, 1993). This perspective combined with personal experience has resulted in an optimistic view of technology use. This influenced me to develop more positive themes of technology use rather than focus on negative aspects such as participant's fears about privacy intrusion.

I consider myself as part of this ingroup (an insider researcher). However, when analysing our shared experiences in the data I was mindful of acknowledging these experiences do not have the same meaning to everyone. For example, while one of the participants and I shared the experience of having our childrens' fathers living overseas indefinitely since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was careful not to impose my own sense making of this experience onto her account. To help me account for this, I discussed my interpretations of her interview data (and the data of all other interviewees) with my supervisors.

Unique Contributions to Knowledge and Implications of the Current Research

One of the contributions of this body of research to knowledge is providing a deeper understanding of the role of various social media family practices to family connectivity and social support across the lifespan (e.g., the wide age range of participants in studies two and three was 19 to 81 years old) within the theoretical paradigms of need to belong and social exchange theory. Further, the thesis established that relationships and roles influence the way that people adopt and engage with social media and how this facilitates family connection (e.g., late adults and their siblings adopting new technology to maintain their friendships or

1 intergenerational contact between adults and young children using audiovisual modes to
2 scaffold the child's emerging social skills), This resulted in a rich description of factors that
3 help map out the phenomenon's conceptual landscape. For example, while group chat was
4 widely valued as a sustainable method for regular interaction to maintain multi-generational
5 family bonds, it was less used between co-resident adolescents and parents (as teenagers
6 work to establish their identities and separate from their parents; Erikson, 1968). Novel
7 findings were young Australians are motivated to use Facebook to react to relatives' posts to
8 assure them of their affection which aligned with social exchange theory, but their main
9 motivation for use for personal benefit was to use it as a directory to find new contacts and
10 build their bridging capital. As a result, the two studies offer a deeper understanding of how
11 the use of various social media modes to engage with family practices might vary across the
12 lifespan. Further, the qualitative nature of the research has provided rich data to clarify the
13 mixed findings of quantitative studies that found social media use has both positive and
14 negative impacts on family connectedness (e.g., Tariq et al., 2021).

15 A potential application of this research includes encouraging grandparents who wish
16 to establish relationships with their youngest descendants to spend time interacting with those
17 who live at a distance using audio-visual applications. While virtual co-presence over audio-
18 visual initially requires the assistance of the child's parents to manage the technology use and
19 facilitate the child's social interaction, one of the longer-term rewards appears to be that
20 children understand the kinship bond and have a greater sense of familiarity with the adults
21 with whom they are interacting. Furthermore, this can be seen as an act of support for the
22 child's parents when the practice has become established (as the older adult has the
23 opportunity to capture the child's attention so the parent can simultaneously engage in
24 another task). The ongoing familiarity of the grandparent with the child's life may lead to
25 easier social communication in their periodic face-to-face interactions.

Another activity highlighted in the first study is Facebook users feel more emotionally connected to family members who regularly positively react to their posts, even if they have no direct communication. This is relevant to those individuals like the late adults interviewed for the second study who stated they were uncomfortable sharing content in the collapsed content of Facebook and Instagram yet want to stay connected with their families. Simply being present in the group chat or Facebook and liking other people's posts is likely to strengthen bonds.

Following Bergin's (2016) work, this thesis also found that engaging with shared interests online served belongingness needs. Findings from the third study also demonstrated that people were able to strengthen family bonds by establishing vicarious interest in the interests of family members. Facebook groups and other private channels such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are well-positioned for privately sharing interests (Waterloo et al., 2018). An application of this research could be to encourage families to foster engaging in shared interests over these applications for sustainable communication.

Finally, engaging in rituals and telling stories about them are important family practices for establishing and strengthening family bonds and group identity (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Little research has investigated how Facebook is utilised for these family practices. This body of research has established that Facebook facilitates the family diaspora to share family celebrations (e.g., birthdays and anniversaries), remember stories about those events (e.g., sharing nostalgic photos), and enact assuring behaviour (by reacting to and commenting on relative's posts).

