

# Communication at ‘just the right temperature’ with social media:

**Developing a framework for the use of social media by the New Zealand Fire Service in the promotion of fire safety to young New Zealand adults**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis was derived from research conducted on behalf of the New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) who sought an understanding of how social media could be used effectively to promote fire safety to New Zealanders. In order to do this, this thesis aimed to position understanding in a framework of young New Zealand adults and their relationships with social media technology. It drew on the theoretical work of McLuhan (1970) and Thompson (1995) in developing a framework that understood individuals as interacting with social media from individualised relevance structures. Research was conducted in the form of online focus groups and semi-structured interviews across four participant-types of young adults previously identified as being both at risk of fire danger and high social media users. These participant-types were: single mothers; tertiary students living in rental accommodation; young Pasifika adults; young Asian adults.

The findings of this thesis argue the following points: 1) variable modes of individual control afforded by media highlight how the development of social media has risen as a positive tool which young New Zealand adults use with greater control to make communication more personally comfortable; 2) this sees social media contribute to a modern shift away from community towards connected forms of individualism; 3) the ability of social media to make networks more visible and open contributes to an understanding of how the resource of social capital continues to be produced, and most significantly provides opportunity for the circulation of collective knowledge through weak ties. This can enrich shared forms of knowledge obtained through other communication means. The opportunities for the promotion of knowledge using social media were discussed in specific terms for the NZFS, however it is advanced that this framework may be useful for other public-good organisations in engaging with social media, particularly in a New Zealand-based context where there is little existing research on the topic; 4) caution is voiced over the fluidity with which social media is constructed as a place. This thesis warns that the relationships young New Zealand adults have with media technology in the construction of this is tenuous, and the more devoid of human investment this relationship becomes, the greater the risk of the loss of a social media platform's status as a place.

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## **Introduction: Connecting social media and the New Zealand Fire Service**

This thesis was derived from research conducted on behalf of the New Zealand Fire Service (NZFS) who sought an understanding of how social media could be used effectively to promote fire safety to New Zealanders. In particular, four target groups of young adults were chosen for study in this research due to their previous identification as high users of social media (Smith et al., 2010), and association with lower socio-economic status which has been said to have both direct and indirect links with fire safety, increasing their risk to fire danger and making them harder to influence (CRESA, 2005; Chalmers, 2000). As largely unexplored territory for the promotion of fire safety by the NZFS, the link between these groups of young adults as at risk for fire safety and high social media users make these demographics an important sample to study in order to develop a theoretical, evidence-based framework for how the NZFS might effectively use social media. These groups are: single mothers; tertiary students living in rental accommodation; young Pasifika adults; young Asian adults. This thesis aims to position understanding in a context of these individuals and their relationships with social media technology, in order to develop a framework for use by the NZFS. In doing so, it seeks to make a contribution to the academic field by sustaining arguments as applicable to a wider context of young New Zealand adults and their relationships with social media technology than just those studied in this thesis, and to advance the proposed framework for the NZFS as useful for other public-good organisations in engaging with social media, particularly in a New Zealand-based context where there is little existing research on the topic.

As exploratory research this thesis did not start with specific hypotheses or expectations to test, but rather advanced with general questions in mind pertaining to the relationships participants had with social media and the relationships they had with the NZFS. The first chapter, *Contextualising social media in literature and theory* serves to situate an understanding of social media in existing literature and theory, while the second chapter, *Profiling the NZFS's fire safety promotion for strategy promotion using social media* provides a relevant background to the NZFS's approach to fire safety promotion and makes some initial links between the two chapters of how success for the NZFS with social media may be envisioned. These two chapters provide the necessary grounding from which areas needed to be explored further in the research were identified.

The following chapter, *Methodology: Qualitative research using asynchronous online focus groups and semi-structured interviews* explains how the research was carried out using asynchronous online focus groups of each participant-type conducted on Facebook (a social media platform), and that further information was gathered from semi-structured interviews with a smaller sample of participants from each group. These participant-types were young adults of the

following demographics: tertiary students in rented accommodation; Pasifika; Asian; single mothers.

The fourth chapter, *Understanding communication practices with social media*, provides a detailed summary of findings from the research relating to participants' general uses and understanding of social media. While nuances in communication practices were evident across participant-types, many of the findings here were able to be used in theorising a more widely applicable framework of young New Zealand adults and their relationships with social media. This framework is developed in the chapter *Understanding the impact of social media on people's lives*, which refocuses attention on the structural impact of social media technology on individuals' everyday lives.

The fifth chapter, *Perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication*, looks more specifically at participants' recall of fire safety knowledge, relationships with the NZFS and opinions and suggestions made by participants of how the NZFS could use social media effectively. Findings from this chapter are combined with the theoretical framework developed in *Understanding the impact of social media in people's lives* in the seventh chapter, *Proposed opportunities for the NZFS in developing a fire safety strategy using social media*. Here, theoretically grounded, evidence-based propositions are made for the development of social media strategies by the NZFS.

In the final chapter *Summarising thoughts: Reinforcing the findings of this thesis*, arguments developed throughout the prior chapters are emphasised that contribute most strongly to the proposals this writer makes about the use-values of these findings. These findings are reinforced in the context of individuals' relationships with media technologies and are noted here in brief:

1. Variable modes of individual control afforded by media highlight how the development of social media has risen as a positive tool which young New Zealand adults use with greater control to make communication more personally comfortable.
2. This sees social media contribute to a modern shift away from community towards connected forms of individualism.
3. The ability of social media to make networks more visible and open contributes to an understanding of how the resource of social capital continues to be produced, and most significantly provides opportunity for the circulation of collective knowledge through weak ties. This can enrich shared forms of knowledge obtained through other communication means. The opportunities for the promotion of knowledge using social media were discussed in specific terms for the NZFS, however it is advanced that this framework may be useful for other public-good

organisations in engaging with social media, particularly in a New Zealand-based context where there is little existing research on the topic.

4. Caution is voiced over the fluidity with which social media is constructed as a place. This thesis provides evidence to warn that the relationship young New Zealand adults have with media technology in the construction of this place is tenuous, and the more devoid of human investment this relationship becomes, the greater the risk of the loss of a social media platform's status as a place.

The following chapters will take the reader on a journey of how these arguments are developed, grounded in the findings from this research and relevant existing research and literature. The goal is to contribute to theory on the relationship between young New Zealand adults and social media, and specifically address how the NZFS might find success with incorporating social media into their fire safety promotion strategies for the participant-types studied.

## Chapter 1: Contextualising social media in literature and theory

The term ‘social media’, a form of computer-mediated communication, has come to be used ubiquitously yet ambiguously. On closer inspection, the term is broad and indefinite and this is a problem that has been widely recognised (for example, Macnamara, 2010; Crumpler, 2008). ‘Indefinite’ is perhaps its key characteristic and this thesis does not wish to box the term off by ascribing it with a firm definition. Instead, this thesis takes from Qvortrup’s explanation of digital media in understanding social media as “a medium that can copy any other medium” (2006: 350). As such, the term will be regarded in both the plural and the singular throughout this thesis.

As a medium that can copy any other medium, the study of social media is inherently more complex than the study of a single communication medium such as the television. Assertions have taken place across the spectrum of definitions, arguing whether social media should be regarded as an interpersonal communication medium or a mass medium, whether individuals should now be heralded as the new ‘content producers’ or whether they should still be regarded as a potentially duped audience like in other media (for example, Grossman, 2006; Gillmor, 2006; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008; Fagerjord, 2003; Parks, 2011). Underlying all of these discussions is a question of relationships that remains central to the focus of this research. How are individuals, and more specifically for this research—young New Zealand adults who are single mothers, Asian, Pasifika and tertiary students living in rental accommodation—relating to social media and what is important about it?

In thinking through how individuals relate to social media, or media in general, two theorists are important: McLuhan (1994) who focuses on the relationship between individuals and the media technologies themselves; Thompson (1995) who focuses on the relationship between individuals and the content, or “symbolic materials” of media technologies. Here again, this thesis will not be side-lined by debate on technologically versus socially determined uses of media but instead will focus on what is most important to this research—the relationships.

McLuhan argued that media *are* environments, and being so, the content of these environments blinded people from the matter of greater importance—that is, that the medium itself is the message (1970). He also classified media as ‘hot’ or ‘cool’, and made a distinction between these depending on the level of participation required in the communication process. He explained that “speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience” (1994: 23). This classification process is complicated for social media. However, McLuhan argued that media technologies serve to remove “irritants” (create comfort) or create “counter-irritants” (pleasure) (1994). Technologies, he wrote, “are direct extensions, either of the

human body or of our senses” (1970: 38). Therefore, in social media’s capacity to copy any other medium, its ability to remove irritants and provide counter-irritants is multiplied. It is possible, then, that this heightened mode of individual control over social media may speak to a communication environment that is more comfortable for individuals to participate in than those that can be classified as ‘hot’ or ‘cool’.

Thompson (1995), theorising media in terms of the “project of the self”, described how media technologies provide access for individuals “to draw on an expanding range of symbolic resources” (212). This is driven by ‘relevance structures’, which describes how “experiences and potential experiences are structured in terms of their relevance to the self” (ibid: 229). To describe this relationship between individuals and the media, Thompson used the term “mediated quasi-interaction”, which is said to “involve the extended availability of information and symbolic content in space and/or time” (84). Like McLuhan’s distinction between hot and cool media, Thompson’s analysis recognised that different media types afforded different relationships between the individual and the medium. However unlike McLuhan who framed this in terms of the removal of irritants and counter irritants, Thompson’s concern was with the lack of feedback available to the communicator—the further the interaction type strayed from face-to-face interaction: “the absence of reflexive monitoring of others’ responses means that recipients are at liberty to determine the degree of attention they pay to the producers” (91). Despite these different framings, it seems both were referring to the exercise of control over communication—whereby the balance of this is tipped further away from the ‘producer’, the more mediated the communication becomes. The concept of ‘control’ is confusing to situate for social media where ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ cannot be easily identified. In these theories though, both would suggest that social media’s increased availability of different modes of communication and choice of content experienced give the individual greater control with communication production and consumption.

### **Media and individualism**

The idea of ‘relevance structures’ is identified here as useful for understanding how individuals may exercise their control with social media. It speaks to a key feature of modern society—that of ‘individualism’, whereby traditional institutions such as church and families are seen to be losing authority in place of individual freedom of choice (Enli & Syversten, 2007). It has been said that the concept of individuality was not a characteristic of pre-modern times. Previously, identity attributes such as lineage and social status were largely fixed by traditional or institutionalised processes where the individual played a mostly passive role (Baumeister, 1986, cited in Giddens, 2000). Thompson (1995) attributed the development of the media as both enriching and expanding the availability of resources which contribute to this modern trend. He described this process as the following:

*Local knowledge is supplemented by, and increasingly displaced by, new forms of non-local knowledge which are fixed in a material substratum, reproduced technically and transmitted via the media. Expertise is gradually detached from the relations of power established through face-to-face interaction, as individuals are able to gain access to new forms of knowledge which are no longer transmitted face-to-face. Individuals' horizons of understanding are broadened; they are no longer limited by patterns of face-to-face interaction but are shaped increasingly by the expanding networks of mediated communication (211).*

This process has been interpreted both optimistically and pessimistically by academics. Pessimistically, it creates what Thompson (1995) called the 'double-bind of mediated dependence'. This he explained as the ability of the media to offer the individual new material and symbolic resources to draw on yet paradoxically at the same time the individual becomes "increasingly dependent on a range of social institutions and systems which provide them with [this] means" (215). Similarly, Williams (1971) used the term 'mobile privatization' to highlight this seemingly paradoxical role that media play in people's lives. To describe this, Williams also used the term 'shell' that explains how media and other technologies permit individuals freedom of direction, but their movements are made within their own private and isolated 'shell'. McLuhan spoke in his theoretical terms of the externalisation of the body to describe this as "the principle of numbness [that] comes into play with electric technology... we have to numb our central nervous system when it is extended and exposed" (1994: 47). So, although media are recognised as enabling new resources for the individual to draw on—describing individual control and freedom in one sense, it is also recognised here that this individual control may not permit as much freedom as it would appear to at first glance, and that there may be consequences at a relationship level given identification with terms such as 'private', 'isolation' and 'numbing'.

Indeed, Putnam (2000) voiced alarm at what he described as the decline of community, because he believed this also meant a loss of social capital which is obtained through healthy community and social bonds. He explained social capital as referring "to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (19), and this matters because "a society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society... If we don't have to balance every exchange instantly, we can get a lot more accomplished... Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity" (ibid: 21). So, as society is seen to become more 'individualised', and less 'community' based, it is feared that resources of social capital will be depleted by less engagement with others around the individual as he or she trends towards the characteristics of 'private', 'isolation' and 'numbing'.

Although the media may be contributing to a society characterised more by individuals than communities, this trend away from relationships grounded by community may not be that bleak. Williams (1983) described how ‘community’ is a “warmly persuasive word... [that] seems never to be used unfavourably” (76). It may be these connotations associated with the word that saw it often romanticised by commentators. Wellman and Berkowitz (1988) wrote that “many current analyses suffer from a “pastoral syndrome”, nostalgically comparing contemporary communities with the supposedly good old days when villagers danced around maypoles...” (124). This ‘pastoral syndrome’ is evident in early writing on the internet and discussion on whether online or ‘virtual communities’ can be conceived as ‘real’ or not. ‘Virtual communities’ was a term first coined by Rheingold in 1993. This described a type of community that was separate from offline relationships, which he celebrated for their ability to be created, revived and maintained online. More recently, in her book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (2010) Baym was more conservative about distinguishing between offline and online communities, advancing that what is “clear at this point is that new media do not offer inauthentic simulations that detract from or substitute for real engagement” (98). Simplified, Baym argued that relationships online were merely simulations of ‘real’ relationships.

Bakardjieva (2004) believed that expression of community in terms such as these demonstrated a preoccupation with ideologically constructed standards that side-lined commentators to a discussion on the wrong topic, by dichotomising online versus offline communities. Similarly, Chayko (2008) maintained that the use of the term ‘virtual’ is a damaging message. Indeed, there are many commentators that echo the sentiment that a distinction cannot be made between the legitimacy of offline and online community type interactions (e.g. Zappen, 2005 and Fernback, 2007). Further, Ellison, Steinfield & Lamp (2007) found evidence to support that rather than the earlier sense that people build new relationships online and take them offline (as expressed by Rheingold), it is more common that people take their offline relationships online. Perhaps the problems associated with dichotomising online versus offline communities come from applying the term ‘community’ itself in what has been previously discussed as an increasingly individualised society. If ‘community’ is not useful, what then should be used?

### **Networks: connected individualism**

The term ‘relevance structure’ (Thompson, 1995) was introduced earlier to describe how individuals orient themselves towards experiences and potential experiences most relevant to themselves. This centres the locus of control over relationship formation and maintenance with the individual. Macnamara argued that although societies “are moving towards individualization for a number of reasons... the internet transforms this to a connected form of individualism” (2010: 87). As such, the term ‘network’ becomes useful. Indeed, Castells (2004) wrote that today’s societies

can be conceived as ‘network societies’, and Wellman and Hampton (1999) proclaimed that “communities are clearly networks” (648). Wellman and Hampton explained this:

*communities consist of far-flung kinship, workplace, interest groups, and neighborhood ties connecting to form a network that provides aid, support, social control, and links to other milieus. The network furnishes opportunity, maneuverability, and uncertainty. There is opportunity to find resources in various social circles. Maneuverability allows one to avoid the penurious and onerous nature of being a single network member and to pursue fortune and happiness elsewhere. And uncertainty stems from the limited scope, low density, and porous boundaries of any one network, which makes it harder to identify with and find succor from a single solidary group* (1999: 649).

Wellman and Berkowitz (1988) wrote that envisaging communities as networks “is appealing because it provides a way of going from small-scale to large-scale phenomena without imposing a radical discontinuity in analytic approach” (128). This approach helps to avoid dichotomising communication online from offline, and the use of words such as ‘virtual’ and ‘cyberspace’. Indeed, far removed from conceptualising relationships online as real or simulated, Castells (2004) viewed the internet as another tool by which networks have become more accessible over time, enabling the network society to operate. In this respect, rather than declining, communities have been transformed into networks (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). This change invites consideration of what this means for the circulation of knowledge, and resources of social capital.

As described by Wellman and Hampton (1999) above, networks are seen to be connected by ties. This concept was used by Granovetter in his classic paper ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’ (1973). He explained that the strength of a tie can be determined by “a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie” (1361). Parallels exist with Putnam’s (2000) definition of social capital (above), and would suggest that the resource of social capital is richest when an individual’s network consists of many strong ties. However, Granovetter argued that the more dense an individual’s network is with strong ties, the more “encapsulated” he or she is within his or her own network. Conversely, the more bridging weak ties an individual has in his or her network, the greater these serve as “channels through which ideas, influences, or information socially distant from ego may reach him” (1973:1370). Indeed, a distinction can be made between two forms of social capital—*bonding* social capital (derived from strong ties) and *bridging* social capital (derived from weak ties) (Baym, 2010). The presence of more weak ties in an individual’s network describes the network’s characteristic of ‘uncertainty’ (as detailed by Wellman and Hampton (1999) above) and the increased freedom which an individual has to move about their network

when weaker ties are of less importance when they are formed or broken. In this sense, a transformation of communities to networks which enable greater connection with weaker ties may be viewed optimistically rather than pessimistically for the resource of social capital.

Putnam used the terms “thin trust” and “thick trust”, markers of social capital, to distinguish between the types of trust borne through ties of different strength. He argued that thin trust, gained through weaker ties, is more valuable than thick trust, gained through stronger ties, because it extends the radius of trust beyond those who are known to the individual personally (2000). Academics have discussed weak ties in an online setting and Fernback and Thompson (1995, cited in Jankowski, 2006) observed that membership of community groups online is fluid because often members can leave as easily as they join. Pfeil (2010) offered some helpful commentary on why online support communities can flourish when they consist of individuals connected only by the weak ties of taking part in the same space online. He stated that this weak connection “ameliorates the possible inequalities and uncertainties that come up when a person discloses personal information that weakens his or her position [with stronger ties that exist offline also]” (129). Pfeil wrote that reciprocity is usually needed to restore the balance in the relationship, however if an individual is not in a position to do this then they may avoid asking for help with their stronger ties so as not to disrupt this balance. He argued that this is less of an issue online because of the ease with which one can leave the support community, often without other members noticing because of the number of others present and providing support. This demonstrates a benefit of the porous nature of networks, as well as the apparent online cultural acceptance that individuals may join and leave network groups with ease.

The type of social media described in the preceding paragraph is of anonymous support communities. However, Social Networking Sites (SNSs)—in particular Facebook—may be considered as more commonly used, with over “845 million monthly active users at the end of December 2011... [and] 483 million daily active users on average in December 2011” (Facebook, 2012). Donath and Boyd (2004) defined SNSs as “on-line environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections” (72). Kennedy and Sakaguchi (2009) defined them differently and asked the following question:

*it can be said that SNSs are broadcast networks broadcasting the information to the “received” members of the network, but unlike the broadcast medium of old, everyone can be broadcasters of the information and unlike Webpages of old, all the broadcasters are “perceivably” linked together in a network of users... Knowing such, why do users of SNSs trust other users and broadcast their personal information? (44).*

What appears to be missing from Kennedy and Sakaguchi's account of SNS's is a contextualisation of the personalised relevance structures with which each individual operates their networks. Donath and Boyd used signalling theory to explain how "public displays of connection" on SNSs act as "an implicit verification of identity" (2004: 73). In this way, dishonesty can bring a social cost where the deceiver would be punished by the deceiver's network. Indeed, these social connections, or ties, are imperative also for the operation of social capital—of thick and thin trust. Not coincidentally, Putnam used the term 'social networks' to explain how social capital is formed: "social networks provide the channels through which we recruit one another for good deeds, and social networks foster norms of reciprocity that encourage attention to others' welfare" (2000: 117). While Putnam did not have the internet in mind when he spoke of this, it has been advanced that "online social networks are filled with [social capital]" (Kanter, et. al 2010: 33).

### **Social media: comfortable communication and collective knowledge generation**

Gangadharbatla (2009) investigated individual differences in the adoption of using SNSs. One of these defining factors he predicted as 'the need for cognition'. This was explained: a "need to exchange information relates to need for cognition or the desire to obtain information about a topic, educate oneself or learn new things" (6). However, the results of the study did not support this. Gangadharbatla speculated that this may be due to the orientation of SNSs being geared more towards social connections than other discussion groups online that are focused more on access to information. Similarly, Conroy wrote that "the internet is used mainly for social learning, communication, social relationships and to foster a sense of belonging" (2005). This social orientation of an individual's operation of their network online raises concerns about the potential for the NZFS to promote fire safety in this setting.

What may be of importance for the NZFS though, is the potential for social media to offer a more comfortable communication environment. Earlier in this chapter it was suggested that the form of social media to enable individuals to have greater control over their network operation may afford a more individually comfortable communication environment than one that is defined as 'hot' or 'cool'. Indeed, Turkle used the analogy "modern Goldilocks" to describe how people take comfort in the internet because it can put "people not too close and not too far, but at just the right distance" (2011: 15). A study conducted by Ellison, Steinfield and Lamp (2008) on college students' use of social media supported this idea. They found that those with lower self-esteem benefited from connecting with others via Facebook whom they may otherwise not have had a relationship with due to fear of rejection. Similarly, Baym (2010) asserted that the reduced social cues combined with time and spatial differences online offer a sense of safety for identity performance. Chayko (2008) called the knowledge that communication channels are almost always available to tap into when desired through social media as 'ambient copresence'. This kind of

background awareness, she said, gives people comfort by providing them “with a near constant background awareness of one another” (115). Ambient copresence is akin to the act of ‘lurking’, a somewhat voyeuristic behaviour of consuming online activity but not overtly participating in it. Pfeil (2010) wrote that lurkers are able to benefit from the archival characteristic of the internet, where past activity and messages can be searched in order to seek support and thereby extending the value of resources given initially by members to other members. Chayko reasoned that lurking is not a passive behaviour and is actually a strategic behaviour that can satisfy many needs, including “to be part of an ongoing story or narrative, to be entertained and informed, and to find community and connectedness” (2008: 175). Lurking, she wrote, helps people feel the presence of their network, and to be present to them in return.

The above examples work to paint a picture of how individuals may relate to social media in a way that provides them with ‘just the right temperature’ for engagement. The challenge for the NZFS is in finding ways to meet individuals at this comfortable level of engagement on social media. The NZFS would likely be regarded as a weak tie—if it all—in a person’s network which calls more on the values of bridging social capital and thin trust, and of the need to make the NZFS’s fire safety strategy personally relevant to an individual, in order to be felt in their network at all. This calls into question the types of knowledge, or messages, best suited for the NZFS to circulate as the promotion of fire safety in this setting. Unlike the mass audience of the mass media that is assumed to be ‘acted upon’ (McQuail, 2009) given its attribution as ‘hot’ media with little left “to be filled in or completed by the audience” (McLuhan, 1994:23), the more active role individuals play in their orientation and construction of their networks with social media requires a different approach and understanding of the acquisition of knowledge.

Levy wrote that “we are linked by language in the one network of thought and decision making” (2005: 192). This is a scenario that has always been so but now “cyberspace renders it so evident that it can no longer be ignored” (191). Cyberspace, he argued, has helped people discover that “reality is a collective creation” (ibid), and this drives a kind of networked power of ‘collective intelligence’. A particularly poignant example of collective intelligence being put to use online is that of Wikipedia.com. Benkler (2006) cited an example where the entry on the contentious topic of abortion was deleted from Wikipedia and within minutes, the entry had been restored by someone else to its prior version. In a large, loosely bound network, this provides evidence that social norms coupled with a large platform that anyone can contribute to serve to “keep the group on track” (ibid). This is consistent with Castells’ assertion that power cannot be attributed to a single actor in a network society because it is exercised in the form of joint action. Power, he argues, is in the human networks themselves (2004).

Further, there is said to be a difference between the type of knowledge derived from collective intelligence, and that imparted by voices of authority in a society. Levy defined collective knowledge as that derived from collective intelligence—which is the sum total of individually held knowledge. This is distinct from shared knowledge which denotes knowledge that is believed to be true in a group (cited in Jenkins, 2008). These two types of knowledge draw parallels with the types of knowledge identified in Schutz's lifeworld theory (1967) as “(1) the objective knowledge that is publicly shared; and (2) the subjective knowledge that is privately owned” (cited in Zhao, 2007: 142), although unlike for Levy, in Schutz's theory this subjective knowledge is not shared. Objective knowledge, akin to shared knowledge, is the kind of knowledge derived from messages circulated by the mass media. Collective knowledge taps into the wealth of privately owned subjective knowledge. Therefore, rather than promoting shared or objective knowledge as is typical through mass media channels, collective knowledge may hold more potential for the NZFS in the promotion of fire safety with social media.

### **Limits to individual control of social media**

Although optimism has been expressed by commentators of the individually empowering abilities afforded by the internet and the rise of influence collective intelligence may have over authoritative institutions (Jenkins, 2008), there exists scepticism around just how much freedom and power has really been redistributed to what was once the ‘mass audience’. More specifically, debate is centred around how much individuals online can really be conceived as participators in an open platform as opposed to mere consumers interacting in just another environment where they can be marketed to. Barney (2004) argued that digital technologies impoverish rather than enrich social relations. He said that digital technologies are more supportive of the creation of commodities—conveniences which contribute to the dissolution of social engagement as individuals relate more to ‘things’, and this “impoverishes rather than enriches our shared reality” (32). Similarly, Borgmann (2004) argued that the commodifying nature of the internet reduces experience to self-commodification that is “shorn of context, engagement, and obligation, of our achievements and failures of friends and enemies, of all the features that time has engraved on our faces and bodies—without all that we lack gravity and density” (64). These views also hint at the danger of social media in providing only a precarious construction of a perceived social ‘place’. This thesis recognises important differences between the concepts of ‘place’ and ‘space’, which will be addressed in Chapter 6, *Understanding the impact of social media on people's lives*.

