# Social network sites as arenas for public discourse

- perception, participation and experience

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# Abstract

Social network sites (SNS) and Facebook, in particular, are often discussed and referred to as public spaces in popular discourse, by politicians and the media and are often theorised as such in the research literature. Still, the general user experience of such spaces as potentially public is thus far under-theorised. By using an audience-centric approach, this thesis challenges assumptions and theories around SNS as public spaces. The project aims to advance our understanding of the everyday user experience of publicness in SNS. Its main research question is: 'How are social network sites experienced as spaces for public discourse in Norway?'.

This research question is investigated through qualitative and quantitative methods, with an overall mixed-method research design. Two rounds of interviews and an online survey were deployed to contribute new insights to the research field. The combination of methods was considered necessary to match the complexity of the phenomenon investigated. The thesis addresses the general experience of SNS, and more particularly, women's experience of Facebook. Drawing public sphere theory as a sensitising framework or starting point which offers core dimensions, language and concepts, the Norwegian and gendered experience of SNS as spaces for public discourse is explored.

Research on SNS as public spaces frequently becomes a question of participation, although we have known for over a decade now that only a small proportion of SNS users take part in observable forms of participation, such as commenting, sharing or posting about public issues. Media and communication scholars still primarily focus on observable participation, and active involvement that is not visible for others has received little attention. This study addresses the general, everyday experience of SNS, regardless of observable activity, which is thus far under-theorised. Besides, the concept of the public sphere is unpacked by drawing on varied explanatory frameworks or theoretical approaches, such as looking at the use of emotion or experience of inhibition.

The main empirical contribution of the thesis is that publicness in SNS is experienced as tension between risk and obligation, rationality and emotions, assumptions of publicness and everyday use, folk theories and own experience, and participation and inhibition. SNS can be, and frequently is, considered in two entirely different ways. One is the self-evident publicness that popular discourse refers to. The other is everyday use, which is mainly oriented around personal and social information and activity.

The thesis also addresses the implicit and everyday use of the concept of the public sphere in Norway, which involves assumptions and deliberative ideals for public discourse on Facebook, despite the limited role issues of public relevance has in their everyday use of this platform. For these informants, such ideals include feeling like they should participate and take responsibility for discourse that is considered too emotional or not deliberative enough. They also express feeling guilty as they rarely visibly participate.

A shared and pervasive narrative of SNS and Facebook as particularly hostile and dangerous spaces for voicing opinions was found, although the expectation of risk involved seemed to stem from popular discourse and rarely from direct personal experience. While there was extensive experience of inhibition in this material, there is little evidence to suggest that these SNS users are passive or do not care. A theoretical contribution of this thesis is to sensitise the concept of inhibition and extend the conceptual framework to go beyond participation or non-participation and instead offer a more precise way of theorising the intent behind apparent passivity.

# List of Publications

*Sakariassen, H. (2020). A digital public sphere: Just in theory or a perceived reality for users of social network sites? MedieKultur: Journal of Media & Communication Research, 36(68), 126–146. https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v36i68.118440. Open Access.*

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*Sakariassen, H (2021) Women's emotion work and strategic use of emotions in public discourse on Facebook. Computers in Human Behaviour Reports. Under review.*

# Contents

# 1. Introduction

On 14 March 2018, the Norwegian minister of justice, a member of the Progress Party, posted a picture on Facebook depicting a group of masked terrorists carrying weapons with a caption text claiming that the Norwegian Labour Party considered the terrorist's rights more important than national security. The minister of justice was known as an active user of social media and provoked extensive public debate by her activity. This particular post was special, however, as it resulted in the loss of her job. Incidents like this demonstrate how in popular discourse, such as in media and politics, social network sites are assumed to be public spaces. This post was recognised and created outrage as a public political expression linked to the Progress Party and the position as the minister of justice, even if posted on a personal yet open Facebook profile. A further example of this is that in May 2018, the prime minister in Norway launched what she referred to as a clean-up campaign of our digital public sphere to tackle online hate speech and to work towards a healthier debate climate on social network sites (SNS), notably in the comment sections of newspapers, that for the most part, have moved to Facebook in Norway.

> The internet is a great contribution to the democratisation of our society. (...) We cannot accept that our political debates turn quiet because people behave badly online (the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, quoted in Garden, 2019)

Such series of events, and many more, tell us something about social network sites in Norway. Setting aside the discussion of whether SNS are constructive or destructive, the underlying premise is the same: social network sites are taken for granted as spaces for public debate, and as such, are taken seriously as political spaces by journalists and politicians. SNS are thus discussed as part of the public sphere and are also frequently conceptualised as public spaces in the research literature (see, for example, boyd, 2010; Neuman et al., 2011; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Storsul, 2014). Popular discourse has followed suit, and SNS are generally deemed to be public spaces, an assumption that informs the conversations we have about these spaces.

However, the 'publicness' of SNS remains unclear, as we know little about how users, in general, experience these spaces. Is it a publicness in terms of visibility, accessibility or topics of common interest? Could it be that while many agree with the idea of such spaces being public, the publicness is more theoretical than self-evident? Are social network sites experienced as public spaces by others than journalists and politicians (and some media scholars)? Do the general users of these sites regard their online activity as public participation?

This thesis aims to investigate ordinary users experience of publicness in SNS by employing an audience-centric perspective to question and problematise many of the assumptions that we have about the publicness of SNS.

This thesis consists of four articles and this 'framing introduction' that documents the cohesiveness of the thesis as a whole, as required by the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Bergen. The framing introduction will summarise, contextualise and discuss the four articles and how they contribute to answering the main research question. As such, it presents the cohesiveness of the research, combines the gaps and conclusions in a joint perspective, and demonstrates the relationship between the thesis and the existing research in the field. Additionally, it will outline the broader theoretical framework of the study and provide an in-depth methodological discussion.

**Chapter two** presents the national context for this thesis. **Chapter three** will focus on the overarching research question that binds the articles together through substantiating the perspectives, theories and concepts. **Chapter four** will present the existing research in the field, identify the research gaps and place the dissertation in a context. In **chapter five,** I will outline and reflect upon the main methodological choices. **Chapter six** provides a summary of the articles. In the **seventh chapter**, I will summarise and discuss the individual articles relating them to the main research question, and discuss the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of these findings.

## 1.1 Aims and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to advance our understanding of the user experience of the publicness in everyday use of social network sites (SNS). My main research question can be formulated as: 'How are social network sites experienced as spaces for public discourse in Norway?'. This question requires several limitations and specifications, which will be discussed in *Chapter 3, section 3.1.*

To explore the everyday experience of a potential digital community where citizens can come together to discuss issues of common interest, this thesis makes use of deliberative democracy and the public sphere (Habermas, 1992) as a sensitising framework (Bishop,1979), which offers core dimensions, language and concepts. However, the point of departure for this thesis is not the assumption that SNS functions as public spheres, nor is it my intention to evaluate if and to what degree SNS functions in such terms. Instead, the public sphere is used

as an interpretive device or starting point to understand the Norwegian and gendered experience of SNS as spaces for public discourse.

Research on SNS in terms of public spaces is frequently about evaluating how well SNS functions as part of the public sphere, which often becomes a question of citizen participation (Masip et al., 2019). We have known for over a decade now that only a fraction of social media users takes part in observable forms of participation such as commenting, sharing or posting about public issues (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). And yet, media and communication scholars still primarily focus on this subgroup, and active involvement that is not visible for others has received little attention (Crawford, 2009).

Therefore, this study departs from the actual, everyday experiences of SNS around public discourse and investigate user experiences (Mirnig et al., 2015). *User experience* is a broad term that includes the perceptions and responses resulting from the use or anticipated use of SNS as spaces for public discourse, which is related to emotions, beliefs, preferences, physical responses, behaviours and accomplishments that encompasses concurrent and retrospective dimensions (Mirnig et al., 2015).

As such, I address the general, everyday use of SNS, regardless of observable activity, which is thus far under-theorised. Besides, this thesis unpacks the concept of the public sphere in an everyday setting by drawing on various perspectives from different research fields that further our understanding of experiencing and potentially participating in public discourse on SNS. The value of such inquiry lies in questioning the assumption that SNS represent public spaces for all users by comparing the "official notion" with the one people experience.

Two rounds of interviews and an online survey were deployed to contribute new insights to the research field. I draw on established qualitative and quantitative methods, with an overall mixed-method research design. The combination of methods was considered necessary to match the complexity of the phenomenon I investigate, known as *requisite variety* (Costera Meijer, 2016, p. 547).

The thesis consists of four scholarly articles that relate to various aspects of the main research question and this framing introduction where I discuss the articles together and highlight how they contribute to fulfilling my project's ambitions. The thesis is called 'Social network sites as arenas for public discourse - perception, participation and experience', a title that encompasses all articles and the main research question. All the articles share in common the use of core dimensions from the sensitising framework of the Habermasian public sphere

(Habermas, 1992) to make sense of SNS as spaces for public discourse. Nevertheless, they differ in their approach to the subject, by, for example, using varied explanatory frameworks or theoretical approaches, such as *emotion work* (Hochschild, 1979) and *inhibition* (Hayes et al., 2006).

By using an inductive approach, this study challenges assumptions and theories around SNS as public spaces. Are these spaces actually experienced as public, and if so, what does 'public' then mean? Is participation always positive or even desirable? Can we theorise non-participation more productively than simply disregarding it as passive or a sign of disinterest? Such theorisation goes beyond challenging popular discourse but also problematises the current emphasis in the research on SNS.

## 1.2 An introduction to the articles

The overall research question is answered through four cumulative articles that I will briefly introduce here. Some theoretical frameworks and methodological information are recurrent in the articles as they have to function separately and independently of one another while still relating to the main research question and topic and using the same material. The article format is a fragmented way to present the landscape of concepts, theories and methodological choices. Therefore, **chapter three** of this thesis is devoted to presenting the theoretical approaches, concepts and perspectives, and **chapter five** is devoted to explaining the overall research design, including the methodological justifications and explanations of the empirical work.

| Source of data | Article | Title |
|---|---|---|
| Round 2 Survey data | Article 1 | A digital public sphere: Just in theory or a perceived reality for users of social network sites? |
| | Article 2 | Why so quiet? Exploring inhibition in digital public spaces. |
| Round 1&3 Interview data | Article 3 | Facebook as an arena for public discourse, experienced as a distinctive situational wilderness in breach of user's democratic ideals |
| | Article 4 | Women's emotion work and strategic use of emotions in public discourse on Facebook |

*Table 1: Overview of articles and set-up of the thesis*

Article one and two are based on survey data. The first article addresses the users' behaviours and perception of SNS as spaces for public debate. It finds that many agree with the idea of such spaces being public spaces, yet few personally experience SNS in that way. The

article displays the contradiction between how these spaces generally are discussed as public spaces and everyday experiences that are generally characterised by personal or private communication. A gendered experience was exposed, in which women are more inclined to post in closed groups or private chats. However, women also tend to be more positive regarding the societal function of debates in SNS, more likely to find that debates on SNS to be important, that debates belong in SNS and that these debates have value. An apparent contradiction in women's experience is found, yet the quantitative material cannot fully explain it and is investigated further in the in-depth interviews.

The second article examines the experience of feeling inhibited from observable participation in public discourse on SNS and claims that such inhibition is a symptom of intention to take part and therefore functions as a study of intent. The concept of inhibition is sensitised by adding layers of meaning to it from various theoretical angles that all relate to inhibition yet rarely communicate across; the spiral of silence theory, the harsh debate climate, political efficacy and specific properties of SNS. The aim is to extend the conceptual framework to go beyond participation or non-participation and instead offer a more precise way of theorising the intent behind apparent passivity. As such, article two builds on the first article by further exploring the experiences that explain the behaviours and attitudes found in article one.

With the two following articles, there are three notable changes. First, the move from survey data to interview data was made to complement and expand on the findings from the statistical analysis that revealed patterns that needed further explanations. As such, it is a transition from providing an overview to obtaining detailed perspectives of SNS as spaces for public discourse, which includes an innate move from quantitative to qualitative methods (Creswell, 2014). Second, the move from SNS in general to Facebook was motivated by the change of data collection method, which required more specificity that would allow for detailed accounts, and from the research data showing that Facebook was the predominantly used platform and that other platforms were less used. Thus, although the survey participants were asked about the general use of SNS, it was likely that they had answered in terms of Facebook. Third, the choice to focus on women was based on the gendered perspectives found in the research data, further discussed in the method chapter, and theoretical perspectives described in the literature review. Overall, there is a transition from a general experience of SNS to a particular group of users and their experience of one particular platform in the next two articles.

The third article explores women's user experience of Facebook as a space for

public discourse and looks at their interpretive repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The findings revealed repertoires based on deliberative ideals, which bore a resemblance to those of Habermas, and negativity toward activity that does not adhere to such ideals. Facebook is found to be experienced as a public space that invokes the feeling that one should participate in debates, and taking part was described as taking responsibility. However, the experience of Facebook is also one of hostility and anger, in which observable participation was preferably avoided due to worry or involved strategies for exiting quickly to shield oneself. While these informants ideally wanted a listen-and-discuss attitude, the experience is that Facebook debates require a hit-and-run attitude.

The fourth article addresses women's experience and strategic employment of emotions in public discourse on Facebook, using *emotion work* (Hochschild, 1979) as a sensitising concept. The presence of strong feelings in public discourse on Facebook, such as anger, received much negative focus and caused worry about potential verbal attacks and the stress of getting emotionally involved. The strong emotions were juxtaposed to the notion of rationality in public discourse by the informants. Such worry frequently inhibited women from posting. Nevertheless, the informants were found to engage in emotion work that attempted to modify strong emotions and influence the tone of debates, and strategic use of emotion was found to enable women to participate in situations that are otherwise challenging. This study shows the multifaceted use of emotion and the emotion work involved in women's observable and non-observable participation on Facebook.

# 2. The Context of Norway

This study was conducted in Norway, a country with five million inhabitants described as a Nordic welfare state with high levels of electoral turnout and high levels of trust in institutions (Esping-Andersen 1990; Hilson 2008).

Typically, Norway is ranked high on international indexes. For example, the Democracy Index 2020 ranked Norway as number one based on five main principles; electoral process, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. The same year, Norway was also ranked on top of the Human Development Report, based on indicators such as relatively high levels of education and low levels of inequality in income (United Nations, 2020). In addition, Norway is found to be the country with the highest level of trust in a comparison of 60 countries (Delhey and Newton 2005), extending to high levels of

trust in the news media (Reuters: 2017). Norwegian society is, furthermore, characterised by equal rights and freedom of speech (Freedom-House, 2018; Reporters-without-borders, 2019).

The welfare state system known as The Nordic Model combines social and economic systems that aim at universal rights within societies with comparatively small differences in income and gender differences (Syvertsen, 2014). Such a model is meant to promote democratic conditions, high levels of civic participation and equality for citizens (Syvertsen, 2014). Civic engagement has been described as ''the degree to which people become involved in their community'' (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004: 135) and is considered an important factor in democracy (Putnam, 2000). "Welfare states are often followed by large voluntary sectors and vibrant civil societies" (Henriksen et al., 2018: 2), and Nordic countries, such as Norway, are traditionally associated with a strong civic culture (Henriksen et al., 2018: 2).

Norway is considered digitally savvy and has a high internet penetration, 98% (Reuters: 2017). Most Norwegians are SNS users (Statistics Norway, 2019), and Facebook is the most popular platform. Most Norwegians use SNS daily, and 40 % also use these platforms for news. Still, Norwegians are not particularly active in online debates, sharing or commenting on the news (Reuters: 2017), which problematises the assumption that accessibility or openness automatically leads to equal participation.

The data collection was conducted in 2016, 2017 and 2018, and a trend for this period is that SNS have received much attention in the media. For example, #metoo and #blacklivesmatter have paved the way for a myriad of Norwegian issues and campaigns using # and SNS to promote awareness. As mentioned in the introduction, politicians have also increased their visibility on SNS, and the election in 2017 was coined as the first "social media election" due to large portions of the campaigning budgets being spent on these platforms (Veberg, 2017). Although SNS was already used for civic participation and public debate, such trends arguably have increased the attention these spaces receive as arenas for public discourse.

In short, the context for this study is relatively well-educated people with an open political system, a robust civic culture and high proportion of SNS users.