Limitations and Future Research

While Facebook remains the behemoth of the social media landscape, as new applications such as TikTok (a short video sharing application) gain popularity, and people change the way they use existing applications (e.g., use Facebook Stories, which offer limited

time for viewers to react compared with permanent Facebook posts) some findings may soon need updating. Furthermore, as youth engagement in Facebook appears to be shrinking (Kemp, 2019) grandparents may find it more challenging to use this collapsed context to gain ambient awareness of their grandchildren's lives. Future research could investigate how older generations are adapting to these new environments to continue to follow their younger descendants.

For some women, the main motivation to use social media is to connect with family (e.g., Gonzalez & Katz, 2016; Plaza & Below, 2014). Although Australian women report using social media more frequently and for longer periods of time than men, it is unknown how much of this use is for kin keeping (Roy Morgan, 2018). There is some evidence to suggest that in a transnational context, family kinkeepers play a role to encourage participation and compliance in mediated rituals (Shaker, 2018; Sinanan et al., 2018). Many women interviewed for this body of research indicated they were the person in their family who took responsibility for keeping in touch with the extended family and organising rituals (e.g., Christmas celebrations) to maintain family bonds. Further research into the utility of social media for kinkeepers and practical applications may be welcomed by the people who take on this role.

Conclusion

This body of research explored how people engage with social media to maintain their family relationships across the lifespan. While the initial review established what was known about the phenomena, it was predominately restricted to a transnational context. The two subsequent qualitative studies investigated a domestic Australian context and found some differences in practices (i.e., general lack of audio-visual connections), and perhaps this was related to Australians' perceptions of time scarcity. The use of Facebook and social media messaging applications using a smartphone was perceived to be a time-efficient and time

1 considerate way to keep in touch with family. That is, messaging did not demand the other
2 person's time immediately, and responses could be scheduled at either party's convenience.
3 In contrast to the stereotype of digitally challenged late adults, this body of research found
4 they continue to adapt to new technology and are able to source the technical help to
5 accomplish tasks using social media. Overall, Australian families use social media as a
6 complementary space to strengthen their family bonds and maintain their family identity.
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APPENDIX A

Study One Supplementary Materials

Tools for Assessment of Methodological Validity

Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Checklist for Prevalence Studies (Munn et al., 2015)

	Yes	No	Unclear	Not applicable
1. Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data?	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data?	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results?	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically?	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice- versa, addressed?	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented?	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, and is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body?	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis, or interpretation, of the data?	☐	☐	☐	☐

Overall appraisal: Include ☐ Exclude ☐ Seek further info ☐

Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Studies (Lockwood et al., 2015)

	Yes	No	Unclear	Not applicable
1. Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
4. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
5. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
6. Is there a statement locating the researcher culturally or theoretically? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
7. Is the influence of the researcher on the research, and vice-versa, addressed? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
8. Are participants, and their voices, adequately represented? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
9. Is the research ethical according to current criteria or, for recent studies, and is there evidence of ethical approval by an appropriate body? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
10. Do the conclusions drawn in the research report flow from the analysis, or interpretation, of the data? ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

1 Overall appraisal: Include ☐ Exclude ☐ Seek further info ☐

2

3 Ranking for dependability using the ConQual Approach (Munn et al., 2014)

Measured by these qualitative critical appraisal questions:	**Ranking System**
1. Is there congruity between the stated philosophical perspective and the research methodology?	⟷ 4 5 answers =“yes”; the finding remains unchanged
2. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the research question or objectives?	↓ 2-3 answers =“yes”: move down 1 level
3. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the methods used to collect data?	↓↓ 0-1 answers =“yes”: move down 2 levels
4. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the representation and analysis of data?	
5. Is there congruity between the research methodology and the interpretation of results?	

4

1 **APPENDIX B**

2 **Study Two Supplementary Materials**

3 ***Participant Information for USQ Research Project Interview***

University of Southern Queensland

Participant Information for USQ Research Project Interview

Project Details

Title of Project:	Goodbye dinner table: Hello group chat: Australians reimagining family connections online
Human Research Ethics Approval Number:	H20REA034

Research Team Contact Details

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Description

This project is being undertaken as part of a Doctor of Philosophy program

The purpose of the project is to explore how Australians are using social media to connect with their families. We are interested in the features of social media you are currently using, and what sort of messages and media families share. We want to know if Australians are using social media for their family celebrations (Christmas, New Year), traditions (birthdays, mother's day), or routines (daily shares on the family group chat, weekly audio calls to a parent, or regularly reacting to a family member's post on your newsfeed). The study seeks to discover what kind of barriers exist to using social media such as digital literacy, or broadband issues. Finally, we are exploring the way you manage your privacy or image online, or if there is perceived pressure to connect with others.