Not only is the internet said to produce reduced value interactions, but the community function of the internet is argued to be undermined and appropriated for commercial ends, where rather than subverting dominant forces of power the internet serves to reinforce them (Song, 2009). It must not be forgotten that the dominant social media platforms are, in their rawest form, businesses with

commercial interests. Facebook currently holds the monopoly of social media activity and rivals Google for the top spot in all internet traffic worldwide, with recent speculation in *The Wall Street Journal* valuing it to be worth one hundred billion dollars (Raice, 2011). The value is in the sheer number of people using the website, every day. Facebook's statistics page states that there are over 750 million active users of the site, of which 50 per cent log on in any given day. Song points out that what is less apparent to users is that their personal interactions and information are being collected and analysed for targeted marketing practices. Indeed, Facebook has created 'Social Ads' where "if you like a company and that company runs an ad on Facebook, we may pair your name and profile picture with the ad when your friends see that ad, in a News Feed-style story. This social context makes the ad more relevant to you and your friends" (Facebook, 2011). In other words, the profiles of individuals are largely—unknowingly to the individuals—used by Facebook to promote products to their friends. For Facebook, the value of their users is in their value as consumers, which they can sell to advertisers.

There are many other commercial benefits that social media are said to provide for businesses. For example, Ziv (2009) highlighted how advertisers can receive instant feedback as to the success of their campaign, unlike other media forms where actions cannot be tracked in the same manner. Lager (2011) saw the potential for social media in creating trust with customers, leading to greater customer involvement and a culture of selling with, not to, customers. Song (2009) wrote that "since the internet excels in bringing together formerly disparate or marginalized groups of people, virtual communities have become an incredibly effective tool for bringing previously unreachable audiences to marketers" (91). This may be positive for the NZFS in looking to engage individuals who are identified as hard to influence for fire safety (Chalmers, 2000). The business of marketing and of learning how to use social media for marketing to online crowds is a fast growing discipline that today seems to overshadow the relevance of literature that has been preoccupied by a debate of real versus simulated practice of community online by not addressing this as an issue. Indeed, this debate is not even relevant to many businesses that have added 'community' features to their website in a bid to make them more 'sticky' by increasing website traffic and user loyalty and thereby making the company more profitable (Song, 2009). From these sources, it appears that whatever value for social capital social media has or does offer, to some extent this is being commodified by dominant forces of power in society. This makes it more realistic for this thesis to consider relationships with social media technology at the individual level, and consider connections within these structures.

This chapter began by situating social media in the importance of relationships, describing how communities have been transformed into networks whereby individuals operate from the centre of their personalised relevance structures. The potential for social capital was described as being

available through strong and weak ties in social media settings, contextualised in the comfortable freedom with which individuals may use social media at ‘just the right temperature’. Differences in the circulation of knowledge in social media settings were compared with that obtained from other settings, and caution was recognised in situating individuals’ control over use of social media in a wider framework of the commercial purposes through which social media platforms operate. Despite this, potential for the NZFS to use social media effectively in a fire safety strategy exists. As Bakardjieva (2004) wrote, “the legitimacy and the practical possibility of this participatory mode of Internet use is what needs to be defended against the assault of consumption and its related practices” (124). In order to understand how these tensions work out in practice, a profile of the NZFS’s fire safety promotion practices needs to be considered prior to the research. This topic will be covered in the following chapter, *Profiling the NZFS’s fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media*.

## **Chapter 2: Profiling the NZFS's fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media**

### **Background: The NZFS's approach to fire safety communication**

The NZFS states that its vision is “working with communities to protect what they value”, and its mission is “to reduce the incidence and consequence of fire and to provide a professional response to other emergencies” (2011). The NZFS has identified social media as new media technologies that may be useful in working towards these goals. Currently, their predominant fire safety promotion strategies take part in essentially two separate forms. The first is the more official fire safety communication material devised at the top levels of the organisation, by the strategic communications team in the NZFS's head office in Wellington. This includes broadcast media advertisements and collateral such as pamphlets and posters that are distributed to and by fire brigades (E Grieve, 2011, pers. comm., 28 June). The second form of fire safety promotion is separate to the corporate communication strategy outlined in the former, and is the type that takes place at the ground-level of interactions between fire brigades and local community members. There is some cross-over between these strategies such as by the fire brigades which distribute collateral formulated by the strategic communications team, but that cross-over has been found to be mostly one-directional (Lloyd & Roen, 2002).

The NZFS has a Contestable Research Fund, established since 1998 with the purpose of advancing “knowledge in fire prevention and fire management in New Zealand in order to meet the Commission's statutory interest as laid out in the Fire Service Act 1975 (Part II)” (NZFS, 2011). The fund is used to commission research for the NZFS that addresses their priorities. This thesis is an expansion of a NZFS funded research report written with the same purpose. NZFS research reports, publicly available on their website [www.fire.org.nz](http://www.fire.org.nz), provide strategic feedback to the NZFS that is used to help fulfil its mission. In the absence of prior research on social media for use by the NZFS, these reports have also been useful in formulating a broad understanding of NZFS fire safety campaigns. Past findings and recommendations have helped identify possible means by which social media may be useful, and lay the grounds for further investigation into this matter. Following, brief attention will be drawn to reports that serve to illustrate these points.

The first point to be made is that research findings and general consensus support that “most of the easy gains in fire safety improvements have been made” (McDermott Miller Ltd, 2001: 38). In the most recent New Zealand Fire Service Commission (NZFSC) Annual Report (2010) it was reported that “all classes of fire incidents fell approximately 12 percent over the two years” (3). National goals set for public education in fire safety demonstrate an already high level of

awareness and high percentage of households with at least one smoke alarm installed (ibid). As part of this changing landscape, where once (twenty years ago) two-thirds of all incidents responded to by the Fire Service were fire related, these are now evenly met with non-fire incidents. This has led the NZFSC to hold the opinion that the fire services legislation be reformed to reflect this changing reality of “its current business mix” (ibid). At present, the primary focus for the NZFSC research remains fire-centric and as such narrows the parameters for communication strategy formation—which may well benefit from a broadening of these parameters.

To date, “the Commission uses a social marketing approach to deliver its fire safety education to the general public and to individuals identified as being most at risk from fire” (NZFSC, 2010). A social marketing approach was recommended in 2001 to be used by the NZFS in a report by McDermott Miller Ltd. Social marketing applies commercial marketing concepts to social campaigns for voluntary behaviour change. This requires an understanding of individuals as ‘consumers’, the desired behaviour changes as a ‘social product’, and the necessary event of a transaction whereby a ‘price’ must be paid for the social product (McDermott Miller, 2001). In this report, McDermott Miller Ltd made the distinction between fire safe awareness and fire safe behaviour change. Awareness, they said, does not necessarily lead to behaviour change. Awareness is more effectively achieved through mass media campaigns, which at that time enjoyed a greater proportion of resources than would be likely under the implementation of a social marketing approach. They posited that a social marketing approach to fire safety communication may “result in substantial reallocation of resources within the fire-safety field. The most obvious example is a switch of resources from mass-media communication towards fire safety communication through community channels” (xi). McDermott Miller outlined guiding principles of a social marketing campaign in their report, and these included adopting an ‘audience centred’ orientation. They explained that “this means avoiding a normative perspective where it is felt that everyone “should” be highly concerned about fire risk (and act accordingly) and those who are not are considered seriously lax. Instead the view would be that the respondent is making a choice that is rational” (ix).

Despite these recommendations and the assertion by the NZFS that they employ a social marketing approach to their fire safety communication, evidence suggests that the approach used by the NZFS is not entirely consistent with a social marketing programme. The same NZFSC Annual Report (2010) that reported a social marketing approach, also reported that television remains the preferred method for people to receive fire safety messages, and one of the few national goals set to evaluate fire safety knowledge and behaviour of the public was the ability of people to recall a single fire safety message. Further, the normative perspective that McDermott Miller Ltd recommend to avoid is not apparent in many of the NZFS television commercials over the past

decade that function on a guilt-based persuasion method. The purpose here is not to draw attention to the NZFSC's shortcomings in employing a social marketing approach, it is to highlight the complexity of what it means to promote 'fire safety' and a fire-safe lifestyle to the New Zealand public. This is further complicated by the ambiguity around what 'behaviour change' looks like when the focus is primarily on fire prevention, and where many of the 'easy gains' have already been made. A social marketing approach vouches for behaviour change over awareness, yet despite little evidence demonstrating NZFS's use of targeted 'social products' that transact to behaviour change, the number of fire incidents attended by the Fire Service continues to decline—and while a causal link cannot be directly attributed, fire safety campaigns may be responsible for some of this success.

However a report in 2006 by TNS stated that while television campaigns are successful in creating high levels of awareness, "overall the NZFS has had a low level of impact on fire safety behaviour. This relates to communications focusing on raising awareness of fire safety and fire risk. People are now seeking to be empowered with 'what to do' (e.g. how to handle different types of fire situations) information" (4). This led TNS to recommend an approach where the focus of fire safety communication remain via television and use "a 'call to action' for people to explore supporting communications" (5). Subsequently, clear calls to action were used in the series of television advertisements *15" Fire checks (NZFS Television Commercials, 2010)* which motivated viewers to complete fire safety checks during television advertisement breaks. More recently though, the NZFS has moved to a "consequence-based approach" (NZFSC, 2010: 5) in their television commercials that dramatically demonstrate the potential consequences that may come about when fire safety practices are not followed, for example *Unattended Cooking Kills* and *Smoke Alarms Save Lives (NZFS Television Commercials, 2010)*. The NZFSC stated in its annual report that "these commercials have generated significant awareness and, very pleasingly, a reduction in the numbers of cooking fires and an increase in the numbers of working smoke alarms identified at house fires" (ibid).

These consequence-based advertisements work in direct opposition to call to action-based messages. The former show how not to behave and serve to increase awareness of dangers, while the latter demonstrate safe behaviours and are designed to increase appeal of them (Sibley & Harre, 2009). Niki Harre, a senior psychology lecturer at the University of Auckland held the opinion that "the kinds of ads that I really think work are ads that show clearly what to do" (*The AD Show, 2010*). In discussion of road safety campaigns, she condemned fear-based advertisements, explaining that they can also serve to give the impression that the exhibited behaviour is normal, and that people have a strong self-enhancement bias with their driving that leads people to dismiss such ads as irrelevant to them. Her opinion is grounded in her research findings (e.g. Sibley &

Harre, 2009). Fear-based, or consequence-based, messages work on the persuasion mechanism of eliciting feelings of guilt. O’Keefe (2002) explained that arousing feelings of guilt is understood to motivate action, as the person wishes to reduce the feelings of guilt they have experienced. However, stronger feelings of guilt are associated with lower levels of persuasion than are messages that elicit lower guilt arousal. It is said that this may be due to stronger associations inducing negative reactions of anger and annoyance rather than motivating corrective actions. What may be more effective, O’Keefe said, is employing an anticipated-guilt persuasion mechanism. This may be more motivating because it avoids the accusatory stance of guilt-inducing messages – it gives the recipient the optional and independent role of self-inducing feelings of guilt which is more empowering than attempted guilt arousal by an external influencer.

### **Prioritising individual and local relevance**

An implicit difference between self-inducing anticipated feelings of guilt, and of attempted guilt arousal is the idea of message *involvement*. The former requires an individual to first choose to become personally involved with the message, while the latter asks directly for identification. Involvement can be understood as a goal-directed strategic processing method and “is typically described as arising in response to the relevance of message content” (Slater, 2002). However, Slater pointed out that this understanding of involvement is at best only partially accurate because “in the social world, people typically choose whether or not to expose themselves to, or pay attention to, a message”. Indeed, this speaks directly to a key theme discussed in the previous chapter of individually constructed relevance structures where individuals choose to engage in experiences that are personally relevant to them (Thompson, 1995). This is the crux of the discussion—individuals cannot simply be ‘acted upon’ in the form of a passive mass audience. They first must *choose* what messages they will and will not pay attention to, *choose* how to interpret them, and *choose* what action to take—if any.

Individually constructed relevance structures, as was discussed, power how individuals interact with media. The use of the internet demonstrates this in its clearest form. The interactive abilities of the internet have various implications; most notable is the vivid use of relevance structures on social media platforms such as Facebook that make evident network structures where individuals are connected to each other in varying forms of relevance, creating varying strength in these ties. This proffers different modes for communication, and different modes for the formation of social capital. The proposition that follows is that opportunities exist for the NZFS to successfully engage with New Zealanders using social media, but that it will require a different approach to the NZFS’s public fire safety education than what is currently being used, although it does interact with rational choice theory of social marketing. Certainly, it seems more likely that when a person is online with the amplified power over who to engage with and which messages to receive, they

would be more compelled to engage with those that make them feel more positively involved over those that make them feel guilty.

So far this chapter has talked predominantly about the existing communication techniques devised at the top level of the NZFS. Also identified was a second form of fire safety education carried out at the front-line by fire fighters. There has been several NZFS research reports that discuss this and highlight several concerns with the methods used (for example Lloyd & Roen, 2001, Lloyd & Roen 2002). One concern some fire fighters have expressed is that they often felt uncomfortable with the form of fire safety communication used because they believed it was circumstantially inappropriate (Lloyd & Roen, 2002). The 2002 report by Lloyd and Roen highlighted how fire fighters felt uncomfortable giving people advice face to face while in uniform as an authority figure, their weak faith in the fire safety pamphlets used—the technique of dropping them into people's mail boxes, and the messages conveyed by them that did not reflect local circumstances. They believed that a 'one-size fits all' approach was ineffective but they also talked of a lack of feedback mechanisms to those who were designing the collateral in the head office. Lloyd & Roen (2002) wrote:

*A number of firefighters told stories that suggested a lack of awareness, on the part of those sending out resource materials, of the actual resource needs of each station. In the absence of functioning feedback systems, it is entirely understandable that those who distribute resources may be unaware of local stations' needs (23).*

These problems, covered only briefly, are enlarged by the opinion of several NZFS research reports that the most effective forms of fire safety communication are done at the local community level by interpersonal contact (for example, Kawai et. al., 2000 and Chalmers, 2000). Indeed, some of the more effective methods for successful interaction between fire fighters and the public include building rapport, using humour and drawing on personal experience and stories to help communicate their messages (Lloyd & Roen, 2001). What this research evidence suggests is that there is a poor fit between fire safety communications created at the top level of the organisation, and the fire fighters who are working at the ground level struggling to find success with the fire safety messages devised by the former, because they are less in touch with the day to day reality of the various local communities.

Another reality of local communities in New Zealand is the decline of volunteer fire fighters. This is an issue recognised by the NZFS which is working to combat this (2010). New Zealand is not alone in its decline of volunteer fire fighters, and Putnam cited this as a U.S. example of the loss of

community (2000). He cited that volunteer fire units have especially suffered in loss of volunteers because it is a physically demanding form of volunteering that the older generation cannot step up to. In a report written for the NZFS by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) on volunteer fire fighters, it was discussed how the most significant motivating factor for volunteering was the desire to give back to the community. It was also discussed how, particularly in rural communities, the volunteer fire fighters play an integral part in the local community and act as a type of ‘social glue’. They are particularly predisposed to act in this central role because of the high level of trust associated with the fire service. To be sure, fire fighters have been voted as the most trusted profession in New Zealand from 2007 to 2011 according to the Reader’s Digest Trust Survey (e.g. Readers Digest New Zealand, 2011), and PricewaterhouseCoopers (2009) stated that the NZFS has been identified as the most trusted government service. Given these factors, a volunteer fire fighter could easily be used as the poster face for social capital. Moreover, a study by Pew Internet Research (2011) “found that the typical internet user is more than twice as likely as others to feel that people can be trusted. Further, [they] found that Facebook users are even more likely to be trusting” (4). The same study found a similar pattern with higher levels of emotional, companionship and instrumental support reported by internet users than non-internet users, and higher again for Facebook users. From this evidence, it would appear that nurturing local communities in an online environment would be conducive to regenerating some of that ‘social glue’ that is reported to have been lost over the years.

### **Fire safety communication strategies in a changing media environment**

If the details of the NZFS described in this chapter are linked with the ideas surrounding communities and networks discussed in the previous chapter, there is room for social media to be used advantageously. Firstly, as has been stressed, individuals interact with media in ways that are personally relevant to them. Fire safety communication strategies that are devised at the top level of the organisation predominantly use television commercial campaigns, and distribute materials to local fire brigades who in turn distribute these materials to the community. Unlike television commercials that do not offer a feedback mechanism of how individuals interact with the commercials, fire brigades interact with the local community and are better equipped to judge the appropriateness of these materials for their area and through informal fire safety communication they are also able to build rapport through their face-to-face interactions in ways that best engage a particular person. However, a lack of a feedback mechanism from the fire fighters to the top level of the organisation appears to contribute to a poor fit between information communicated and how it is received. There is also a level of discomfort felt by fire fighters as uniformed authorities giving advice to people in their homes. Demonstrated here are tensions between different types of knowledge as discussed in the previous chapter—shared, devised at the top level of the NZFS, and collective, from the front-line fire stations.

Here, social media may well be able to serve as ‘just the right temperature’ for engagement and go some way to resolving the poor fit between information communicated by the NZFS and how it is received, by devising a strategy that incorporates the use of collective knowledge. Social media platforms offer a place where many individuals feel comfortable communicating. Their networks are individually constructed by them, creating a greater level of personal connection between the information they engage with compared to information broadcast over television. This environment has the potential to make both individuals of local communities and fire fighters feel at home. Social media essentially equips both parties with the same tools for communication and places them on equal grounding. Participation is a two-way street here, necessitating strategies to increase fire safety in communities be more than just creating the right message. Indeed, Ooi (2009) stated that a “top-down, hierarchical and formal tone when engaging in social media does not work well and will not be well received” (103).

This does not mean to say that there is no place for mass media campaigns, or that these should be entirely separate to the social media strategy used by the NZFS. As early as 1973 it was noted by Granovetter that people rarely act on information from the mass media unless it is also transmitted by personal ties. This is because, without the personal connection to the information there is no particular reason to—it is not part of their relevance structure. He said “enthusiasm for an organization in one clique, then, would not spread to others but would have to develop independently in each one to insure success” (1374). This highlights the potential power of Granovetter’s concept of weak ties, whereby use of social media can make these more accessible and enable enthusiasm to spread with little effort through people’s social networks. The connection between a television advertisement and social media might be as simple as a call to action asking people to connect with them on a social network—with an incentive for doing so.

It was noted in the previous chapter that some commentators expressed a concern with the ‘loss of community’, and of the (in)sufficiency of online communities to combat this. Many conceived online communities as not grounded in place, and indeed that is one of the merits of communication online. However, there may be some value in taking the ‘place’ in a physical sense, and bringing it online. There is an implicit concept of place evident in the direction of relationships that is shown to move generally from offline to online, and this could be used as an anchor from which the NZFS could develop its social media strategies. Hampton argued that “the Internet may hold as much promise for reconnecting people to communities of place as it does for liberating people from them” (2004: 217). As noted earlier, in marketing literature, social media are providing new means for communicating with ‘hard to reach’ audiences. This situation may be

useful for the NZFS in strategy formation for the four target groups identified as both high social media users and at risk for fire safety.

A one size fits all approach would clearly not be suitable online—particularly when, unlike on television, a strategy does not need to be designed with a ‘mass audience’ in mind. Rather, social media enables the design of a strategy with the individual needs of specific local communities in mind. Bringing the local fire brigades into this strategy would not only help ensure that local communities had easy access to the fire safety knowledge best suited to them, but it would also be a vital part of generating the social capital needed to make the network work. This is because the high level of trust exists more with the fire fighters themselves rather than the NZFS, since the fire fighters are the faces of the NZFS—they are who communities know and interact with (TNS, 2006). Further, the informal networked communication style characteristic of social media would better harbour personalised interactions between the NZFS and individuals at a participant-participant level, rather than a top-down authoritative approach. This provides for a space where fire fighters could build rapport and draw on personal experience to help illustrate their communication.

Moreover, the network nature of social media holds the potential to foster many useful connections for the NZFS. In particular, bridging social capital elicited via weak ties could be used not only to help increase volunteering for local fire brigades, it could be used to elicit different forms of volunteering or altruistic behaviour that would benefit a local community and reflect the fire safety goals of the NZFS. Putnam (2000) stated that:

*Social connections encourage giving for many reasons. Joiners may be generous souls by nature, but involvement in social networks is a stronger predictor of volunteering and philanthropy than altruistic attitudes per se. As fund-raisers and volunteer organizers know well, simply being asked to give is a powerful stimulus to volunteering and philanthropy. When volunteers are asked how they happened to get involved in their particular activity, the most common answer is, “Someone asked me” (121).*

As discussed earlier, social media provide the tools to connect networks in this way and also host an environment where people may feel less uncomfortable about asking for support online than offline, due to the weak ties characteristic of some online interactions. Here some initial ideas can be identified as holding potential for the NZFS. This includes the use of user generated and maintained wikis and forums that could work as a self-sufficient resource that would grow organically over time as the network enlarges, and archival information grows. This would also benefit ‘lurkers’ who would be able to glean information from others’ online interactions. Even better, the NZFS could link their mass media campaign with social media by offering an altruistic

incentive for people to connect on social media. This would foster the generation of social capital from the outset, and is something that the NZFS is better equipped than many other organisations to do, given the high levels of trust already associated with it.

### **Uses of social media for public-good purposes**

Currently, the NZFS has a nationalised presence on Facebook and YouTube, with a following that has continued to grow during the period of this research. At the time of writing, the 'New Zealand Fire Service' page on Facebook had 19,937 likes (2012), and recently achieved an unprecedented ranking of 52<sup>nd</sup> most viewed New Zealand YouTube channel for the week of September 12<sup>th</sup> 2011. This correlated with the launch of their 'Word from the Wise' advertisement campaign that screened on television during the Rugby World Cup and was uploaded onto YouTube. Interestingly, these advertisements featured unscripted interviews with New Zealanders who had been out drinking and were filmed on city streets. Drawing on ideas discussed in this literature review, it is suggested that this campaign's success may in part be due to the use of everyday New Zealanders to impart their advice which induces a sense of 'involvement' rather than a guilt-based message, and the potential for the advertisements to spread throughout the networks of those featured in them due to the relevance of these strong and weak ties to other individuals.

There are other instances of the NZFS engaging with local communities online, but unlike the 'Word from the Wise' campaign that was devised by the top-level of the organisation, these are more consistent with efforts carried out at the 'front-line' of fire safety practice by local fire fighters. For example, the Greenhithe community's volunteer Fire Brigade and the Taradale volunteer Fire Brigade each keep a blog (Greenhithe Residents Web Site, 2012; Taradale Volunteer Fire Brigade, 2012), and the Rolleston volunteer Fire Brigade has its own website containing details of its history and information for community members, including a 'questions' section where a fire fighter answers the public's curious questions such as "what is the scariest fire you have been involved in?" (Rolleston Fire Brigade, 2012). A number of fire brigades also have their own, mostly static unofficial websites (such as the Papamoa and Plimmerton volunteer Fire Brigades (2012) and the Tokoroa and Tauranga Fire Brigades (2012)).

In addition to their websites, the Porirua Fire Brigade and the Newlands volunteer Fire Brigade maintain Facebook pages, Porirua with a Twitter account also (2012). The Ngaruawahia volunteer Fire Brigade has a Facebook page but no website (2012). While their number of 'likes' is low, their activity has a localised focus—the Newlands and Ngaruawahia Fire Brigades post their call outs, and the Porirua Fire Brigade regularly post photos of call outs and community activity. The Porirua Facebook page is especially focused on posting content related to fire safety messages and local news involving fires. Without conducting in depth research, it is difficult to determine whether there are other local brigades that have also embarked on a social media initiative, as there is no

obvious structure of how these are organised under the NZFS. Rather, it seems clear from the unpolished nature of these websites and social media accounts, and from their self-disclosed references as ‘unofficial’ sites that these community initiatives are independent from the NZFS’s fire safety communications strategies. These inconsistencies highlight the youthful stage of the NZFS’s online, and more specifically, social media strategy, and that there is much development of this left to do.

It must be acknowledged that a quantitative report assessing the effectiveness of digital media for at-risk groups has recently been published for the NZFS (UMR, 2011). The results of this were useful in justifying the parameters of study for this research. Importantly, it reinforced the identification of young people as hard to influence by finding an attitude of complacency towards fire safety. It also identified a positive attitude towards connecting with the NZFS using social media, but that any connection would likely be passive whereby individuals would not actively seek out the NZFS. This finding is consistent with the idea of individualised relevance structures introduced in this thesis to the use of social media and suggests that the NZFS does not easily fit within these, highlighting the need for research to address *how* the NZFS could foster the promotion of fire safety through social media.

Attention must also be drawn to the pressing need for research on social media in a New Zealand context that led the NZFS to commission both quantitative and qualitative (this) research on the topic. The World Internet Project New Zealand (WIPNZ) recently released findings from its third biannual survey (Smith et. al., 2011). That only the third survey has just been completed is testimonial alone to the youthfulness of the internet’s role in society. The study found that 86 per cent of New Zealanders use the internet, up from 79 per cent in 2007. Other striking statistics include the finding that 69 per cent rated the internet as an important source of information—ahead of other media and other people, and that 58 per cent felt the internet plays an important role in their everyday lives. Further, 64 per cent belong to a social networking site with 96 per cent of these using Facebook. Eighty-seven per cent of survey respondents under 30 were users of social networking sites. However, not even the 2011 WIPNZ survey yielded data pertaining to individuals’ relationships and communication online in a social networking context—with criteria of the most relevant survey question limited to emails, attachments, instant messaging, chat rooms and online phone calls (Smith et. al., 2011:11). These findings, and lack of findings, point to the prevalence, and importance of the use of the internet to New Zealanders, and further to the rising need for New Zealand-based research into how public-good organisations can reach young adults in this new, and prominent, communication environment of social media.

An example of a successful New Zealand public service campaign using social media can be drawn from the Inland Revenue Department (IRD). Recently, it used targeted Facebook ads in an indirect marketing campaign that was successful in driving New Zealand graduates now living overseas to make repayments on their student loans. The IRD reported that “the initiative would suggest a growing level of awareness of repayment obligations by overseas-based borrowers” (cited in TVNZ, 2011). In Australia, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) recently published a case study of their social media use during disaster emergency (2011). They cited their success in using Facebook and Twitter to “proactively push out large volumes of information to large numbers of people ensuring there was no vacuum of official information” (vi), after their number of ‘likes’ jumped from 17,000 to 100,000 likes within a 24-hour period following the flash floods on January 10<sup>th</sup> 2011. The same report also cited that a lesson learnt was to “not use social media solely to push out information. Use it to receive feedback and involve your online community” (vii). Indeed, not long after the release of this case study came a report that “the Queensland Police social media strategy came seriously unstuck this weekend as a wave of prejudicial comments resulting from its FaceBook site threatened the prosecution of an alleged child killer” (Knight, 2011). The incident highlighted the contentious nature of ‘pushing out’ sensitive information to a public that is more than willing to publicly give feedback and interact as part of a community.