# 3. Conceptual framework

This chapter describes the conceptual framework, which is the structure the thesis is embedded. Such a framework informs and supports the research endeavour (Maxwell, 2012, p. 39) and provides the context that explains 'the key factors, concepts or variables and the presumed

relationship among them' (Maxwell, 2012, p. 20). However, the conceptual framework that the articles have in common is a sensitising framework (Bishop,1979) rather than an explanatory framework. This thesis uses core dimensions, terms and concepts from deliberative democracy and the public sphere (Habermas, 1992) as an interpretive device and starting point to explore SNS as spaces for public discourse. However, the experience of the publicness of these spaces is studied through various psychological and sociological theories, concepts and perspectives, such as inhibition (Hayes et al., 2006) and emotion work (Hochschild, 1979). Thus, the individual articles address aspects of the experienced publicness through other theoretical perspectives, while the sensitising framework offers the central language, concepts and terms. Such perspectives allow for inductive, audience-centric views on publicness in SNS that, for example, goes beyond rationality and instead include emotions and beyond observable participation to instead focus on user experience, which also involves inhibition. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the articles are theoretically interconnected.

## 3.1 Unpacking the research question

The research question for this thesis is: *How are social network sites experienced as spaces for public discourse in Norway?* This first section is dedicated to unpacking the different elements of the research question; public(ness), public discourse, and public space.

The term *public* is multi-layered and encompass 'any issues affecting how we live together that require common solutions', also covering matters outside the traditional definition of electoral politics (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007, p. 6). Additionally, the term public is claimed to 'connote ideas of citizenship, commonality, and things not private, but accessible and observable by all' (Papacharissi, 2002). On a similar note, Coleman and Ross (2010) distinguish between three meanings of public; the accessible (instead of closed), the universal (instead of particular) and visible (as opposed to hidden). The multi-layeredness of the term public is useful in this thesis as the aim is to investigate the experiences of publicness in SNS from an audience-centric perspective, which can relate to collectivity, accessibility, visibility or various constellations of all three.

In Norwegian, the term *publicness* [offentlighet] is an established term used in everyday conversation and the media. Publicness has a broad meaning adhering to the definitions above and includes different dimensions of public life, such as political discussions, public exchanges of opinion, debates of societal relevance, civic engagement and more non-labelled activity. In the interview setting, using this term solicited the informants' interpretation of what publicness

on SNS means to them and what it means to take part in it. *Publicness* is thus used as a sensitising concept (Charmaz, 2006). Using publicness as a sensitising concept means that it is an interpretive device that serves as a jumping-off point or lens for a qualitative study (Charmaz 2006: 259). The intention is to understand the experience of publicness in SNS and allow the concept to become charged with meaning through the course of the research. The concept of publicness is related to the concept of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, and such concepts and their position in this study will be discussed further in the next section. I explore SNS as spaces where citizens can come together to discuss issues of common interest (Jürgen Habermas, 1991). However, a study of the publicness of SNS is not necessarily a study of the public sphere. One essential difference is that SNS are digital places for communicational exchange that "challenges conventional divides between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, and the personal and the political" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 151). As such, these spaces include different types of communication, functions, and information that can be used for various purposes, oriented towards issues of shared interest. Therefore, these spaces may be part of a public sphere, yet only if they are used for such an orientation towards issues of shared interest (Papacharissi, 2002). Building on this notion, this study also suggests additional conditions, such as perceiving these spaces to accommodate public discourse and how such views on SNS as spaces for public discourse, in general, correspond with the direct everyday experience of these spaces.

Based on this study's approach, the experience of the publicness in SNS cannot be easily defined as the experience of the public sphere, public space, public deliberation or public debate. First, if we acknowledge that these spaces are used for different purposes, it makes little sense to focus only on the space of SNS itself. Therefore, that a space is public in terms of access does not guarantee that the activity in this space is related to public or civic participation (Papacharissi, 2002). Second, democratic theories emphasise action that is not only pertaining to shared, collective issues but that is also visible (Jenkins, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Yet, focusing only on observable participation would mean turning a blind eye to most users because we know that the majority of users do not enter into debates or participate openly on SNS (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). Third, examining the type of communication (for example, is it deliberative?) is also too narrow a focus since this is not a study that evaluates how well SNS functions as a space for public deliberation. However, focusing on the user experience of

publicness allow me to set aside such limitations and explore SNS as spaces for public discourse across the dimensions of accessibility, visibility and collectivity.

The difficulty with defining the concept is partly an issue of translation from the Norwegian *offentlighet* (öffentlichkeit in German) to the English *public sphere*. The public sphere is a spatial metaphor that describes both the space and the communication, while publicness does not include a spatial dimension, as it describes a state or a condition rather than a space (Sandvoss, 2007). In this thesis, I intend to examine the state or condition, which also involves the experience of both space and communication; to avoid muddling the concepts together, it is essential to unpack, explore and define them separately.

While participation in the public sphere is typically associated with debate and deliberative qualities (Jürgen Habermas, 1990), this study is not limited to the experience of such a specific form of communication. Research has suggested that everyday talk (Wright, 2015) and storytelling (Black, 2009) are important aspects of online communication and should not be ignored. In Wrights study of online spaces as "third spaces" (Wright, 2015), he builds on Habermas´ characteristics of the informal and non-public opinions and the formal, public opinions (Habermas et al., 1991) and investigates how political talk and engagement emerge in online spaces (such as SNS), which are not intended for political purposes. He argues that these spaces become political through the course of everyday talk along with the connections people make between their everyday lives and the current political or social issues (Wright, 2015).

All types of communication that address issues of public interest, for example, debates, deliberation, dialogue, and everyday talk, regardless of the form such communication takes, is relevant for understanding the experience of publicness in SNS, even though the first article has a narrower focus on public deliberation as a particular type of communication. *Public discourse* was chosen as a term to describe an orientation towards issues of common interest, yet without narrowing down the form of communication. It was chosen as a neutral term, compared to other forms of communication, as a synonym for how users talk about what is considered public. As such, the term discourse is used in a phenomenological sense. However, the term discourse has also been described to construct the topic and govern how a topic can and should be talked about, which also regulate the conduct of others (Hall, 2004, p. 346). For example, Fairclough considers any discursive event as being a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice at the same time (Fairclough, 1992). The use of the term public discourse in this thesis also draws on such definitions in two ways. First, discourse is chosen as a concept that grasps the experience of the publicness in SNS, as it encompasses

the communication of others and how such communication and action govern social practices and the conduct of others. Second, discourse analysis is more specifically used in article three, which focuses on how the informants use interpretive repertoires to construct their reality of Facebook.

The research question for this thesis is: *How are social network sites experienced as spaces for public discourse in Norway?*

It should be noted that this study is not an evaluation of how well SNS functions as part of the public sphere in Habermasian terms. Instead, I explore the publicness that ordinary users experience in these spaces, which also involves comparing the implicit assumptions, expectations or evaluations of publicness that popular discourse and the informants provide. The value of such exploration is unpacking the concept of the public sphere in an everyday setting and learn what publicness on SNS means to people and what it means for them to take part in it.

## 3.2 Deliberative democracy and the public sphere

Democratic participation of citizens in social network sites is linked with participatory democracy, and more precisely, to the notion of the public sphere. While democratic theory, in general, focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process, theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication facilitating or restraining this process (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002).

The public sphere lies between the state and society, Habermas claims, 'a network for communicating information and points of view' (1996, p. 360). The public sphere is considered an essential component of the socio-political organisation because it is where people come together as citizens and articulate their views to influence politics (Habermas, 1991, p. 176). The role of the public, according to Habermas, requires that certain principles are met. First, the public debate should consist of rational and impartial reasoning, and no one should dominate this communication. Second, citizens have to participate in the public debate where all parts of the population are represented. And third, the public debate should contribute to set the political agenda (Habermas, 1996). Such principles are discussed in this thesis, although the experience of SNS as spaces for public discourse goes beyond these definitions.

SNS have been connected to the notion of a public sphere from the onset, as they are considered to provide tools that could extend the role of the public in the social and political arena, provide new and more egalitarian spaces for public deliberation (Neuman, Bimber, &

Hindman, 2011; Schäfer, 2015) and increase political participation. "New media was suggested to revive old democracy" (Papacharissi, Hunsinger, & Selft, 2014, p. 146).

One of the main critiques of public sphere theory, which is relevant for this study of SNS, claims that the public sphere, as theorised by Habermas, was elitist, bourgeois, and not inclusive (Eley & Calhoun, 1994; Fraser, 1992). White bourgeois men were taken to be the universal standard that defined the common good and what should count as matters of common concern (Eley & Calhoun, 1994; Fraser, 1992). The enthusiasm that surrounded the potential of the internet, and later SNS, to revitalise the public sphere was based particularly on the notion that these spaces were inclusive, egalitarian and accessible to all. Due to the internet's architecture, the expectation was that all users could be equal, have the same access and possibility to take part and have a democratising effect (Neuman et al., 2011; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Storsul, 2014). Such inclusiveness and freedom generated expectations among scholars that SNS could enable political deliberation that would include people from all groups. The internet was considered a provider of technological structure that allowed endless opportunities for interactive exchange and a plurality of unfiltered voices (Van Dijck, 2012), and particularly, new and interactive aspects, such as many-to-many communications, were highlighted (Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 10).

## 3.3 The clash of long-lived concepts and a rapidly changing digital setting

Media studies has a fascination with the concept of the public sphere (Papacharissi et al., 2014). Discussions of the public sphere frequently take place in the research literature and received increased attention with the advent of the internet and social media (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). In an article from 2013 reviewing the use of the public sphere in media research, Lund & Livingstone point to many studies referring to the older work of Habermas, such as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1991),* first published in German in 1962, and ask what these debates and arguments have to offer today's media studies, half a century later (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). On a similar note, Wessler (2019) accuses some media researchers of referring to Habermas in a very scant form. In the book *Habermas and the Media*, he writes:

> A fleeting reference to "Jürgen Habermas 1989" coupled with a disparaging remark
> according to which his concept of the bourgeois public sphere obviously fails to capture
> the complexities of contemporary public spheres – and of the author goes to other

> matters, other authors, seemingly better ideas. In such a superficial invocations
> Habermas is in danger of becoming a straw man (Wessler, 2019, p. 154)

Concepts inherited from the past that are no longer effective for understanding today's world have been described as *zombie concepts* by the sociologist Ulrich Beck *(2014).* A review article looking at studies that have dealt with the digital public sphere discusses the different ways researchers have to tackle the concept of the public sphere in an online setting. Some researchers, for example, have considered abandoning the concept altogether, while others no longer regard it as a single approach (Masip et al., 2019, p. 3-4). The conclusion in this review article is that "We are clearly dealing with a *zombie concept: it is dead but still alive"* (Masip et al., 2019, p. 4), pointing to the inclusion of a concept that might not be advantageous in the particular setting of SNS. The notion that the public sphere is referred to as a zombie concept and lives a life of its own resonates with my research in two particular ways. First, as a media researcher, the fascination with the public sphere is difficult to manoeuvre. Since several researchers have pointed out that the concept of the public sphere does not function well in the online setting of SNS, it has been ongoing work to find a way to usefully relate to the concept in my research. However, as the public sphere is such a central concept in media studies, it is difficult to enter the academic conversation and relate to other research without discussing it in some way. Second, the informants implicitly use something that resembles the concept of the public sphere, and as such, it may be a zombie concept, but it is alive in everyday speech in Norway and was therefore considered important for understanding their experience. Using deliberative democracy and the public sphere (Habermas, 1992) as a sensitising framework (Bishop,1979) offered dimensions, language and concepts to discuss the experience of SNS as spaces for public discourse, but was not used for explaining these experiences.

Some research, which will be addressed in the next section, have in addition advanced the concepts of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, which I draw on when using the public sphere as a sensitising framework for exploring SNS as arenas for public deliberation.

## 3.4 Advances of the concept of a public sphere

While the claim is made that media scholars often refer to the original publication, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Jürgen Habermas, 1991),* by Habermas in 1962, some scholars have developed the concept of the public sphere further. However, before discussing such contributions, two points should be noted about Habermas' work. First,

Habermas' later work, such as Between Fact and Norms (2015), is known to nuance some of his positions in the light of critics. In addition, he did review the role of media in the public sphere (Habermas, 2006) and addressed the possibility for deliberative elements in internet communication, where he argued that the national publics would be undermined rather than reinforced due to fragmentation.

Mansbridge et al. (2012) introduced what they refer to as a third phase of deliberative democracy theory; a systemic approach. The first phase, according to them, was mostly about 'ideal theory' concerned with elaborating and justifying the general principles of deliberation, for which one of the influential voices was that of Habermas (1991). The second was about empirical studies that looked for deliberation (see Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004 for an overview). The third phase, involving deliberative systems, has attributed three functions to deliberative democracy. First, the epistemic function of a deliberate system is to produce opinions and decisions that are informed by facts and the outcome of meaningful considerations (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Second, the ethical function, which promotes respect among citizens, thereby helping the system to run and are described as 'the lubricant of effective communication' (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 11). Third, the democratic function includes 'of multiple and plural voices, interests, concerns and claims' (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 11). For the system to be legitimate, no one must be excluded, at least not without a strong justification that all can accept. Such a systematic turn opens up for a conceptualisation of the different functions for democratic legitimacy, which is beneficial when using the public sphere as a sensitising concept for exploring the experience of SNS as arenas for public discourse.  For example, Facebook or SNS, in general, can have an epistemic function, as they are spaces where users come together and exchange ideas, and in that way, help generate opinions. Such spaces can also have a democratic function as they include a plurality of voices and interests.

Van Dijck argues that while terms such as democracy and participation have been borrowed to implicitly argue the value of SNS as part of the public sphere, the concept of the public sphere has been frequently misinterpreted (Van Dijck, 2012). She claims that Habermas's original model of thinking, if interpreted correctly bears relevance to understanding the function of SNS. She refers to his analysis of the rise and fall of the public sphere, where Habermas characterises two areas of politically relevant communication: on the one hand, the system of informal, personal and non-public opinions, and on the other, that of formal, public opinions. The first area contains 'verbalized attitudes, feelings, tastes—

primordial opinions or small talk', all of which are 'typically exchanged within the family, peer groups, or among acquaintances at work' (Van Dijck, 2012, p. 165). Such informal, quasi-official talk and opinions do not meet the conditions of rational debate required in the formal mode of public opinion exchange, yet still has a function in the public sphere. Thus, SNS do not institute a new public sphere. Instead, they are communicative spaces that can 'formalise and inscribe a heretofore informal discourse that was always already part of the public sphere' (Van Dijck, 2012, p. 165). Looking at the distinction between formal and informal communication is considered advantageous as personal and political tends to become blurred in the setting of SNS (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). There is a large body of work around the distinction between the public (formal) and the private (informal) (see, for example, Weintraub, 1997). Weintraub argues that the distinction between the two "comprises not a single paired opposition, but a family of them, neither mutually reducible nor wholly unrelated" (Weintraub, 1997, p. 2). For this study, the feminist approaches tendency to understand private and public in terms of a distinction between the domestic and the public (Weintraub, 1997) is particularly relevant due to its gendered nature. Unpacking the concept of the public sphere in an everyday setting will allow for an investigation of how such distinctions are experienced on SNS.

On a similar note, the concept of Third spaces is relevant (Wright, 2015). Third spaces are public spaces outside the home (first space) and work (second space), where people can interact informally, yet political talk and action may occur. This thesis explores the publicness of SNS, although users' experience of SNS may not involve following established political groups or taking part in discussions. Wright argues that third spaces are 'not intended for political purposes, rather – during the course of everyday talk – become political through the connections people make between their everyday lives and the political/social issues of the day' (Wright, 2015, p. 74). Such everyday online spaces are considered to be where interactions of "ordinary" citizens' informal political talk take place. To study this 'everydayness' of political talk, Wright proposes to embrace the 'vernacular, expressive and porous characteristics of everyday public speech' (Wright, 2015, p.74). SNS and Facebook are thus not considered as third spaces per se. Instead, they are platforms containing multiple spaces and constellations of public, private and potential third spaces. In this line of thinking, it is not the platform that constitutes the third space, but pages, profiles or groups. Wright accuses much of the research on SNS of being directed at explicitly political activities or groups; there has been relatively little research on the potential for third spaces to form on SNS (Wright, 2015, p. 74). This study

explores the experience of public discourse in the everyday use of SNS and Facebook, which will encompass potential third spaces.