Participation

Your participation will involve participation in an interview that will take approximately one hour of your time.

The interview will take place at a time and venue that is convenient for you and can be conducted face-to-face or online.

4

Questions will include "Are there things that are important to your family to do online that are to do with celebrations or family routines? For example, you might tag each other in birthday greetings, or all share information in a family group chat" and "Do you feel pressured to be available and responsive on any platform – in what kind of situations does this occur and how do you manage it? For example you might turn off locations, be 'silent', remove 'read receipt' or 'last seen'" status.

The interview will be audio recorded.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. You may also request that any data collected about you be withdrawn and confidentially If you do wish to withdraw from this project or withdraw data collected about you please contact the Research Team (contact details at the top of this form).

Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

Expected Benefits

You are contributing to science!

It is not expected that this study will directly benefit you however it is anticipated that you may benefit from sharing and reflecting on your family communication practices, and this will inform future research and potentially others in the future.

Participants will receive the opportunity to win one of four $25 gift cards by entering their email into the draw. The draw will be conducted on 30/04/2020. Winners will be notified by email. USQ students also have the opportunity to receive course credit.

Risks

In participating in the interview, there are minimal risks such as distress or anxiety if information about you were to be made publicly available. The researcher mitigates against this risk by ensuring that all publicly available information is non-identifying; the results are reported fairly, accurately, and do not misrepresent your experience or voice.

Further Resources

Lifeline "Lifeline is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services." Ph 13 11 14

Headspace "*eheadspace provides free online and telephone support and counselling to young people 12 - 25 and their families and friends. If you're based in Australia and going through a tough time, eheadspace can help*". https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace/

Privacy and Confidentiality

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law.

- The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription.
- You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript for review and have the opportunity to request changes
- You will have one week from receipt of the transcript to review and request any changes to the transcript before the data is included in the project for analysis.
- The researcher and her two supervisors have access to the recording.
- The recording is necessary to ensure that your contribution is accurately recorded.

When the project is complete a summary of the results will be provided to you via email

Any data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management policy.

Consent to Participate

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate in this project. Please return your signed consent form to a member of the Research Team prior to participating in your interview.

Questions or Further Information about the Project

Please refer to the Research Team Contact Details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

Concerns or Complaints Regarding the Conduct of the Project

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 1839 or email researchintegrity@usq.edu.au. The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

Advertisement Posted to Twitter, Facebook, and USQ's Student Survey Site

1 *Participant Consent Form*

University of Southern Queensland

Consent Form for USQ Research Project Interview

Project Details

Title of Project:	Goodbye dinner table: Hello group chat: Australians reimagining family connections online
Human Research Ethics Approval Number:	H20REA034

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Telephone: +61 7 4631 5576

Statement of Consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project. ☐Yes / ☐No
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction. ☐Yes / ☐No
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team. ☐Yes / ☐No
- Understand that the interview will be audio recorded. ☐Yes / ☐No
- Understand that you cannot participate in the interview without being audio recorded. ☐Yes / ☐No
- Are over 18 years of age. ☐Yes / ☐No
- Agree to participate in the project. ☐Yes / ☐No

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Please return this sheet to a Research Team member prior to undertaking the interview.