Unlike the IRD and the QPS that had very specific goals of debt repayment and disaster management respectively, the NZFSC has a general goal of using social media to promote and sustain fire safety in communities. This requires an approach that is more nurturing of its goal than the former organisations that apply more direct techniques to achieve their specific goals. As such, it follows sensibly that their primary focus might be more on receiving feedback and involving the online community, while the ability to ‘push out’ information takes a back seat. The Australian-founded Hello Sunday Morning (HSM) campaign is one such campaign that embraces this paradigm.

HSM is a campaign born out of the Australian Government’s call to advertising agencies to come up with a strategy to combat the country’s binge drinking culture (Eleven, 2011). Like New Zealand, past advertising campaigns to change drinking behaviour had been fear-based (ibid), and the founder of HSM stepped radically outside of the traditional fear-based message transmission model. Embracing the internet, Raine decided to take a year off drinking and blog about his experience via social networks, encouraging others to do the same thing. Indeed, since its launch in 2008 the inspiration to follow suit spread throughout his personal networks, and his ties’ networks in widening circles. The number of registered HSM users is currently 3680 (Hello Sunday Morning, April 2012) and this is nine months after Eleven’s article that reported the number at 1400. Raine’s goal is to hit 10,000 users by 2013. A quick browse of the HSM website

shows clear evidence of a vibrant supportive community. Further, the success of this campaign is far more tangibly calculated than a 30-second television commercial.

Key elements of the HSM campaign strike at the heart of themes covered in these first two chapters of this thesis. Most importantly, it draws its power from individually constructed relevance structures. Relying on the campaign to spread through individuals' personal networks (not specifically online) immediately increases the relevance of the campaign to strong and weak ties of that network. More so, the act of blogging about the experience and the fact that (non) drinking goals are individually set by the user, make the information more relevant again, and takes heed of the individual focus with which people use the internet. Support from other HSM users is apparent on the website, with supportive comments posted by users on other users' blog posts. Further, the nature in which HSM is hosted on its own website allows for users to choose their level of anonymity or self-disclosure, and while there are branches of HSM on Facebook and Twitter, overt interaction via these networks is not required for participation. This leaves it open for individuals to participate in 'just the right temperature' for them.

Of course, this is merely speculation of what *could* happen online. The reality of what might actually happen online, and the extent to which individuals and local communities would be willing to participate and contribute to this reality is a matter that requires investigating. This discussion has illustrated the current fire safety communication techniques used by the NZFS and some of the weaknesses prevalent. Tying these weaknesses to the ideas of community and networks online discussed in the previous chapter has facilitated visualisation of how social media might fit into the NZFS's communication strategies. Most prominent is the idea that social media would serve well—that communication between the organisation's top levels, local fire brigades and the New Zealand public become more closely linked by allowing for greater use of collective knowledge. Giving local fire brigades more freedom to play a locally focused strategic role might help ensure not only that local communities are receiving information and support best suited to their needs, but help regenerate social capital in the communities by opening them up to a suitable platform where people can choose to get involved—and may be more open to this involvement should other members of their network also be involved. These ideas for social media, while only utopian possibilities at this stage, are aligned in support of the NZFS's vision: "working with communities to protect what they value".

### **Chapter 3: Methodology: Qualitative research using asynchronous online focus groups and semi-structured interviews**

The research for this thesis was approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics committee and conducted using a mixed method approach that yielded qualitative data through the use of asynchronous online focus groups and semi-structured interviews. In the previous chapter, the need for research to address *how* the NZFS could foster the promotion of fire safety through social media was identified and this contributed to the rationale for using a qualitative research design that focuses on individuals' ways of thinking. This is better positioned to formulate an understanding of young New Zealand adults' relationships with social media technology, particularly since the thesis theorises these relationships through such concepts as individualised relevance structures, control and comfortable temperature of engagement, and the generation of social capital—which are unquantifiable concepts. Further, a combination of focus groups and individual interviews were used in order to draw out processes and normative understandings behind collective judgments (Williams & Robson, 2004), as well as individual understandings at work in participants' relationships with social media technology.

Key ideas discussed in the previous chapters were used to shape questions posed to participants. These related to individual social media uses generally, connections with others for support and information reasons, level of comfort associated with social media use, relationship with businesses and organisations through social media, and questions about fire safety knowledge and possibilities for the NZFS. These questions in both the focus groups and semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit discussion on participants' relationship with social media in general—valuable to explore and test out the theoretical approach introduced in the previous chapters, and also to contextualise their knowledge and attitudes towards fire safety and the NZFS to help towards building a specific framework for the NZFS. Please see *Appendix 1* and *Appendix 2* for questions used in the research. In the chapters following, observations and discourse analysis of this material are used to draw out how ways of thinking embedded in the participants' social context are shaping the way they use and respond to social media, and the importance of this for the NZFS.

#### **Methodology in detail**

Four specific demographic groups were identified as target groups for this research due to their previous identification as high users of social media (Smith et al., 2010), and association with lower socio-economic status which has been said to have both direct and indirect links with fire safety, increasing their risk to fire danger and making them harder to influence (CRESA, 2005; Chalmers, 2000). These groups were:

- Tertiary students in rented accommodation
- Young Pasifika adults
- Young Asian adults
- Single mothers.

Suitable respondents were contacted for each of the target groups and asked to participate in the research. Some potential respondents were contacted by the researchers, while others were contacted by other respondents of the same target group. Mostly, this was done online through Facebook, Trade Me forums, and SkyKiwi (a New Zealand-based Chinese community) with some offline contacts also used. Effectively, this drew on a ‘snowballing’ method characteristic of offline focus group recruitment where population sampling is not random, allowing for contacts of participants to also take part (Williams and Robson, 2004). More central to the theoretical underpinnings of this research though, was the method’s ability to demonstrate the existence and use of social networks.

Participation in the asynchronous online focus groups was rewarded with monetary compensation of a \$20 supermarket voucher. Further compensation was given to those who also participated in an individual semi-structured interview. Participation in the focus groups required participants to attend via an online Facebook event and respond to all of the discussion points (a total of six) in the group (with the exception of single mothers, the pilot group who were required to contribute to a minimum of three). The researcher contacted selected participants from here and carried out semi-structured interviews with them.

Focus group sizes varied slightly across the participant-types, with 12 in each of the students’ and single mothers’ focus groups, 10 in the young Pasifika adults’ focus group, and 8 in the young Asian adults’ focus group. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 4 participants from each focus group. Both the focus groups and interviews were conducted by the researcher of this thesis. These focus groups and interviews took place between November 2011 and February 2012.

### **Using asynchronous focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews**

Williams and Robson (2004) stated that strengths of asynchronous focus groups afforded by an online environment include enabling participants more time to carefully construct and consider their responses—a luxury less afforded in synchronous communication, and that larger numbers of participants could be better managed. In this research there was no cap on the frequency or length of discussion made, or rigid requirements for when this took place. This enabled communication more closely aligned with a natural process as it may occur on a social media platform, rather than a more controlled focus group that would make the circumstances more artificial.

One of the first documented studies using asynchronous online focus groups was conducted by Murray (1997, cited in Williams and Robson, 2004). He found that a weakness in his method was illuminated by a too high a level of questioning by the researcher that led to serial direct responses rather than stimulating discussion among the participants. This provided a caution that questions for this research needed to be carefully formulated to best engage with the target groups, and to make them as succinct as possible.

Another advantage highlighted by Williams and Robson (2004) was that online focus groups provided anonymity. This is not the case on Facebook, where participants used their personal profiles to engage in the focus groups. Using Facebook as a platform for the research required careful consideration of potential ethical limitations such as these, and the lack of previous academic research that could provide a precedent for the method served as another limitation. Other concerns centred on ownership of content and ability for group members to invite other members to join the group (Paynter, 2011). Nevertheless, these issues of a blurred public and private space and decentralised control in the medium are key characteristics of social media. The actual communication process was of equal importance to this research as the dialogue elicited from the focus groups. For this reason, it was necessary that the focus groups be conducted in a social media environment that was as minimally artificial as possible. Facebook was selected for its dominance as a social media platform—as has been discussed in previous chapters—in order to make the focus groups most accessible and comfortable for participants. It was also noted that situating the focus groups on Facebook may have excluded some social media users without Facebook accounts from participating, and skewed discussion towards uses of Facebook.

Semi-structured interviews with individual participants were a necessary supplement to the focus groups. This was due to discussion in the first chapter that pointed to individualised relevance structures as a central theme for user interaction with social media. Indeed, Jones recognised that grouping people together online for research is one that ignores the reality of the individualistic participation in the social nature of the medium (2010). It was anticipated that discussion from individualised interviews would help further contextualise how individuals understand, use, expect to use and would like to use social media. These interviews were conducted over Skype or telephone which lowered the barrier to participation by eliminating the need to travel for the interview and allowing participation from the comfort of one's home or chosen environment that is familiar and safe (Mann and Stewart, 2003). Mann and Stewart discussed issues with building rapport during online interviews (2003). However, their discussion was based on text-based interviews that predate the convergence of phone calls and video calling online which Skype enables. It was still important to note, though, that these interviews operated in a reduced cue

environment compared to one where the interviewer and interviewee are physically present together and this may have had an impact on establishing rapport.

### **General Research Design Strengths and Limitations**

The internet is a complex, and as yet, largely undisciplined field for inquiry (Baym and Markham, 2009). This must be emphasised as it implicitly as well as explicitly impacts the discussion, research and findings of this thesis. As Baym and Markham wrote, “chasing the new in an academic context is in many ways a lost cause: There is no way to keep ahead of the ever-shifting postmodern subject living in interwoven political, economic, and social contexts that are media saturated” (2009: xiv). Despite this, valuable and lasting contributions can still be made to this field of inquiry by solidly grounding research in theoretical literature and drawing parallels with other contemporary research (ibid).

According to Baym (2009), exemplary qualitative internet research adheres to a number of inter-related strengths. These include grounding research in theory and data, the use of multiple strategies for data collection, and considering the “interconnections between the internet and the life-world within which it is situated” (179). The research design for this thesis had these criteria at the forefront. The methodology was carefully constructed to test theoretical frameworks outlined in the first chapter as well as sustaining an open and reflexive exploratory process that can reflect on social media practices by the target groups in an environment that is as minimally artificial as possible. This, combined with a multiple method approach of gathering data, works towards a recognition of understanding the actualities of social media use. Maintaining a clear focus on the actualities and the context within which participants see themselves as operating reduces the risk of making inferences based on hypothetical situations and possibilities that may not be realised (Boyd, 2009).

The research design for this thesis was again complicated by its purpose to provide the NZFS with robust recommendations for how they might use social media most successfully. So, while the research conducted is anchored most strongly to the certainties of how social media is currently used, discussion of possibilities was a necessary research component and it is recognised by this researcher that such findings must be treated with caution, and that inferences based on this information are inevitably weaker.

Another delicate tension of this research was in conceptualising the internet as a place. Baym stated that “offline contexts always permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experience. The best work recognizes that the internet is woven into the fabric of the rest of life and seeks to better understand the weaving” (2006: 86). Likewise, Boyd noted:

*The difficulty with this egocentric network view [of social media] is that there's no overarching set of norms or practices; instead, each node reveals an entirely different set of assumptions. This issue is quite noticeable when researchers (including myself) have foolishly tried to discuss the blogosphere or MySpace as a continuous cultural environment only to be challenged by other blind researchers looking at the elephant's trunk or ear (2009: 27).*

It is this constant state of flux that lends itself better to a qualitative rather than quantitative research approach. Indeed, Baym and Markham stated that “qualitative research requires a tolerance for chaos, ambiguity, and inductive thinking” (2009: ix). Conducting qualitative research in a context that lacks an overarching set of norms or practices holds the risk of the researcher becoming overwhelmed by the sheer breadth and depth of findings. This necessitates that practical boundaries must be drawn to effectively conduct research, and that a balance must be struck between this requirement and the recognition that other relevant paths of inquiry will be unexplored in the same research (Baym, 2009).

With these tensions in mind, this research drew practical boundaries by defining the participants demographically, aligning these characteristics with groups of people identified elsewhere as high-risk for fire safety. It also required that participants take part in an asynchronous focus group environment on Facebook, whereby anonymity was not possible, and that a minimum number of interactions within the focus group were compulsory. These boundaries produce limitations in that they are artificially created and not necessarily reflective of how the participants might act outside of the research environment. However, some boundaries were kept purposefully loose in order to minimise the artificial nature of the research environment. This was done by not specifying how participants recruited others for participation, not monitoring whether the recruited participants met the demographic criteria for the focus group, and not moderating the comments within the focus group. While this brings about other limitations, such as that the researcher cannot say with full certainty whether all participants of a specific focus group are representative of the participant-types, it is more aligned with a realistic use of social media and this is deemed as of greater importance to the researcher.

In the following two chapters, a detailed overview of specific observations from the research is given. The first chapter covers generally what participants have said they are doing with social media, while the second chapter looks more specifically at participants' perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication. After these chapters, this thesis then turns to apply these findings to literature and theory detailed previously in order to theorise an understanding of social

media practices for young New Zealand adults and to envisage how the NZFS might successfully use social media to promote fire safety.

## **Chapter 4: Understanding communication practices with social media**

In this chapter, results from the asynchronous focus groups and semi-structured interviews have been used to produce general observations of all participants in forming an understanding of communication practices with social media. Please note that unless stated otherwise, references to participants' discussion refers to discussion in the focus group pertaining to their participant-type. All participants' names have been changed to honour confidentiality of their participation, and participant-types are sometimes referred to in short-hand as per the following:

- Tertiary student living in rental accommodation = students
- Young adults who are single mothers = single mothers
- Young Asian Adults = Asian
- Young Pasifika Adults = Pasifika

### **What do participants say they are doing with social media?**

Observations from the research conducted demonstrate three general findings of what participants say they do with social media. These are: 1) that Facebook was the most used social media platform; 2) that social media is commonly used socially to keep in touch with friends and family; 3) while social media is primarily used for social purposes, informational and/or practical purposes play a notable role for some participants. Details and nuances across participant-types will be covered in more detail below.

#### **1. Facebook was the most used social media platform**

Across all groups of participants, it was apparent that Facebook was the most often used social media platform. Given that the focus group research took place on Facebook, it is likely this factor influenced the findings however this result was anticipated regardless of this, and supports pre-existing statistical evidence of Facebook's dominance as a social media platform and of the wider internet, as discussed in previous chapters. Indeed, Facebook was chosen as the platform on which to conduct this research due to the likelihood that it would be most accessible and familiar for participants. The supremacy of Facebook use was made clear by participants' implicit reference of Facebook as they talked about their social media use. It seemed to be a taken-for-granted assumption that people would understand they were referring to Facebook and its functions without needing to identify Facebook as the platform or fully explain the context of this.

This was apparent in how people described the typical ways that they use social media. For example, Kristen (single mother) wrote that *"I think I'm mainly a background Lurker but also an occasional poster. I think it's a great way to keep in touch and up to date with those because of life's twists and turns you could easily lose contact with. I only really started using my Facebook*

account... ”<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Kristie (student) described the social media functions she used: *“I like how it is a quick and easy way to see what people have been up to all in one place. I mainly use it for the chat function and to comment/like other peoples status’s, links and photo’s and only post something about once a week”*. Evident in both of these descriptions is the presumption that the audience reading their accounts will understand the social media they are referring to without needing to clarify it. Kristen referenced Facebook part way into her description, while Kristie did not reference Facebook at all. Presumptions of a common understanding of Facebook were embedded in many others’ descriptions, for example Brett in the young Asian adult focus group, and Derek in the young Pasifika adult focus group. In addition to these trends, Facebook was also often referred to in an abbreviated form as ‘FB’ or ‘fb’: This further signified the prevalence of Facebook use by an assumed understanding that ‘FB’ refers to Facebook.

Social media use frequency descriptions were reasonably varied and there was no obvious pattern characteristic to the different types of participants, but they all served to indicate the prevalence of social media in their lives. Many used ‘day’ as a measure of their frequency when asked about this in interviews. For example, Katherine (single mother) wrote that she updates her status *“at least once a day”* and Jessica (student) said she checks it *“at least twice a day”* while some used it less frequently than this such as Tara who wrote *“I usually check Facebook every 1-2 days for updates”*. Philip’s response asking to clarify the question with *“as in like how many hours a day kind of thing?”* demonstrated the regular frequency with which he used social media. In the focus group responses, regular usage of Facebook seemed to be implied in participants’ responses. This is made particularly evident by those who said they would feel lost without it (or similar), for example Katherine (single mother) and Michelle (student), or those who said they would have to rely on different forms of media to communicate if they did not have social media—for example Andrea (single mother), Allison (Pasifika).

## **2. Social media is commonly used socially to keep in touch with friends and family**

In describing the typical ways participants themselves use social media, the most common articulated use was to keep in touch with friends and family. For example Lauren (single mother) wrote: *“I generally use social media to share photos and updates with family and friends who are spread all over the world”*. Similar admissions were made by Angela, Kelly, Lisa, Katherine and Mary in the single mother focus group. This was also expressed similarly in the young Pasifika adult focus group, for example Allison wrote: *“I use social media to keep in contact with family and friends on Facebook”*. Similar comments mentioning both family and friends were made by Derek, Anna, Tara, Kayla, Shawn and Victoria.

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<sup>1</sup> Written discussion from the online focus groups has been used verbatim in this thesis.

This trend was articulated slightly differently by students living in rental accommodation, who spoke more of using it to keep in contact with friends and acquaintances and not for family, for example Kristie described how *“It is the main way I catch up with everyone”* and Michelle stated that *“I use it to keep up to date and communicate with friends”*. Similar comments mentioning friends or nonspecific about the type of people social media was used to keep up to date with were made by Erin, Amber, Danielle, Jessica and Rachel.

For young Asian adults, the trend was somewhere in between with some identifying friends and family, and others being less specific. For example Monica wrote that social media is *“a great way to keep in touch with people who live afar or are travelling”*, while Natasha said: *“I treated this social media to communicate with friends and families from home”*. Similar comments about using social media to keep in touch with people were made by Patricia, Brett and Philip.

As these examples across all focus group participants illustrate, the common theme is that participants used social media as a tool to stay in touch with people who played a pre-existing part in their lives. In this way, they implied that social media has helped them to continue their relationships with greater ease than other modes of communication. Another frequent reference made in the above examples was that the friends and family they communicate with using social media are geographically distant, implying that using social media or Facebook specifically has helped to further break down the barrier of physical location to keeping in touch with those that are important to them. Later in this chapter, this point will be covered more under the section “What makes social media as a communication tool unique” in analysis of why social media is perceived to be a convenient and flexible communication tool.

### **3. While social media is primarily used for social purposes, informational and/or practical purposes play a notable role for some participants**

Several patterns emerged from participants’ responses that indicate social media is primarily used for social purposes. Many interviewees were asked what percentage of their social media use they would estimate was for information or knowledge seeking purposes rather than purely social purposes. Amongst the young Asian adult participants, Holly and Philip estimated a much higher use for social purposes—Holly said that she used it for *“just social”* reasons only, while Philip explained how *“quite a few of the companies don’t have Facebook pages yet. So... it’s just easier to go onto their web page”*. Contrary to this, Patricia and Brett both estimated their social media use for informational or practical reasons would be 70%. Brett explained how *“I’d probably say like 70/30 like I suppose I do Facebook stalk a wee bit but it’s usually for events, birthdays stuff like that – to set stuff up, or check when things are and things like that”*.

The young Pasifika adult interviewee responses were similar. Anna estimated her use of social media for informational reasons would be about 30%, and she explained how it was useful that *“I go on our nursing page everyday though. Just especially with the earthquake because we’re right in the city and we might get moved out to Lincoln so it’s good to see what’s happening”*. Tara made a similar estimation of *“about 75% social and the rest informational”*. Allison, a high social media user estimated her use would be an even split: *“maybe like 50/50. Because you know like I’ll... sometimes I’ll go on Twitter to ask a question or something... Or I just like like people’s experiences, but then I do like my own updates and stuff.”* Likewise, Shawn believed his use of social media was fairly evenly split between social and informational purposes, estimating *“maybe 50/50”*.

Students articulated an even higher level of use of social media for social reasons. Jessica said that *“including events and things probably about 10% [informational reasons] I’d say, so not really a hell of a lot”*. Danielle’s response was similar, estimating *“purely social would most likely be 85 – 90% I’d have to say”*. Amanda’s estimate for informational purposes was slightly higher at *“like a quarter or a third kind of thing... the rest, three quarters would just be keeping up with what’s happening and that sort of thing”*.

As will be made evident through discussion to come, the use of social media for social versus informational reasons was not as easy to separate for single mothers. Katherine’s response indicated that she used social media for both reasons while seemingly placing more significance on the ‘social’: *“I mean it’s about the social as well but I do sometimes you know, look for information on there as well. It’s sort of half and half really”*. Nicky estimated she uses social media more for informational reasons at 75%, but as a means of providing information to others rather than seeking it. Andrea did not estimate a figure, but elaborated with an example of how she used social media in an information-seeking way:

*Not long ago I asked about my three year old being such a tantrum thrower and you know what to do with her and that, and as someone said which is true—ignore the negative behaviour and praise the positive. So things like that can be very informative and very good because you have people have been there and done that you know.*

Philip wrote: *“but quite a few of the companies don’t have Facebook pages yet”*, and his use of the words ‘but’ and ‘yet’ connote an understanding that he imagines that companies will have Facebook pages in the future. Some of the responses of social versus informational use cited above were not obviously reflected in the participants’ other responses, and it is suggested that this may be because reasons for social media use are fluid. Participants’ discussion suggests that popular uses may be in a transitional mode trending towards greater weight in informational purposes. This

may not be at the cost of social purposes, but in addition to them and blurring the boundary between the two, increasing individual time spent using social media.

For example, some interviewees who were less articulate about their use of social media for informational purposes were also asked if they have, or would consider connecting directly with a business or organisation via social media. Generally, participants answered that this was something they had not really done but that they would not have a problem doing, indicating that they had not given much consideration to using this channel of communication for such purposes. Jessica (a student) said that:

*Um no I haven't but if it was a specific thing with a specific company then I wouldn't have a problem going and using social media through them and maybe seeing if other people had had similar things, and social media might be quite useful to see if other people had been in similar situations.*

Shawn (Pasifika) and Michael (student) also indicated that they would use social media for these purposes, but that using the search engine Google to seek an answer is a more familiar action:

*If it was actually running then I'd definitely use it. Like there's quite a few websites especially like computer-orientated ones where they have like an online person who you can chat with if you've got a problem like with your cell phone and stuff... I don't think they do that in New Zealand yet. I'd definitely use it, otherwise I'd just like Google search or post on Facebook if I had a problem. (Shawn)*

On the flip side, a few participants reported already using social media to engage directly with businesses, causes and organisations. For example, Patricia (young Asian adult) explained in an interview how *"I have done that like on Twitter. Like I think tweeting an online shopping company or something or just a music store or whatever—they do you have this in stock today... I'm perfectly fine with that. Twitter is fine because it's more anonymous"*. Young Pasifika adults articulated a more diverse set of uses that fitted into this category in the focus group. For example, Maria wrote how she joined a Facebook page *Against Newmarket Cotton Page*, and Allison wrote how she left feedback on companies Facebook pages such as *The Warehouse* and *Mighty Ape*.

While people did not generally tend to consider social media as an obvious channel for communication between themselves and organisations, their references to other ways they used social media implied that they were already doing something close to this, but in a more social way. For example, although Jessica said she had not explicitly interacted with organisations using social media she said that she likes to engage with *The Healthy Food Guide*:

*I like that they share their recipes and post interesting articles about food and health on Facebook; this is because it relates to my studies and main interests... there is no particular reason for this other than my main interest in social media is keeping up with friends.*

Shawn too said that he used his Facebook news feed “almost as like an actual news feed... so like [I follow] Al Jazeera, CNN, 3 news, Stuff.co.nz so it’s just interesting articles that come up.” He also stated that he likes businesses like Dick Smith on Facebook because “usually they post deals on their Facebook and it just comes up in my news feed”.

Indeed, many made reference to interacting with businesses using social media because of special deals available to them for doing so (for example, Andrea, Philip, Danielle, and Anna even makes purchases through social media, preferring to shop online than in physical stores). Danielle also explained that she tended to interact with businesses using social media to enter competitions, but after the competition ended “you’d keep getting all these updates that’d clog up your news feed about things that you weren’t particularly interested in so that’s when I’d tend to make the cull [‘unlike’ the Facebook page] really”. So although there was some interaction taking place, for these participants this was as a consumer and the interest to engage with businesses and organisations beyond this role was minimal. Jessica may well be representative of these participants’ thoughts when she said “there is no particular reason for this [low engagement with businesses and organisations on social media] other than my main interest in social media is keeping up with friends”.

Allison (Pasifika) and Patricia (Asian) were two participants that used social media in uncharacteristically sophisticated ways. Single mothers were also unique among the groups in their social media use, utilising more social media platforms for social and informational purposes. It seemed that these more sophisticated social media users were better able to articulate the differences between using social media for different means, and to identify forms of social media use that were better suited to these different purposes. For example, both Allison and Patricia were regular users of Twitter and they identified this in interviews as a more appropriate social media platform for seeking practical advice and engaging directly with businesses and organisations than Facebook. Allison said she witnesses people doing this a lot on Twitter “but not so much on Facebook... because you know you tweet a lot and I see people asking questions and then like you know they’ll say “is this shop open today?”... or “where do you find this?”—and then if I know I’ll help them”. Similarly, Patricia said how “Twitter is fine because it is more anonymous”.

Single mothers seemed to blur the line more between using social media for social and informational purposes. As high frequenters of forums and message boards, they tended to engage

with other mothers and this common ground provided both social interaction and informational advice when needed. For example, Andrea said this about message boards in an interview:

*If you're asking things about your baby what's this or what's that at the time if you can't ring family or friends it's very handy because you get instant answers from a lot of other parents. So it's very good for stuff like if your kids are sick and that and you think do I take them to the doctor is it normal and stuff like that.*

Katherine compared using the search engine Google to find answers compared with using social media in an interview:

*I do Google but sometimes Google's not really your friend a lot of the time you know you want more so personal experience from people who may have gone through something similar, or you know just things like that sometimes it's better to get it from an actual person than an actual internet site.*

This dialogue echoes what Jessica imagined might be possible when she discussed how she had not specifically sought out information from businesses or organisations through social media but that she considered that “social media might be quite useful to see if other people had been in similar situations”. As previously highlighted, although acknowledging the potential for social media to be used in this way, using the search engine Google to seek information was still articulated to be the online method of choice for Shawn and Michael. These different perspectives not only demonstrate discrepancies in participants’ social media use, but they also paint a picture of the potential held by social media to be used constructively for information seeking and collective knowledge purposes, as illustrated earlier by Levy’s theory of collective intelligence (2005).