### 3.5 An autopsy of publicness; defining the concepts

As the previous sections have argued, researching the experience of publicness involves navigating different aspects and concepts of deliberative democracy and the public sphere. For the purpose of defining the concepts used in this thesis, I will devote this section to splitting publicness, which in the Norwegian sense is a condition that includes both, into 1) space and 2) activity. While SNS as spaces might be experienced as public or non-public based on particular criteria, the activities might also be evaluated as public or non-public based, however, on a different set of criteria. This section is devoted to unpacking the terms and such criteria. While a split between activity and space might appear straightforward initially, there are some methodological issues. The ontological issue is whether one can distinguish between the space as one that exists externally to the users and their activity or if it is this activity that continuously creates and re-create this space. On a similar note, epistemologically speaking, one might ask if this is a general distinction that works in all contexts. Still, I find it analytically useful to look at space and activity separately while being mindful of such methodological issues.

**The spaces**

SNS have been described as a mix of private spheres and networked publics (Papacharissi et al., 2014, p. 151). These spaces have also been said to "challenge conventional divides between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, and the personal and the political" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 151). While social network sites (SNS) vary in their functionality and focus, a central aspect of SNS is the possibility for users to share material, opinions, and information (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan, 2010) which are personal, social, and political (Hermida, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013). Considering the experience of publicness in SNS is therefore not a straightforward task as it easily becomes entangled with the private and personal use of the very same spaces.

danah boyd describes networked publics as 'simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (boyd, 2010, p. 39). She points to four affordances that she finds play a significant role in configuring networked publics: persistence,

replicability, scalability and searchability (boyd, 2010, p. 45). Persistence refers to the automatic recording of online expressions, capturing moments that in a conversation might be regarded as ephemeral, making them persistent. Replicability concerns the increasing difficulty of distinguishing what the original is and what is the duplicate, knowing that reproductions can be modified and altered. Scalability relates to the potential of widespread visibility yet not the guarantee of it, irrespective of what the individual wants. Searchability pertains to how searching for people and opinions have become increasingly viable in networked publics (boyd, 2010, p. 45).

These networked publics, due to the architecture of affordances, are considered to be shaped by three particular dynamics. The first concerns the *invisible audience*. Not all audiences are visible in an online space, nor do they need to be co-present due to the affordances previously mentioned. The content can be accessed by individuals other than the intended audience at another time and set in a different context. Not knowing the audience makes it difficult to determine what is socially appropriate and what will be understood by those who are listening. Second, in SNS, we also experience the phenomenon known as *context collapse*, where the lack of boundaries (spatial, social and temporal) makes it difficult to maintain separate social contexts. Such collapsed context makes it challenging to know what is appropriate, and even in the situations where the immediate audience might be understood, the affordances again open for other potential audiences. The third dynamic is the *blurring of the public and private*, referring to the way public and private become meaningless terms in the absence of a controlled context. Such a dynamic is found to alter interactions, with the potential to complicate activity intended for broad visibility and make public certain interactions that were not intended to be public (boyd, 2010, p. 45).

While these affordances and dynamics do not dictate the user's activity, the social dynamics of public spaces are known to enable particular social, political, and cultural formations and forms of agency while discouraging others (Harvey, 2000). In short, the design of a space impacts the condition for public debate, and the architecture of virtual environments has wide-ranging consequences for the type of public interaction and participation possible (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019: 148). The underlying architecture of sites such as Facebook has been found to both determine the tone of voice and to stimulate particular types of interactions (Papacharissi, 2009).

**The activity**

In terms of deliberate democracy, citizens' inclusion in the political decision-making processes is essential, making the concept of participation central. The public sphere emancipates a communicative space where people can, and do, interact, form public opinion, and where citizens can deal with matters of general interest and express and articulate their views (Habermas, 1991). Active political participation is seen as beneficial for rendering political decision-making legitimate. To reach an outcome that benefits the common good, democratic decisions should be based on deliberation where everyone can participate and do so based on norms of rationality (Habermas, 1992, 2015; Habermas, Schwabe-Hansen, Høibraaten, & Øien, 1991). Deliberative democracy is often associated with an egalitarian view, where equality is seen as central to access and high levels of engagement (Carpentier, 2011; Pateman, 1970). Equality and citizen empowerment are expected to create a more "level playing field" (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014). Accordingly, political literature tends to frame active participation as a distinctly beneficial phenomenon, as a means for empowerment and as a condition for democracy (Jenkins, 2006; Putnam, 2000). The established model, then, normatively posits participation as the exclusive means towards citizen power, thereby conceptualising non-participation as negative or powerless, in other words, not as what it is, but what it is not – the absence of the more desirable active citizen participation.

Public participation can take more than one form, as citizens can engage through *civic participation* and *political participation*. The two concepts have much in common; however, they also possess distinct differences. Civic participation is 'the organised voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others' (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Carpini, 2006, p. 7). Civic engagement could include activity in a community association (Putnam, 2000), feeding the homeless and raising funds for community needs (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Political participation, on the other hand, is 'activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or by influencing the selection of people who make those policies' (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, p. 38). This would encompass acts such as voting, volunteering for a political campaign or signing a petition addressed to elected officials on behalf of an organisation.

At the start of this chapter, I refer to Couldry et al., who claim that the term *public* can be said to encompass 'any issues affecting how we live together that require common solutions', also covering matters outside of the traditional definition of electoral politics (2007, p. 6). This is a useful definition for this thesis, as it is wide enough to include political and civic

participation. However, while the activity or communication that is part of the user experience and is explored in this thesis requires a particular orientation towards commonality and things not private, it may fall outside the definition of participation in the traditional observable sense. SNS are considered third spaces (Wright, 2015), spaces for informal, personal and non-public opinions (Van Dijck, 2012), and spaces where the personal, private and individual merges with the public, collective and the political (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). As such, the dichotomised categorisation of participation and non-participation becomes troublesome because it does not fully explore the richness of the experience and activity that forms the publicness of SNS.

 'Public' is also defined in terms of visibility (Coleman and Ross 2010). Research tends to characterise two types of online participation: the few active members, who post most of the content and the majority of passive members, who browse and take advantage of the benefits offered without contributing to community activities – these passive members were generally referred to as 'lurkers' (Crawford, 2009). The term lurker is defined by Cambridge Dictionary (2017) as 'one of the silent majorities in an electronic forum; one who posts occasionally or not at all, but is known to read the groups posts regularly'. A literature review of studies that have been concerned with online participation labels the different perspectives on lurkers in research as mostly negative; they are seen as selfish free riders because they do not contribute, whereas online communities require fresh content to be sustainable. On the other hand, it has been found that lurking is a valuable form of online behaviour (Crawford, 2009; Sun et al., 2014). When studying why people lurk, it was found that the motives for many were altruistic, mainly connected with being unsure about their place in the group and showing consideration by not posting (Preece et al., 2004). Nor is it a clear dichotomy. Users may go from one role to the other, from listener to poster and vice versa. Additionally, online political participation's conceptualisation requires scrutiny as non-participation may not stem from passivity but rather a form of mediated political action with an active stance and true user intentions (Casemajor et al., 2015). Users can choose to refrain from activity to further a cause considered socially undesirable. It can sprout from conscious collective and individual political choices. The prevailing focus on participation only as observable behaviour does not provide us with information about motivation or intent (ibid.). Casemajor et al. (2015), therefore, suggest looking for intent rather than observable results, and in this perspective, deliberately choosing non-participation will qualify as active participation.

Moreover, it has been argued that not all observable online participation reflects user intent (Morozov, 2011). Political participation is defined as activity with the intention or

consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action (Verba et al., 1995, p. 7). In line with this definition, online public participation is mostly framed as an intentional and explicit act and is thus often operationalised as an index of activities (Calenda & Meijer, 2009). One could, therefore, argue that political participation, often associated with speaking and influencing others, has a performative nature (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2007). A criticism that rests on the performative quality of the concept, *the slactivism hypothesis* (Morozov, 2011), presents social media participation as merely a form of self-staging, not translated into offline participation and not affecting political change. In this hypothesis, online political participation is not driven by conviction and commitment but by self-staging and social desirability bias and is regarded as low effort and not leading to any change (Sveningsson, 2014; Vitak et al., 2011).

In SNS, we know that few create content or participate in the traditional sense (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014), and there seems to be a need for a new or additional understanding of how users of SNS take part in these public spaces. Crawford argues that terms such as "lurking" fail to capture the detailed experience of presence online and that the focus on participation or 'having a voice' in social media has led to other types of engagement being overlooked, namely online attention (2009). By renaming lurking as listening, as Crawford (2009) suggests, this type of participation is about not only being informed on matters of general concern, as mentioned earlier, but also listening in to the opinion landscape. In this sense, it is relevant to look at the public in terms of accessibility (Coleman and Ross, 2010). Crawford refers to this as background listening, where 'commentary and conversations continue as a backdrop throughout the day, with only a few moments requiring concentrated attention'. This type of attention that so many of us pay social media becomes a backdrop, or what Crawford refers to as the texture of the everyday. This is a more accurate description of what is happening regarding those who do not post or seldom post on social network sites. Keeping informed is part of being a citizen. In addition, researchers such as Nick Couldry (2006) and Tanja Dreher (2009) have argued that having a voice is only meaningful when these voices are being listened to by others and ideally also invoke some sort of response or acknowledgement.  As those who post need an audience, listening in has to be understood as participation in a digital public sphere. However, it is a type of participation that is reliant on people posting, and in that respect, listening and posting are forms of participation that mutually rely on one another.

This thesis is about user experience, and activity is part of such experiences. To be able to explore participation as part of the user experience, it was therefore essential to open up the

concept and include all forms of public or civic-oriented activity in relation to SNS, regardless of its being observable or invisible to others. In this study, being present on SNS, observing the opinion landscape or publicly oriented issues is considered participation. The two articles based on the interview data (3 and 4) supports previous studies (Casemajor et al., 2015; Crawford, 2009; Ewing, 2008) by demonstrating that there are various active evaluation or engagement processes involved, even though the result rarely is observable participation such as posting or commenting.

# 4. Literature review

This chapter presents the research field and the literature that makes up the academic conversation this study enters into. Although the four articles each include a theoretical background addressing the specific literature and relevant concepts, the overarching literature is presented here. This literature review will identify the research gaps and place the dissertation in a context. As such, it will inform the development of arguments, compare and contrast findings, and demonstrate this thesis' contribution to the field.

What is presented here is a literature- search and review that has developed as a doctoral degree student. I have had different stops, picked up literature tips from reviewers, collected tips from advisors, colleagues, peers and from a snowball effect of my continuous reading.

### 4.1 Spaces that are difficult to define

Social network sites (SNS) are described by boyd and Ellison (2007) as internet-based platforms that allow the users to create a profile that is public or semi-public within a defined system, to list those "with whom they share a connection", and to articulate and make their social networks visible. Social network sites, thus, allows users to take part in digital and visible social networks. Since the advent of SNS, researchers have discussed their potential to provide new and more egalitarian spaces for public deliberation (Neuman et al., 2011; Schäfer, 2015). SNS have been discussed as affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), networked publics (boyd, 2010), and a structural retransformation of the public sphere (Neuman et al., 2011). Such discussions has often centred around two common threads; the potential for egalitarian access and participation and the properties that makes these spaces different from a face-to-face or offline setting.

The first common thread in these discussions is based on the expectation that all users could be equal due to the architecture of the internet and SNS. The equality in question refers to having the same access and possibility to participate, which was expected to have a democratising effect (Neuman et al., 2011; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Storsul, 2014). However, since then, the research literature has gradually moved towards a general understanding that SNS have not lived up to such potential. Instead, it is debated if it is meaningful to discuss SNS as public spaces for reasons such as fragmentation (Bruns & Highfield, 2015), little and non-egalitarian active participation and the unclear impact of such participation (Dahlgren, 2013). Additionally, the derogatory tone and incivility that is considered part of the debates on SNS (Rost et al., 2016) are frequently discussed and reflect a concern about a negative impact on public deliberation in general.

SNS have been described as networked publics, "publics that are restructured by networked technologies". As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice" (boyd, 2010: 39).  The second part of this definition is central for this thesis, as I question what kind of imagined collective the users experience when they log on to SNS, such as Facebook. Are they experienced as spaces for publicly oriented conversations or perceived to be unrelated to the notion of publicness? An experience that will likely differ from one user to another, as it is shaped by the architecture of SNS and by users' social contexts, identities, and practices (Baym & boyd, 2012).

SNS are spaces known to challenge conventional divides between different types of spaces, such as the personal and political (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Regardless of how well they function, pages that are not initially political (such as Facebook) represent digital spaces where citizens can participate in political discourse otherwise, not consciously sought out, but rather as an everyday occurrence (Neuman et al., 2011:11). Moreover, the concept of Third Spaces argues that within SNS, there are pages, profiles or groups where users can interact informally that are not explicitly political, yet where political talk and action may occur (Wright, 2015), and these spaces have different levels of accessibility and visibility.

To discuss Facebook as publicness is particularly challenging, as users move back and forth between unevenly distributed levels of personal and public topics (Burkell et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2015). SNS have been described as private spheres where users engage in public conversations privately – they are not behind closed doors, nor in full view of the public (Papacharissi, 2015). Embedded or drowned in non-deliberative forms of discourse, instances

of deliberative exchange may occur (Wessler, 2019: 109), and other types of public activities may feed into the stream of everyday use. Along these lines, Van Dijk (2012) argued that SNS function as instruments for communication that 'formalize and inscribe a heretofore informal discourse that was always already part of the public sphere' (166). SNS as arenas for public discourse are shaped by an interplay between the technology and architecture of the platform, and the users' social contexts, practices, and expectations (Baym & boyd, 2012). Thus, the social dynamics and the technical design of Facebook impact the conditions for taking part in this potential arena for public discourse. Facebook may not be understood exclusively as a public arena, yet it is an instrument for communication and may function as an arena for public discourse from time to time.

Although the research literature more or less seems to agree that SNS have not lived up to their full potential as more egalitarian and inclusive public spaces, they still present online spaces that allow for public information and public discourse. Therefore, they are still worth studying and discussing in these terms. However, instead of taking SNS for granted as publicness by discussing them as either constructive or deconstructive, this study addresses how public discourse is a part of the users' experience which includes anticipations, beliefs, preferences or behaviours in their everyday use of SNS. Article 1 investigates how users perceive SNS as an arena for public debate and found that while they know that SNS are generally portrayed as arenas for public deliberation, they might not see much of that side in their SNS use, which is primarily used for public deliberation personal and social reasons.

## 4.2 Self-presentation and the risk of voicing an opinion

The second common thread when it comes to SNS as potential publics focus on the properties that are unique to computer-mediated settings compared to unmediated ones. Users of SNS and Facebook have an unknown audience and different contexts that may collapse into each other, which blurs the lines between private and public (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Moreover, SNS-specific affordances such as persistence, searchability, replicability and scalability (ibid.) may induce the feeling of being less in control of what is posted, which is likely to trigger uncertainty and impact participation (Baym & boyd, 2012). It has been found that these properties reduce the user's control and make it considered "riskier" to voice one's opinion (Sveningsson, 2014), and is in that way found to influence how active users are. Additionally, politically engaged young people report being hesitant about using social media for political deliberation (Storsul, 2014). This hesitation is linked to self-presentation, not wanting to stand

out as highly political, since social network sites collapse social context, and this kind of deliberation is rather kept in discussion groups with a more segregated audience (ibid.). It is a similar case for social media recommendations; when sharing in SNS, the user removes the story from its original content and attaches their reputation to the link (Hermida et al., 2012: 822). Also, the way users curate the data they share is considered meaningful, as it carries a signal to their audience (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010: 313). Along these lines, sharing a political post is a symbolic action that signals political preference (Hermida, 2014: 44-45), which is linked to identity and impression management. SNS may facilitate an arena for public discourse, but users must navigate the integration of communication forms and collapsed social context. Articles two and three address the experience of risk of participating in public discourse. In article two, worry about other users' responses is found to be the main reason for experiencing inhibition. In article three, the experience of Facebook is found to be one of hostility and anger, and despite little direct personal experience of this, observable participation is considered risky.