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Interview Questions

1. People use different modes of social media at different times. For example, some people like to make family video-calls that go for hours even though they're not talking, other people like to share and tag each other in images on Instagram. When you are communicating with your family, why do you use the social media platforms and features you choose?
2. When you communicate with different family members, does your social media mode vary and why?
3. How do the ways you connect with your family differ from your practices with your friends? Some people never call their friends but always text, yet their mother expects a weekly video call on Messenger. Maybe this is because we have different views about the etiquette of communication? Or maybe it's about proximity and time? For example, you might be seeing your friends every day so any mediated communication is purely functional, whereas you see your mother only when you're on holidays, so your phone calls are also catch-ups.
4. Has your practice of using social media changed over time and why? For example, maybe you used to use Facebook to post general information, but now it's mostly Facebook groups because you got bored with posting?
5. How would you characterize the general affect of your communication with your family over social media. For example, is it mostly positive ("Hey check out this cute photo of us at the beach"), assuring of the relationship ("I miss you, I love you"), for
6. shared tasks ("Can you please chip in for Dad's birthday present?"), sharing feelings ("I'm feeling so scared about my new job"), or networking ("Can you believe that Aunty Rose is going to Chile this year for her 50th?").
7. Are there things that are important to your family to do online that are to do with

celebrations or family routines? For example, you might tag each other in birthday greetings, or all share information in a family group chat.

8. Thinking about your side of the family broadly - is there currently any one person among you and your family who, in your opinion, works harder than others at keeping the family in touch with one another online? (Rosenthal et al., 1981) and how do they do it?
9. Do you feel pressured to be available and responsive on any platform – in what kind of situations does this occur and how do you manage it? Like you might turn off locations, be “silent”, remove “read receipt” or “last seen” (Matassi et al., 2019)
10. What sort of impression management strategies do you employ (for example makeup for photos, types of photos displayed, restricting tagging) and how does this vary by audience?

1 # APPENDIX C

2 ## Study Three Supplementary Materials

3 ### *Participant Information for USQ Research Project Interview*

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University of Southern Queensland

Participant Information for USQ Research Project Interview Part 2

Project Details	
Title of Project:	Goodbye dinner table: Hello group chat: Australians reimagining family connections online
Human Research Ethics Approval Number:	H20REA034

Research Team Contact Details

Principal Investigator Details
Ms Susan Abel
Email: susan.abel@usq.edu.au
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Mobile: +61 424861264

Supervisor Details
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Email: charlotte.brownlow@usq.edu.au
Telephone: +61 7 4631 2982
Dr Tanya Machin
Email: tanya.machin@usq.edu.au
Telephone: +61 7 4631 5576

Description

You have already begun participation in this project as outlined in the following paragraph. Since we first started talking, severe restrictions to movement have been imposed by governments around the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This second interview aims to explore how these restrictions may have changed your communication patterns, family rituals and other online family activities.

This project is being undertaken as part of a Doctor of Philosophy program. The purpose of the project is to explore how Australians are using social media to connect with their families. We are interested in the features of social media you are currently using, and what sort of messages and media families share. We want to know if Australians are using social media for their family celebrations (Christmas, New Year), traditions (birthdays, mother's day), or routines (daily shares on the family group chat, weekly audio calls to a parent, or regularly reacting to a family member's post on your newsfeed). The study seeks to discover what kind of barriers exist to using social media such as digital literacy, or broadband issues. Finally, we are exploring the way you manage your privacy or image online, or if there is perceived pressure to connect with others.

Participation

Your participation will involve participation in an interview that will take approximately one hour of your time. The interview will take place at a time and venue that is convenient for you and can be conducted online or face-to-face as long as current regulations in regards to "social distancing" can be adhered with

As part of this project you will be asked to bring three artefacts (e.g., photos or posts) that reflect your experience of social media in the past few months and I will ask you why you chose th item and how they might represent your experience over the past few months. Sample questions are: "3. Has your practice of using social media changed over the past few months?", or Previously we spoke about the modes that you use to communicate with your family and you didn't report using video calls. I'm wondering if this has changed, or if other aspects of your communication with family have changed?"

The interview will be audio recorded.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. You may also request that any data collected about you be withdrawn and confidentially If you do wish to withdraw from this project or withdraw data collected about you please contact the Research Team (contact details at the top of this form).

Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

Expected Benefits

You are contributing to science!

It is not expected that this study will directly benefit you however it is anticipated that you may benefit from sharing and reflecting on your family communication practices, and this will inform future research and potentially others in the future. You will receive my gratitude for helping me with my PhD 😊

Risks

In participating in the interview, there are minimal risks such as distress or anxiety if information about you were to be made publicly available. The researcher mitigates against this risk by ensuring that all publicly available information is non-identifying; the results are reported fairly, accurately, and do not misrepresent your experience or voice.