## **What makes social media as a communication tool unique?**

In forming an understanding of what makes social media as a communication tool unique for the participants studied, it was clear that there were: 1) pronounced differences amongst the focus groups in conceptualising using social media for advice and support means; 2) that the style of communication on social media can be useful but not without some drawbacks. These findings will be covered in greater detail below.

### **1. There were pronounced differences amongst the focus groups in conceptualising using social media for advice and support means**

This observation is linked closely with one in the previous section that covers how social media is primarily used for social purposes, but that informational purposes can play a part in social media use. Advice and support are concepts that by definition scatter the line between these two uses because they may be sought or provided for social and/or informational purposes. The previous

section of analysis illustrated how using social media for information reasons was unfamiliar yet plausible for some while others demonstrated they already used it in this way. This evidence helps to explain why advice and support with social media may be conceptualised differently across the focus groups, given this gap in articulated social media use for social and informational reasons.

In each focus group, participants were asked to talk about the different roles of giving advice and support to others and of receiving it using social media, and to draw on examples if possible to help illustrate their discussion. The responses to this question demonstrated pronounced differences across the four participant-types. Broadly speaking, young Asian adults and single mothers talked positively of the merits of being able to do this with social media while young Pasifika adults and students living in rental accommodation were more hesitant about using social media for these means.

Although both spoke positively of using social media for advice and support means, there were also clear differences of how social media was used for these purposes between young Asian adults and single mothers. Young Asian adults spoke of engaging social media for practical reasons, and for its ability to yield feedback from many people who collectively had a wide range of experience and knowledge to draw on. For example, Monica wrote:

*It's like an open forum but of people you know, even if they aren't close friends. So basic questions like "who knows of a good hairdresser because mine has left town?" – you'll get answers and recommendations that are often honest and genuine (because they wouldn't respond otherwise), and of a range more vast than if you just asked friends when you saw them (which may not be very often especially when you need an answer relatively quickly).*

Others echoed how social media served to be “*more productive than a one to one conversation*” (Holly, Natasha), as a way of “*getting more opinions, and more knowledge, as well as a consensus of what the majority trusts/knows*” (Patricia). Philip reaffirmed this by explaining how it:

*really widens your informations circle as people around you may have the same idea as they were brought up the same way as you but being connected with other people from other countries gives you the edge to get the best idea for a problem... My personal experience is when I was having my knee reconstruction surgery I got told I had to use either my petal tendon or ham string to replace my torn ACL. But a friend over in Aussie via fb suggested that there are synthetic options which cut down the recovery time from a year to just 6 months.*

The responses given by single mothers suggested that their usage of social media for advice and support reasons was far more integrated into their overall habitual use of it, unlike young Asian

adults who seemed to engage it for these purposes when required. A dominant theme across all participants in the single mother group was their role as a parent, and many expressed how they used social media to alleviate feelings of isolation, and to talk to other adults while being at home with children. For example, in interviews Katie said that using social media helps her to “*feel less isolated*” from being able to connect “*with other adults, because I spend—I’m a stay home parent, and also a single Mum, and so—even though it’s not talking it’s interaction with adults*”. Nicky alluded to this also by saying “*sometimes it’s kind of hard to get out and stuff with little ones and things*”, and likewise Andrea said “*it’s very handy if you’re sitting at home, especially when you’re feeding your baby you can’t do much but sit there and go on the message board or Facebook you know*”.

In the examples provided by single mothers of ways they use social media for advice and support, most of them did so in the context of parenting support. More pronounced differences that separated single mothers from other focus groups were their engagement with people they did not previously know outside of social media, and their use of social media in anonymous settings. Using forums and message boards such as the Trade Me message board was frequently mentioned, for example Courtney said:

*Parenting threads / message boards definately. I don’t have many friends with children the same age as mine – all quite a bit older or quite a bit younger. Good to have support / ideas from people going through the same thing at the same time.*

Likewise, Mary said:

*I have got great advice from parenting messageboards. Being a first time mum has been great getting advice from other parents, for example when my son had a bad head cold got advice on feeding & how to unblock his nose etc.*

Like young Asian adults, single mothers also recognised the merit of being able to draw on the collective experiences of a wide range of people. This is implied in the answers above, and Nicky articulates this more overtly in an interview:

*A lot of my friends have girls and stuff. And so boys are completely different to girls and things, it’s quite you’ve got a wider network and that and stuff, and people that have quite often or I might have been through something that they’ve gone through, had to dealt with and you can sort of get advice like mental guidance and things.*

In addition to using forums and message boards, some single mothers also mentioned how they had joined support groups through social media. For example, Katherine explained how she joined a

*“due January 2011” support group that she found useful for support that went beyond parenting help. She said that “any advice to do with anything I felt I could go to them, or they could come to, and I found it easier as I guess I knew them well over the forum but I didn’t know them that well that I would be uncomfortable with it”. She also explained in an interview how her son was born with a heart condition and she joined an online support group specific to that condition and in doing so she “meet[s] people from other countries like, I talk to people from America who have the same condition as my son has and you know, it’s kind of different over there of how Americans and New Zealanders do stuff in regards to um heart conditions etc.”*

While forums and message boards played a dominant role in how single mothers used social media, Facebook was also referenced in advice and support seeking purposes. Again, mothers mentioned being part of more private groups on Facebook—for example Katie, who said *“there’s a couple of groups about breastfeeding that I’ve joined on Facebook... so I’ve posted a couple of questions in those groups to get ideas and advice from other breastfeeding Mum’s”*. Katherine also explained in an interview how her support group for mothers with babies due in January 2011 was formed on Trade Me *“but we made a Facebook group, so now we just talk on Facebook”*. Katie also detailed in an interview how she engaged with pre-existing friends on Facebook for advice and support reasons, saying how:

*I’m often surprised when people I’m friends with but don’t really know very well are helpful, particularly those people that I haven’t seen since primary school but I’m friends with them on Facebook and I’ll post something on there and they’ll have advice or something to offer is often a bit surprising.*

Utilising an existing network of friends was the primary perspective that students living in rental accommodation considered when addressing the focus group question relating to advice and support. Their responses tended to treat using social media for these purposes of advice and support with caution, and many detached themselves from their explanation—talking vaguely about people in general. For example, Michael said *“giving advice over social media is hard, as it more often requires the use of face to face interactions”* and Heather talked about how it can be useful for:

*Some people [that] may feel more awkward having to chat to people face to face, especially if it’s something embarrassing. With social media it enables them to ask embarrassing questions anonymously and receive advice on what to from people that have been, or are in a similar situation, and because social media helps you connect with people from all over the world you’re more likely to find someone who understands what*

*you're talking about. For example, lots of people ask questions on Yahoo stating that they're "Too embarrassed to tell anyone".*

Like the responses from the young Asian adults, Heather identified how social media can be useful but did not disclose whether this related to her own experiences. Further, both she and Michael appeared to orient the question around advice and support of a personal nature rather than for practical purposes, and this was typical of many other student participants too. For example Kristie articulated that she thinks social media can be good for this *"provided the advice/support isn't too personal, otherwise I think it isn't appropriate to discuss it publicly on facebook or twitter where everyone can see who you are"*. Danielle revealed that she thinks *"supporting others via social media is becoming a common reality. When people are sick, have lost a loved one etc. I always see an outpouring of support through their social media sites, because their friends can now more readily see when they are going through difficult times"*. Similarly, Sreekari distanced herself from seeking advice or support from social media but understood why others might do so:

*I would much rather get advice or support in person or on the phone if I'm away from people I feel comfortable with. However I know it's a lot easier for people to post things up online as a release... In this case social media sites can be great because anyone who wants to support them may do so.*

Some also expressed opposition to the idea of using social media for advice or support. For example, Amanda stated: *"Often on Facebook, people like to regularly update everyone with news that they are sad or angry so that they receive sympathy and feel like someone cares about them. This practice can get very annoying when you realise that most people are just attention seeking..."* Likewise, further discussion in an interview with Michael revealed that he believed that *"personally I think they've just got to man up and take it... if there's a question you're too embarrassed to ask, just man up and ask it in person."* When asked to consider using social media for advice and support in a more practical sense on impersonal issues he said *"stuff like that I would first try research it but if I couldn't find any research and I needed a bit of help that way then... something that's like really trivial I would be fine with"*.

Different again, Young Pasifika adults tended to consider both personal and practical forms of advice and support when addressing the focus group question. Like students, they were generally hesitant about using social media for more personal types of support. Victoria noted that *"Sometimes statuses seeking advice or support on FB is better off being done by private messages as I've seen some nasty messages bandied about by people. Dirty laundry should be aired in private at times"*. Jared echoed this sentiment by saying *"I would say talk face to face for advice*

*that's personal, don't go posting your problems all over facebook. but for other things facebook is good you can get a lot of different opinions".*

Tara explained in the focus group how *"some of my friends will post status updates about how for eg. they have broken up with a partner or someone close to them has died. I feel this is personal so will send a private message rather than comment directly to the status update"*. In an interview, she elaborated on why this was the case:

*I just think social media's more of a public kind of a space. And I just only ever... yeah, I don't know I guess it's just my own personal beliefs and how I've been brought up. I've been brought up in a quite conservative household kind of thing. And my parents are like 'oh don't go putting anything you know, online' or you know even about family matters like family business is private.*

Anna held a similar view, describing how *"I would not use my status updates or write openly on any of my friends pages to give advice or support, i would sent a private message for that"*.

In addition to a trend towards believing expressions that are personal or emotional should be communicated privately, young Pasifika adults articulated many other means less personal in nature by which they use social media for support. For example, Anna explained how she is part of a private group on Facebook for her nursing class:

*at the moment we are all having trouble with choosing the best textbook for one of our courses, and through posting questions on our page, we have all come to the agreement that the "other" textbook is better. If I didn't have access to our site through social media I may have brought both books, so I find the advice and support very helpful.*

Others gave examples of using status updates to *"get more than one opinion from people with different experiences at once"* (Derek). For example, Maria wrote that *"I recently just posted a status 'what is the niuean word for flower' and got three replies back. I think social media, or FB at least, is useful for this sort of advice, or for asking people's opinions on things (twitter is also helpful for opinions)"*. Like Maria, Allison wrote that *"I find on Twitter it is very helpful and easy to ask a simple question and have it answered quickly!"*.

Making use of Facebook pages was also mentioned by young Pasifika adults, the only focus group to do so in answer to this question. Marcus wrote how *"receiving information during big earthquakes was quite well done over facebook I thought. After seeing some of the photos of parts of town like sumner with the rock falls on these [Facebook] pages, thats aaaaall the advice i needed not to go there!!"*. Maria wrote how *"support can come from creating a facebook page,*

*e.g. the Against Newmarket Cotton Page that somebody set up, which generated over 1000 likes. I found this page via a fb friend, and it gives support to the victims". Tara also said how she will "join groups to show my support for others ---- eg. A Facebook group in support of the NZ victims in the earthquake in Haiti".*

Finally, YouTube was also mentioned by Allison and Tara in the young Pasifika adult focus group as useful for providing practical help. Allison said *"I love watching beauty videos on Youtube and getting advice/reviews on products I am considering buying. In the past I have watched videos on phone unboxing when considering a new phone to purchase". Tara wrote that "Also like Allison, I do like to watch beauty videos on youtube. They give good advice on how to do make-up/hair... I also do this when I have mechanical repairs (car) to do because it is valuable both financially and in terms of overall general knowledge".*

As demonstrated in this section, there were pronounced differences across the focus groups in conceptualising using social media for advice and support purposes, and in describing current practices. Students living in rental accommodation demonstrated the most narrow use and conceptualisation of this, while young Pasifika adults demonstrated the broadest understanding of all groups—considering both personal and practical forms of support, and articulating examples from across a range of social media. In the chapters to come, the importance of these differences will be explored more in theorising use of social media and developing a strategy framework for the NZFS.

## **2. The style of communication on social media can be useful but not without drawbacks**

In the focus groups and interviews, participants were asked questions about when they may feel more comfortable using social media than other communication tools, how their lives might be different without social media, and what things they did not like about social media. Discussion generated from these questions helped to form an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of using social media as a communication tool for them.

### ***2.1 Social media was used to reconnect with people participants would otherwise be out of touch with***

As briefly mentioned in section 1 of this chapter discussing how Facebook is commonly used socially to keep in touch with friends and family, connecting with those whom participants already had a pre-existing offline relationship with was expressed as an important function of social media for participants. Further, it was also mentioned that this was particularly useful for remaining connected with those who were geographically distant from participants. However, social media appears to have equipped people with far more than just a new tool to communicate with people

afar. It was also expressed as a way people have been able to reconnect with those they had lost touch with, or were unlikely to be in contact with otherwise:

*I don't have everyone on my cellphone or email so social media is quite handy. There are many acquaintances and I wouldn't have them on cellphone or email either* (Victoria, Young Pasifika Adult).

*Since it has become so popular, it is easier to find some long lost friends especially high school mates* (Natasha, Young Asian Adult).

*Social media is also good for getting in touch with people you haven't seen in a while for example someone you went to school with years ago but haven't seen since then* (Christina, student).

This point was commonly made in the student focus group, with Erin, Michael, Melissa, Jessica and Rachel acknowledging this similarly. This point was not explicitly mentioned by single mothers, although in an interview Katie spoke of her surprise “*when people I'm friends with but don't really know very well are helpful, particularly those people that I haven't seen since primary school but I'm friends with them on Facebook...*”. As will be discussed in the chapters to come, this observation is important in theorising how social media work to make individual networks more visible and open.

## **2.2 Social media can make communication with others less awkward**

Many students explained why social media can be useful for connecting with acquaintances by describing how it is “*slightly less awkward as letters and phone calls are generally for people who you wouldn't lose contact with*” (Michael). This theme of social media being a ‘less awkward’ style of communication was widely articulated across all focus groups. Maria (young Pasifika) explained the reasoning behind this when she said it is “*easier to use social media when it is somebody that you don't really talk to, but want to talk to, because you're not actually talking to them*”.

The asynchronous ability of some social media to create a sense of “not actually talking” to others appeared to be a key advantage for many in terms of making it a more comfortable style of communication with people they were less familiar with. Following are some examples that appear to be conveying this reasoning:

*It is just easier to type it in a non-personal setting such as facebook* (Diana, young Asian adult).

*I prefer using Facebook to talk to people I'm not that close a friends with. for example id like to know how they are doing, however, it won't worry me if they didn't reply, its a less demanding way of communicating for me (Marcus, young Pasifika adult).*

*casual communication in general as it is more accepted on social media as calling someone just to say hey what's up could be a bit odd if it is someone you don't talk to on a regular basis (Kristie, student)*

*I like the way you can choose who and what you respond to on facebook, and how you can choose when you respond (Amanda, student).*

In an interview, Danielle (student) explained how the distance created by social media in communication practices could also be useful for helping people that were part of her wider network: *"in terms of people knowing that they do have a support network it's easier to reach out to people when, if you otherwise wouldn't feel comfortable but with that small separation it could be a step towards at least making someone feel a little bit better"*.

Although single mothers did not talk along these lines when discussing how social media can be a more comfortable communication tool, their answers tended to centre on parenting advice and using message boards constructively in anonymous settings. Some examples to demonstrate:

*I think with messageboards sometimes its about being able to be anonymous. sometimes theres things that ya want opinions on but asking people you know could be embarresing (Mary)*

*its good to use messageboards for on-the-spot advice. sometimes if theres an embarrassing or personal question i don't want to take to family or friends it can be good to get an answer in a faceless environment like a messageboard. there have also been times when it feels like I have talked a topic to death with people who know me, so if i still need to talk about it, I take it to a messageboard to get more opinions/perspectives without hassling my friends any more! (Katie)*

*Definitely with parenting advice, or any advice that may be uncomfortable to say to someone in person (Katherine)*

The advantage of social media making communication less awkward was also expressed in terms of providing space to have a more reasoned discussion or debate than via communication in other means. For example, in an interview Anna explained why she thought social media is a useful tool for this:

*Sometimes you see people arguing and they get all 'blurb blurb' and they don't know what to say they go off on a tangent. But I think when you're writing something you can like pause and put the right words in and convey yourself in a good manner.*

In the young Asian adult focus group Monica also made the point how “*you can do it in your own time and aren't 'put on the spot' so can think about what you want to communicate*”. Erin (student) referenced how social media is good “*for this kind of thing*” (the focus group) because “*you are free to put responses that may be more difficult to say in real life*”. In a similar sense, Christina (student) wrote how:

*Confrontation over something is always alot easier in writing therefore if you have a problem with a friend it can sometimes be alot more civilised to discuss problems through a tool such as chat or mail on facebook. It gives you more time to react and respond to confrontation so that the problem can be resolved without the heat of a face to face argument. It can be alot easier to get your point across in this sense.*

While single mothers did not make reference to social media making communication easier for well-thought discussion, a few mentioned they liked it as a communication tool because they were shy in some situations. For example Erica wrote how “*I can be quiet shy around new people so being able to post without having to face people is great and I have met many people who I wouldnt have ever met had it not been for social media*”. Similarly, Nicky explained in an interview that “*I'm a little bit shy, so yeah no I think it's quite good because it's faceless and nameless and things [Trade Me message boards]*”. Alicia wrote that she felt more comfortable using social media “*pretty much in every situation... simply because I express myself far more comfortably through writing than through speech*”.

### **2.3 A lack of contextual information on social media can be a drawback**

As noted previously, single mothers appeared to have frequented anonymous social media environments such as message boards to a far greater extent than other participant groups. While this reflected in how they identified the strengths of using social media to communicate in comfortable ways, they were also able to draw on experiences from these that showed drawbacks to communicating in anonymous environments. For example Katie explained in an interview how “*on Trade Me it can get a bit vicious. You know like, people, I've been accused of being things that I'm not by people that have never met me*”. Equally, Nicky expressed in an interview that “*For the people that you don't know, some people can kind of say things that are not true, I guess... they can kind of be fake. Pretend they're someone that they're not.*” Andrea also echoed this sentiment in an interview when she remarked how message boards “*can get nasty and very very judgmental*”.

Participants from other groups also noted nuances when the existence or lack of contextual information alongside communication on social media illustrated inconsistencies that they did not like. Tara (young Pasifika adult) talked about how “*some people seem to have a different persona on social media than what they do in real life*” in an interview. She was of the opinion that “*it’s kind of like a cowardly way to—in some regards—to communicate*”, and illustrated this with an example:

*There’s this girl in my class she’s so quiet you’ll never hear anything out of her the whole year. And then on Facebook she’s got all these real slutty pictures of her, and um, she’ll like say all these real, this stuff trying to get a reaction from people you know? ... it’s just so far removed from what they are like in real life you know?*

In an interview, Patricia (young Asian adult) talked about her reluctance to use anonymous forms of social media for personal matters:

*Personal matters are really strange because people don’t know you... And even if you give somebody the context online, nobody knows exactly what you’re really like. So, yeah I mean I’ve had arguments with people I don’t know. But that’s the Internet for you.*

Other young Asian adult participants in the focus group also mentioned their dislike of textual-based social media to be misconstrued or take away from the experience of face-to-face communication. For example Natasha wrote how “*I still prefer to communicate face to face. You can called me old fashion as I do not want to spend longer time in front of PC. In fact, you can one’s facial expression whether one’s interested towards the response or not*”. Brett agreed with this sentiment, saying that “*things can be taken in a negative way if read the wrong way*”.

#### ***2.4 Social Media was commonly praised for its flexibility and convenience as a communication tool***

Despite recognition that social media has limitations in terms of the contextual information available for communication, participants more commonly praised the flexibility and convenience that communicating via social media afforded them. This was illustrated in an array of examples:

In the Pasifika focus group, Allison said “*I like the idea of having an ongoing conversation that you can come back to*”. She compared it to a better form of texting, because it is free and enables a person to share content via hyperlinks also. Similarly, Derek compared using social media to making a phone call: “*you don’t really have to commit to something like a phone call and a conversation can last for more than one day*”.

In the student focus group, the idea of an “ongoing conversation” akin to “casual communication” (Kristie) was also prominent. Heather wrote how “its easier to be able to send them a short message, go away do something, read their message, reply and so on. Also it generally can be done anywhere so even when you are busy you still have time to reply to them”. Rachel reinforced this: “I also feel more comfortable using it to casually communicate with close friends, such as asking about a friend’s day, or organising a time to hang out... Nothing too personal / emotional”. In an interview with Danielle, she elaborated on why she liked to use Facebook’s private messaging option specifically over other forms of communication such as email and Skype:

*It’s way more flexible and you can do it at any time of the day. Like I personally wouldn’t really want to skype anyone if it was late at night and I’m in my pyjamas and not really feeling like I want to see anyone, but Facebook yeah because it does have that separation and you can choose when you want to respond and it’s all up to you individually you feel like no-one’s controlling what you’re doing really.*

In the young Asian adult focus group, Monica also commented along these lines: “You can do it in your own time and aren’t ‘put on the spot’ so can think about what you want to communicate”. Likewise in an interview, Holly explained that “it’s not necessary to do it right there at that moment”.

This casual style of communication can be attributed to why some participants articulated their preference for using social media for practical benefits. For example, organising events or contacting a large number of people via social media was seen as a time saver for reaching people “all in the one spot rather than texts or phone calls going back and forth to one organiser” (Christina, student). Philip also emphasised this point in the young Asian adult focus group by explaining how it “means that you don’t have to repeat yourself with everyone”.

Anna (young Pasifika adult) described how she recently used social media “aka facebook” to organise a hen’s night. She explained she found it more comfortable to use “as it is easy and I had faster responses as to whether or not people were going to attend... I did not have to waste my time leaving messages and chasing guests up”. Remarks of a similar nature were made by Maria and Jared also in the young Pasifika adult focus group. In the student focus group, similar remarks were made by Jessica and Amanda, and Melissa detailed how she “found it particularly helpful when I was running fundraising events because I could post up information for people to read in their own time (if they wanted to) and join in”. This type of advantage was not explicitly discussed by single mothers.

Another value underscoring the preference to use social media for this type of communication appeared to be an expectation amongst participants that a response via social media was likely to be faster than from other communication tools. This was expressed by some single mothers as an advantage for using social media for support purposes. Erica talked about this in relation to the Christchurch earthquakes: *"Its great being able to jump on there [Trade Me forum] day or night especially after the large aftershocks and know that there will be others feeling the same way"*. Kelly also wrote that she had *"used messageboards when I have needed to know something & was likely to get a broad range of advice/opinion relatively quickly... You can get more info quickly by this type of communication."* Andrea echoed this as an advantage also, saying how *"it's very handy because you get instant answers from a lot of other parents"*. Similarly, in the student focus group Jessica wrote how she used social media *"if I want numerous people to know something asap"*. Michelle and Melissa referenced fast responses with social media also.

In the Asian focus group, Julia explained why being part of a Facebook group for her class was useful for reasons of speed and convenience: *"Think how hard it would be to track everyone down and ask them individually! It is actually far more convenient and quicker to do so rather than emailing or seeing a lecturer and asking them in person"*. In the young Pasifika adult focus group, Shawn wrote how he will use Facebook to contact someone *"if the person is notorious for not replying to txts"*, implying that Facebook could be a faster way to get in touch with someone than sending a text message. In the same focus group, Allison talked of using Twitter to have her questions answered quickly, and Anna noted how *"what I get the most out of social media is that I get to see current photos of my friends and family who have moved overseas, more frequently than if we were posting letters"*. Victoria also acknowledged how social media was faster than traditional forms of communication, but said she *"still enjoy[s] receiving emails and letters in the post"*.

Not only was a response expected faster on social media, but young Pasifika adult and student participants also alluded to an expectation that a response on social media was more likely than through other communication means. For example, in the young Pasifika adult focus group Maria wrote how she uses social media *"to connect with people I need to contact, because they either don't have mobiles, don't have credit, or don't check their emails"* likewise, Kayla wrote that *"I prefer to facebook people (if they're on facebook) rather than email because increasingly more people tend to check their facebook pages more often than email"*. Danielle (a student) also expressed in an interview that *"I find that Facebook private mailing has kind of overtaken email in a way. That's kind of the role that it plays for me anyway"*.

The points covered in this section paint a picture of a casual style of communication that participants feel comfortable using. Participants tended to like how social media afforded them the ability to come and go from a wider conversation, at their own leisure. Practical benefits of this communication in their own time saw a pattern of participants remarking that social media is easier for communicating with larger groups of people, such as when organising an event. Although social media was commonly understood as a casual style of communication to be done in one's own time, it was also expected that a response via social media would be faster than other forms of communication, and that social media was a more reliable tool to communicate with in general. All of these observations are held together by an understanding that is implicit in participants' discussion. That is, these participants regard social media as a central space for accessing their network of friends. Their answers work on their own knowledge, experience and presumptions that they are able to tap into their network via social media at their own time to attend to their own wishes and demands, and that others in their network will be doing the same, on a frequent basis.

### **3. Promotional-type communication is accessed by individuals when desired**

In the focus groups, participants were asked to talk about examples of businesses and organisations they like to engage with using social media, and why they perceived some to be better than others. Three patterns emerged from similar responses across the focus groups. These were: 1) participants liked to engage with those they already had an affiliation with; 2) participants or those known to participants were drawn by competitions and special deals offered; 3) businesses or organisations that posted too frequently or were heavily promotional were disliked. There were also trends evident within specific focus groups, as will be covered below.

#### ***3.1 Participants liked to engage with those they already had an affiliation with***

Commonly, participants remarked how they would 'like' (on Facebook) businesses or organisations they *"already like... and I wouldn't bother with companies that I don't already have positive feelings towards"* (Erin, student). Remarks similar to this were made by Patricia (young Asian adult), Derek, Kayla, Jared, and Allison and Shawn in interviews (young Pasifika adults), Christina and Michelle (students). This was a generalised claim, most prevalent amongst the young Pasifika adult and student participants.

Again, responses from the single mothers group were notably different to the other groups, with many participants stating they tended to connect more with smaller or at-home businesses, particularly those with a baby focus. For example, Angela wrote that *"I love connecting with at-home businesses, such as those making bibs, cloth nappies, etc"*. Similar claims were made by Katherine, Mary, Lisa and Lauren.