## 4.3 An unknown audience, social influence and self-censorship

Different social circles rarely collide in face-to-face communication, but social networking sites merge multiple social contexts into a single network (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Therefore, it is easier for people to imagine their audience and portrait themselves accordingly in face-to-face communication. The collapse of multiple audiences, or types of audiences, into a single context makes it difficult for people to use the same techniques online as they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversations (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Every participant in a communicative act has an imagined audience upon sharing content and modulating their self-presentation level (ibid:115). In our everyday lives, we take on many roles; we are professionals, friends, parents, and those roles follow a particular type of behaviour and sets of expectations from others (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011). Having an unknown, potentially vast and inappropriate audience leads to self-censorship (Tufekci, 2008).

Self-censorship is the act of preventing oneself from speaking, and social networking sites affords users to type out and review their thoughts before sharing them, a feature that adds a phase of filtering that is not available in face-to-face communication; filtering after expressed but before sharing (Das & Kramer, 2013). Das and Kramer defined this as last-minute self-censorship and found that 71 % of 3.9 million users used some form of last-minute self-censorship over 17 days (ibid.). Hayes et al. (2006) argue that people in a polarized opinion

climate may refrain from participating in discourse out of fear of criticism or disagreement. This has been supported by Sleeper et al. (2013) that found that political content was often not posted since it was considered potentially controversial. They also found that people would have censored as much as 50 % less often if they could specify their audience, mostly related to worry about the inconsistency of their self-presentation (ibid.).

Social media affords social space where the visibility of others produces social influence (Gruzd et al., 2014) where individual behaviour may be encouraged or constrained by the presence of others (ibid.) as users adapt to cues indicating norms of disclosure and sharing (Spottswood & Hancock, 2017). One study found that the social relation environment on social network sites does produce normative pressures that resemble offline conversational settings and informational influences on political expressions (Kwon et al., 2015: 1431). A greater interpersonal or group influence reduces anonymity, increases peer-to-peer monitoring, extensive networking opportunities with offline contacts, and greater immediacy (ibid.). The affordances of SNS add to the experience of social surveillance and social control (Brandtzæg et al., 2010). When fundamental human desires for social approval (Reiss & Candland, 2004) manifest themselves via online social networks, they influence how we manage self-presentation and the extent to which we exchange our opinions, thoughts and feelings. When considering SNS as arenas for public discourse that exists in-between the personal and the public, self-presentation and taking part in this publicness are closely intertwined, and social influence and self-censorship are likely to occur. Such dimensions are explored in articles three and four, employing an audience-centric perspective that departs from the actual everyday experiences of SNS as spaces for public discourse.

## 4.5 To participate or not to participate

SNS platforms, such as Facebook, opens up for a wide range of activities, from small acts of engagement, such as liking or sharing (Kleut et al., 2018), to posting longer text arguing for a particular opinion. There is an underlying tendency to consider public participation on SNS necessary, as public participation is framed as a distinctly beneficial phenomenon in political literature (Jenkins, 2006; Putnam, 2000), and SNS platforms, like Facebook, relies on user-created content and activity, making participation a necessity for the platform (Nonnecke et al., 2006). Online participation has, thus, predominantly been understood by researchers as content creation or actions that can be observed and counted and non-participation has been labelled *lurking* (Crawford, 2009).  However, it is established that most users do not contribute content

themselves (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Sun et al., 2014; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009), and the non-observable activity of most users (van Mierlo, 2014) are overlooked and remains under-theorised thus far. The activities that cannot be seen and counted are often referred to as non-participation, defined not by what it is but by what it is not: the absence of the more desirable active citizen participation. The common theme in the literature is the normative assumption that active political participation is intrinsically good (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017) and that non-participation is less good. Consequently, participation tends to be discussed, and non-participation tends to be ignored.

Some researchers have argued that non-visible activity should be counted as participation, as opposed to a passive non-behaviour, since these users actively log in and engage online, contributing to the community by providing a gathered audience (Crawford, 2009; Sun et al., 2014). Instead of referring to such activity as "lurking", the term *listening in* is suggested (Crawford, 2009). It is argued that users can choose to refrain from activity to further a cause considered socially undesirable, which may follow from collective or individual political choices (Casemajor et al., 2015). As such, non-participation might involve considerable cognitive and emotional effort (Ewing, 2008). From these perspectives, deliberately choosing non-participation will also qualify as active behaviour, and therefore these scholars suggest looking for intent rather than observable results. Conversely, Morozov (2011) puts the self-evident nature of participation in social media into perspective by presenting it as "slactivism": merely a form of self-staging, which fails to translate into offline participation or political change. Intention matters in the questions of participating or abstaining from visible participation and is therefore suggested as an important research angle. Article two addresses such intent by addressing the experience of inhibition. We argue that inhibition is a lens to study the intent behind the apparent passivity traditionally described as non-participation. In addition, this article sensitises the concept of inhibition by bringing together established theories and visualising its multi-layeredness. Article three also engage with the research literature about context collapse, social influence and experience of risk and inhibition and does so by looking at the user experience of Facebook in an everyday setting. The informants were recruited regardless of observable activity even though they were all regular users of Facebook. As such, these data provided insights that span across the dichotomy of participation versus non-participation, teasing out negotiation of potentially taking part and the experience of inhibition.

**4.6 A hostile debate climate**

There are several reasons why users do not visibly participate in the public environment of Facebook, such as the malicious tone in online discourse that generates the feeling of having less control and the need to shield oneself from potential attacks (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; danah boyd, 2008; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Storsul, 2014; Stroud, Van Duyn, & Peacock, 2016). Online communication is frequently concerned with 'venting emotion and expressing hasty opinions' instead of rational debate (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 15) and that participants are more interested in shouting at each other than engaging with substantive ideas (Hermida, 2014: 41-42). It has been argued that particular traits found in online communication, such as the dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity and lack of cues, foster deindividuation, as described in *SIDE-theory* (Joinson, 1998; Walther, 2011), and as *the online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2005)*.* These explanations for the more aggressive debate-climate on SNS suggests that users are able to detach themselves from their online behaviour and take less responsibility for one's actions (ibid.), thus promoting behaviour that is both antisocial and contagious (Brown, 2000: 10-11). While SNS do not cause someone to be rude or make derogatory comments, they have made such attitudes more visible than before (Hermida, 2014: 42-3), and it is suggested that observing derogatory remarks may make it more acceptable to be rude and offensive (ibid.). Numerous studies have observed comments that deny and disrespect opposing views (See, for example, Hwang et al., 2018; Ruiz et al., 2010). This is concerning, as it harms democratic values and favours polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014), and research has found that conversations mostly take place in private chats instead of within the public spaces of Facebook (Swart et al., 2018). The hostile debate climate forms a backdrop for all the articles in this thesis. Article two shows that worry about potential responses from others is the most common reason for experiencing inhibition when posting on SNS. Furthermore, article three shows how the experience of such hostility on Facebook breaches with ideals for democratic deliberation that the informants have. Lastly, article four shows the emotion work that the informants engage in to negotiate and potentially participate in such a debate climate.

**4.7 The role of gender in SNS as arenas for public discourse**

Traditionally, politics and public participation have been viewed as a masculine arena (Norris, 1991), and a plethora of studies indicate the continued existence of gender differences in political discussions and public participation. It has been found that women traditionally are

less inclined to discuss political matters (Miller et al., 1999) and have fewer political discussions outside the privacy of their home compared to men (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). They are also less likely to publicly share their political opinion (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010) and are more likely to answer 'do not know' to a political question (Mondak & Anderson, 2004). However, it has been argued that women do not participate less but rather differently than men (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Norris, 1991). An earlier study (Norris, 1991) revealed how women were heavily involved in a more extensive range of political arenas and activities, such as community associations, voluntary organisations, and protest groups. Such findings are supported by a more recent study that found women to be active in less formal political activities (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). Women are, for example, found to participate more than men in civic participation and social activism (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Verba et al., 1995).

It has also been suggested that gender differences can be attributed to a gendered communication style (Cook et al., 2007; Hickerson & Gastil, 2008; Suzuki, 2006). Some studies argued that men more often express opinions or attempt to persuade others (Burns & Verba, 2002; Miller et al., 1999) and referring less to others when they do so (Ulrike & Uta, 2015). Women have also been less prone to say they enjoy such discussions (Verba et al., 1997).

In light of the gendered differences in participation and communications style and the role SNS have in contemporary society, it has been debated whether online interaction replicates these dynamics or weakens the traditional social roles. Support for the socially poor to get richer by empowering socially disadvantaged individuals (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008) has been found. However, other studies suggest that traditionally gendered dynamics involved in civic engagement are replicated on Facebook (Brandtzaeg, 2015) and that gendered discourse patterns persist in online social network environments (Brandtzaeg, 2015; Joiner et al., 2016; Joiner et al., 2014). For instance, women are more likely to support humanitarian aid and environmental issues on Facebook than men but less likely to discuss institutionalised politics (Brandtzaeg, 2015). On a similar note, males were drawn more toward political and information-oriented subjects than females, who are more strongly attracted to personal or relational issues (Brandtzaeg, 2015; Krasnova et al., 2017). In line with such findings, a study found that this consequently translates to the type of shared information; women share more personal topics while men are more likely to discuss issues that are less personal, such as politics (Wang et al., 2013). Men also tend to write more original posts, while women more often comment on other people's posts (Hayat et al., 2017).

Studies have, in addition, found gendered discourse patterns in SNS. It is established that men have a more assertive and dominant discourse style and display a more competitive nature, while women display a more cooperative nature with an affiliative and supportive discourse style (Hayat et al., 2017; Joiner et al., 2016; Joiner et al., 2014; Leaper & Ayres, 2007). Indeed, a string of recent studies has found that women are generally more supportive in SNS settings across different platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (Joiner et al., 2016; Joiner et al., 2014; Walton & Rice, 2013; Wang et al., 2013), which endorse earlier findings confirming females' tendency to use more supportive language in comparison to men (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). Such discourse patterns can be related to dialogue, which is directed towards collaborative, problem solving, taking others seriously, versus debate which is the language of opposition, winning and counterarguments (Meijer, 2001).

The gendered differences in participation and discourse can be traced to the importance that relationships in SNS have for women. Women are found to be more sensitive to others' opinions and prefer a positive tone in the communication (Lin & Lu, 2011), women are more oriented towards being 'consensual' compared to the 'aggressive' men (Joiner et al., 2014) and men are found to 'interrupt more, are more hostile in tone [...] and are more likely to respond to women in a challenging way' (Polletta & Chen, 2013, p. 294). The gendered discourse patterns might stop women from voicing their opinion (Vochocová et al., 2016). For example, one study concluded that 'most sites of public talk are masculine' (Polletta & Chen, 2013, p. 294) and that women are often seen as incapable of the kind of talk required in these forums, exclusively defining 'public political talk' as 'favouring men over women' (ibid., p. 292).

Such gender differences may not only pertain to the topic of discussion or the style of communication but also to the type of responses women receive when engaging in public discourse. One study found that women who chose to assert their opinions online were particularly targeted by mob-mentality, known as gender trolling (Mantilla, 2015), which attempts to silence women's participation in online public debates (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017) and restricts their civic engagement (Lewis, Rowe and Wiper 2016).

Two of the articles in this thesis looks more closely at women's experience of Facebook as arenas for public discourse, as the literature suggests that the collapse of different contexts in SNS might be particularly challenging for women to navigate. Both the importance of positive relationships and the communication style will potentially hinder women from voicing an opinion or take part in a public debate. While the research literature provides knowledge about the genderdness of observable activity and communication style, yet we know little about

women's user experience when navigating these blurred arenas. In particular, article three addresses how women perceive and anticipates other users' communicative practices as part of the experience of the publicness in SNS, including the considerations they have when participating in this arena, regardless of this being observable or non-observable participation. Article four, on the other hand, addresses the role of emotion in public discourse on SNS and examine how emotions are experienced, negotiated and used by women. This relates particularly to the research literature on debate climate and hostility and gendered communication patterns.

Thus far, the focus has been on theoretical framing, concepts and a literature review of the research field. The next chapter will describe how the research was conducted, the method, data and analysis.

# 5. Research design

This chapter aims to methodologically tie together the different articles and provide an overview of the research design for the thesis. This chapter complements the method section in the individual articles and bridges the separate parts with the whole of the research design. While the terms method and methodological are often used interchangeably, I will here adhere to a distinction between *method*, which refers to the techniques of research that are employed to construct data and interrogate the data, and *methodology,* which describes the overall epistemological approach adopted by the study (Gray, 2003, p. 4). The first three parts of this chapter will revolve around the choice of method, and methodology will be addressed in part 4. The data treated in this thesis stem from three data collections and involve several methods and analytical steps, yet are all parts of the same narrative. While the articles provide a detailed account of the particular data and analyses relevant for the individual manuscript, this chapter will present the whole landscape of method and methodical choices. In the first part, I will account for the mixed-method approach. Part two describes the research data, informants and data collection, which will be organised chronologically according to the sequence of data collection. Part three will present the analysis of the data, organised by articles. The fourth part contains a methodological reflection. Part five addresses ethical considerations and accounts for research credibility.

**5.1 Mixed-methods approach**

Mixed methods is the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (Polit & Beck, 2004, pp. 273-288), often selected for pragmatic reasons as it is a method that enables the researchers to be flexible when choosing investigation techniques to answer the research question (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). In this study, a mixed-method design was chosen based on the assumption that a mix of qualitative and quantitative data can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the research object (Newman, Benz, & Ridenour, 1998). Qualitative methods are valuable for obtaining detailed perspectives that include the context and capture the participant's voice, allowing greater depth or further explanations (Creswell, 2014, p. 5). At the same time, there is limited generalisability. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, are valuable for investigating the relationship within data and drawing conclusions for a large number of people, which allows for generalisation and providing an overview. At the same time, such methods provide a limited understanding of the context and use the researcher's language rather than the participants' own words (Creswell, 2014, p. 5). Therefore, a mixed-methods approach provides a 'bi-focal lens, rather than with a single lens', that enables the researcher to '*zoom in* to microscopic detail or to *zoom out* to indefinite scope' (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005, p. 283), thus providing the opportunity of developing a more exhaustive overall picture. Combining methods is tantamount to downplaying each method's respective weaknesses (Newman et al., 1998), and both forms of data provide different insights and opportunities to view the research problem from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2014). Creswell warns, however, that a mixed-method approach is 'not simply the gathering of both qualitative and quantitative data'; it also calls for integration to contribute to the understanding 'more than one form of data could do on its own' (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). According to the framework proposed by Greene et al. (1989), there is a range of different purposes for mixed-method studies. Along these lines, this study employs mixed methods in the research design as a whole and not within each article in two particular ways. First, as *complementarity* (Greene et al., 1989), I seek elaboration, enhancement, and clarification of the results from one method with results from the other method. The results from the survey suggested that most users experience inhibition, which can be understood as a symptom of intention to take part. Wanting to take part, yet finding it challenging to do so, is particularly followed up in the second round of interviews where, for example, it is found that it is not just about wanting to take part but also about feeling obliged to do so. The survey data also suggest a contradiction between how SNS generally are considered as public spaces and an everyday experience characterised by personal or private communication, which includes a gendered dimension where women

considered public discourse on SNS to have more value and nonetheless were less inclined to take part in it. In-depth interviews allowed me to enhance and clarify such contradictions. Second, mixed methods were used as *expansion*, meaning that I am seeking to expand the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components (Greene et al., 1989). One example of this was finding that inhibition frequently was described in the first round of interviews. These descriptions were taken into account when formulating statements for the survey, which allowed me to explore the experience of inhibition amongst a larger population.

How these different data and analyses are integrated will be accounted for in each step of the data collection and from one analysis to the next before returning to the overall methodology adopted by the study.

## 5.2 Research data, informants and data collection

| 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|
| Interview MeCIn | Survey MeCIn | Interview follow-up |
| | | |
| Autumn 2016 50 informants | Autumn 2017 N=2064 | Autumn 2018 10 informants |
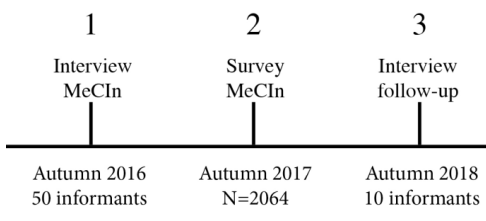
*Figure 1: Data collection points*

This thesis is based on three sets of data: one quantitative data set and two sets of qualitative data. The data collection started with in-depth interviews with a substantial group of informants (N=50) that intended to mirror the Norwegian population. These interviews were followed by a national representative survey (N=2056), which was followed by a new round of interviews, this time only with female users of Facebook (N=10). Details about the research data, choices and considerations when collecting these data will be described chronologically in this first section.