Further Resources

Lifeline "Lifeline is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services." Ph 13 11 14

Headspace "*eheadspace provides free online and telephone support and counselling to young people 12 - 25 and their families and friends. If you're based in Australia and going through a tough time, eheadspace can help*". https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace/

Privacy and Confidentiality

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law.

- The interviews will be audio recorded for transcription.
- You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript for review and have the opportunity to request changes

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- You will have one week from receipt of the transcript to review and request any changes to the transcript before the data is included in the project for analysis.
- The researcher and her two supervisors have access to the recording.
- The recording is necessary to ensure that your contribution is accurately recorded.
- Your information will be de-identified.

When the project is complete a summary of the results will be provided to you via email

Any data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management policy.

Consent to Participate

We would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate in this project. Please return your signed consent form to a member of the Research Team prior to participating in your interview.

Questions or Further Information about the Project

Please refer to the Research Team Contact Details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

Concerns or Complaints Regarding the Conduct of the Project

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 1839 or email researchintegrity@usq.edu.au. The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

1 ***Participant Consent Form***

University of Southern Queensland

Consent Form for USQ Research Project Interview Part 2

Project Details

Title of Project:	Goodbye dinner table: Hello group chat: Australians reimagining family connections online
Human Research Ethics Approval Number:	H20REA034

Research Team Contact Details

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Ms Susan Abel
Email: susan.abel@usq.edu.au
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Dr Tanya Machin
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- Understand that the interview will be audio recorded. ☐Yes / ☐No
- Understand that you cannot participate in the interview without being audio recorded. ☐Yes / ☐No
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- Agree to participate in the project. ☐Yes / ☐No

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Please return this sheet to a Research Team member prior to undertaking the interview.

Page **1** of **1**

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Interview Questions

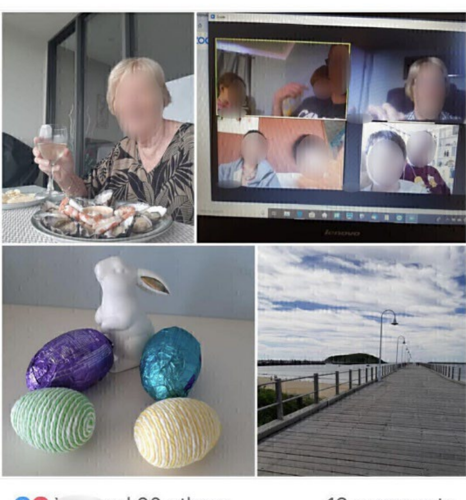
1. The emergence of COVID-19 has resulted in the imposition of strict movement restrictions by the Australian government. As a consequence many of us are at home. This has perhaps changed the way that you are communicating online. Previously we spoke about the modes that you use to communicate with your family and you didn't report using video calls. I'm wondering if this has changed, or if other aspects of your communication with family have changed?
2. None of us can see our friends at the moment so I'm wondering how your communication with your friends has changed and has this affected the quality of your relationships?
3. Has your practice of using social media changed over the past few months?
4. Are there things that have become important to your family to do online that are to do with celebrations or family routines?

You've brought along some artefacts for us to have a look at today. Can we talk about these now? Here are some sample questions

5. Which one of these do you think best represents your experience over the past few months?
6. Can you tell me why you chose this one?
7. How does it make you feel or what does it mean to you?

1 ***Redacted version of images provided for photo elicitation interview with Liz***

Me, myself and I having the first Easter alone ever.
However eating, walking, contacting family and a visit from the Easter bunny made it bearable.
Happy Easter everyone.