Other participant-types liked to engage with those who they would likely interact with offline. For example in the young Asian adult focus group, Monica wrote how *“for bars, it’s great to keep updated with bands or particular occasions they may be having, or drinks specials etc.”* In the young Pasifika adult focus group, Allison talked of how she engaged with businesses via social media that she had been a customer of to give them feedback, while Victoria engaged with the *Red Cross* and other organisations to sign up for voluntary work. Tara liked official Facebook pages for her *“favourite musicians/artists/writers as I like to know if/when they will tour NZS so I can get tickets/book etc”*. In the student focus group, Heather liked to engage with the organisations like the Court Theatre and Christchurch events because they *“post relevant updates letting you know whats coming up/whats happening”*, while Rachel engaged with the Student Volunteer Army because pages like these *“can keep you in the loop about events and things that are relevant to you / are localised for better relevance”*.

Other reasons given that demonstrated a personal interest in the business or organisation participants connected with using social media included because they were run by friends or family (Kayla, young Pasifika adult; Katie, single mother), and because they related to participants’ hobbies (such as Jessica who liked the Healthy Food Guide and Amanda who liked the Mercury Energy Tactix Facebook page—both students). Anna (young Pasifika adult) shopped for shoes on Facebook for a size that she was unable to find in physical stores, and Patricia (young Asian adult) followed the *New York Times* as a means for getting free access to their articles.

This tendency for participants to engage with businesses or organisations via social media that they had a genuine interest in appears to speak to a reluctance of participants to use this medium for more consumer or informational purposes, perhaps due to their orientation of social media use primarily around social motivations—as detailed previously in this chapter. Jessica (student) explained why her engagement with businesses or organisations on social media is low by stating *“there is no particular reason for this other than my main interest in social media is keeping up with my friends”*. The apparent need for a personal interest in a business or organisation before an individual will engage with them may be compounded by success for the business or organisation being more likely if there is an incentive offered and if they strike the right balance of engagement, as will be addressed in the following sections.

### ***3.2 Participants, or those known to participants, were drawn by competitions and special deals offered***

Many participants recognised that they, or people they knew, were drawn to engage with businesses or organisations by incentives such as special deals or competitions. Participants held mixed views on the use of this strategy. For example in the young Asian adult group, Philip liked

the online business 1day *“as they sometimes do special sales to people only on fb”*, while in an interview Brett explained how he knew people who liked pages to enter a competition but he was unsure if it was an effective tactic: *“I guess if they’re winning something they don’t really care they’re just like oh ‘like’ and then they’ll never read it again”*. He went on to explain that competitions or even being personally asked to like a page was not enough motivation for him to connect with businesses or organisations this way: *“it’s pretty impossible to get me to do anything like that”*. In an interview, Patricia was also sceptical of Facebook pages that used incentives such as competitions to encourage people to ‘like’ their page. She believed that people should want to keep in touch with the business or organisation if they like or follow it. Competitions lead to people without a genuine interest connecting with them and this was her *“beef with social media.”*

The single mothers group did not stress this point, although Andrea mentioned that she followed *“some pages of businesses that give away free stuff”* and Courtney expressed her dislike at the tactic: *“some get your attention and get you to ‘like’ with some fancy gimmick like a competition and then you never see them with an online presence again ie. you get the feeling they just want to get numbers to like them”*.

In the young Pasifika adult group, views to businesses and organisations using incentives were mixed also. Kayla wrote how *“sometimes my friends enter competitions and you have to ‘like’ the page before you can vote. After the competition I tend to ‘unlike’ the page”*. Conversely, Maria, Shawn and Marcus all described how incentives successfully worked to connect them with a business or organisation. For example, Maria wrote how *“I guess I only go on business pages that offer an incentive eg. Whittakers on Twitter. They offer a free block of chocolate for tweet of the week”*, while Marcus wrote how he has *“taken a liking to joining radio station groups. I can enter competitions online rather than having to join up and things like that... comps are free to join so why not”*.

No participant in the student focus group wrote anything to oppose the use of incentives by businesses and organisations to connect with them, while a couple mentioned they liked this. Kristie wrote how she likes *“engaging with new stuff that is happening, specials and competitions – like 1day and Tony Bianco shoes”* and similarly Christina described how those that post about competitions *“spark my interest more”*. In an interview, Danielle explained how she has connected with businesses on Facebook *“quite a bit when some of them had competitions and stuff and I wanted to enter things to win stuff you’d have to like ‘like’ their page or whatever”*.

While some participants expressed opposition to the use of incentives by businesses or organisations to connect with them via social media, many detailed how this had worked for them or others they knew. However, as alluded to by some examples provided and as will be detailed in

the next section, for businesses and organisations to successfully sustain a connection with people on social media, many participants felt they needed to do more than just offer an incentive for people to 'like' their page.

### ***3.3 Businesses or organisations that posted too frequently or were heavily promotional were disliked***

As exemplified by Kayla (young Pasifika adult) in the previous section that *"after the competition I tend to 'unlike' the page"*, and similarly by Danielle (student) in an interview, running a competition or offering an incentive to gain an initial connection with people via social media did not necessarily signify value in terms of communication between both parties. As Courtney (single mother) expressed in her dislike of the use of incentives, *"you get the feeling they just want to get numbers to like them"* and participants who sensed businesses or organisations were using social media in a heavily promotional way like this were deterred from engaging with them.

Single mothers especially were adverse to *"big businesses that seem to make posts, then log out"* (Angela), preferring smaller businesses because they felt they received a more personalised experience from them. For example Lisa wrote how smaller businesses are *"more likely to reply, (with a personal approach) not a scripted automatic type reply, or just leaving your comments/questions un answered like larger businesses or organisations seem to do"*. Kristen agreed with this sentiment, describing how *"I also like small/home businesses because they have personal pride in how their business is run so are more likely to go out of their way to ensure customer satisfaction!"*.

This theme of preferring businesses or organisations that took a more 'personal approach' to their social media communication was also present in the other focus groups. For example, in the student focus group Amanda explained how she likes *"engaging with the mercury energy tactix fb page as they treat you as an individual and are lovely... any that respond to each individual query are better than those who ignore or do not consider the clients individually important"*. Similarly, Kristie described how she likes *"those that make you feel involved and not just a target for advertising"*. In the young Pasifika adults focus group Allison and Maria both liked interacting with businesses that *"actually respond to you on their social media pages"* (Maria). Allison was detailed in her opinion of what makes some businesses and organisations using social media better than others, *"based on: interactivity, addressing issues/problems, being friendly, not posting passive aggressive status updates, posting regular and informative updates, varying content of updates – not just selling, but also sharing 'fluffy/random' updates or links etc"*. The value for Allison in 'fluffy/random' content speaks to the socially driven characteristic of the medium, which is of central importance to participants.

Participants held mixed views on the use of ads on social media. Some found these easy to ignore, for example Brett (young Asian adult) in an interview explained how he does not *“really mind the ads because I don’t really look at them, they don’t affect me”*. Similarly in the student focus group Rachel wrote that *“I ignore their ads down the side of pages”*. Others were less trusting of ads on social media, for example Diana (young Asian adult) mused how she would not bother with paid ads *“as somehow it just seems like they may not be as legitimate?? strange to say, i know”*. On a similar note, Kristie (student) explained how she found *“the ads down the side to be generally annoying as I find most of them are misleading”* and Erin (student) also wrote how she ignored these types of advertisements. Michael (student) also revealed in an interview a reason why he does not engage with businesses or organisations on social media is because *“a lot of time I think it’s just fake or something. Like because these pages can be made up by anyone, it doesn’t really have a lot of... like, doesn’t really draw me”*. Anna (young Pasifika adult) was the only one to describe Facebook advertising positively by explaining in an interview how she found online shops she liked through *“those wee little ads [that] come up on the side of my Facebook”*.

Finally, students were the most vocal about disliking businesses or organisations that post on social media too often. For example, Erin wrote how *“businesses and orgs are better with social media when they don’t pester you too much – otherwise I would just block them from my news feed”*. Danielle agreed, echoing how *“those that fill your news feed with lots of irrelevant content just cause more annoyance and tend to be deleted”*. Christina and Melissa also agreed, and Melissa added that *“its best if posting are concise and relevant. We don’t need to know every single little thing about it in one status. If we want to find out more we will certainly click on a link or whatever for more information”*.

As has been demonstrated in this section, there are obstacles to engaging with businesses and organisations via social media, and to creating a successful sustainable channel of communication between the two parties. The subtext driving many participants’ views and actions on this appears to be that unlike other media, participants have more control over what they engage with on social media and currently they are primarily motivated to connect with others for social purposes on these platforms.

This chapter drew together findings from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews to make observations about what participants said they do with social media and what makes it a unique communication tool for them. These observations pay heed to individualised relevance structures at work with social media uses, point towards a comfortable communication environment for participants, and the orientation of the medium as primarily socially motivated. In the following

chapter, participants' perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication, as well as how they imagine the NZFS using social media will be covered.

## **Chapter 5: Perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication**

This chapter explores where participants have said they learnt their fire safety knowledge, and why they might remember this. It then looks at how the NZFS is perceived by participants as effective at promoting fire safety and, finally, details how participants imagined the NZFS being able to use social media. These observations are important for understanding participants' existing relationships, knowledge formation and attitudes towards fire safety and the NZFS, and will be developed into a theoretical framework in chapters to come. Like the previous chapter, unless stated otherwise, references to participants' discussion refers to discussion in the focus group pertaining to their participant-type. All participants' names have been changed to honour confidentiality of their participation, and participant-types are sometimes referred to in short-hand as per the following:

- Tertiary student living in rental accommodation = students
- Young adults who are single mothers = single mothers
- Young Asian Adults = Asian
- Young Pasifika Adults = Pasifika

### **Where have participants learnt their fire safety knowledge and why do they remember?**

In the focus groups, participants were asked what fire safety knowledge they could easily recall, where they had learnt it from and why they thought they could recall this knowledge more easily than other information they may have received along the way. Many participants tended to remember similar information, and reflected they remembered this for similar reasons also. Three explanations stood out as reasons why some fire safety knowledge was better remembered than others. These related to the 'catchiness' of a slogan, the repetition of knowledge, and education from a young age. Most knowledge tended to be recalled from primary school education and television advertisements. As will be discussed later in this thesis, these trends speak to the previously identified form of shared knowledge (through slogans, repetition and television), as well as involvement in the learning process (primary school education).

The phrase "stop, drop and roll" was the most commonly quoted piece of fire safety knowledge by all participant-types. This spoke to a wider theme of learning fire safety knowledge in primary school that participants still remember today. Many participants believed this education was memorable because of the use of a catchy phrase, and repetition of the phrase from a young age. Some also reflected their recall of this phrase was helped by a New Zealand pop song of the same title (for example, Maria in the young Pasifika adult focus group). Rachel (student) wrote how "[I] think I've remembered it because it was catchy and repeated several times during my years at

*primary school*". Similar reasoning was given by many participants, across all focus groups. Even in the single mothers group, many recalled their knowledge of the phrase from their own primary school days and although some identified that the phrase had changed since then as their children were learning it, their memory of the phrase learnt from their own childhood was stronger. For example, Lauren wrote *"I also remember stop, drop and roll from when I was at school – although now that my kids are at school the catch phrase is get down, stay down, get out (or something similar to that)."* Likewise, Kristen described the phrases she remembered: *"Yip 'common guys get firewise!', 'stop, drop and roll!' and 'get down, keep low, get out!' These are all quite catchy and easy to remember though in saying that I'm a little stuck on exact wording of the third one"*. These examples imply that the education they learnt at an earlier age was more effective than phrases heard more recently.

Fire safety education at a young age was strongly remembered, and some participants contextualised the fire safety knowledge they recalled with the experiences of learning it. For example, Christina (student) explained how *"in primary we had a fire safety demonstration thing where we all had to role play being in a fire and doing stop drop and roll... I've never forgotten it and even remember the classroom I was in when doing it!"*. Kelly (single mother) also remembered how during primary school the NZFS *"came out and we did roll plays on how we would react... I think I have remembered because it was made fun, & was done for several years"*.

Similarly, Anna (Pasifika) recalled the 'stop, drop and roll' message *"from school as we had to act it out and I think you always remember things better if it is associated with an action"*. Tara (Pasifika) recalled when *"some local firefighters visited our class at primary school and showed us a scorched/blackened electric blanket which almost burned down a house and burned a boy about our age (six years old). --- I have never ever forgotten it because it was so visual"*. In an interview Brett (Asian) elaborated how *"all the stuff I remember about fire safety like... I was young"* and reasoned that *"starting young was really good. Like going to schools because kids love fire engines, like if they see one they're real excited... stuff that seems like – I don't know, that they don't get to see every day they love it"*. Similarly, in an interview Allison (young Pasifika adult) also remarked that *"when I was a kid I'm sure we did a lot at school on it but I don't remember anything else"*. From the examples illustrating memories from primary school education here, it seems that the use of a combination of strong visual elements with active involvement contributed to fire safety knowledge making a memorable impact at a young age.

Powerful visual elements were also reported by participants as being effective in helping them remember television advertisements from the NZFS. For example in the student focus group, Michael, Kristie and Rachel mentioned how the visual impact of some television advertisements

was effective by triggering fear. Rachel wrote that she remembered *“things like never leave cooking unattended, from the horrifically sad firesafety ads on TV. Scare tactics work”*. This provides evidence in support of effectiveness of the existing consequence-based model of television advertisements used by the NZFS. While many participants recalled fire safety knowledge from television ads, they more commonly attributed their ability to do so to repetition, ‘catchiness’ of phrases or slogans used, and recentness of the ad campaign. Participants tended to remember slogans such as *“come on guys, get firewise”* and *“don’t drink and fry”* and many reasoned this was due to their ‘catchiness’ and repetition, particularly in the student focus group. For example Amanda (student) explained that *“I think I remembered them more over other things as they are phrases that sound catchy”* and Shawn (young Pasifika adult) wrote *“the catchier it is the easier it is to remember”*. Courtney (single mother) recalled *“not to leave your cooking /not cooking when drunk from more recent advertising campaigns”* Danielle (student) remembered *“that we should not ‘drink and fry’ – humorous ads on television recently”*.

Many participants recalled pieces of fire safety knowledge and attributed this to television advertisements without an explanation of why they may recall these particular pieces of information. Marcus (young Pasifika adult), however, explained why this may be the case for him:

*they have a way of engaging the audience as they pretty much do all the work for us by sending their message out in under 30 seconds while I just sit there sometimes 2-3 times a night. Although I know I have seen them, I don’t remember written adverts like in magazines or billboards because I actually have to read them and even though the work I have to put in is minimal, its just so much easier to recall television adverts.*

Michael (student) and Brett (young Asian adult) both made similar observations in interviews. Michael explained: *“Where like as in TV, when ads come on you’re almost forced to kind of watch them. You can go away if you want to but a lot of the time you’ll just sit there and wait through the ad”*. Likewise, Brett reflected that *“Like TV you have to watch it because it’s in between stuff. A lot of people just have it on because you don’t want to change the channel”*. This characteristic of television as a communication channel is different to social media, and as will be discussed means there are different implications for how participants imagine the NZFS promoting fire safety effectively through social media.

## **How do participants perceive the NZFS and their effectiveness at promoting fire safety?**

Many interview participants were asked their opinion on how well the NZFS had promoted fire safety to date, and how well-educated they considered themselves in fire safety (note, as the pilot group single mothers were not asked for this information). Generally, people considered

themselves to have a comfortable level of fire safety knowledge, and believed that the NZFS had done an effective job at promoting fire safety.

Amongst the young Pasifika adult participants, Anna and Tara were confident they were well-educated in fire safety, while Shawn felt he “*wouldn’t say I’m an expert but I have a vague idea what to do*” and Allison said “*no, I don’t think so not really [well-educated in fire safety] like with a serious fire well I’ve never been, you know, around one but I’m not sure what to do exactly and I don’t have – I don’t know if you have kits or anything for that*”. Allison then illustrated this with a story of ill-preparedness:

*Like at our house all we had is fire alarms. And we actually, we didn’t know at our flat – we lived here for about six months and it never went off and we didn’t realise it was because it didn’t have a battery in it. We just thought it was working and then our landlord came to change the battery and realised there was no battery in it!*

Despite this, she thought that the NZFS have been effective at promoting fire safety, although she believed she had not learnt anything since primary school. She considered that that the knowledge is “*there and it’s embedded and maybe instinctively I’d know what to do when there was a fire*”, and she also acknowledged a recent “Don’t Drink and Fry” campaign, noting she “*thought that was really funny*”. These apparently contradictory claims may suggest that although she is aware of slogans such as ‘don’t drink and fry’ there is a gap in knowledge obtained more recently and an alert that she had been living with ineffective smoke alarms that made her cautious about her fire-safe abilities.

Anna, Tara and Shawn also felt the NZFS had communicated fire safety effectively. Tara and Shawn both remembered a recent “Don’t Drink and Fry” campaign from television with different opinions. Like Allison, Shawn thought “*it’s pretty good... especially with the kids from town. Like they’ve interviewed kids from town that look like they’re drunk, and just saying ‘don’t drink and fry’*”. Tara, on the other hand, said “*I hate that ay. It reminds me of a sunsweet prunes ad... I just don’t think it shows how fire can destroy your whole life. It’s just too, I don’t know it just doesn’t seem like it’s very serious you know?*”. She mentioned how she found other television ads powerful—those demonstrating how unattended cooking can kill, and how a discarded cigarette ignited a couch in flames. She explained that “*I find that they’re visual, like personally I like those ones that are quite memorable kind of thing... and can show how fast fire can get out of control is really good*”.

In reference to the same “Don’t Drink and Fry” campaign, Philip (young Asian adult) recognised in an interview that the NZFS had “*always had that model ‘don’t drink and fry’ they’ve just*

*changed their approach about it*". He explained that *"they used to go for the scare-factor type of stuff and now it's just, they sort of—with the latest ad they've got a sort of piss-take about it"*. He thought it was *"definitely funny, it gets people's attention and it's been mentioned on Facebook a couple of times"*. Meanwhile Patricia and Brett (also young Asian adults) found the ad less memorable and were unable to explicitly recall it. Patricia cautioned that she thought the NZFS *"could take themselves less seriously but at the same time if they did that they could be disrupting the whole trust thing being the fire service... it really depends on how they want to market themselves... But I don't know it's really tough for the fire department to do it"*. Philip, Patricia and Brett all believed they held a comfortable level of fire safety knowledge, while Holly (young Asian adult) believed she had *"very limited"* knowledge.

Philip and Brett both believed that the NZFS were effective at promoting fire safety. Like Tara, Brett thought the *"over the top"* television advertisements were particularly effective. Speaking of an "Unattended Cooking Kills" advertisement he said *"that's not a very good ad. But that's why you remember it because it's so over the top that you remember it"*. Patricia had less praise for the effectiveness of the NZFS communications, saying that *"I haven't seen that much of them lately... aside from the PSA's on TV, I feel like they're quite detached"*.

The students asked held positive feelings towards the effectiveness of the NZFS at promoting fire safety. Jessica reasoned *"they've been pretty good"* because of slogans remembered from primary school and recent television advertisements, and Amanda made a remark along similar lines. All students considered they were well-equipped with fire safety knowledge, although Danielle admitted *"there's a lot more I could probably learn"*.

In general, evidence from the interviews across all participant-types demonstrated an optimistic outlook on their own feelings of confidence in fire safety and how the NZFS was perceived at communicating this. Some remarks made by interviewees suggested a hesitancy towards the claims they made, for example Allison who made seemingly contradictory claims, and those who were cautious to say they had a *"vague idea what to do"* (Shawn)—similar remarks by Danielle, Patricia, Philip and Brett. The praise of the NZFS's effectiveness of promoting fire safety is incongruent with this hesitancy, and this may arise from a lack of concern by participants with fire safety or a perception of unimportance to them, or a difficulty in articulating or assessing their own knowledge of fire safety. Anna (young Pasifika adult) even considered why the NZFS promotions may be less effective for some people: *"I reckon some people just think they're bigger than that you know, they just think 'oh, whatever' and that's what happens in fires... they just don't really care... they think 'oh that would never happen to me', you know?"*. On a similar note, Brett (young Asian adult) admitted that although he remembered fire safety messages (such as 'don't

drink and fry’) *“I don’t know if it would actually stop me from doing it but you know... I guess everyone knows not to do stuff but they still do it”*. These admissions by Anna and Brett allude to an attitude of complacency about fire safety that may also be a factor contributing to the incongruence between self-stated fire safety ability and praise of the NZFS’s effectiveness at promoting fire safety, signifying just how hard to influence some of these participant-types may be.

### **How do participants imagine the NZFS being able to use social media?**

Focus group participants were asked what they believed the NZFS could do to help it successfully engage with them using social media. Participants tended to echo each other in their opinions, particularly in the young Pasifika adult and student focus groups, as will be outlined below.

Young Pasifika adult participants tended to agree that using quizzes and competitions would be a useful way for the NZFS to engage with them using social media. They suggested that both quizzes and competitions could be fire-related to promote fire safety, for example Allison wrote *“I like quizzes and giveaways. Perhaps they could ask a question and say the first five to answer correctly would win a Fire safety pack or something similar. The question should be fire safety related and the prize would further reinforce fire safety at home”*. Derek, Maria, Tara, Kayla and Jared all agreed that the use of quizzes and giveaways were good ideas.

There was also an acknowledgement among young Pasifika adult participants that interaction needed to be kept varied and creative. This point was pressed by Anna and Shawn. Shawn wrote that *“they should mix it up a little. Have the tips, have the stories of fire fighters, have something fun as well”*. He also held the opinion that the NZFS *“should take the same approach that you would take if you were talking to your friend. No one wants to hear you rant on about advice all the time (e.g. Don’t do that...”*. Others in the focus group suggested varied creative approaches in which the NZFS could use. For example, Maria suggested they *“post interesting stories. Promote yourselves e.g. interesting/funny/intriguing video clips which can go viral and link people to your page. Ask thought provoking questions in the statuses. Get other popular pages to like you”*. Anna and Victoria made suggestions to use social media to get people engaging with the NZFS offline: *“I think that offering workshops or asking for volunteers would be a fantastic way to engage”* (Anna) and similarly Victoria thought *“practical things are always good”*. Victoria said *“I think you should have courses teaching people about fire safety including a practical with fire extinguishers – had fun with this at UC by Fire Fighting Pacific. The guy taking the course had great anecdotes”*. She also used St John as a comparative organisation, recommending that the NZFS use *“Top Tips”* like St John did in its newsletters because they were *“very informative”*. In an interview Anna also drew on a ‘quit smoking’ campaign for inspiration on how she believed the

NZFS could use social media: *“you know how they have with smoking, they have all those famous people with those wee quotes? ... Yeah I reckon they could use celebrities to inspire fire safety”*.

Finally from the young Pasifika adult focus group, Marcus thought the NZFS could use Facebook advertising for direct fire safety prompts: *“like instead of “click here to find out how to prevent fires” literally have an advert that says “are you forgetting something on the stove?”... just something that could trigger the mind of people on facebook that they do have something cooking”*. This speaks to a view of using a more direct approach to communicating fire safety messages, rather than working on a relationship of constructive interactions between social media users and the NZFS, as is implicit in the other suggestions made by young Pasifika adults. A more direct approach of promoting fire safety where people are likely to see the material was also suggested in the young Asian adult focus group. Brett did not believe that social media was an appropriate place for the NZFS to promote fire safety, *“but if i were to suggest something i’d probably say youtube and make them watch a short ad before they can watch the video they intended to watch”*. Julia agreed that *“making ads to play on Youtube before your video loads is a very good idea because youtube is a huge platforms that many different generations use, as well as the fact that you have to watch a part of it”*. Similarly, Patricia felt that it would be *“odd for an emergency service to be connecting on that level [with people on social media]”*. She said she would be happy for the NZFS to be on social media as a contact point *“rather than them acting like a social news feed or something”*.

In the young Asian adult focus group Natasha also acknowledged that *“it is quite a challenging task. But I do believe the NZFS can start off by listing out the major contribution to fire occurrence in student flatting”*. Diana, Philip and Holly had suggestions similar to some of those made in the young Pasifika adult focus group about keeping it fun and interactive by using promotions. Philip noted that *“to catch the attention of fb users they need to have an administrator of the social media needs to be up with whats happening around the world and have a good sense of humour to keep the user interested”*.

Diana also referenced the NZ Fire Fighters calendars, saying *“I think the calendars could have a bigger presence in social media as well”*. This was mentioned by other females in all focus groups, often with some enthusiasm. For example Erin (student) wrote *“i 100% would ‘like’ their page if they were to upload their yearly calendar onto their facebook page :-p”*. Tara (young Pasifika adult) suggested that the NZFS *“could have a platform to vote for their favourite firefighters each month”*. Similarly, Angela (single mother) noted that *“a profile pic of a sexy fireman wouldn’t go amiss :D”*.

There were a variety of opinions in the single mother focus group, however an overall desire for interaction on a personalised level was apparent. For example, Angela wrote they should *“reply to posts, comments and questions left on their page”* while Mary thought it would be useful to have *“a select few experts who do updates, answer questions. I like knowing who I am talking to rather than just ‘some person’ in an office”*. Erica reinforced these views by stating it was most important *“if someone asks a question someone answers it reasonably promptly”*. There was an emphasis on small-scale interaction that could be done quickly. For example Lauren wanted to see *“things that can be done easily and quickly to pass the info onto children as well”*, Erica wanted *“regular updates with small but helpful advice”* and similarly Mary said *“I find small competitions keep me interested & keep me coming back to sites etc Quizzes, things you can get the kids involved with & be interactive”*.

In the student focus group, many participants echoed an agreement that catchy slogans would be useful *“because they definitely stay with you for a long time”* (Jessica). This suggestion alone is not by itself helpful in describing how the NZFS might connect with social media users in the first place. Christina, however, had an idea for how catchy slogans could be used as a hook for the NZFS to connect with users:

*if they used phrases that people remember from before such as “stop drop and roll” or “come on guys get firewise” to create a facebook page, I think it would draw immediate attention to people as they recognise it from “ages ago” and trends even from years ago (as people love to look back on memories) are what gets “liked” and the page would easily spread, once they have a good number of followers on their page they could use that page to continue spreading the message about fire safety.*

Rachel agreed with Christina’s idea, and while Amanda thought *“slogans are a good option”* she also cautioned that *“I guess that lots of people my age (21) might think they are lame even though they would remember them”*. Like the young Pasifika adults, quizzes and competitions were also suggested by students as options for the NZFS to use on social media. For example, Rachel wrote *“Interactive stuff could also work well, for example online competitions to create a new slogan, localised news about fire / fire safety / the NZ fireservice to prevent people from feeling that interacting with them via social media is irrelevant, quizzes about firesafety etc”*. Similar suggestions of quizzes and competitions were also made by Danielle and Kristie.