### Data collection one: interviews

The data from the first round of interviews were collected in the MeCIn public connection project (Moe et al., 2019). Members of the project group individually interviewed fifty Norwegians during the autumn of 2016. The recruiting was done through networks and snowballing, using a sociological analysis of the constitution of social classes in Norway (Hansen, 2009) as a basis for a quasi-representative sample of the Norwegian population. Although this was a qualitative study, and the findings cannot be generalised, considerations were made to ensure that the group of informants was aggregated in a way that included

relevant categories and dividing features. Informants were, thus, selected to reflect the population based on demographic criteria such as age, gender, educational levels, profession, minority representation, rural and urban areas.

These semi-structured in-depth interviews comprised a broad range of questions about the use of media and democratic matters, inspired by Couldry et al. (2007). The design originated from a cross-media perspective (Hovden & Moe, 2017), and the aim was to analyse media use integrated with everyday practices and across a range of different platforms, including social media. The interviews started with *a day in a life method* (del Rio Carral, 2014), emphasising media use. The use of social media was examined through several questions about everyday use. We asked what social media were used for, including the different types of platforms and positive and negative aspects of such use. The use of Facebook, in particular, was addressed by asking the informants to look at their news feed, and talk us through what they saw, inspired by the *think aloud method* (Van Someren, Barnard, & Sandberg, 1994). These descriptions were then followed up by asking the informants to reflect on whether this would count as a 'typical newsfeed', and if they had any reactions to what they saw and were likely to respond to anything, and if so, in what way. *Appendix 1* shows a translation of the questions that pertained to SNS from the interview guide.

For this thesis, some issues arose because the questions about SNS (referred to as social media in the interview) were incorporated in an interview about general media use and everyday practices. First, SNS use tended to be a topic that came up sporadically throughout the interview, and sometimes, the information I was left with was fragmented and therefore had to be used conservatively. Second, the focus on social media varied based on the use of such media platforms and how much the informant had to say. Not all the informants in this first round of interviews were frequent, or at all, users of SNS. While the interviews provided a good picture of the informants' overall use of media in an everyday setting, trying to extract only the use of social media did not afford equally rich data. Therefore, an additional round of interviews (data collection three) was conducted at a later stage to complement and expand on these data.

Although these interviews were conducted before starting my PhD work, I worked as a research assistant for the project and was part of the group that conducted the interviews and transcribed them verbatim shortly after each interview. In total, I transcribed 27 interviews, 12 of which I conducted myself, which allowed me to profoundly engage with the material, as Gray (2003, p. 149) recommends.

The transcribed interviews were used to formulate some of the questions in the following survey. In particular, the interviews were influential when I composed the questions about social media use. One example is the reasons for feeling inhibition that came up sporadically in these interviews and needed further examination. The interviews with female informants who were regular Facebook users (N=20) from this round were also used in the analysis for two of the articles, together with ten follow-up interviews that I conducted separately at a later stage. The reason for using this particular sub-sample will be discussed in the section about the follow-up interviews (data collection three).

**Data collection two: survey**

To follow up the interviews and look for systematic differences, an online survey with 2,064 panel participants was also conducted as part of the MeCIn Public connection project during autumn 2017 (Hovden & Moe, 2017; Nærland, 2018; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). Norwegian participants, 18 years and older, in Kantar's panel, were invited to participate. At that time the panel had 45.000 people registered, 6202 of whom, based on background information, was invited to participate. The recruiting of participants was set to continue until we had a sample of more than 2000 who were statistically representative of the Norwegian population based on age, gender, and educational level. The result amounted to 2,064 participants (Kantar-TNS, 2017), 33 % of those invited to participate. However, this sample was a little skewed towards the older age groups and higher education levels compared with national statistics (SSB, 2017), and the dataset, therefore, was weighted in the analysis accordingly. Surveys are, in general, expected to under-represent people who have the least recourses, which might be partly because they are hard to reach and partly because they might be less willing to participate. The survey, generally, addressed public connection. The participants had to be prepared or comfortable to answer questions about attitudes and participation and to talk about abstract terms, which typically is easier for those with higher education (Bourdieu, 1993). This point is also relevant for the first round of interviews, where the informants had to meet a researcher face-to-face and answer questions about politics or culture that can be perceived as personal or direct.

The survey consisted of 79 questions (600+ variables) and aimed to address 'public connection' (Couldry et al., 2007) and media use, supplementing and expanding the interview data. *Appendix 2* shows a translated version of the survey questions that pertain to SNS.

The questions about social media were formulated by me and were included in the survey based on the aim of this thesis – to explore the experience of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Although popular discourse and the news media often refer to these platforms as part of the public sphere as described in the contextualisation of the project, the interview material in the first round of data collection indicated a contradiction between the participants' general view of these spaces, which follows the popular discourse, and actual everyday use. Consequently, I considered it important to gather representative quantitative data that could measure and provide grounds for a conclusion as to how users, in general, experience these spaces in their everyday use. I questioned whether a regular user of SNS perceived these spaces as publicness. Furthermore, I asked how SNS were considered as spaces for public discourse by exploring the experience of private versus the public. Statements exploring SNS experience that covered these distinctions were thus included in the MeCIn survey, and the participants were asked to answer on a four-point Likert scale (see page 48 for a description of why the survey had four answer points).

Questions about the experience of inhibition were also included in the survey in the form of statements with multiple response options. The questions about inhibition were based on pre-knowledge that few people participate in observable ways and desire to learn more about the reasons people have for not doing so. These questions were inspired by the interviews and by different theoretical approaches that address inhibition, which is described in detail in article 2. Additionally, questions about what motivated people to participate in an observable way were included in the survey. These survey questions were influenced by the reading of the first round of interviews.

Questions about SNS activity during the previous week were also included in the form of statements allowing for multiple responses. However, constructing SNS activity measures for the survey involved considering several conditions. One was the limited space versus worry about including a whole spectre of activity, given that SNS provides many possible ways of taking part. It was also recognised that it had to be a mix between activity oriented towards the publicness and more social activity to include options that applied to most respondents. In addition, there was the issue of how active an activity needed to be; for example, SNS participation is generally framed as content creation or actions that can be observed and counted. In the survey items about "public activity", all five items are about observable participation, such as "posting" or "commenting". However, in the survey items about social activity, some activities are non-observable, such as "find out what is happening with friends"

or "find out about cultural activities". As the project progressed and these data were analysed, I would ideally have wanted some of the "public activity items" to have covered non-observable activity, for example, "looking for information" or "looking at other people's arguments when forming my own opinion", as well. Including such survey items would have provided a more holistic way of understanding the respondents' experience of the publicness in SNS. Therefore, the follow-up interviews were designed to be particularly mindful of non-observable activity to elaborate and enhance the findings in these analyses.

A sub-sample of the dataset from the survey was used in the analyses for this thesis; only weekly or more frequent SNS users were included, which was 83 % of the total sample (N=1720).

**Data collection three: follow-up interviews**

The second round of interviews (and the third data round) were collected in autumn 2018 to follow up more specifically on tendencies in the use of SNS and Facebook that were discovered through reading the transcribed interviews from the first round and from analysing the survey data in the second round. These interviews would supplement a sub-sample of the interviews from the first round, and they would be analysed together. While the first round of interviews had many informants and questions covering an extensive range of media use, the use of social media was a topic where some informants reflected more than others. A reading of the material suggested that women, in particular, had an ambivalent view of SNS and expressed more manifold experience of these platforms as public spaces than men. While women provided considerable and sometimes surprising reflections that suggested that publicness in SNS proposed some sort of dilemma, men were more inclined to quickly dismiss public discourse on SNS as nonsense. This preliminary finding, combined with theoretical arguments, informed the choice to do a follow-up study that included only women. It was also clear from the interviews and the survey that Facebook was the most popular platform, and the first round of interviews had focused mostly on Facebook use by discussing the news feed. The first round included 20 interviews with women who used Facebook daily that were included in the analysis. The second round of interviews focused on women's user experience of Facebook and was collected to enhance the first round of interviews. Additionally, analysing the survey data had provided some systematic differences and reflections that needed further exploration.

The second round of interviews was additional to the first round of interviews using a new set of informants. I recruited women of different ages who used Facebook in their day-to-

day lives. Theoretical sampling was selected to gain rich data and discover variations and gaps within this group (Gubrium et al., 2012, p. 359). Age diversity was included to explore age-related differences (Brandtzæg et al. 2011; Gardner & Davis, 2013; Palfrey & Gasser, 2010). Profession and educational background were used as sampling criteria for further variation throughout the second wave's recruitment. Both educational background (Bovens, 2017; Spruyt et al., 2018) and work environments (Emler & Frazer, 1999) were expected to influence the experiences of public environments. Higher education is associated with more political participation (Bovens, 2017; Spruyt et al., 2018), and participation and attitudes are found to be mediated through work and work environment (Emler & Frazer, 1999).

The recruiting of this round took place through personal networks and snowballing. The data were considered to reach sufficient saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) after ten in-depth interviews, bearing in mind that I already had 20 interviews from the first round of data collection.

The two sets of interviews, consisting of 20 female Facebook users from the first round and the additional ten female Facebook users, are used in the same analysis and were recruited similarly and used comparable criteria for inclusion. However, there are some differences between the two datasets. The first round of informants was recruited based on demographic criteria such as age, gender, educational levels, profession, minority representation, rural and urban areas. However, only a subsample of these interviews was used for the analysis; women that used Facebook. The second round of informants was recruited only to include women who were users of Facebook. Additionally, using overlapping criteria such as age, educational levels and profession as dividing features. *Appendix 3* shows an overview of the informants from both interview rounds.

The second round of interviews focused on the use of SNS and Facebook. A day in a life method (del Rio Carral, 2014) was again included at the start of the interview, this time in relating specifically to the use of Facebook. Questions about ways of participating were included, the informants were asked to talk about a time they had posted something on Facebook and the type of reactions they got, and they were asked about how they reacted to others' posts. The interviews were conducted by me and again transcribed verbatim shortly after each interview. These interviews lasted about an hour, and *appendix 4* shows a translation of the entire interview guide from the follow-up interviews.

In the process of interviewing, I tried to stay away from certain vocabularies, such as public debate, and from presenting a normative view where participation would appear as better

than non-participation in an attempt to keep the interview setting as open as possible. The attempt to keep the conversation about participation as inclusive as possible, I used a set of cards, inspired by card sort (Conrad & Tucker, 2019), with different types of activities, including non-observable SNS participation (see Appendix 4 for a full description). These cards were lay out in no particular order and introduced a range of activities as a neutral way to open up the conversation about participation, beyond just posting or sharing. The informants could also add activities they did not consider to be covered by the initial stack of cards. This was a method of handling the normativity of the subject, which is discussed further in the section about validity.

## 5.3 Analyses

As described in the previous chapter, there are three sets of data involved. The quantitative survey data were used for articles one and two, and the interview data from both interview rounds were used for articles three and four. This chapter will give an overview of the analyses described in further detail in each article and reflect upon the analytical choices.

| Source of data | Article | Type of analyses |
|---|---|---|
| **2**<br>Survey data | Article 1 | Nested OLS Regression models |
| | Article 2 | Exploratory factor analysis & OLS Regression |
| **1&3**<br>Interview data | Article 3 | Interpretive repertoire analysis (discourse analysis) |
| | Article 4 | Thematic analysis |

*Figure 2: Overview of data, articles and type of analysis*

**The analyses of the survey data**

The two first articles are based on quantitative data and analysed through statistical analyses, particularly useful for finding patterns. While the specific details can be found in the articles, I will account for the types of analysis deployed: *OLS regression models* and *exploratory factor analysis,* two established types of analyses that look for patterns in different ways.

*Article one* set out to address the users' behaviours and perception of SNS as spaces for public debate. Such a perception was considered likely to be significantly related to demographic

variables (age, gender and level of education), the use of Twitter and the type of SNS activity reported by the users. *Ordinary least square (OLS) regression models* were considered appropriate to explore the relationship between these theoretically likely predictors and the perception of SNS as public spaces.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression is a statistical analysis method that estimates the relationship between one or more independent variables (x) and a dependent variable (y) by isolating the effect of each predictor by keeping the other predictors constant (Yan & Su, 2009). In this case, the dependent variable was the perception of SNS, and the independent variables were demographic (age, gender and level of education), the use of Twitter, and SNS activity. The use of Twitter was included in the analysis since the experience of this platform is expected to influence the perception of SNS as arenas for public deliberation since it is known to be used for public purposes. Twitter is, for example, associated with sharing opinions and information (Hill et al., 2000; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010) and is broadly found to be a platform where people check, share and comment on the news (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). Likewise, the relationship might be reversed; people who have more positive perceptions of debate in SNS are more likely to use Twitter.

SNS-activity were measured by two index variables because such activity was identified as having two dimensions. One pertains to what was considered to be an orientation towards the publicness, such as posting a news story or taking part in an online debate, and one includes social or personal activity, such as chatting with friends. The detailed composition of these indexes can be found in *Article 1, Table 2*.

In the survey, eight variables described different perceptions of SNS as public spaces, and, thus, eight different regression models were conducted. These were nested (hierarchical), which allowed for the analysis of only the use of Twitter and demographic differences in the first step, and SNS activity in the next step, controlling for the variance already given in the first step. Nesting the analysis, thus, allows for separating the effect of each step.

OLS regression models estimate the relationship between variables by minimising the sum of the squares in the difference between the observed and predicted values of the dependent variable configured as a straight line (Yan & Su, 2009, p. 11). The eight regression models in this analysis show significant relationships between predictors yet account for little of the variation in the data ($R^2$), indicating that it would be beneficial to include additional variables in the analysis. However, the lack of perfect conditions is common in social science as the objects we study are people, and their actions typically have complex contexts and causal

connections, which rarely can be fully explored through few predictors (Elster, 1989). Therefore, the hypothesis of a relationship between variables must be guided both by theory and inspecting the data (Yan & Su, 2009). Moreover, this analysis showed the relationship between the included variables and provided an overview of how users, in general, perceive SNS as public spaces.

*The second article* explored the reasons why users might experience inhibition from voicing an opinion on Facebook. The article aimed to advance our understanding of non-participation by studying inhibition through a combination of separate theoretical frames that are closely related and might overlap yet tend to be applied in isolation. The survey included fifteen potential reasons that stemmed from the research literature and the reading of the first round of interviews. I wanted to look at all these reasons together to search for potential patterns and overlaps in the general population of users of SNS, and the intention was not to pit one theoretical angle against another but rather to study them together as dimensions of inhibition that may be separate or intertwined and overlapping. *Exploratory factor analysis* was considered an appropriate analytical method by which to do this. This analytical method reduces a large number of variables, such as the fifteen reasons for feeling inhibition, and groups them into factors. In other words, it is a method for explaining the correlations among variables in terms of more fundamental and underlying entities called factors (Cudeck, 2000). Such analysis aims to establish the number of such fundamental dimensions underlying a range of variables and to 'quantify the extent to which each variable is associated with the factors' (Cudeck, 2000, p. 256). In exploratory factor analysis, contrary to confirmatory factor analysis, the grouping of factors is not about confirming a hypothesis or checking that the variables adhere to a known existing pattern but instead letting the data expose a pattern of such fundamental dimensions.

The two main steps in factor analysis are deciding on the number of factors to retain and deciding the correct type of rotation. When selecting the number of factors to keep in the factor analysis, one common approach is to simply keep all factors with an eigenvalue above 1.0 (Kaiser criterion). However, there is broad consensus that this is among the least accurate methods (Velicer & Jackson, 1990), and deciding which factors to retain requires careful consideration because both over-extraction and under-extraction of factors affect the results (Costello & Osborne, 2005). Based on eigenvalue, only three factors should have been retained in this analysis. Factor four had an eigenvalue below one, which is a reason to omit this factor.