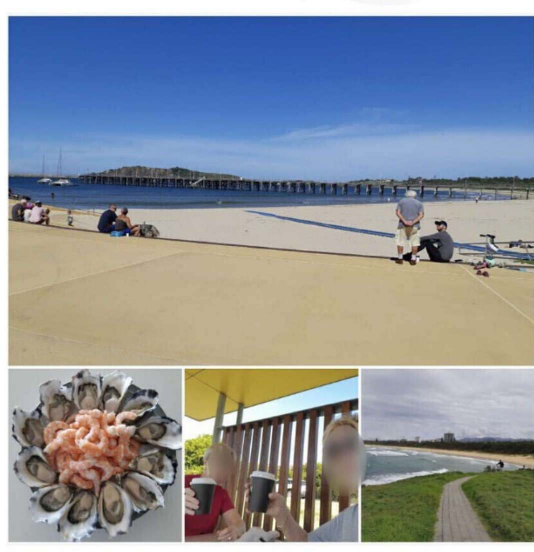
nd 20 others 13 comments

A coronavirus day.
Walk on the beach.
Game of bridge online with friends.
Delicious lunch and 5.00 drinks.

18 10 comments

2

Another Corona Thursday in



22 6 comments

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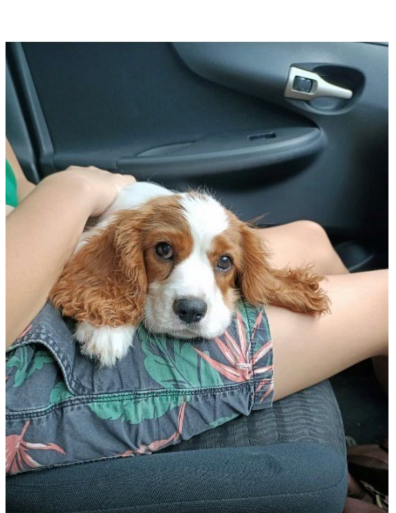
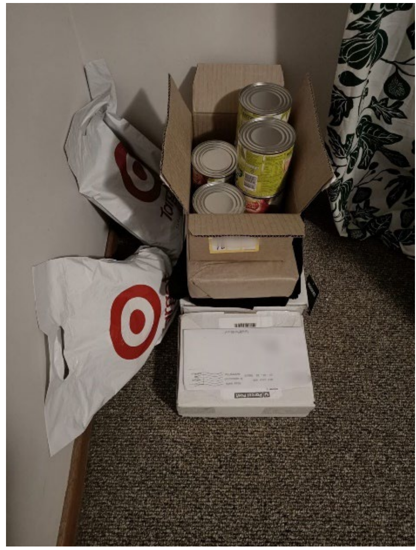
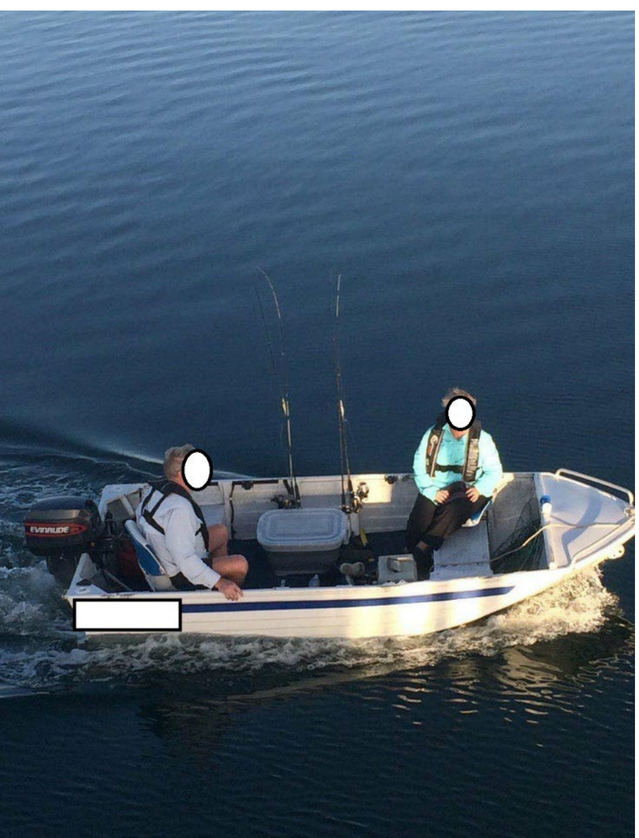
Redacted version of images provided for photo elicitation interview with Rachel

29/4/20, 1:06 pm





Redacted version of images provided for photo elicitation interview with Ashlee



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