A point noted by Rachel above about having localised news *“to prevent people from feeling that interacting with them via social media is irrelevant”* was also identified by Danielle, Melissa and Amanda in the students’ focus group. Amanda wrote that she agrees *“with the idea that people would engage more if they feel they could be affected by an issue, either a local issue or something*

*that could happen to them easily. Otherwise it is easy for people to not take in any useful info from news*". This perception of the NZFS using an approach that was more localised and/or personally relevant to social media users was also identified by the researcher as a possible approach that the NZFS could use, based on theoretical discussion in earlier chapters of this thesis and previous identification that fire fighters are better equipped to promote locally targeted fire safety strategies than promotions formulated at the head office. This possible approach was explained to all interviewees who were asked for their opinion on it.

The response to the suggestion by the researcher of the NZFS using a more localised, personally relevant approach to social media was generally positive, but not without caution that it would not be an easy task. Amongst the young Pasifika adult interviews, Anna, Shawn and Tara were adamant that the NZFS *"should definitely use social media. Because that's where everybody, well every second person has Facebook don't they?"* (Anna). Shawn believed that social media presented an opportunity for the NZFS to *"bridge like a gap [target age demographic gap] between the very young and there's a huge gap I guess in terms of advertisement... social media you can kind of target anyone"*. Allison was more cautious in claiming that there was a place for the NZFS on social media, saying *"I think they could. They can use it effectively, but then again... they have to get people engaged and stuff"*. Their perception of the NZFS using the more localised approach was positive. There was a sense that engagement at this level would help raise local awareness of the presence of the NZFS and what they do. For example, Tara said *"I think that is a really valuable thing to do, definitely. And also I think people just don't really know what the fire service does. It would be good for the community to know what exactly they do, because you know they do a lot more than just fighting fires"*. Shawn had visited the current NZFS Facebook page to see what they were already doing and commented it helped to *"kind of get a better appreciation of what they're doing. Because you don't really know if they're putting out fires until it's kind of near your house"*.

Single mother interviewees had varied beliefs on whether there was a place for the NZFS to use social media effectively. Katie thought it would be good to teach her child *"who likes to look over my shoulder when I'm on the computer"* about fire safety. However, she was less sure it made practical sense for the NZFS to engage at a localised level because *"I'm not sure whether they'd have the administrative, you know if fire fighters are interested in social networking enough for the individual stations to maintain it"*. On the other hand, she said if they *"had updates on there or something about open days at fire stations, that would be something that my children would like, it would be something that I would take notice of and probably participate in"*. Katherine reasoned that *"if people had a reason to go there [the NZFS on Facebook] they would but if they didn't have a reason they probably wouldn't even think twice about it I guess"*. She was unsure if a localised

approach would be effective, but said *“I think definitely talking to an actual person [rather than an organisation] makes it a lot easier”*. Nicky thought it was a good idea for reasons of convenience, because *“a lot of people are getting into the facebook’s and the message boards and all that social media kind of stuff... the way life is these days – life’s just so busy that... if it’s sort of where a vast majority of people were sort of already going”* she thought it could be useful. Andrea, who lives in a volunteer fire fighting region, thought it would be beneficial as an alternative contact channel *“to have people like that because they’re your local people so if you do need to get in contact with them you can”*.

The students interviewed expressed caution towards the NZFS using social media. For example, Jessica thought it would not be a *“silly”* idea because *“everyone knows that fire safety’s important”* however she was *“not sure that it’d be the most effective thing to do”*. Michael compared the potential effectiveness of social media with the use of television, and thought that with social media *“they’ll probably get more of a viewing audience but less attention”* because *“a lot of people will just ignore it because they don’t have to look at it”*. Danielle thought there was potential for it to be *“done the right way... but... I definitely think it should be confined to Facebook I think it’d be a bit of a waste of time to go for any of the other social networking really”*. Like Michael, Amanda was unsure that people would bother with the NZFS on social media: *“I think it could be just another one of those things that people are like ‘ah that’s just annoying’ or ‘why would I want to join that page’ or that kind of thing”*.

All students agreed, however, that using a more localised, personally relevant approach was a good idea. Jessica thought this was especially relevant to Christchurch because *“at the moment community has sort of come a bit stronger with all the earthquakes so that could be a really good ‘in’ promoting community sort of thing”*. Michael, from Rangiora, also believed that *“coming at a community level and that kind of stuff would probably be very beneficial for places like here”*. Danielle and Amanda, who had previously suggested a localised approach as useful in the focus group reiterated their beliefs that national campaigns can *“seem a bit distant”* (Danielle, similarly articulated by Amanda). Danielle thought a localised social media approach might help in *“actually realising that they’re (fire fighters) people and they are actually close to you and it all affects things close to home would make a big difference I reckon”*. Amanda, like Katie (single mother) also raised concern about the administrative ability for a localised social media presence saying that *“it could be tricky because there might be a bit of variation between the different localities with how they run it and... I don’t know if their values or anything would change but might have slightly different takes on it”*.

The young Asian adult interviewees were also cautious about how effective the use of social media could be for the NZFS. While Philip thought that social media is *“definitely a great platform for them [NZFS] to get their message out to everyone in New Zealand”* he was less sure about taking a localised approach because *“most of the NZ fire men are volunteers... there’s no drive for them to have more of a presence in their community”*. He saw St John as being *“more sort of community-based type of stuff. Because they have all these trainings that you can do through the St John people. Like I did the first aid course through them.”* He saw this as a possible way to get the community more involved with the NZFS: *“so maybe like fire stations can do something like that”*. Brett and Patricia both did not think that using social media was a good idea for the NZFS. Brett said that *“in my opinion I don’t reckon it’d be that effective.”* Although he would not mind their presence on social media he *“wouldn’t go looking for it”* and because he is *“still quite young and so it doesn’t interest me at all”* he also did not see that other people would be interested in it either. Similarly, Patricia said that she did not *“see people utilising it and I definitely don’t see people liking the fire department on Facebook”*.

To conclude this chapter on a less than optimistic note about people’s opinions on NZFS’s ability to use social media effectively highlights the difficulty of the task. These findings will be drawn together with theoretical ideas and pre-existing research (as discussed in earlier chapters) in the coming chapters to help make sense of the situation for the NZFS and how they might best employ social media to effectively promote fire safety to the participant-types studied for their previous identification as high social media users and as being at-risk for fire safety. Different emphases in patterns of social media use among the four groups will also be clarified in Chapter 7 in terms of knowledge formation, public-private boundaries, and hybridity of social media uses. The next chapter, *Understanding the impact of social media on people’s lives* begins by formulating an understanding of the impact social media has had on the lives of those studied.

## **Chapter 6: Understanding the impact of social media on people's lives**

This chapter serves to situate participants' use of social media within a theoretical understanding of their relationships with media technology and how social media comes to be conceived as a place for communication in their individual networks. It is necessary to theorise a broader understanding of social media uses at this point in the thesis in order to develop from this a more specific framework for use by the NZFS. The theoretical arguments to be advanced here offer contributions to the academic field in understanding the relationships that young New Zealand adults have with social media technology.

### **Refocusing attention on the *form* of social media over its content**

In the chapter *Understanding Communication Practices with Social Media*, observations from the focus groups and interviews conducted demonstrate a preoccupation with the *form* of social media and the impact its structural conditions had on participants' everyday lives. For example, dominant themes expressed by participants were that they could more readily keep in touch with family and friends, and use social media as a more convenient and less awkward communication tool. This sheds light on McLuhan's understanding that "the medium is the message" (1994: 8) as of greater importance for broader theoretical development than Thompson's framework of 'relevance structures' constructed around 'symbolic materials'—the content—of a medium (1995). In placing greater importance on the form of social media technology, this thesis grounds understanding of social media in terms of spaces, places, networks and relationships rather than in the content of knowledge communicated.

"The fish knows nothing of water" (1970: 75) is an analogy used by McLuhan to illustrate his argument that media *are* environments, to the extent that they are ordinarily imperceptible to people who are distracted instead by the content of the media. In support of this, observations made in the chapter *Understanding Communication Practices with Social Media* demonstrate assumptions of shared understandings amongst the focus groups of comprehension of Facebook's functionality, a high level of ordinariness of social media's integration into mundane activities of day to day lives, and an anticipated state of 'feeling lost' without it. Of particular note was a generalised inability of participants to articulate an answer to a focus group question asking how they would imagine their lives to be different if social media were not around. While some addressed this question by noting things like that they would "*feel lost*" (Michelle, student) or that "*it would be very expensive to stay in touch with family and friends from afar*" (Derek, Pasifika), this question was left unattended by most participants across the focus groups (with the exception of the single mother focus group). While this may be due to many factors, including that it may have been overshadowed by the preceding question asked in the same paragraph, it is suggested

here that it speaks to a wider theme of a difficulty in addressing the question due to the ingrained nature of social media in participants' lives—that it has become an imperceptible, or at least difficult to articulate, lived communication environment. The question did not seem to be readable by respondents as a practical choice between social media and not, as it involved an imaginative leap beyond their current daily horizons.

In order to address this gap in information obtained from the focus groups, the same question was also asked directly to many interviewees. Their answers, while varied, painted a picture of structural conditions by which social media have *improved* their personal communication. For example, Philip (Asian) said that it would be “*harder*” to stay in contact with friends and family, while Brett (Asian) noted that he “*wouldn't know whose birthday it was*” and Holly (Asian) said she would feel “*cut off*” without it. Allison (Pasifika) was unsure where she would get information and advice outside of her immediate circle of family and friends, while Tara (Pasifika) reflected how social media made it “*easy*” to communicate and Shawn (Pasifika) imagined that he would have to “*resort back*” to communication via text messaging. The language used by participants here to describe their imagined impact of living without social media is significant in sustaining the usefulness of McLuhan's perspectives to social media. Namely, McLuhan's understanding that all media (human tools and technologies inclusive) “are direct extensions, either of the human body or of our senses” (1970: 38) he supports with a theory of disease (or discomfort) that explains “why man is impelled to extend various parts of his body by a kind of autoamputation” (43). Not only in the language used by participants is it evident that social media is an *improvement*, but this can also be seen as an alleviation of discomfort, in the way that living without social media would be *harder*, or, that a person would feel *cut off*—in fitting language that describes how social media can be metaphorically felt as an extension of the body. Moreover, Brett's remark that he “*wouldn't know whose birthday it was*” speaks to an externalisation of knowledge, demonstrating a small-scale example of what McLuhan may have been referring to when he wrote of the approach of “the final phase of the extension of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society” (1994: 3).

That the impact of social media is most comprehensible in terms of its form is perhaps one of the key characteristics that separates it from comprehension of the more established types of media such as television and print media—which in recent years it has risen to take centre stage with, or even overshadow. This is so, because its unprecedented combination of communication forms makes it more difficult to comprehend as a distinct object in comparison to media with a more linear style of communication, such as the television. Qvortrop (2006) argued that it is problematic to understand the internet as being characterised by a set of fixed features, whereby as a digital

network it “is a medium that can copy any other medium” with “an unlimited number of features” (350). This distinction focuses attention on the agency of what is done with social media forms more sharply than on the content produced with it, because unlike other media the form of content is not as consistent or predictable, thus weakening what McLuhan (1994) would describe as the ‘blinding’ effects that the content of a medium has on the character of any particular medium.

McLuhan (1994) used the electric light as an example of how communication media are often not recognised by the environments they create or alter for communication by pointing to a general lack of recognition of the electric light as a communication medium because it has no content. Yet, he explained, electric lights “eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV” (9). It is this functionality, he argues, that is the message of any medium: “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (8). Such structural changes were noteworthy to participants’ own conceptualisations of social media. In discussion to come, this chapter will continue to contextualise the impact that social media has had on the lives of participants in these structural terms.

### **Revisiting the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘networks’**

The initial research proposal for the NZFS research report on the same topic envisioned using social media to address at-risk groups as community members rather than consumers. It was suggested earlier that communities may be better understood as networks online, whereby networks more accurately portray the structural openness that social media allows to build one’s network in contrast to the more ‘closed’ connotations associated with community-type relationships. Observations of participants’ dialogue in this thesis’ research find that favouring the term ‘network’ still holds, and that this concept is central to understanding the impact of social media on people’s lives.

A key factor favouring an understanding of social media structured in terms of networks over community is ‘openness’. Macnamara (2010) wrote of a seemingly paradoxical relationship between a current move towards individualisation in many societies, whilst “the internet transforms this to a connected form of individualism” (87). This, he said, “reflects the duality of the internet... its capacity to take people away from one plane of human interactions (e.g. local physical contact), but to connect them on a geographically and culturally wider plane through a network of communities” (ibid). His description of communities structured by networks online may be interpreted optimistically, by Williams’ understanding that ‘community’ is a term that “seems never to be used unfavourably” (1983), as discussed in Chapter 1: *Contextualising social media in literature and theory*. The term ‘community’ was not used by any participant in all focus groups, however what may be perceived as ‘networks of communities’ were implicitly illustrated by many in their articulation of their social media uses—most particularly with the single mother

participants, some of whom reported a sequential process of finding other like-minded mothers through social media and then forming a more closed community that had its home on social media.

Mostly, participants used language signifying positive feelings towards the relationships they maintained with social media. For example, Kristen (single mother) wrote *“I think it’s a great way to keep in touch and up to date with those who because of life’s twists and turns you could easily lose contact with”*. A contributing factor in these positive feelings towards social media as a communication environment may be the ‘openness’ with which the media is structured. This openness of the environment is most apparent when other communication environments are dimmed. For example, Katherine (single mother) described how being able to access Facebook from her phone while in hospital was a *“lifesaver”* because of the connections she was able to sustain between her and her network outside of the hospital. Social media provided a communication environment that remained open for her during a time when others were closed to her and the effect of maintaining access to this environment she said was important in helping *“keep me sane”*. ‘Openness’, as demonstrated in the preceding example, refers here to its environmental composition in terms of time and space—as superseding in accessibility over other communication environments.

‘Openness’ can also be used to describe the structure of social media in a second sense; relationships, particularly those fitting the description of weaker ties, are more readily sustained with social media due to the openness with which people’s individual networks function. As exemplified by Kristen in the previous paragraph, a commonly articulated function of social media by participants was its ability to regenerate social connections with others that would be less likely to remain active in an individual’s social network if the social networking function of social media had not lowered the barriers to sustaining these weak ties. These two forms of openness taken together can help describe how societies, while seemingly becoming more individualised and feared to be less community-oriented, are also being aided by social media to augment a social structure of connected individualism.

Earlier in this thesis it was proposed that individuals oriented themselves online from individually constructed relevance structures. The open function and form of social media make individual control of these structures, or networks, more evident than other types of media, and may be considered as affording the individual with more power and control online than is available elsewhere. While an affordance of greater control and comfort is evident in some respects, for example over communicating with others, in others it is more difficult to conceptualise, for example with issues of privacy and power. These observations also have consequences for the

conditions of time, space and place that the uses of social media impose on the individual and their social environment. These arguments will be explained in more depth below.

### **Social media and the affordance of greater individual control and comfort**

In the chapter *Understanding Communication Practices with Social Media*, a number of attributes describing participants' use of social media were identified. A theme common to many of these was the ability of social media to give individuals greater control, and/or comfort to their communication via social media. The work of McLuhan can again be drawn on to inform articulation of an explanation of this theme.

That social media may be 'just the right temperature' for individual engagement and communication was an idea posited earlier in this thesis. This concept was informed by McLuhan's distinction between media that are hot and cool depending on the level of participation required in the communication process. In understanding the internet as a medium that can copy any medium, the 'temperature' of social media is not largely predetermined by its form. This, indeed, was a key virtue of social media expressed by participants, in terms of their ability to use it in their own time, on their own terms. This finding was discussed in the chapter *Understanding communication practices with social media* under the heading 'Social Media was commonly praised for its flexibility and convenience as a communication tool'. Not only does this flexibility in participation 'temperature' give individuals greater control to act as media producers (to use traditional media terms), but it gives them greater control in their actions as media consumers also. However, observations from *Understanding communication practices with social media* point towards a trend of social media use predominantly for keeping updated, in touch with and communicating with others, in what is understood by participants as a social setting amongst their pre-existing social ties. These individually constructed relevance structures that inform their participation of social media, and more predominantly the social network site Facebook, are not new or unique to social media. For the participants of this research social media enhance visualisation of, and add communication modes to, connections of these individualised networks by rendering them more open and accessible.

It was discussed under the previous heading 'Revisiting the concepts of 'networks' and 'community'' that social media openness may be conceived as being both a reference to the environmental composition of time and space, and the structure of relationships enabling weaker ties to be more readily sustained. The illustration of individually constructed relevance structures in this sense demonstrates how social media are able to alter the environment by which they operate, providing what McLuhan (1994) would call "counter-irritants" (pleasure) and the "removal of irritants" (comfort). Elsewhere, McLuhan also described comfort as consisting of "abandoning a visual arrangement in favour of one that permits casual participation of the senses" (32). This is

part of what McLuhan describes as ‘self-amputation’, an externalisation of the body to seek “immediate relief of strain” (43). In this theory, the ordinariness of social media use becomes hardly a novel concept. This is because of its adaptability to be used in ‘just the right temperature’—employing counter-irritants and removing them as needed—permitting the individual greater control and comfort. Indeed, more recent commentary has noted how the internet has made McLuhan “relevant anew” (Wolf, 1996).

So in this light, social media have restructured and opened up the environment for these young adults by affording them greater comfort and control over their communication practices within their own networks. Specific advantages expressed by participants, as detailed in the chapter *Understanding communication practices with social media*, include enabling an environment whereby communication with weak ties is “*less awkward*” (Michael, student) due to the asynchronous communication capabilities that give the impression that “*you’re not actually talking to them*” (Maria, Pasifika). Participants described how the casual approach to communication with their network translated paradoxically into lower expectations of a response or communication from their weaker ties, yet higher expectations of a response from stronger ties in their network than through other modes of communication due to the centrality of social media as an anytime communication medium used by others in their network. This was due to an assumption that the message will be received and responded to at the convenience of the receiver. These paradoxical expectations suggest that there are social norms at work here, verifying the lower importance and porous nature of weaker ties in an individual network, and suggest social media are providing new means with which to manage these through a casual style of communication employed at the comfort and control of the individual.

While the use of social media can have these positive repercussions for individuals, as described above, there are other repercussions for the restructured environment that social media are implicated in that span wider than communication with convenience. This chapter now turns to address this topic.

### **Social media: A more public network in a more private environment**

The use of social media for advice and support means was an aspect addressed in the research, however it was absent in the discussion immediately above due to the range of ways that participants conceptualised the terms. When the words ‘advice’ and ‘support’ were introduced to the focus group discussions, the connotations of emotional involvement attached to these words drew responses from participants that brought the twin terms of public and private into vision. The tension between these notions with social media use can be perceived as an exacerbation of the openness of individual’s networks afforded by the social media environment, and this point is

particularly important for a thesis developing a framework for use by a public body to influence personal knowledge and action.

The tension here can be theorised differently using the work of McLuhan (1994), Thompson (1995) and Williams (1971) who talked respectively of the externalisation of body parts, the double-bind of mediated-dependence, and mobile privatisation (please see the chapter *Contextualising social media in literature and theory*). The common theme across these theories can be situated in Wellman and Hampton's argument that "communities are clearly networks" (1999: 648), also detailed in *Contextualising social media in literature and theory*. Taken together it can be understood that as individuals become better equipped to operate from the centre of their networks employing mechanisms to both counter and remove 'irritants' in their modes of communication, as these mechanisms (such as social media) become more sophisticated, their network is afforded with more fluidity and openness while also giving the individual agency to make network movement and communication more comfortable. These consequences respectively make the network both more public in a more private environment.

'Distance' plays a crucial role in informing understanding here. While in one respect distance is no longer a factor in communication with social media because everybody is equally accessible in a network at any given time or geographical location, in another respect because communication is taking place through increasingly private means there is much distance associated with the mode of communication. These conditions for using social media for advice and support means were informed with both positive and negative opinions that differed markedly across the focus groups.

As described in *Understanding communication practices with social media*, the single mothers group spoke most positively of using social media for advice and support means. They were the most active participant-type in seeking this outside of their closer network ties, engaging in communication on anonymous forum environments for immediate support and sometimes transforming these weak ties into more lasting network connections by shifting communication from Trade Me to a closed group on Facebook for example. A reason advanced here for this more active use and positive framing of social media for advice and support means is their social situation as single mothers—an often physical confinement to their home with less interaction with other adults through other communication means, augmenting for them the positive consequences associated with the openness and comfort of social media.

In contrast, the other participant-types were generally less active in seeking advice and support external to their existing network, and more apprehensive about engaging their current network for advice and support through social media. Young Asian adults articulated using social media support more on an 'as needed' basis, rather than in an ongoing environment like single mothers,

and they framed this situation around broadcasting a call for help in practical means to their network in order to yield multiple responses. This kind of outcome can be described as employing a network for collective intelligence (Levy, 2005), a concept introduced in the chapter *Contextualising social media in literature and theory*, and to be revisited in the following chapter. Employing social media for practical forms of advice and support was conceptualised as being useful in this manner similarly among young Pasifika adults, however, like students they also considered the implications for using this same space for advice and support of a more personal nature.

The implications of these findings are two-fold. Firstly, participants took issue with crossing a private-to-public boundary by drawing on observations of their friends who had communicated openly to their network about a topic personal in nature. Secondly, participants also envisaged communicating through the more private functions available with social media but took issue with the lack of contextual communication cues available to them in doing so. These implications point to three factors relating to the form of social media and its use: 1) the friction associated with applying social norms to the use of the medium; 2) although all connections in an individual's network are personally meaningful, they are not all regarded equally despite the equal access available to all; 3) the complexity of communication associated with negotiating a more public network in a more private environment. These factors necessitate a closer look at conceptualising social media in terms of its affordances to render a network more open and comfortable to use.

### **Social Media: More than networks**

That discussion about the optimistic potential of the internet has previously been grounded in a visualisation of restoring the concept of community, as discussed in *Contextualising social media in literature and theory*, is an example of how history pre-configures an approach to something new. The point being that, even when social media is able to be conceptualised in terms of its open network form, in terms of its comforting effect on an environment and free from the distraction of its 'content', it is equally important to consider the wider social conditions within which this takes place. The use of social media is situated within an existing social structure and people bring their own knowledge and beliefs informed by this, to their use of social media.

Complexity theory has been advanced by Qvortrup (2006) as an alternative approach to the medium theory as employed by McLuhan in understanding the Internet. Qvortrup believed that viewing "media as environments" is too restricting in its subscription to a medium as having fixed features. He rejected this idea because the internet is a medium that can copy any medium, making it problematic to characterise it in terms of fixed features. He proposed instead that media function as complexity management tools and that the internet should be understood in terms of its complexity management capacity—"the basic mechanism being that complexity is managed by

complexity” (ibid, 350). In doing so, Qvortrup saw that the internet creates a paradoxical problem: “By increasing its internal complexity, thus being able to manage external complexity, the internet in itself produces complexity management problems” (351). Although proposed as an alternative to McLuhan’s theory, they have much in common. Is not the extension of human bodies and senses, as motivated by the need to remove and counter ‘irritants’ similar to employing tools to manage complexity? This thesis argues that they are, for it follows that the more ‘extensions’ an individual is equipped with, the more complex the situation becomes. Indeed, Qvortrup understood that although the probability of communication between actors is increased with the internet, social complexity is also increased.

Tredinnick (2009) acknowledged that a key idea from complexity theory is “that the history of a system conditions its present, and that therefore its history cannot be excluded from the description of that system”. This is where complexity theory usefully departs from McLuhan’s theory, and Tredinnick’s description of the features of complex systems is consistent with observations from this thesis’ research, and similarly with findings from a study conducted by Castells et. al. (2004) of the role the internet played in Catalonian society. Complex systems are described by Tredinnick in terms of an open network system where local interactions dominate, and—more contentiously—each element is ignorant of the system as a whole, operating in a self-organising fashion unmotivated by needs greater than at the individual level. This description draws parallels with Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) which also places emphasis on the power of the network, and so diverges from a human-centred agency focus. The ‘actors’ are nodes in the network through which information flows, and these actors do not need to be conscious of their actions nor necessarily human (Van Loon, 2002). Each actor has interests which need to be accommodated (Sismondo, 2004). Adding this on to an understanding of observations from this thesis’ research, it works to describe how the externalisation of communication and knowledge can come to function with the technology of social media. However, there are wider implications for the emergence of this to social media as a meaningful place, which shall be addressed shortly. For now, this thesis will depart from the frameworks provided by complexity theory and ANT theory, due to their being primarily descriptive rather than explanatory in nature and inattention to the conscious interpretations and actions of individuals in the network (Couldry, 2006; Tredinnick, 2009).

The idea of conscious agency is one this thesis now turns to. Previously in this chapter, it was argued that social media afforded individuals greater control of their style of communication with their network. However, the complexity of doing so in a more public network, on more private terms remains to be addressed. The conditions of time, space and place will be considered in greater detail to help inform an understanding of the extent of control that may be attributed to the individual and her/his use of social media. This consideration begins by revisiting McLuhan’s

analogy that the “fish knows nothing of water”, closely aligned with the characteristic of complex systems whereby each element is ignorant of the system as a whole. These assertions deserve to be granted some merit—for as it was explained previously, participants had difficulty in situating themselves outside of a social media environment, and if individuals are understood as operating from their own relevance structures then the need to situate one’s actions in an understanding of the system as a whole is not an ever-present, pressing one.

The most outstanding observation from this thesis’ research, was also the most anticipated: that Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform, playing a dominant role in participants’ social media use and communication practices in general—with many using Facebook exclusively, engaging with no other social media outside of this platform. It is not coincidental that this is the case, and it is important to consider the role that Facebook plays, given that the implications of people’s use of social media pertaining to the openness of their networks and comfort of communication are for the most part situated on Facebook—a single website on the internet. As has been detailed previously in this thesis, Facebook operates as a commercial business. With the omission of names and contact details, the personal information and actions imparted on Facebook by every member of the site are aggregated as data and sold as a sophisticated targeted marketing model for businesses to use in advertising back to users of Facebook.