However, Horn's parallel analysis (PA), which is considered a more accurate method (Dinno, 2009; Glorfeld, 1995), supported the retaining of four factors. Still, factor four also consisted of only one variable, which would be another reason to omit it. However, keeping the fourth factor provided the "cleanest" factor structure; item loadings above .30 and few items cross-loaded (Costello & Osborne, 2005). It is essential to keep in mind that this was exploratory factor analysis. If this had been a confirmatory factor analysis, factor four would have indicated that the instrument (i.e., a combination of survey questions) was not functioning as expected. This analysis was not about testing an instrument but exploring if and how these fifteen reasons for inhibition correlated (although it does suggest that more items should have been included). The fourth factor, therefore, was kept in the analysis.

In the survey questions, the respondents were asked about the experience of inhibition and answered with either 'have experienced' or 'have not experienced', which means that the data had dichotomous values. However, standard methods for factor analysis expect that the variables are continuous. Therefore, I chose to employ polychronic correlations when rotating the factors, as this method also allows for dichotomous variables (UCLA, 2019). Oblimin rotation was used since the factors were expected and found to be correlated.

The next step employed *OLS regression models* in two ways based on the factors from the previous analysis. First, I wanted to test whether demographic variables impacted the experience of inhibition; second, to test whether inhibition impacted participation and whether experiencing some types of inhibition over others was likely to affect participation more or less. This analysis enabled a study of something as intangible as non-participation, describing different inhibition dimensions and the relationship inhibition has with demographic differences and SNS participation.

**The analyses of interview data**

The third and the fourth articles are based on interview data and were thus analysed through qualitative methods. While specific details can be found in the articles, this will account for the types of employed analyses; *interpretive repertoire analysis* and *a phenomenologically inspired thematic analysis*.

*The third article aimed* to examine three main aspects: (1) the kind of 'public' arena Facebook represented for women, (2) how women experienced communicative practices and participation of others on Facebook, and (3) the considerations women had when participating

in this public arena, including their considerations and justifications for not choosing to participate in an observable way. Discourse analysis, or to be more exact interpretive repertoire analysis, was considered a useful analytical approach because it looks at context and versions of experience, including evaluation.

'Discourse analysis is concerned with the meanings and that events and experiences hold for social actors' (Wetherell, 2001, p. 1). To study discourse is to study human meaning-making (Wetherell, 2001, p. 3). Instead of exploring informants' actions or beliefs, the interview data are used to reveal regular interpretative practices through which informants construct versions of actions, cognitive processes, and other phenomena. Therefore, the principal unit of this analysis is not the individual but rather the interpretative repertoire (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The interpretative repertoire is a theoretical and analytical concept used in some forms of discourse analysis. Interpretive repertoire analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) looks at the social function of language, including implicit use and context (Wertz, 2011, pp. 60–63; Wetherell, 2001). Interpretive repertoires identify descriptions, routine arguments and evaluations considered to be the 'building blocks' (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 173) speakers use to make sense of everyday life. Repertoires are considered to 'construct' our lived 'reality' (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172), and in this article, repertoires are used to explore women's 'reality' of public discourse on Facebook.

Interpretive repertoire analysis does not assume that there is one accurate version of informants' actions and beliefs (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The data for this analysis stems from interviews and speech in such setting can be understood as interpretation work around the topic of conversation; it is reflexive, theoretical, contextual, and textual, because the object (like Facebook) is not an abstract entity that everyone experiences in the same way. When talking about a Facebook experience, the informants do not simply produce a neutral description and express their opinion, but give their version of such experience, which also contains an evaluation (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Evaluation is an essential point in this kind of analysis because, with evaluation, something comes into existence, a 'reality' is created, and this reality can become a building block for other realities. The essence of Facebook as a public space becomes defined through the interviews in which the informants' opinions are context-dependent versions that constitute an evaluation of this space.

In this type of analysis, the interviews are not interpreted as stories with a clear and distinguishable meaning. Instead, all the accounts by the interviewees are taken into consideration and analysed to identify significant patterns. The researcher then questions the starting point behind such accounts and the limitations of the perspective on which the description is based. The final point in the analysis involves systematically linking descriptions, accounts, and arguments to the viewpoint from which they were produced and, in so doing, naming the different interpretative repertoires.

Discourse analysis concentrates on the regularities of language used: what kinds of descriptions and accounts of a topic are possible, what kinds of evaluations are they based on, how do different modes of accounting construct different versions of reality or produce different kinds of truths, and what do these versions accomplish? (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). For example, the interview showed strong interpretations of a democratic ideal for Facebook as a space for public discourse in a way that enabled them to present their views, argue for them, and defend them in an effective and convincing way. Navigation between different subject positions or temporary identities clashes with the traditional view that qualitative research should capture the speakers' authentic intentions, experiences, meanings, or behaviour (ibid.). Instead, discourse analysis emphasises the informant's opinions and evaluations of Facebook as a public space, and looking at linguistic resources as the informants move between different discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), was considered particularly useful in the analysis for this article.

*The fourth article* addresses women's experience, and use of emotions in public discourse on Facebook and applies the concept of emotion work (Hochschild,1979) as a sensitising concept within the space of Facebook. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate to condense the material, looking for descriptions related to emotions, including experiences of one's own use of emotions and that of others.

This analysis adopted a phenomenologically inspired approach and thus differed from the third article by focusing on the informants, not discourse, as the principal unit for analysis. Phenomenology can be described as focusing on the lived world; consciousness as experienced from the first-person perspective, such as judgments, perceptions, and emotions (Husserl, 2012; Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Merleau-Ponty considers the body to be our anchor in the world, the body by which we can be in the world and relate to other people and things (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). As such, phenomenology studies the embodied lived experience, which

was considered an appropriate starting point for analysing for the lived experience of emotions, and which coincidently has a defined physical component.

In phenomenology, people are understood as beings in a situation, never fully free but in a world never fully finished either, and as such, there is never either determinism or full choice (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Instead, there is a dialectic relationship between a person as a body and the world where it is located. When several informants are asked to describe Facebook as an arena for public discourse, their descriptions will be based on the standpoint from which they perceive the phenomenon. Different perspectives of the same phenomenon provide inter-subjectivity and present common meanings that enable us to understand that phenomenon's structure (ibid.).

The analysis started with employing strategies of meaning condensing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), followed by a deeper interpretation using sensitised concepts (Charmaz, 2006, p. 259) of emotion work as analytical categorisation. Using an inductive approach, both descriptions of emotions and emotional descriptions were condensed in the search for themes and later grouped according to the particular function the emotion seemed to serve. Next, the phenomenon's structure was translated into thematic categories by linking to the concept of emotion work (Hochschild, 1979). The aim was to sensitise the concept of emotion work in the specific setting of Facebook and let it become charged with meaning through the course of the research process (Charmaz, 2006, p. 259). Searching for themes happened at two stages, first by analysing the first wave of interviews, and secondly in a process that involved searching for themes in the second wave and refining the themes from the first round of analysis simultaneously. Although this bears a resemblance to grounded theory, as I have tried to be attentive to issues of interpretation and have questioned longstanding assumptions, this project does not involve grounded theories distinctive set of procedures or aim to develop theory (Charmaz, 2006).

## 5.4 Analytical concepts

The analytical concepts in this study have a historical dimension as they have developed over time, and *user experience* gradually took over from *perception* and *participation*, which was the analytical concepts I started with. *Perception* can be described as an intervening process between stimuli and responses (Garner, Hake, & Eriksen, 1956). *Perception* thus accounts for what happens between SNS activity and response. *Participation* was included to encompass all forms of observable SNS activity. Later on, the concept of *user experience*, which is a broader

concept that includes perception and participation, was instead adapted. *User experience* has been defined as 'a person's perceptions and responses resulting from the use or anticipated use of a product, system or service' (Mirnig et al., 2015). *User experience* encompasses all the user's 'emotions, beliefs, preferences, perceptions, physical and psychological responses, behaviours and accomplishments that occur before, during and after use', and is a consequence of the user's internal and physical state resulting from prior experience, attitudes, skills and personality, and the context of use (Mirnig et al., 2015). Expanding to the broader concept of *user experience* was considered necessary as the two original concepts of *participation* and *perception* did not resonate with the research results and did not cover the whole story. For example, user experience was considered to cover non-observable participation or negotiating potential participation better as this was interlinked with many aspects, such as emotions, anticipations and beliefs, as discussed further in the result section.

## 5.5 Methodological reflection

While all the articles are either quantitative or qualitative, they do come together in a mixed-method approach. According to Costera Meijer, it is vital to choose a varied set of methods that matches the complexity of the phenomenon investigated, which she refers to as *requisite variety* (2016, p. 547) The previous sections have accounted for the varied set of methods that was chosen in this study and how they relate to each other in the overall research design. In this section, I will reflect on the methodological choices.

In terms of epistemology, the research on social network sites is not what one might call a mature field (Kuhn, 1962), with a single, leading, current scientific theory at the core. Instead, studies of SNS derive from an array of different and occasionally competing theoretical angles originating from various traditions, such as communication, psychology, sociology, politics, and technology. This multidisciplinary field has the advantage of openness and inclusiveness when it comes to proposing new angles and new understanding, but also the disadvantage of not having established theories that apply to the whole field. The disadvantage has to do with the research on social media not appearing as one field as such, but often as a dispersed set of research items associated with the same digital platforms that occasionally relate to one another. Reflexiveness and an exploratory approach were considered essential when trying to navigate such a complex field and to create a research design for this study.

The term 'paradigm wars' has been used to describe the contrasting epistemological and ontological positions that characterise quantitative and qualitative research (Bryman, 2008, p.

13), and Bryman questions whether mixed methods symbolise the end of such war. In an epistemological sense, there is an issue as to whether social research can look for 'general laws', or that emphasis should instead be on 'humans as engaged in constant interpretation of their environments within specific contexts' (Bryman, 2008, p. 13). Such a contrast is frequently drawn up in terms of a battle between general theoretical and methodological stances. From an ontological perspective, there is a distinction between a social realm that exists externally to actors and can be uncovered by the researcher and a domain that is a continuous process of creation and re-creation by its participants (Bryman, 2008, p. 13).This is a contrast between objectivist and constructionist accounts of the nature of society, where quantitative research is typically associated with a positivist and objectivist stance, while qualitative research is associated with an interpretive and constructionist one. The debate about the choice of method might, therefore, become a debate over fundamental philosophical matters in terms of how humans and their society should be studied (Bryman, 2008, p. 13).

Bryman claims that there are two stances in mixed-method research, one that emphasises the differences and stresses their incomparability and one that emphasises a pragmatist position (Bryman, 2008, p. 20). In this project I adopt a pragmatic stance. In the pragmatic approach, mixing methods have become a matter of technical decision about the appropriateness for each method to answer the research questions (Bryman, 2008, p. 19). Still, some would argue that because quantitative and qualitative methods have contrasting epistemological positions, they involve the study of different phenomena and, therefore, cannot be compared (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002). In such a view, a mixed-method approach cannot be used for triangulation but can be used to study complementary issues. At the start of this chapter, I claimed that the mixed-method approach had two functions in this study; as complementation and as expansion (Greene et al., 1989). I choose a varied set of methods to match the complexity of SNS as public spaces. Each round of data collection builds on the previous data, and different types of data offer a complementary and expanding view I would not have gained through one data collection, nor through one method. Every stage, therefore, has involved an elaboration, enhancement or clarification expanding the range of inquiry, allowing a different view of the object of research. One example of this approach as complementary was the first interviews indicating that the perception of SNS as public spaces varied. This was followed up in the survey that could further clarify that SNS was generally perceived as public spaces but was often not used as such, indicating a separation between the general view and individual use. Such a finding was then followed up again in interviews to elaborate and explore it further,

finding that the general view seems to affect personal use, even though it differs from personal experience. An example of this approach as expansive was exploring the vague indications of inhibition from the first round of interviews, which was then considered from several theoretical perspectives and followed up by specific items in the survey, allowing a more structured view of a hidden phenomenon we have little knowledge of.

In working with the quantitative material, I did adopt a post-positivist approach. This approach posits that there is a reality that is independent and external to the researcher, yet acknowledges that reality can only be understood in a limited way as the understanding comes from the researcher's conceptual tools (Bryman, 2008, p. 14). This contrasts with the qualitative research that treats language as a mechanism for understanding the social world and interviews as a means of understanding topics about which they are asked questions (Bryman, 2008, p. 15). In discourse analysis, for example, language is considered as action in its own right and not merely as a window to the action. I recognise that there are differences in the way social reality can be apprehended and have been mindful of this in the research design.

## 5.6 Ethical considerations

All three rounds of data collection have been assessed and pre-approved by the *Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD),* the national archive and centre for research data that assesses whether a research project that processes personal data meets the requirements of data protection legislation.

The informants in the interview and survey setting have given informed consent to take part in the study. In the interviews, the consent was addressed and signed at the start of the interview.  In the survey, the consent information was included at the start, and the participant had to confirm by clicking before accessing the survey questions. All information given to the informants/participants about the project and the formulation of consent has been pre-approved by the *Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).* The informants are treated anonymously in the analysis and not referred to by their real names. In the interview data, anonymity also involved removing information that could indirectly reveal an informant's identity in the transcription process. The information given to the informants in each data collection round can be found in *appendix 5*.

**5.7 Research credibility**

This study is based on qualitative and quantitative data and analyses, which means the research credibility or trustworthiness must be addressed in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The rigour of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study (Connelly, 2016).

**Reliability and dependability**

Reliability, also known as dependability in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), refers to whether the results of a particular study can be reproduced by another study with the same type of participants at another time. It refers to the stability of the data over time and the conditions of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The quantitative data in this study stemmed from a cross-sectional survey answered by a pre-selected panel, and the questions about SNS were placed towards the end of the survey. It is plausible that the preceding questions affected the answers to the questions about SNS, and it is also possible that the length of the survey was tiring for some of the participants. The latter point is particularly relevant in light of more than half the participants completing the survey on their smartphones. The small screen of the smartphone would show several questions with drop-down menus instead of grids, making it more laborious to answer, even though the survey was programmed to work on such a device. With a cross-sectional survey and no comparative data, it is, however, unclear to what degree this might have affected the reliability of the data. The survey questions were asked about "social media" as a general term and not linked to a specific SNS platform, such as Facebook. The idea was to open up for an overall experience and later connect this with another variable that specified which SNS the participant used during the last week. It turned out that most of the participants used Facebook, and other platforms were mainly used in addition to Facebook. Additionally, the wording in some of the statements in the survey could be said to fit more with the set-up of Facebook. It was therefore debatable if it was most accurate to call this a study of the perception of Facebook or SNS? However, even if the participants were users of Facebook, I could not be sure that they had Facebook in mind when they answered the statements. Therefore, this was described as a study of SNS in general, which are likely to change over time. New platforms might come and go, making the result difficult to reproduce by another study. The process of creating the survey

was documented and led by a researcher experienced in quantitative methods, Jan Fredrik Hovden.

The qualitative data in this study stemmed from two rounds of interviews. The first round was conducted by the MeCIn-project, and 50 informants were interviewed by the members of the research group. Although the interviews were conducted by several people, they followed the same semi-structured interview guide, and the group frequently met to discuss the interviews and the process of interviewing. The transcription of the recorded interviews also followed the same detailed guidelines. It was agreed, for example, that we would transcribe verbatim and indicate breaks in the text. This process allowed for peer debriefing (Nowell et al., 2017) at several stages of the data collection and later through reading and commenting on the analysis for individual articles and by discussing the material in-depth as part of a joint book project (Moe et al., 2019). The process was documented and led by a researcher experienced in qualitative methods, Brita Ytre-Arne. The second round of interviews was conducted by me alone and with a different interview guide that focused more on SNS and Facebook. The recorded interviews were transcribed using the same guidelines as in the first round of interviews.

All the data in this study have been viewed and interpreted through specific theoretical lenses and through different lenses; the results may have varied. Both interviews and the survey rely on self-reporting, which raises the question of to what extent users are aware and able to reflect on their experiences with regards to public discourse. However, the question this study seeks to answer is not how things are, but instead what people think, which the data in this study provides answers to. Still, more implicit, tacit elements of users' experience might have been missed.