So, even when individuals resort to the more private modes of communication via Facebook, or while they are communicating with greater control over when and where their communication takes place affording them greater comfort in their communication practices, this is done so at the price of privacy in another sense. Not only do individuals need to be wary of the openness of their network in terms of what information is seen and withheld by others in their network, as was the most commonly articulated point of tension by participants, but they ought to be wary of the openness with which they surrender their personal information for sale. In fact, this was not an issue raised by participants across all participant-types, and a reason advanced for this again calls on an understanding of individuals operating from their own relevance structures. Communication amongst those they know is of greater concern than the same information also imparted to a faceless, impersonal website. In this regard, it is the individualised relevance structures that create the media content that acts as the “juicy piece of meat” that distracts individuals from the wider implications of their use of social media.

This complexity of negotiating the private and public in a space that is inherently neither can be perceived as disrupting Goffman’s (1959) theory of front stage and back stage performance. Papacharissi (2010) explained how “SNSs potentially collapse front and backstage into a single

space, by allowing privately intended information to be broadcast to multiple public audiences, and delivering publicly produced information to private and intimately known audiences” (142). Papacharissi described such a space that is neither private nor public as *social*, and the primary motivation for action as also being “social, and determined by the semi-private and semi-public social needs of these multiple *private publics* that formulate the social” (49). Broadly speaking, then, social media are constructed and formulated primarily for commercial purposes, but are used primarily for social purposes.

This tension is similar to the well-worn topic of the commodification of mass media, however social media differs in the extent it can also be conceived of as a ‘place’. Barker explained that “we may distinguish between space and place on the grounds that the latter are the focus of human experience, memory, desire and identity. That is, places are discursive constructions which are the target of emotional identification or investment” (2007: 376). Castells wrote that “space is the [symbolic] material support of time-sharing social practices” (2011: 441). Taken as such, the commercial motivations of Facebook provide the material support for a social space, while the actions of individual members serve to construct it as a place. Thompson’s description of a “double bind of mediated dependence” (1995) is relevant here as it embodies the captive nature of Facebook as it becomes ascribed as a place. Papacharissi explained the consequences of this in terms of the cost of privacy: “Privacy defined as the right to be left alone attains the characteristics of a luxury commodity, in that ... it becomes associated with social benefits inversely, in that the social cost of not forsaking parts of one’s privacy in exchange for information goods and services... places one at a disadvantage” (2010: 47). This captive nature of Facebook use was touched on by some participants, for example Amanda (student) explained in an interview that:

*If there’s only a few people who used it it wouldn’t really matter [if I didn’t use Facebook], but because the majority of my friends rely on that and don’t text as much you’d kind of be left behind a bit... I mean I guess you don’t have to rely on it, but I do now I guess and all of a sudden it would be quite different*

Similarly, Marcus (Pasifika) wrote “*I use facebook like the others to keep in contact with friends and that is a major player in me not deleting facebook. if i didn’t have friends around the world on facebook I would gladly delete it. way to used for what i get out of id*”. The captive nature of Facebook as illustrated here sharpens awareness of the limitations of individual control in their use of social media. While social media may have altered the environment for communication for these young New Zealanders by rendering it more open and comfortable to use, fundamentally the structural conditions behind this change remain the same. As Song (2009) wrote, “it is hard to get

around the fact that the internet primarily functions to strengthen the control and power of existing institutional structures” (81).

That Facebook may be understood as a place, carries with it connotations of both its potential for the NZFS and caution. Potential, for the opportunities it may hold for the NZFS and for the constructive uses by individuals in communication, knowledge seeking and social capital generating purposes will be discussed in the following chapter; caution, for the fluidity with which this place is constructed. Barker (2007) argued that the convergence of time and space enabled by social media “is not to reduce the ‘friction of distance’ but to render it entirely meaningless” (399). However, this thesis argues that such ‘friction of distance’ is only overcome by sustained conditions of communication involving “emotional identification or investment”—i.e. to the extent that it functions as a ‘place’. Papacharissi (2010) borrowed the term ‘convergent supersurfaces’ from Vyzoviti (2001) to describe how the space created by convergent technology “is disjointed, reconnected, woven, and re-organized into places light enough to rest on the outer landscapes of greater systemic structures, and not heavy enough to dissolve into the systemic core of the institutions of democracy” (71). She explained that “a sense of place helps navigate through convergent supersurfaces; however, this sense of place is individually arrived at and exercised, with the self as the central point of reference” (74).

This returns the discussion to an understanding of the individual with the power in constructing a sense of place. Given that young New Zealand adults are socially motivated and construct this sense of place through building and sustaining a network of ties varying in relevance, tension builds between their motives and the commercial motives of a social media platform like Facebook. As Facebook continues to evolve, the social practices of individuals using the platform evolve with it. The situation here is one of continued externalisation of information as young New Zealand adults use Facebook to communicate in ways that they are most comfortable doing, and Facebook seeks to aggregate that information into a profitable business model. Information is more readily aggregated when communication takes shape in a more automated way rather than through genuine human interactions (see, for example, complaints by Pell, 2010 and Wood, 2011 who complain about the lack of ‘friction’ on Facebook due to the seamless ways of ‘sharing’ and celebrating birthdays). This scenario points towards Facebook’s status as a ‘place’ as a precarious one, for the more it develops to automate and simulate people’s actions on the platform, the more complex it would become for individuals to meaningfully negotiate the boundaries between public and private in their social practices, and the less it can be perceived as a place as it would become less associated with emotional investment. As such, this thesis argues that although social media holds potential in its ability to condition an environment with greater comfort and openness for communication, any strategy developed by the NZFS for social media use should not be overly

reliant on any one social media platform such as Facebook because it is not “heavy enough” (to use Papacharissi’s phrase from above) to sustain its conception as a place with any great certainty.

## **Chapter 7: Proposed opportunities for the NZFS in developing a fire safety strategy using social media**

In the previous chapter, the form of social media as a medium was considered closely in seeking an understanding of how social media impact on people's lives. For the participants studied in this thesis, it was argued that the use of social media has a positive impact for individuals by enabling communication with their network that is both more open and more situationally comfortable for the individual. Caution was voiced about the competing motives of social versus commercial of individuals and the owners of social media platforms respectively. This had consequences for the boundary between the concepts of private and public, and the extent with which any social media platform may be conceived of as a 'place'. Facebook, it was argued, is only tenuously conceived of as a place and as such any strategies formulated by the NZFS involving social media must be mindful of this, despite Facebook's current position of great popularity. However, it was also noted that participants did not voice concern at their information and interactions being used for commercial reasons. They were more concerned with the functions and types of interaction that social media in general afforded them. With that, this chapter is able to outline a number of opportunities that the NZFS may use to inform future strategy development incorporating the use of social media.

The concept of social capital was a prominent theme in *Contextualising social media in literature and theory* and informed development of the questions used in the research for this thesis. Observations from participants' discussion in this research point to the existence and potential for the generation of social capital to the extent that individuals construct their social media use into a meaningful 'place'. By this it is meant that participants' patterns of social media use across the participant-types granted them differential access to resources of social capital compared with others who used it in different ways. A discussion of the various forms in which social capital presented itself, grounded in opportunities for the NZFS, follows.

### **Making use of collective knowledge**

The difference between collective knowledge and shared knowledge was discussed in *Contextualising social media in literature and theory*, and this detailed how the network function of social media enabled collective knowledge to be pooled in ways that it comes to be understood as collective intelligence. This idea of collective intelligence was implicitly referred to by many participants in discussion of their social media use, particularly in detailing examples of advice and support they had been part of or witnessed online, and in information-seeking purposes. By young Asian adults in particular, this behaviour was articulated in terms of being able to tap into their pre-existing network due to social media making this more visible and open to them. For example, Monica wrote "*It's like an open forum but of people you know, even if they aren't close friends*"

and Philip wrote that it *“really widens your informations circle as people around you may have the same idea as they were brought up the same way as you but being connected with other people from other countries gives you the edge to get the best idea for a problem”*. Evident here, is the value recognised in reaching weaker ties in a person’s network due to the visibility and openness which social media permits. Similarly, Benkler (2006) has also observed how uses of Wikipedia demonstrated collective intelligence.

Indeed, single mothers spoke of reaching out to anonymous forums to receive and impart parenting support with others. There was a sense that these connections were made because the knowledge or support sought was not available in their pre-existing networks. For example, Courtney said *“I don’t have many friends with children the same age as mine... good to have support/ideas from people going through the same thing at the same time”*. Nicky, who has a son, expressed similar reasoning: *“a lot of my friends have girls and stuff. And so boys are completely different to girls...”* These examples demonstrate the value of weak ties in freeing individuals from being “encapsulated” (Granovetter, 1973) by access to only strong ties in their network. They demonstrate use of bridging social capital, a resource which social media has made easier for people to tap into. Previously, Ellison et. al. (2007) had found evidence of bridging social capital on Facebook.

It was also noted that students and young Pasifika adults tended to consider social media in terms of the bonding social capital they may be able to access, framed by a concern for the compromise of privacy when doing so in what is perceived as a more public setting of visible connections to their weaker ties, and where the distance created by the style of “mediated quasi-interaction” deprives its participants of feedback (Thompson, 1995). Participants here generally agreed that social media was not the best option for tapping into resources of bonding social capital due to the distance in communication created by the medium, and the stigma or unease associated with engaging in personal topics in a more public environment. Ahn (2012) mused similarly that “perhaps the design of the SNS platform influences the types of relationship-building activities members enact with each other” in her study that did not find significant results for the impact of Facebook use on bonding social capital. For example Erin (student) wrote *“if a friend is crying, you can’t give them a hug”*, and Victoria (Pasifika) wrote *“dirty laundry should be aired in private”*. However, both participant-types also recognised the merit of social media in being able to *“get more than one opinion from people with different experiences at one time”* (Derek, Pasifika) although students distanced themselves more from this practice, imagining how others rather than themselves may find it useful: social media *“enables them to ask embarrassing questions anonymously”* (Heather). In another sense, it can be understood that social media helps maintain access to the resources of bonding and social capital due to its use as a communication

tool of convenience, enabling ties to be more readily sustained, even if they are not engaged for explicit social capital purposes through this medium. In this way, it may help sustain social networks at ‘just the right temperature’ to make access to bonding social capital through alternative communication means easier, or to tap into bridging social capital online.

The concept of collective knowledge borne through wider network engagement holds the most value for the NZFS to use social media as an additional communication tool for their goals of promoting fire safety. Fire safety knowledge was well articulated by participants as being obtained through mass media and other authoritative institutions such as the educational system, however this was clearly ‘shared knowledge’—for example the common repetition of catch phrases such as “stop, drop and roll”. This pays testament to the effectiveness of communication strategies through these channels, because fire safety phrases were well-remembered. In the case of shared knowledge obtained through the primary education system, it is noted that the role of active involvement described by participants in their memory of this was a strong contributor for some to message endurance. With the exception of two single mothers sharing their stories of fire safety from personal experience, there was little evidence of participants tapping into collective knowledge to demonstrate the fire safety knowledge they had obtained. This points to a stark contrast in the way participants will more readily use, or imagine to use, social media to tap into the resource of collective knowledge, as described above, and the ways in which they have learned fire safety knowledge. Therefore, an opportunity exists for the NZFS to use social media to promote the circulation of collective fire safety knowledge, with social media’s ability to make the knowledge more personally relevant adding richer depth to knowledge obtained through more traditional communication channels.

Notably, participants rarely related their fire safety knowledge to personal experiences of their own that did not involve authoritative institutions. When probed further in interviews, some participants were hesitant about their claims of feeling equipped to deal with a fire-related incident. As described in *Perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication*, this sense of “*having a vague idea what to do*” (Shawn, Pasifika) or the supposition that “*maybe I’d instinctively know what to do*” (Allison, Pasifika) may be due to the absence of personal relevance ascribed to their understanding of fire safety. Indeed, it is also suggested that a degree of complacency was implicit in participants’ orientation to fire safety due to the detached manner in which many of them quoted commonly understood ‘shared’ knowledge about fire safety and attributed their memory of this to reasons of repetition and catchiness, in ways that were absent of personally meaningful connections made to them. Even more remarkable was the inability of most interviewees to identify where their local fire station was. This inability was expressed with surprise, with some interviewees initially assuming they did, but with closer thought realising they did not. For

example, Patricia (Asian) said “*I think I do. Wait, I don’t know where it is—no I don’t actually. No actually I don’t*”. The word “actually” was often used by other interviewees also to communicate this lack of knowledge, and this carried with it a connotation that they were also clarifying and acknowledging this point with themselves at the same time. It was almost like a watershed moment, where participants realised just how limited the personal relevance of what they knew about the NZFS was.

It was argued in *Contextualising social media in literature and theory* that people negotiate their networks online through structures of relevance. Each tie in their network has varying degrees of relevance to that individual, and information from those which falls outside of their network will be given attention only when it is of special relevance to that individual. This manifested itself in different ways in this research—for example, the practice of ‘googling’ for information when it was needed, the act of ‘liking’ business pages on Facebook to enter a competition and then ‘unliking’ them because the individual was no longer interested in the business, and the act of ‘liking’ business or organisation pages on Facebook because they had a sustained level of interest in it. These instances demonstrate the individuals as the power holders to how they consume information through social media. This is different to the balance of power held by mass media that enable message transmission to become part of commonly held ‘shared knowledge’ in the absence of personal relevance to a particular message. Therefore it is argued that any fire safety promotion strategy replicating similar communication techniques as used in other media that promotes shared knowledge will be less effective with social media than strategies targeted to the medium.

### **Making fire safety knowledge more personally relevant**

So far, it has been established that social media is better equipped for the circulation of collective knowledge powered by personal relevance to the knowledge. This is because this is the type of knowledge most valued and recognised by participants in their use of social media, as it most readily fits into the form of social media in rendering individual’s networks more visible, open, and comfortable to access. Moreover it appears there is a lack of fire safety knowledge obtained from sources of personal relevance, with most coming from shared sources associated with little personal meaning. If the NZFS were able to engage social media to enhance circulation of collective forms of fire safety knowledge, then this could work to help enrich fire safety knowledge and behaviours overall. Indeed, it was discussed previously that messages seeking behaviour change may be more effective when the recipient is presented with messages designed to elicit self-inducing feelings of guilt, rather than those that work on attempted guilt arousal by an external influencer (a mechanism present in NZFS’s ‘consequence-based’ advertisements). Self-inducing feelings of guilt may be more effective because individuals are required to first choose to become

personally involved with the message and this is understood to be a more empowering method of persuasion.

The difficulties arise when it comes to visualisation of how the NZFS might practically engage social media to promote fire safety in this way. Problematically, suggestions from participants of how the NZFS might use social media to successfully engage with them did not easily fit with this model of collective knowledge powered by personal relevance. For example, participants commonly suggested the NZFS use tactics such as catchy slogans that had been effective for them through other communication channels. They also suggested the NZFS make use of competitions and giveaways, despite a prior acknowledgement by many that this is not an effective tactic in making them pay attention past gaining entry to the competition. This indicated that participants were speaking in terms of what marketing tactics they were aware of in social media, more than in terms of what accorded with their own personal media practices.

While participants were generally in agreement that the NZFS should utilise social media because *“it’s the way the world’s going so I guess you’ve got to go with it”* (Tara, Pasifika), they also expressed reservations about the extent to which social media would be an effective platform for the promotion of fire safety. These reservations centred on an acknowledgement that social media is not perceived as a suitable platform for authoritative institutions to impart their messages. As described earlier, some participants compared the different roles of participation between watching television and other ‘cooler’ types of communication. There was a sense that the less active the role that the individual had to play in the promotion of fire safety, the more successful it was likely to be. This created doubt in participants’ visualisation of how the NZFS could use social media successfully, because some recognised that their role of greater agency on social media meant that they *“wouldn’t go looking for it [fire safety information on social media]”* (Brett, Asian). This suggests that participants did not see the NZFS as having personal relevance to them, and were therefore not interested in interacting with them via social media.

Despite such reservations, participants still usefully made suggestions based on their social media experiences and preferences. Some identified small pockets on social media that aligned most closely with other media, enabling the NZFS to replicate similar strategies to those used for television. For example, it was noted that advertisements are required to be at least partially played before a YouTube user is able to watch the video clip they want to, and this could be a useful space for the NZFS to play advertisements. Similarly, the advertising column down the side of Facebook was also identified as a means by which messages could be consumed with minimal effort required from the individuals. As detailed in *Perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication*,

these messages could act as direct, on the spot fire safety reminders for individuals, such as “*are you forgetting something on the stove?*” (Marcus, Pasifika).

More commonly expressed though, was a need for the NZFS to cater to the preferred communication style of the medium in order to be most successful. Specifically, this called for a need for the NZFS to place emphasis on communication that was interactive and humanised rather than one-way and authoritative. It was said that this needed to be kept varied and creative in order to keep individuals interested. Some participants imagined that this might involve a mixture of different approaches, such as “*have the tips, have the stories of fire fighters, have something fun as well*” (Shawn, Pasifika). Others suggested a culmination of these ideas, such as quizzes and competitions that centred on fire safety education, collaboration with other popular pages and the use of celebrities to inspire fire safety. (Note: for more specific ideas from participants, please see the chapter *Perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication*).

These ideas spoke to the function of the medium as socially motivated. If communication is too often ‘serious’ or formal in nature, then there is a decreased likelihood of individuals continuing to pay attention to the NZFS. Indeed, Amanda (student) thought that “*it could be just another one of those things that people are like ‘ah that’s just annoying’*”. Despite this perception that the NZFS “*could take themselves less seriously*”, in the same breath it was also recognised that “*if they did that they could be disrupting the whole trust thing being the fire service*” (Patricia, Asian). As was discussed in the chapter *Profiling the NZFS’s fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media*, the NZFS are associated with high levels of trust and this must be nurtured carefully in order to use the resource of social capital to promote fire safety with social media. Embedded in this pre-existing trust associated with the NZFS is an understanding of the NZFS as an authoritative body. If they were to “*take the same approach that you would take if you were talking to your friend*” (Shawn, Pasifika)—i.e. acting less in an authoritative capacity as recommended by some participants, this could well disrupt the relationship of trust between the NZFS and the public. Therefore, any social media strategy developed by the NZFS introducing a new way of engaging with the public would need to strike a delicate balance in order to avoid disruption of this pre-existing trust. Perhaps the suggestions from participants that best fit these circumstances were voiced most strongly by the single mothers group, who called for attentive engagement from the NZFS at a personal level. This meaning that the NZFS must honour the individualised two-way communicative culture of the medium. Using this as a baseline for the NZFS’s social media presence, more specific strategies can be built on top. As has been outlined, though, the problem with strategy formation is in making a connection between the types of strategies suggested by participants, and the way people talked about their actual use of social media.

This research also explored the extent which participants used social media for practical purposes in contrast to essentially socially motivated uses. The divide typically demonstrated a greater emphasis on socially motivated uses of social media, however some estimated a higher motivation for information purposes and it was noted that this may allude to the fluidity of social media use and its expansion on platforms such as Facebook from motivations grounded in the social to incorporate other functions. For example, it was noted by some participants that they used their Facebook news feed “*like an actual news feed*” by following the social media accounts of media outlets such as “*Al Jazeera, CNN, 3 news...*” (Shawn, Pasifika). Others, in their capacity as consumers, shopped directly on Facebook and used business pages as a direct line of communication between them and businesses. Further, many participants engaged with business or organisation pages on Facebook if they had a vested interest in doing so. Therefore, although most participants used Facebook over other platforms of social media, and although their use was primarily grounded in the social, there is also evidence that supports an openness of individuals to welcome connections with their social media use that is not immediately grounded in the social.

This helps in the first instance to establish the presence of the NZFS on social media to not be perceived as strange or out of the ordinary to individuals, meaning that individuals may be open to tapping into a connection with the NZFS. In the second instance, it also eases pressure for the NZFS to “take the same approach that you would take if you were talking to your friend”, which may be less appropriate for the NZFS given their pre-existing status as a trustworthy authority. The point of most concern lies in generating the circulation of collective knowledge powered by personal relevance to the knowledge, when it appears from participants’ responses that there is a lack of personal knowledge (which makes up collective knowledge) in the first place. By this, it is meant that many people do not hold fire-related stories from personal experience because they, or their strong ties, have not been in such a situation. This pays heed to the note made in *Profiling the NZFS’s fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media* that most of the ‘easy gains’ in fire safety improvements have already been made, and the focus for the NZFS for most people is primarily on the continued prevention of fire-related incidents.

To solve this problem of a lack of personal knowledge that makes up collective knowledge—the form of knowledge attended to with greatest priority on social media, the NZFS must help in the generation of this. This means that the NZFS must find ways to promote fire safety as more personally relevant to individuals. Following the observations made from the focus groups and interviews in this research, it is proposed that the NZFS could nurture this in a number of ways. This includes the use of incentives to help establish connections, promotion of fire safety in more locally relevant ways, a firmer grounding in the concept of ‘place’ by refocusing fire safety

promotion at a more community-based level for social media and an integration of social media strategy across communication platforms.

Of these propositions, the concept of ‘place’ is the most important given its establishment as only tenuous on social media platforms. In order to stabilise the meaning of ‘place’ in a strategy involving social media, it must be well-grounded in other platforms to make up for this fragility of a social media platform. Although Facebook may be currently conceived as a ‘place’ by individuals, this place is primarily constructed by connections that exist outside of Facebook also. This means that if Facebook ceased to be conceived as a place, an individual’s network would still continue to exist although some ties to that network may become less visible and accessible. Similarly, a fire safety strategy made by the NZFS must reach beyond social media in order to retain visibility and accessibility. This necessitates a strategic integration across other communication platforms, and strengthens a case for localising fire safety strategy to maintain it as personally relevant.

In *Profiling the NZFS’s fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media* it was discussed how evidence from previous research pointed to a poor fit between fire safety strategies created at the top level of the NZFS and the reception of these by local fire station staff who often felt uncomfortable with the methods of disseminating these because they believed it was sometimes circumstantially inappropriate. This problem was exacerbated by a lack of feedback mechanisms available to the fire stations to help devise effective communications strategies (Lloyd & Roen, 2002). Social media is here advanced as a tool that can work to relieve the problems of poor fit and lack of feedback mechanisms by integrating collective knowledge into strategy formation. Localising fire safety strategies can also help to stabilise the meaning of place.

In discussion of the focus group question asking participants how they believed the NZFS could use social media successfully, several students advanced the merits of using *“localised news about fire/fire safety/the NZ fire service to prevent people from feeling that interacting with them via social media is irrelevant”* (Rachel). This approach was discussed further in interviews with participants, who were generally positively receptive of the idea but also voiced reservations about its potential to be effective. These reservations related to the administrative difficulties of employing a localised strategy on social media, such as whether fire fighters would be interested in doing so, particularly because *“most of the NZ fire men are volunteers... there’s no drive for them to have more of a presence in their community”* (Philip, Asian). It was also recognised that there would likely be discrepancies between the local deployment of these strategies because they *“might have slightly different takes on it”* (Amanda, single mother), which is important because

the administrator would be expected to “*have a good sense of humour to keep the user interested*” (Philip, Asian).

These concerns necessitate careful management and deployment of a localised fire safety strategy and raise questions the NZFS would need to address about the local social media administration. Further, the implication that local (or regional) fire station staff may not be interested in engaging with the public via social media brings the discussion back to the concept of social capital and how social media might be used to regenerate this resource. It was argued that any fire safety strategy involving social media must be strongly grounded in place, and that to do this integration across other communication platforms was necessary. One of these platforms can be identified as the geographically local community, which is of course grounded by physical place. By involving the local community through this ‘offline’ channel, this could work to heighten individual interaction and relevance with the NZFS, which in turn would help to increase the pool and circulation of collective knowledge, which can manifest as a form of bridging social capital—provided by support and sharing of knowledge amongst weak ties in a network.

A number of suggestions from participants voiced support for practical community involvement, such as community open days at fire stations, courses and workshops and simply asking for volunteers through social media. One participant compared the NZFS with St John and believed that St John had a firmer community grounding because of their community training such as first aid courses. He believed the NZFS could do something similar to increase their felt presence in the community (Philip, Asian). A firmer grounding of fire safety promotion by combining offline and online strategies in this way would contribute to increasing the personal relevance associated with knowledge obtained. It is suggested that a basis for participants’ beliefs that practical, offline activities would help in the promotion of fire safety is their strong memory of learning fire safety through practical methods of active involvement from when they attended primary school. Evidence of their strong recall of fire safety knowledge obtained through active involvement supports the understanding asserted in *Profiling the NZFS’s fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media* that knowledge obtained through methods aligning most closely with message involvement are more effective than those involving eliciting feelings of fear and guilt. If this strategy is again implemented at a later stage in life, this could also work to replicate results with enduring impact.

In addition to the use of social media and physically locally based platforms, other communication channels already employed by the NZFS could be integrated to help strengthen the effectiveness of fire safety promotions. It was noted earlier that previous research by TNS (2006) had identified the NZFS television campaigns as being effective in creating awareness (discussed primarily in this

chapter in terms of ‘shared knowledge’ such as slogans), but with little impact on fire safety behaviour. They called for the implementation of a strategy empowering people with knowledge of what to do, in addition to awareness. This included the recommendation to use a ‘call to action’ in television communications for people to explore supporting materials. Although social media could be used here as the ‘supporting materials’, the problem with this has been discussed in this chapter as the less active role participants’ adopt when using cooler media such as the television. Therefore, although broadcast media and social media could play complementary roles in supporting one another for the promotion of fire safety, any such ‘call to action’ would need to be personally motivating to an individual in order for the link to be successful.

It is proposed here that although social media can also serve to increase and sustain awareness of fire safety, there is also greater potential for individuals to seek and obtain more empowering forms of knowledge. Such empowerment describes behavioural change which was noted earlier in this thesis as the end goal in social marketing. However, the transactional model offered by social marketing to achieve this seems less useful than one that is based instead on how people use social media in their own lives. It was mentioned earlier in this chapter that participants suggested the use of incentives such as competitions as a potential way to get people noticing the NZFS via social media, despite their acknowledgement that this connection may not have an enduring impact. It was also identified in *Profiling the NZFS’s fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media* that the potential for the generation of social capital through social media meant that use of an altruistic incentive could also be effective. This works in opposition to a social marketing model which assumes an exchange must take place. Here, it is suggested that by making an incentive altruistic in nature, this will increase the enduring relevance of the incentive to individuals because an individual has invested something of greater consequence than an unlucky entry into a competition. More specifically, the incentive should be participation-based in order to increase the personal relevance and involvement with the knowledge attended to.

As a hypothetical example to illustrate, the NZFS might call for the public to share their own advice and experiences for fire safety, plotted on an interactive map or forum by town or neighbourhood, so that others in their neighbourhood can benefit from tailored and localised advice for their area. In this way, individuals could help others by recommending local outlets for smoke alarms or fire-safe children’s clothing, and warning of local dangers in the area, for example. The NZFS could assign certain people, whether they are volunteers or NZFS employees, to moderate this knowledge base and provide expert personalised advice. This activity would be based on a social media platform operated by the NZFS, rather than a public platform such as Facebook, where aliases could be used to facilitate greater use of weak ties for bridging social capital purposes. It was discussed in *Contextualising social media in literature and theory* how the

concept of reciprocity is of less importance in online communities consisting of people who would not be in contact with each other otherwise, due to the porous nature of the network and the weak connection formed enabling people to come and go as they pleased (Pfeil, 2010). Indeed, it has been established earlier in this chapter that the generation of bridging social capital through weak ties holds the most promise for the NZFS to use social media to promote the circulation of collective knowledge.

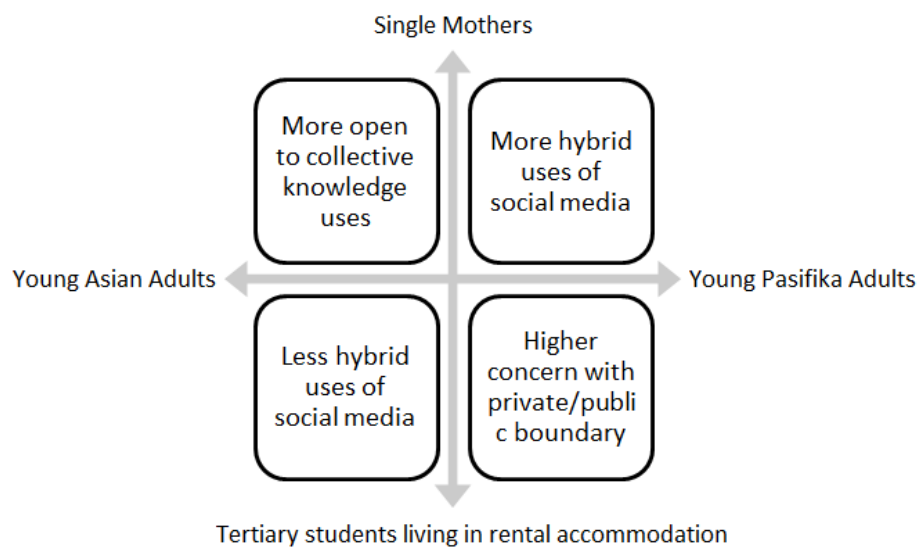
In this way, awareness of the altruistic call to action could be raised through existing communication channels and social media channels, and—as was suggested by some participants—through the use of celebrities and integration with existing popular organisations' social media presence. Although the actual knowledge circulation would be based outside of a platform like Facebook to help increase the stability of 'place', integration with Facebook could be used to help promote awareness and increase motivation to take action amongst people's existing networks. For, as noted earlier, Putnam (2000) wrote that "involvement in social networks is a stronger predictor of volunteering and philanthropy than altruistic attitudes per se... simply being asked to give is a powerful stimulus" (121). These locally focused knowledge bases would also attract lurkers, or to use Chayko's phrase of 'ambient copresence', people who do not actively participate but glean support from archived resources. This helps extend the value of social capital over time, and provides another means by which needs can be met at 'just the right temperature' online. Further, these locally focused knowledge bases could be the root to extended community support and offline activities such as fire station open days and workshops as suggested above. To take from an example from this research, some single mother participants described a similar line of progressions in how they met like-minded mothers through the Trade Me forum and then established a community outside of this, transforming these initially weak ties into stronger ones.

This hypothetical description of how the NZFS might engage social media for the promotion of fire safety is based on a model of collective knowledge generation which combines the power of increasing personal relevance through utilising existing network connections, and stimulates bridging social capital through weak tie connections that are again made more relevant to individuals by their localised focus. By placing the power of individualised networks centre stage in determining how knowledge is generated and attended to on social media, this model can work towards remedying some of the reservations held by participants about the potential limited effectiveness of implementing a fire safety strategy through social media. Knowledge is not broadcast, but accessed by individuals at their will. It refocuses attention on the generation of collective knowledge instead of the awareness of shared knowledge which works to capitalise most on the differential form of social media compared with other media, and to add greater depth to

already obtained ‘shared knowledge’ of fire safety—empowering people with ‘what to do’ (a state desired by TNS in 2006) by meeting individuals at ‘just the right temperature’.

## Opportunities for the NZFS to use social media successfully: By participant-type

It was acknowledged earlier in this chapter that patterns of social media use by group type granted them differential access to resources of social capital compared with others. The figure below visualises the most relevant differences for the NZFS prominent across the participant-types of single mothers, students, young Asian adults, and young Pasifika adults:



**Figure 1: Characteristics of social media use by participant-type**

From the discussion above, it should be apparent that social media uses for collective knowledge and a hybridity of social media uses (connoting greater openness with how participants negotiate their networks) are characteristics indicating a greater likelihood of engagement with NZFS strategies. Therefore, it is suggested that the NZFS would most easily find success in engaging single mothers on social media using the model proposed, while students would be the hardest group to engage. Brief overviews of the characteristics of social media use by participant group, contextualised by relevance to opportunities for the NZFS are detailed below.

### *Single Mothers*

It is suggested that single mothers hold the most promise out of the participant groups studied for the NZFS to successfully engage them in a fire safety strategy involving social media. This is because they most strongly articulated using social media in ways that made best use of finding bridging social capital by reaching outside of their existing network to create initially weak ties

that reaped benefits from the circulation of collective knowledge. This practice was intertwined closely with social motivations that helped them feel the presence of and connect with their network, when other communication channels were often less available to them. Furthermore, it is suggested that this habitual intertwining of social and informational motivations for social media use meant that negotiating the boundaries between private and public was of less concern to single mothers. These characteristics of social media use position single mothers as a group of strong candidates for the NZFS to successfully engage them with social media.

### ***Young Asian Adults***

It is suggested that the participant group type of young Asian adults holds some potential for the NZFS to successfully engage them in a fire safety strategy involving social media. This is due to their clear recognition and use of the benefits of using social media for collective knowledge purposes. Further, they did not take issue with the boundary between private and public on social media, as they were able to separate out emotionally motivated uses from practically motivated uses and articulate their uses unproblematically in this way. However, with the exception of Patricia who articulated hybrid uses of social media, most participants in this group type described their social media use to be more narrow in their approach than others, with engagement on social media platforms outside of Facebook rarely detailed. Therefore, although their patterns of collective knowledge use on social media holds some potential for the NZFS, their more narrow uses of social media may be a limitation.

### ***Young Pasifika Adults***

Like the participant-types above, patterns of use evident by young Pasifika adults are favourable for the NZFS to find success with engaging them on social media. Young Pasifika adults described using social media in a variety of ways, and they were most clearly able to articulate the benefits as well as the drawbacks of using social media for different purposes. While this suggests a greater awareness of their relationship with social media and the potential it holds, it may also speak to young Pasifika adults approaching engagement with the NZFS via social media with greater hesitancy. They were cautious of the boundary between private and public with social media and this drove articulation of the divide between positive social media uses in a public setting, and those less desirable that involved private matters. Since the model proposed for the NZFS to engage individuals on social media calls for the use of personal (private) knowledge, this may present an obstacle for the NZFS in engaging with young Pasifika adults.

### ***Tertiary students living in rental accommodation***

Of all participant-types studied, it is suggested that students would be the hardest group for the NZFS to reach. This is because students articulated patterns of social media use that were least in

line with the model identified in this thesis as holding the most potential for the NZFS to successfully engage individuals with social media. Although students were able to identify the potential of social media to be used in ways such as the generation of collective knowledge for practical purposes, students predominantly used social media for social purposes only, with a focus on engagement with stronger rather than weaker ties. Like young Pasifika adults, they were also concerned by the boundary between private and public and this concern may have contributed to their more limited habitual uses of social media. These patterns see students as the most closed off from the opportunities of bridging capital and collective knowledge that the NZFS are most likely to find success with. However, identification of this pattern of use may also present an opportunity for the NZFS to devise strategies that would need to work more through existing social relationships than connecting through relationships formed purely for practical reasons—like the acquisition of fire safety knowledge.

While these different emphases in patterns of social media use by participant-type are important for the NZFS in devising specific fire safety strategies targeting these groups identified as high-risk, the common characteristics of social media use across all groups help extend the use value of the findings of this research to a wider understanding of the relationship between individuals and social media that can be applied beyond a specific fire safety strategy for these high-risk groups, in different contexts by the NZFS and others alike.

## **Summarising thoughts: Reinforcing the findings of this thesis**

The findings of this thesis are significant in two respects: first, they provide the NZFS with a theory-based and evidence-based framework for incorporating social media into their fire safety promotion strategies; second, this thesis contributes to academic literature on uses of social media by positioning understanding in a framework of young New Zealand adults and their relationships with social media technology. The youth of social media technology and of academic research in this field, combined with the sparseness of New Zealand-focused research, increases the importance of this research's contribution to the field.

In the introduction of this thesis, it was noted that the findings from this research were also to be used in formulating a report for the NZFS to help them identify meaningful ways they could use social media in the promotion of fire safety, given their unfamiliarity with and recognition of social media as an important communication medium for many New Zealanders. Previous research had helped in identifying four different groups of young adults as important to study as participants in this research given their propensity for high social media use, and heightened risk for fire danger: single mothers; tertiary students living in rental accommodation; Pasifika; Asian. Asynchronous online focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participant-types, with results used to inform discussion and development of recommendations grounded in media theory and literature, and previous social media and NZFS research.

The first chapter, *Contextualising social media in literature and theory*, served to establish key ideas used in the development of this research. It began by recognising the importance of theoretical work by McLuhan (1994) and Thompson (1995) of situating individuals' relationships with media technology and content at the forefront of comprehension of social media uses. Modern 'communities' were identified as 'networks' (Wellman and Hampton, 1999) in providing a more useful approach in understanding how development of media technologies over time has amplified individualised relevance structures as a framework for how individuals relate to media. It demonstrates what Macnamara described as "a connected form of individualism" (2010: 87). The transformation from communities to networks seemed to be underpinned by the concept of increased control afforded to individuals—framed by McLuhan as a motivation for comfort by removing and countering 'irritants', and framed by Thompson as the loss of control, or 'feedback' available to those communicating and producing messages.

This structural shift to an individualised focus of communication was voiced as alarming by Putnam (2000) who equated the apparent loss of community with loss of the resource of social capital. As a romanticised notion, 'community' was used by earlier academic commentators on the internet who hopefully envisaged its revival in the form of new 'virtual communities' (Rheingold,

2000 [1993]). However, it was noted that using terms such as ‘virtual’ or ‘simulations’ were limited in their usefulness when applied to social media as it had been identified that people generally took their pre-existing relationships from offline to online (Ellison, Steinfield & Lamp, 2007). A networks frame was recognised as more useful in conceptualising continuity of relationships across different communication channels (Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988). It invited consideration of what this meant for the circulation of knowledge and social capital.

Granovetter’s (1973) concept of weak and strong ties was used to inform understanding of how social capital can be generated in networks. The merits of weak ties in their production of bridging social capital were recognised in comparison to the limitations of an ‘encapsulated’ network consisting of only strong ties. Online support communities were advanced as an example of how the use of weaker ties in generation of ‘thin trust’ is being used positively in social media (Pfeil, 2010). It was explained how connections on social networking sites foster trust, and it was noted that uses of SNSs were predominantly socially motivated and this may present a challenge for the NZFS in seeking to use it successfully for promotional purposes. However, it was noted that potential existed in the way social media may be conceived as constituting a more comfortable communication environment for individuals, by offering engagement at ‘just the right temperature’.

The idea of collective intelligence was identified as present in social media (Levy, 2005). Differences between the types of knowledge derived from collective intelligence and that derived from authoritative institutions were recognised as collective knowledge and shared knowledge respectfully, and it was noted that collective knowledge may be more significant for the NZFS in successfully using social media for the promotion of fire safety. Finally, the potential of social media to provide a comfortable communication environment for individuals nurturing the circulation of collective knowledge and social capital was cautioned with a reminder that these environments are structured by commercial motives and the limitations of individual control over these spaces.

In the second chapter, *Profiling the NZFS’s fire safety promotion for strategy formation using social media*, current fire safety promotion strategies were contextualised in findings from past research conducted for the NZFS and an overview of the NZFS’s vision and current success at promoting fire safety. It was noted that most of the easy gains in fire safety had already been made, and the challenge involved in visualising success when the primary objective for the NZFS’s fire safety goals is on continued *prevention*. The differences between consequence-based and call to action-based messages were discussed, and it was suggested that those employing an anticipated guilt persuasion mechanism would be more effective than those using an accusatory guilt stance

due to the requirement of the former of message involvement reducing negative reactions that may arise from an external influencer in the latter. This idea of personal involvement having a more powerful role was linked back to ideas discussed in the previous chapter that individuals operate from relevance structures, choosing to attend to information deemed personally relevant to them. It was recognised that the environment of social media that enables the individual greater control than broadcast media called for a different strategic approach in fire safety promotion.

Discrepancies between fire safety communications devised at the top-level of the NZFS, and those working at the front-line of the service were recognised. Different models of knowledge (shared and collective, respectively) were apparent between the two, with no feedback mechanism in place to use the collective knowledge of fire fighters advantageously. The potential for the NZFS to play a part in the generation of social capital was identified, and it was suggested that social media may work as a channel through which the discrepancies between knowledge at the top-level of the NZFS and those at the front line could be reduced. This could be done through a more localised approach to fire safety communication that would also make it more personally relevant to individuals, an approach identified as especially important for the NZFS's success with social media. Further, it was suggested that success and the generation of social capital was more likely with social media if the NZFS did not communicate in an authoritative tone, and acted in more genuinely personalised ways as is custom in this medium. If done right, the NZFS could foster altruistic behaviour amongst weak ties and leverage this in the circulation of collective fire safety knowledge.

Current social media endeavours by the NZFS were described, and it was noted that the online presence of some 'unofficial' local fire stations pointed towards the youthfulness of the NZFS's fire safety strategy development with social media. Some successful public service campaigns using social media by other organisations were detailed, however it was recognised that unlike the direct goals of these campaigns, the NZFS has a more general goal of nurturing fire safety and this requires a different approach. It was maintained that personal relevance was required for involvement in fire safety promotion, and an individual's relationship with social media at 'just the right temperature' remain important in strategy formation.

As detailed in the methodology chapter, the research methodology was designed to engage participants in focus groups by participant-type on Facebook in an environment with minimal artificiality, and to conduct semi-structured interviews over the phone or Skype also in a way designed to make participants feel they were engaging at a comfortable temperature for them. Questions were informed by ideas identified in the first two chapters of this thesis. It was noted

that some limitations from the research findings may arise due to the focus groups being hosted on Facebook potentially denying access to some, and skewing discussion towards uses of Facebook.

The chapter *Understanding communication practices with social media* drew together findings from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews to make some observations about what participants said they do with social media and what makes it a unique communication tool for them. It was found that Facebook was the most often used social media platform, that social media was commonly used socially to keep in touch with family and friends, and that, although social media use was primarily socially motivated, informational purposes also played a part. Pronounced differences across the focus groups in conceptualising social media use for advice and support purposes were identified, with young Asian adults and single mothers speaking more positively of this than the other participant-types who spoke with more caution towards uses of social media for these purposes. The style of communication with social media was identified as useful in reconnecting participants with people they would otherwise not be in touch with (weak ties), and enabling less ‘awkward’ communication in support of the idea that social media may be used at ‘just the right temperature’ for individuals. It was also noted that a lack of contextual information in communicating with social media could be a limitation, however social media was strongly praised for its flexibility and convenience as a communication tool. Finally, it was also identified that promotional content is accessed through social media by individuals when desired, and that participants liked to engage with those they already had an affiliation with. Further, participants were drawn to engage with those offering incentives, and did not like communication that was heavily promotional or too frequent in nature from businesses or organisations. These observations pay heed to individualised relevance structures at work with social media uses, and the orientation of the medium as primarily socially motivated.

The chapter *Perceptions of the NZFS and their fire safety communication* began by detailing where participants said they had learnt their fire safety knowledge, and why they thought they may remember this over other knowledge. Three explanations stood out as reasons why some fire safety knowledge was better remembered. These related to the ‘catchiness’ of a slogan, the repetition of knowledge, and education from a young age. Most knowledge tended to be recalled from primary school education and television advertisements. Participants generally considered themselves to have a comfortable level of fire safety knowledge and believed that the NZFS had done an effective job at promoting fire safety. However the optimism expressed towards the NZFS’s effectiveness of promoting fire safety was incongruent with some participants’ hesitancy at describing their own fire safety capabilities, and it was suggested that this may allude to a lack of concern by participants with fire safety or a perception of unimportance to them, or a difficulty in articulating or assessing their own knowledge of fire safety. This chapter concluded by detailing

opinions of and suggestions made by participants in how the NZFS could use social media effectively. Some suggestions did not fit clearly with how participants said they used social media, and caution was voiced towards how effective a strategy using social media may be for the NZFS. It was agreed though, that the NZFS should use social media.

In *Understanding the impact of social media on people's lives*, attention was refocused on the form of social media technology over its content, due to evidence from participants demonstrating emphasis on the structural impact social media technology had over their everyday lives. This was most apparent in participants' expression that social media was a less awkward, more convenient and flexible communication tool that enabled them to keep in contact with people worldwide with ease. These structural changes were expressed by participants as having a positive impact on their communication environments, and it was this positive relationship that participants said they had with social media technology that drew to attention the importance of McLuhan's theoretical work. For participants, social media had become part of their lived environment, enabling communication improvements, or a new level of control and comfort by engaging at 'just the right temperature' that were hard for them to visualise living without.

It was argued that the structural conditions of social media were able to render networks more open in two senses: one, as superseding in accessibility over other communication environments; two, as providing conditions that more readily sustain weaker ties in an individual's network. These two forms of openness helped demonstrate how social media augments a social structure of connected individualism. Further, it was argued that rather than creating new networks social media enhance visualisation of, and add communication modes to, connections of existing individualised networks by rendering them more open and accessible. It was acknowledged that social norms were also at work in communication with social media, demonstrating how pre-existing structural conditions influenced communication on social media. Although social media afford networks with more openness and fluidity while also giving the individual agency to make network movement and communication more comfortable, it was seen that these consequences respectively make networks both more public in a more private environment. This public-private tension was most apparent in discussion with participants of social media uses for advice and support purposes. This tension, which was articulated differently by participant-type, served to demonstrate the complexity of communication associated with negotiating a more public network in a more private environment.

The extent of control that participants had over social media was discussed in terms of how social media are constructed primarily for commercial purposes, but are used primarily for social purposes. Significantly, although participants' communication on a platform such as Facebook exacerbated the tension between the public-private boundary by the use of personal information for

commercial purposes, this was not identified as an issue by participants. It was argued that their concern instead with the public-private tension within their network pays tribute to the individualised relevance structures that participants operate within. Further, it also showed how social media was able to ‘act as the juicy piece of meat’ by distracting them from the wider implications of social media uses. It was argued that although the tension created by commercialism is similar to that with mass media, social media differs in the extent it can also be conceived as a ‘place’. This thesis situated understanding that the commercial motivations of social media platforms such as Facebook provide the material support for a social space, while the actions of individual members serve to construct it as a place.

Thompson’s theory of the ‘double-bind of mediated dependence’ was used to explain the captive nature of these social media platforms, and the limitations that this poses for individual’s control over their use of social media. It was reasoned that although social media may have altered the environment for communication by rendering it more open and comfortable to use, fundamentally the structural conditions behind this change remain the same. It was projected that social media platforms such as Facebook would continue to develop to automate and simulate people’s actions, in a cycle that promotes their commercial motivations and the socially motivated relief of ‘irritants’ for individuals. However, as this develops, the more complex it would become for individuals to meaningfully negotiate the boundaries between public and private in their social practices, and the less it could be perceived as a place, as it would become less associated with emotional investment. This informed emphasis that caution must be used in formulating communication strategies with social media due to the fluidity with which social media platforms achieve their status as a ‘place’.

Discussion from the chapter *Understanding the impact of social media on people’s lives* was used to theoretically inform development of social media strategy propositions for the NZFS in the chapter *Proposed opportunities for the NZFS in developing a fire safety strategy using social media*. Argument in this chapter was organised by participants’ patterns of social media use that granted them differential access to resources of social capital by participant-type. Evidence of the circulation of collective knowledge was most apparent in the young Asian adults and single mothers groups, demonstrating greater use of weak ties and bridging social capital. The other participant-types articulated more reluctance in employing their network for social capital purposes, and it was argued that this was due to the public-private tension created by this communication environment. A contrast between the type of shared knowledge recalled by participants from other communication channels, and the ways in which they use social media for collective knowledge was identified. It was proposed that this presented an opportunity for the NZFS to use social media to promote the circulation of collective fire safety knowledge, with

social media's ability to make the knowledge more personally relevant adding richer depth to knowledge obtained through more traditional communication channels.

Promoting a different type of knowledge with social media was important because it was argued that the balance of power with social media was structurally different to that held by mass media which enables message transmission to become part of commonly held 'shared knowledge' in the absence of personal relevance to a particular message. It was argued, therefore, that any fire safety promotion strategy replicating similar communication techniques as used in other media that promotes shared knowledge would be less effective with social media than strategies targeted to the medium. Difficulties arose though when it came to practical visualisation of how the NZFS could formulate strategy development, due to the incongruence with how participants expressed the ways they used social media, and how they imagined the NZFS using it. Participants also articulated reservations about how effective the extent to which social media would be an effective platform for the promotion of fire safety. These reservations centred on an acknowledgement that social media is not perceived as a suitable platform for authoritative institutions to impart their messages, and it was suggested that this was because of an implicit understanding by participants that they would be required to play a more active role (than in other communication media) if a fire safety strategy were to be successful with social media, which they may not be willing to do because of a lack of personal relevance to them. For communication on social media to be successful, it was stressed that the NZFS must honour the individualised two-way communicative culture of the medium, while maintaining a delicate balance in order to avoid disruption of their pre-existing regard by others as trustworthy.

Concern was acknowledged with the potential for generating the circulation of collective knowledge powered by personal relevance to the knowledge, when it appeared from participants' responses that there is a lack of personal knowledge (which makes up collective knowledge) in the first place. To solve this problem, it was reasoned that the NZFS must help in the generation of this knowledge. This meant that the NZFS must find ways to promote fire safety as more personally relevant to individuals. To do this it was argued that the meaning of 'place' needed to be stabilised, and this necessitated a strategic integration across other communication platforms, and strengthened a case for localising fire safety strategy to maintain it as personally relevant for individuals. The physically local community was advanced as an important communication platform in stabilising the meaning of place for individuals, which was argued would also increase their personal relevance to the promotion of fire safety, by making it locally relevant and presenting opportunities for active involvement through interactions offline also.

It was seen that greater individual active involvement offline and through social media also presented greater potential for individuals to seek and obtain more empowering forms of knowledge, going beyond a level of awareness. This led to the suggestion that altruistic-based incentives could be an effective strategy technique, increasing the enduring relevance of the incentive to individuals and generating social capital. A hypothetical example was provided to demonstrate how these ideas could be put into practice. This was based on the model developed in this chapter of the generation of collective knowledge, combining the power of increased personal relevance through utilising existing network connections, and stimulating bridging social capital through weak tie connections that are again made more relevant to individuals by their localised focus. Finally, opportunities for strategy formation by participant-type were given. It was noted that different emphases in patterns of use across these groups presented prospects for the NZFS to optimally engage with them by employing different emphases from the theoretical model proposed in their strategy formation.

In acknowledging that the participant sample studied in this research was relatively small in scope, and that participants were selected for the specific purpose of helping the NZFS formulate fire safety strategies using social media for at-risk groups difficult to influence, it is reasoned that arguments made are sustainable for generalisation of young New Zealand adults wider than this participant sample because of commonalities across all participant-types. Most useful are the findings related to individuals and their relationships with media technologies. Variable modes of individual control afforded by media highlight how the development of social media has risen as a positive tool which young New Zealand adults use with greater control to make communication more personally comfortable, and by which contributes to the modern shift away from community to connected forms of individualism. The ability of social media to make networks more visible and open contributes to an understanding of how the resource of social capital continues to be produced, and most significantly provides opportunity for the circulation of collective knowledge through weak ties. This can enrich shared forms of knowledge obtained through other communication means. The opportunities for the promotion of knowledge using social media were discussed in specific terms for the NZFS however it is advanced that this framework may be useful for other public-good organisations in engaging with social media, particularly in a New Zealand based context where there is little existing research on the topic. Finally, this thesis also contributes to the academic field by voicing caution over the fluidity with which social media is constructed as a place. It warns that the relationship young New Zealand adults have with media technology in the construction of this is tenuous, and the more devoid of human investment this relationship becomes, the greater the risk of the loss of a social media platform's status as place.

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## **Appendix 1: Questions used in the focus groups**

1. Talk about the typical ways you use social media and why. For example, you might be a heavy content sharer, post the occasional comment or be a background ‘lurker’ – what do you get out of this that you wouldn’t if social media weren’t around?
2. Talk about the idea of giving advice or support to others using social media. If you can, draw on examples to help explain your motivations and outcomes of the situation.
3. Can you think of any situations in which you may feel more comfortable using social media to communicate with others instead of another form of communication (e.g. phone call, face-to-face, letter)? Why is this the case?
4. Many businesses and organisations are getting into social media. Talk about examples of those you like engaging with using social media and those you wouldn’t bother with. Why are some better than others?
5. What fire safety knowledge can you easily recall? If you remember, share where you learned this from. Why do you think you can recall this knowledge more easily than other information you might have received along the way?
6. Based on discussion from the previous questions in this focus group, what things could the NZFS do to help them successfully use social media to engage with the public?

## **Appendix 2: Sample questions used in semi-structured interviews**

Do you use any other forms of social media apart from Facebook?

What don't you like about social media?

How do you think your life would be different without social media?

How much of your social media use is for more informative than purely social purposes?

What motivates you to like or follow or interact with businesses and organisations on social media to begin with?

How are the businesses you engage with on Facebook better than others?

Why do you choose to deal with particular types of issues via social media rather than a different mode of communication?

Would you consider yourself well-educated in fire safety? Would you know what to do in a fire-related incident?

How effective do you think the NZFS fire safety communications is and has been for you?

Do you know where your local fire station is?

What do you think about the idea of the NZFS using a more localised approach with social media than a single nationalised presence, do you think there's any value in that?

Do you think there is a place for the NZFS to use social media effectively?