**Internal validity and credibility**

Internal validity, also known as credibility in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), refers to whether the interpretation of the data and the inferences drawn from the data are plausible and trustworthy (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the study and therefore the findings, which can be related to using standard procedures, providing adequate justification and thus an integral part of the entire research process (Kvale, Brinkmann, Anderssen, & Rygge, 2009)

*With quantitative data,* there is always a need to reflect on whether the questions asked in fact measured what they were intended to measure, as there are several potential sources for

mistakes in the formulation of survey questions. To ensure validity, there is a need for operationalisation of abstract concepts to make them concrete, limited and measurable, which in this case included the concepts of public space and participation. Still, certain words such as 'political' and 'debate', for example, might mean different things for different participants. Moreover, questions about the use of SNS and participation was limited to 'last week' in an attempt to make it easier for the participants to answer. The statements about inhibition were given an introduction, as the interview material indicated a notion that one is supposed to participate and not supposed to feel inhibited. Therefore, it was considered likely that 'socially desirable bias' (Steenkamp et al.,2010) might influence people's answers, and an introduction was added to function as a neutraliser. Finding the right balance between length and items to include in the survey was also a matter of negotiation. After analysing the data, I do think that more alternatives should have been included when it comes to inhibition, as this might have made the factor structure more robust (in article two). The methods used for analysing the quantitative data are well established, which enables transparency in the interpretation of the data.

*In the setting of qualitative data, such as interviews*, it is crucial to recount accurately and correctly what the informants said and the context in which it was said. In this study, all interviews were transcribed verbatim from Norwegian, and the quotations from the interview material are direct translations into English. Such direct renderings make it clear what the informants said and what my interpretation is, allowing the reader to evaluate the validity of my interpretations. There is. However, the chance that translated terms may carry different connotations.

In the interviews from the third round of data collection, I wanted the informants to talk about how they experienced Facebook in relation to new stories and issues of common interests, which include participation. Since earlier research has suggested that most people post or comment to only a small extent, I approached this question by listing a variety of ways one can participate; these were written on cards that I spread out in no particular order, including non-observable ways of participation. The aim of doing this was to provide the informants' options for types of participation that they were likely to engage in and might not otherwise think of in terms of participation. Thus, the cards were also used as a starting point to discuss other types of participation, such as posting and commenting. This method was loosely inspired by card-sorting methods (Conrad & Tucker, 2019). However, in this case, it was not about ranking and instead about providing options that would allow for a more inclusive

conversation about participation. In the setting of both interviews and the survey, social network sites were referred to as social media as this is what these spaces are commonly called.

**Generalisation and transferability**

*Generalisation* refers to the quantitative results potential to form a basis for drawing conclusions about the characteristics of a larger population (Hammersley, 2008, p. 43). A question one might ask is if the statements made about the sample are true for the whole population. The survey had 2064 participants, which is a fairly large sample. These participants were recruited based on probability sampling to mirror the Norwegian population based on three specific criteria: age, gender and level of education. It is reasonable to conclude that inference from this sample to the Norwegian population is valid. However, the participants were only recruited based on three demographic criteria among an infinite number of others, and therefore, as in all generalisations, it can be questioned as to whether we can speak of these data as representative of all Norwegians. The report from Kantar (2017) states that around one-third of those who were invited did participate. Furthermore, the group that participated were older and higher educated compared with the total group of invitees. It is, therefore, also likely that they differ in other ways that we are only able to speculate about.

In the qualitative material, the focus is on the informants and their story, but without proclaiming that this is everyone's story. *Transferability* in terms of qualitative data is then about the extent to which findings are useful to persons in other settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A rich, detailed description of the context, location, and people studied, which is provided in the articles and supplemented in this chapter, supports this study's transferability.

# 6. Summary of articles

The articles in this thesis are cumulative and will be synthesised using a historical approach in the next chapter, while this chapter offers a summary of the individual articles. The first article takes a wide perspective as it questions how users understand SNS as arenas for public discourse. While many questions the quality of such debates and whether or not they are good for democracy, there seems to be a general assumption by politicians and the news media that these spaces are part of our public sphere. This article attempts to question this normative understanding that users of SNS perceive these as places for public debate. The second article looks at the experience of inhibition in these spaces and argues that inhibition is a way of understanding the intent behind apparent passivity in SNS. While the first two articles look at

the use of SNS, the second two focus on Facebook. The third article is intended as an empirically-driven close-up picture of how discourse on Facebook is experienced by the users and the considerations and strategies they apply when taking part themselves. The fourth article is a study of women's experience and use of emotions in public discourse on Facebook.

## 6.1 Article one

*Sakariassen, H. (2020). A digital public sphere: Just in theory or a perceived reality for users of social network sites? MedieKultur: Journal of Media & Communication Research, 36(68).*

The first article investigates if and how users perceive SNS as arenas for public debate and whether this perception corresponds with demographic characteristics and SNS activity. This article draws on quantitative data (N=2064) from an online panel collected in autumn 2017 in Norway.

While SNS are often discussed as public spaces by researchers, media and politicians, this article questions the taken for grantedness in the way these spaces are discussed and questions whether ordinary users of SNS share such a view of SNS as public spaces. Little attention has been given to how ordinary users´ perceive SNS thus far.

By asking users to provide information, this article found that SNS are perceived less as arenas for public deliberation and more as spaces primarily used for social or personal reasons. Still, the results show that people are aware that SNS are portrayed as spaces for public deliberation, even if the common denominator is that their everyday experience is characterised by such debate to a very small extent, if at all. Moreover, this article claims that the conventional divides between the private and the public is challenged in SNS, as a great deal of uncertainty about such a distinction is uncovered. Deliberation on SNS is found to have little value; nevertheless, discussions about important issues are understood as belonging here. However, the perception of SNS as being a public space is related to both demographic characteristics and SNS activity. The implication of these findings is that SNS may be portrayed as spaces for public deliberation in popular discourse, yet for most users, in their everyday experience, they are not.

## 6.2 Article two

*Sakariassen, H; Costera Meijer, I (2021) Why so quiet? Exploring inhibition in digital public spaces. European Journal of Communication (*https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211017346*).*

The second article addresses how we can further our understanding of a phenomenon that is as hidden, unnoticed and invisible as is non-participation. In this paper, we argue that inhibition is a valuable socio-psychological lens through which to study non-participation in social network sites (SNS), particularly in those situations where users actually wish to voice their opinions about societal matters, politics or news.

Using empirical data, we first sensitise the concept of inhibition by visualising its multi-layeredness in terms of the spiral of silence theory, the harsh debate climate, political efficacy and specific properties of SNS related to identity and impression management. Second, we show that inhibition functions as an in-between concept balancing participation and non-participation in SNS. The aim is to extend the conceptual framework of political communication regarding participation and non-participation since it goes beyond making sense of non-participation. Instead, inhibition offers a more precise way of theorising the intent behind this apparent passivity.

The results stem from quantitative panel data collected in fall 2017 (N=2064). Through factor analysis (PCF), we integrate established theories that allow us to define overarching dimensions of inhibition, demonstrating that it is a complex phenomenon not easily understood through one specific theoretical perspective.

## 6.3 Article three

*Sakariassen, H (2021) (Submitted) Facebook as an arena for public discourse, experienced as a distinctive situational wilderness in breach of user's democratic ideals.*

Facebook allows users to engage in public discourse. However, debates on social network sites are criticised for damaging democracy by adding to polarisation, limiting perspectives, and promoting a derogatory tone driven by emotion and personal conviction rather than facts. Research has thus far mostly focused on visible participation on Facebook, while the broader experience of this public space remained under-theorised.

This article explores women's experiences of Facebook as an arena for public discourse. It aims to examine three main aspects: (1) what kind of 'public' arena Facebook represents for women, (2) how women experience others' communicative practices and participation on Facebook, and (3) considerations women have when participating in this public arena, including the effort or choices to not participate in an observable way.

This study provides novel insights by investigating women's user experience of Facebook as an arena for public discourse by conducting qualitative interviews with 30 female users of Facebook (aged 19-74) in Norway and studying this material through interpretive repertoire analysis.

The findings revealed repertoires based on deliberative ideals, which bore a resemblance to those of Habermas. Furthermore, negativity toward activity that does not adhere to such ideals was detected. Facebook is found to be experienced as a public arena that invokes the feeling that one should participate in debates, although the arena is described as mostly for social use. Moreover, their experience of Facebook is one of hostility and anger, even if they have not been personally confronted with such hostility. Observable participation was preferably avoided due to worry, and in those cases where these informants joined in and took part in such debates, it was described as taking responsibility, however not done with confidence and with strategies for exiting quickly to shield oneself. The experience is that Facebook debates require a hit-and-run attitude, more than a listen-and-discuss attitude. The results indicated that worry was a key factor for negotiating these ideals and sometimes unintentionally replacing them with behaviour that may be harmful to public discourse.

## 6.4 Article four

*Sakariassen, H (2021) (Submitted) Women's emotion work and strategic use of emotions in public discourse on Facebook.*

Debates on Facebook are frequently seen as being too emotional, and rational arguments give way to anger, outrage, and polarisation. Based on 30 in-depth interviews, this article explores how emotions in public discourse on Facebook are experienced and negotiated by Norwegian women.

The findings show that while some emotions are disliked and considered non-conductive, other emotions are employed strategically. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates how the use and negotiation of emotions can be understood as emotion work (Hochschild,1979).

This study followed two lines of enquiry based on the assumption that women have a particular relationship with the emotional expressions that are part of public discourse on Facebook. The first enquiry concerned women's experience of emotions; the second concerned how women employed emotion in this setting.

Overall, the experiences of emotions in public discourse on Facebook was negative. The presence of strong feelings, such as anger, was a strong factor informing the women's experiences. Worry about getting involved in such angry exchanges sometimes inhibits women from posting; instead, they self-censor, which is about shielding themselves from potential attacks and the potential stress of getting emotionally involved. Much of the focus was centred on strong emotions, such as anger, which was held in contempt. In contrast, other emotions that initially received far less attention were frequently employed. The use of emotions in public discourse on Facebook involves emotion work as a central theme. The informants' attempt to modify strong emotions and influence the tone of a debate involves work that was both observable and non-observable to others. Non-observable activity is often ignored and discussed in terms of non-participation. The angry debates these informants referred to can be understood as clashing with the pro-social cues on Facebook and deliberative ideals, and entering these debates may also clash with the roles that women traditionally take upon themselves. The strategic use of emotion was found to enable women to participate in situations that are otherwise challenging. The results of this study show the multifaceted use of emotion, which contributes to nuances and furthers the understanding of the emotion work that is involved in women's observable participation on Facebook.

## 7. Main findings and concluding remarks

This chapter provides a discussion of the four articles and the overall contributions of the thesis, some concluding remarks and suggestions for further research. This research was conducted to further our understanding of how SNS are experienced as spaces for public discourse. The purpose was to address the publicness of these spaces, how it is generally experienced and what it entails to engage or not engage with it. In this endeavour, the cross-disciplinarity of relevant theories for understanding SNS as a public arena has been a resource and challenge. The result has become a requisite variety of both theories and methods, picket to best tackle the overall research question; *How are social network sites experienced as spaces for public discourse in Norway?* Part one of the following discussion will provide a discussion of the articles. Part two illustrates the implications of this study and addresses the overarching discussions.

**7.1 Part one: discussion and synthesis of the articles**

The purpose of this thesis is to advance our understanding of the user experience of the publicness in everyday use of social network sites (SNS). While SNS in general, and Facebook in particular, often are referred to in terms of public spaces, the 'publicness' of SNS remains unclear, as we know little about how users, in general, experience these spaces. The thesis unpacks the concept of the public sphere in an everyday setting by using an audience-centric approach and drawing on perspectives from different research fields to further our understanding of experiencing and potentially participating in public discourse on SNS. Four articles have addressed the research question using a variety of methods, theories and data. The following is a synthesis of the articles where I move back and forth between the data to account for the cumulative narrative of the findings in this thesis.

The quantitative material in this study suggests that while many confirm the notion of SNS as arenas for public deliberation, few experience SNS in such a way in their everyday use. There is a contradiction in seeing deliberation on SNS as having little value in everyday use of SNS and still understanding discussions about important issues to belonging there, as this is how it is portrayed in popular discourse. Furthermore, there is generally a great deal of uncertainty when distinguishing between the private and the public on such digital platforms.

Such findings are supported by interviews with women where their ideals about Facebook as an arena for public discourse are rarely represented in their everyday use. Instead, they experience a harsh and angry debate culture that makes them worry about voicing their opinion. However, this notion of a harsh and angry debate culture is not directly experienced on Facebook. Instead, it seems to stem from popular discourse and news media. These women express a strong dislike for the emotional and non-deliberative type of discourse on Facebook and actively choose to abstain from observable participation for several reasons.

In the quantitative material, it was found that most users of SNS experience inhibition, and worry about others response was the most frequent reason for this experience. While the research literature often focuses on observable public participation in SNS and labels non-observable participation as non-participation (Crawford, 2009), the extent of inhibition that users experience suggests that non-participation is not passive. To experience inhibition, one must want to express an opinion, and inhibition is suggested to be an indirect way of studying intent.

The interview material supports that it is not passivity or not caring that stops women from participating in public discourse on Facebook. Instead, through analysing interpretive repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988), it is found that this platform is a challenging arena to voice an opinion, which comes across in several simultaneous repertoires. First, Facebook is experienced as a wilderness, and that observable participation might result in a verbal attack. Second, the mix between personal and public involves considering self-presentation, audience and the role within one's social network. Third, the informants have ideals about public deliberation and feel like they ought to participate, and when they do, it is frequently described in terms of taking responsibility. They do find that navigating the combination of worry, duty and social roles is difficult, and posting therefore involves strategies for quick exits and shielding oneself.

The interview material also found that emotions have a central role in women's manoeuvring of Facebook as an arena for public discourse. They express a dislike of strong emotions, and emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) is found used to negotiate such emotions. However, emotion work results in both observable and non-observable participation, reinforcing the notion that non-observable participation is not passive.

## 7.2 Part two: overarching discussions

This thesis is part of the project *Media, Culture and Public Connection: Freedom of Information in "the Age of Big Data" (MeCIn)* (Moe et al., 2019). A project that explored how Norwegians use their freedom of information across media and cultural arenas and give new insight into the relationship between citizens and the media. The premise for the MeCIn-project is looking at the public connection (Couldry et al., 2007) and the different "roads" such an orientation towards the publicness might take. These roads may be highways of various media input or narrow paths following only one media platform. In MeCIn, SNS and Facebook are understood as part of the public connection and can be part of a media-rich connection or the single point for connecting Norwegians to the publicness.

This thesis looks at both the general and the gendered, everyday experience of publicness in SNS. The point of departure for this thesis was that these platforms are often discussed as publicness and as spaces for public discourse in Norway. However, the user experience of these platforms remained unclear. Deliberative democracy and the public sphere

(Habermas, 1992) as a sensitising framework offered core dimensions, concepts and language to understand how people experience this publicness and compare it with the "official notion".

This study has demonstrated that the concept of publicness in SNS can be, and frequently is, considered in two entirely different ways. One being the self-evident publicness that is generally known to most users, as it is how these spaces are referred to in the popular discourse, which is vital as it shapes the way informants experience and talks about these spaces. The other is the kind of publicness that SNS represent in everyday, gendered use, which is mainly oriented around personal and social information and activity. The interplay between these two different versions of the publicness in SNS provides overarching discussion points that I will address here.

The first point has to do with the implicit and everyday use of the concept of the public sphere in a Norwegian setting. Discussing the public openly in this project has revealed the multilayeredness of the experience of publicness. It is related to collective issues but also about accessibility and visibility. However, in a Norwegian setting, the experience of SNS as spaces for public discourse is frequently about deliberative assumptions and expectations that interact with these different layers. For example, collective issues are, by the informants, considered in terms of how the way they are communicated and the kind of issues that are considered acceptable to address in SNS. Likewise, accessibility is often related back to the ideal that everybody ought to have access and less about what kind of access the informants are experiencing. Earlier I discussed the need to replace perception and participation with user experience (5.4) because it resonated better with the results. Looking at perception and participation did not accommodate the findings of the anticipated publicness described above, nor the reflections around rationality versus cognition (emotions). For example, in article four, the results show that cognitive-communication and emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) enable women to participate in otherwise challenging situations in SNS. Moreover, the use of emotions is not experienced to clash with their deliberational ideals but instead function as a strategic way of attempting to modifying stronger emotions or influence the tone in the debate according to such ideals. User experience was chosen as it resonates with the many layers in the results, where one could say that expectations create the experience and the experience creates the spaces.

This study finds that SNS as spaces for public discourse are experienced as contradictory in terms of how they function and the informants' deliberative ideals. Such a finding can be made clearer by connecting it to the systemic approach (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Mansbridge

et al. (2012) argue that in the systemic approach, deliberative democracy has three functions; the epistemic, the ethical and the democratic. The epistemic function is to produce opinions that are informed by facts and meaningful considerations, the ethical function is to promote respect among citizens, and the democratic function is to include multiple and plural voices (Mansbridge et al., 2012). This is in line with the ideals that the informants in this study implicitly talk about. However, what is generally experienced is opinions that are emotional and non-deliberative and that there is little respect or consideration from those who post. While it is considered to be a good thing that potentially everybody can have their voice heard, the informants in this study do not experience SNS, and particularly Facebook, as spaces where they want to speak out. These points problematise the assumption that accessibility or openness leads to equal participation and emphasises that one also needs to experience participation as unrestricted.

Habermas and the concept of the public sphere, or rather publicness (Sandvoss, 2007), have a longstanding presence in Norwegian publicness. His book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1991)*, was first translated and published in Norway in 1971, almost 20 years before it was made available in English. It was early added to the universities curriculum and has thus been a part of the education within social sciences for many decades. The particular position the concept of publicness has in Norwegian everyday talk might be attributed to diffusion from those with education within social sciences, which encompass, for example, teachers and political advisors. My informants affirmed such implicit expectations and assumptions of publicness close to Habermasian ideals of democracy and demonstrated that the concept of the public sphere implicitly has seeped into everyday language. The everyday use of the concept of publicness in Norway comes with assumptions and expectations that also includes the experience of SNS and Facebook.

Van Dijck (2012) emphasises that the public sphere (Habermas, 1992) consists of two areas of politically relevant communication: the formal, public opinions and the informal, personal and non-public opinions. Furthermore, she suggests that SNS represent communicative spaces for informal, quasi-official talk and opinions that have a function in the public sphere, even if they do not meet the conditions of rational debate required in the formal mode of public opinion exchange (Van Dijck, 2012). However, while these areas are usually separated, personal and political tends to become blurred in the setting of SNS (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), which is supported by this thesis. However, my results do not simply suggest

that the two arenas blur into each other. Instead, a particular relationship between the experience of the formal and informal arenas is found.

The result of this study indicates that while SNS are predominantly used as personal or informal arenas, it comes with the ideals and expectations of public or formal arenas. The informants implicitly assume a publicness in SNS contradictory to the limited role issues of public relevance has in their everyday use of this platform, which includes ideals of collectivity, the type of communication and rationality. Such assumptions, close to the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere, awoke ideals about citizen obligations, where the informants express feeling like they should participate, they should take responsibility for discourse they consider too emotional or not deliberative enough. However, since they are rarely involved in observable participation on SNS, they also express the feeling of guilt and describe different strategies they employ to enable them sometimes to take part.

In a sense, the implicit ideal of a Habermasian public sphere becomes a hindrance for observable participation in the publicness on SNS, even though being an active and responsible citizen is part of the very same ideal. For example, the informants express that they should act according to deliberational ideals in a setting where few others seem to do the same, which implicates two obstacles. First, voicing an opinion has to be rational and cut through all the emotional on off-topic discourse. Second, as part of the self-presentation, it is important to not only display an opinion in a convincing manner but also correctly present the opinion along the lines of such ideals. We might, therefore, question if the focus on SNS as public arenas and democratic ideals impose barriers for inclusive and egalitarian citizen participation, as these implicit expectations adopt the language and norms for formal public opinions, which might be particularly difficult to navigate in spaces that are a blend of "the private and the public (…) and the personal and the political" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 151).

Democratic ideals, as an obstacle for observable participation, is a finding that came implicitly from the informant's discourse. However, when asked directly about obstacles for observable participation, they point to is the angry and harsh debate climate. A shared narrative of Facebook as a particularly hostile and dangerous arena for voicing an opinion was found among most informants, which is another expectation that mainly contradicts the informant's direct personal experience. Although, I would not argue about the serious and harmful nature of disrespecting opposing views (See, for example, Hwang et al., 2018; Ruiz et al., 2010) or online harassment of women (Lewis, Rowe and Wiper 2016; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017; Mantilla, 2015), I do find it interesting that women who have not directly experienced, for

example, being attacked or harassed for their opinions, nor observed others in their network having such experiences, still are so tuned into the potential that it might happen. This leads me to the next point in the overarching discussion, which is about the vigour of popular views and folk theories (Palmer et al., 2020; Rip, 2006) that I have encountered through the course of this study. The perceived risk of observable participation in a harsh and angry debate climate will be used as an example.

Folk theories have been defined as "implicit parts of everyday life that provide ways of thinking about and guides for acting upon the world, and through the course of this research I discovered that folk theories about the harsh debate climate are central in the assumptions they have of SNS as a space for public discourse. Folk theories can be more or less explicit, they can be shared or contentious, and they can be purely speculative, based on personal experience, and/or second-hand sources" (Rip 2006, as cited in Palmer et al., 2020). A predominant folk theory about SNS as an arena for public discourse is that there is a high risk when voicing an opinion as people might verbally attack or harass you. Folk theories do not need to be coherent, all-embracing or universally accepted. They are instead considered as components of the wider culture (Palmer et al., 2020) or symbolic recourses (Swidler, 2001) that people use to navigate everyday life. Folk theories about SNS as a space for public discourse is about the beliefs and perceptions people have about such publicness and how it feels to engage or not engage with it.

This study uncovered expectations of risk when visibly participating in SNS that seem to stem more from folk theories than personal use. Indeed, the worry about the potential aggressive or harmful activity of others was a reoccurring topic throughout this project. The survey data suggested that worry was the most frequent reason for experiencing inhibition. In the interviews, the worry about potential risk was a central topic in the discourse about observable participation or potential observable participation. Despite scarce accounts of direct negative experiences with abuse or adverse comments, if any, the perceived dangers and the discourse surrounding online participation (Lewis et al. 2016) were so off-putting for the informants that they were hesitant to participate. Such folk theories also include implicit expectations of the public sphere, as anger and hostility were frequently juxtaposed by deliberation, openness and inclusion.

The results in the study indicate that expectations of risk stem from folk theories and popular discourse and rarely from direct experience. With hardly any informants that could account for direct personal experience of aggressive comments, online harassment or other behaviour that such risk entails, it was still the most pervasive topic in these interviews. Folk

theories that can be speculative or based on second-hand sources (Rip, 2006) provide particular ways of thinking that do not encourage the use of SNS as arenas for public discourse. In the experience of SNS as spaces for public discourse, the affordances of SNS (boyd, 2010) become central. Worry that everything is searchable or can be taken out of context and spread to others seemed to cross over and did not stay within the expected boundary. For example, posting on own Facebook wall seemed to cause the same worry as posting in a discussion in a larger group or newspaper debate section. In that sense, these informants generally expected an unknown and critical audience on Facebook regardless of where they posted and the settings they had chosen for their account.

Third spaces are public spaces outside the home where people can interact informally, yet political talk and action may occur (Wright, 2015). It has been suggested that online spaces (such as SNS) which are not intended for political purposes, can become political through the course of everyday talk and the connections people make between their 'everyday lives and the political/social issues of the day' (Wright, 2015, p. 74). SNS and Facebook contain constellations of public, private and potential third spaces. Wright accuses much of the research on SNS of being directed at explicitly political activities or groups and that there has been relatively little research on the potential for third spaces to form on SNS (Wright, 2015, p. 74).

This thesis set out to explore the experience of SNS as arenas for public discourse and expected to find representations of third spaces. However, the implicitly assumed publicness that resembled Habermasian ideals of democracy and the folk theories about the harsh and angry tone in SNS seemed to hinder the type of informal political talk that Wright (2015) describes. While some informants described situations where they had voiced an opinion, these were accounts that centred around coming up with strategies that allowed them to participate and the feeling of worry. It did not come across as a type of everyday activity, and nor was it. On the other hand, chat groups were frequently used for everyday talk and sometimes political talk. As such, this particular function within Facebook affords third spaces.

The title of this thesis is "Social Network Sites as arenas for public discourse – perception, participation and experience". While SNS are often referred to as spaces, the findings in this study suggested that arena was a more apt metaphor. "Arena" was chosen as it describes the spatial component of publicness as it provides a layered set of relevant meanings, such as a central stage, a field of conflict, activity or endeavour (dictionary.com, 2021). The experience of SNS and Facebook as arenas for public discourse is truly that of a combat arena. Such experience represents a battle between democratic ideals, assumptions of publicness

versus everyday use, folk theories versus own experience, and participation versus inhibition. It is equally an apt metaphor for how the public discourse on SNS, and particularly Facebook, is experienced, which includes hostility and attacks, which in article three is described as a wilderness that requires a hit and run attitude. Although the informants are rarely observable participants in this arena, there is little in this material to suggest that these users of SNS are passive.

### 7.3 Empirical contributions

The main empirical contribution of this thesis is increased knowledge of the user experience of the publicness in SNS. The findings of this study have provided four articles that, in different ways, have tried to grasp the complexity of SNS as arenas for public discourse, how it is experienced and the considerations involved in observable and non-observable participation.

It was found that within the platform of Facebook, there are spaces considered public and spaces that are considered to be private or accessible to fewer and a more defined group of people. Thus, publicness was a topic for particular places on Facebook, such as in large discussion groups or the debate sections of, for example, news outlets. The perception of an angry tone in public discourse on SNS seem to stem from such places. The potential third spaces within Facebook are spaces that are not intentionally political, but where discourse about public or political issues may occur (Wright et al., 2015), were generally not considered a part of the publicness on Facebook, but instead discussed as personal or private spaces where the perceived hard and aggressive public debates still caused worry about being potentially attacked.

The publicness on Facebook that these women had in mind bore a resemblance to a Habermasian public sphere (1991), where ideals about rationality and anyone could voice their opinion were central. As part of this ideal, they also felt obliged to participate. However, on Facebook, they experienced a wilderness with a harsh debate climate that did not live up to their ideals and where observable participation involved worry. Worrying about others actions caused these women to self-censor, to be less open to the opinion of others or to post as a hit and run activity.

This study has also provided some knowledge on what it means to take part in this publicness in terms of the experience of inhibition and a normative understanding of observable participation as the ideal.

Article two established that most users of SNS experience inhibitions and that those users who do not engage in observable activity should not be understood as simply passive but may take active choices due to feeling inhibited. This finding supports earlier studies that have argued that non-participation may stem from an active stance and true user intentions (Casemajor et al., 2015) or a form of consideration (Preece et al., 2004). Such a finding is further substantiated in article 3, where interviewing women provides nuance to the experience of inhibition by, for example, linking it to types of spaces within Facebook and varying intentions and reflections on participating some times, but not always.

In the presentation of the conceptual framework, I refer to the difficulty of navigating the critique one gets for excluding and including the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). An additional layer to this navigation challenge came from the interview material. My analysis shows that a popular account, resembling a Habermasian public sphere, is used by the informants. Therefore, even when trying to avoid certain loaded words in the interview setting and talking about the topic as objectively as possible, the informants still frequently answered in normative terms. This may be a Norwegian or Scandinavian particularity, but it can also be traced back to the normativity of the method (Rothenberger et al., 2016), as discussed earlier – or a mix between the two. Still, the aim of the study is to understand what people think as opposed to how things are, and in that respect the method provides the required data.

Similarly, the informants felt that observable participation in SNS was good, and therefore they expressed feeling that they should participate. Furthermore, they expressed a negative view of their activity, which they referred to as lurking. They seem to had an ideal in mind, which is reminiscent of ideals about activism, where the 'right' type of activism is considered to be direct action, and the type of activism women primarily are involved with does not adhere to such ideal (Craddock, 2019: 137). The notion that observable participation was the right type of participation is in line with how researchers tend to frame participation (Crawford, 2009), and a finding that highlights how instrumental normativity is in the general perception of SNS and questions the level of objectivity that it is possible to achieve.

## 7.4 Theoretical contributions

This thesis is overall inductive, although certain parts, for example quantitative OLS regression analysis, is deductive. At the bedrock is the research question about user experience of SNS as public arenas, and a requisite variety of theories and combinations of different

theoretical fields have been employed to explore this research question. One theoretical contribution is combining overlapping theories from different fields that use divergent terms and often are applied in isolation. Investigating the publicness of SNS is complex in terms of a space that is difficult to define, the possibility for wide and dispersed activity, and the ontological issue of trying to separate the two. Requisite variety of theories was considered essential.

Some researchers have argued for the importance of intent in the study of participation in SNS as a public space (Casemajor et al., 2015; Crawford, 2009; Ewing, 2008; Preece et al., 2004), as we know little about those who do not post and little of the intention behind what is posted. Some research has, for example, suggested that some observable participation can be a form of self-staging (Morozov, 2011), while not participating in an observable way can involve effort and intention (Casemajor et al., 2015; Ewing, 2008). Therefore, it has been suggested that intent is central to study irrespective of the result being observable participation or non-observable participation. This thesis addresses the concept of intention to post on SNS in two ways; it suggests that the experience of inhibition is a sign of intention to participate, and that inhibition offers a more precise way to study intent, which is generally hidden and inaccessible for researchers to grasp. One theoretical contribution is suggesting a possible way to study intent.

Such an indirect way of studying intent might be useful since asking about the intention behind apparent passivity makes little sense, as this would entail asking users about the intent behind all the things that they do not do. The complex concept of non-participation, or in this case, non-observable activity, was studied through the experience of inhibition. However, to fully study inhibition required sensitising the concept by combining different theoretical angles, as each angle added an extra layer of meaning. Visualising the multi-layeredness of inhibition demonstrated that it could be considered an in-between concept that balances participation and non-participation in SNS. Thus, this theoretical contribution extends the conceptual framework beyond the dichotomy of participation and non-participation.

This thesis makes a theoretical contribution by using the concept of emotion work to make sense of women's user experience of SNS as 'activity'. While Arlie Hochschild (1979), the sociologist who first coined the term, finds that the term is frequently being used incorrectly when moved to a different context (Beck, 2018), I believe that this is not the case for this thesis. The setting is different, yet the concept of emotion work in this thesis does involve the capacity to manage and produce a feeling, which is how Hochschild describes the term. In the

setting of Facebook as an arena for public discourse, it was found that women strategically used emotions to influence the tone of the debate, in particular, to modify strong emotions. Such strategic use of emotion was also found to enable women to participate in situations that might otherwise be hard to navigate. As such, the emotion work that women engaged in in the setting of Facebook was for the most part about calming the debate to an emotional level they deemed acceptable and using emotional rhetoric was considered as a form of protection when voicing their opinion. This study was only of women's emotion work since they were considered to have a particularly complex relationship with public participation in Facebook (Vochocová et al., 2016), a space known to blend personal and public communication (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Therefore, it is uncertain if men engage in emotion work to the same extent on Facebook and if it would have similar functions.

## 7.5 Methodological contributions

The transparency of the method used can be considered a methodological contribution. Detailed descriptions of the data, analysis and theoretical context are available in the articles and the method chapter. This thesis demonstrates the need for various methods, addressing the complexity of the topic with requisite variety (Costera Meijer, 2016, p. 547) and providing enough information for other researchers to replicate or further develop this work.

As described in the theoretical contribution, this thesis provides a novel approach to studying intention to participate in those situations where there is no observable activity. A methodological contribution, in line with this, is the first step towards an SNS-inhibition scale. This potential scale is constructed from extensive reading of theories that in different ways address inhibition, and although the scale requires testing and refinement, it is described in detail and can be further developed and used for other researchers. Media studies could benefit from finding some standardised ways of asking about media use, particularly SNS, which is dispersed and involves a variety of activities. Along these lines, Vochocová et al. (2016) noted that the comparability of results from different studies was limited given various approaches in studying political expression in an online setting.

> The arrival of social network sites has arguably broadened the repertoire of online platforms and forms of political engagement; at the same time, it has brought a challenge for researchers to distinguish between qualitatively different levels of engagement and participation based on particular types of online action.

(Vochocová et al., 2016: 1325)

The SNS-inhibition items can be found in the second article; Why so quiet? Exploring inhibition in digital public spaces. It should be noted that while the factors from the analysis in article two were not found to be gendered, some of the individual items were gendered. These were; finding it hard to express myself well, worry about being criticised or misunderstood, and worry about sharing something that might turn out to be wrong. Further development of an inhibition scale might want to account for the genderedness that became obscured in my factor analysis.

Based on the research literature on online public participation that tends to frame participation as intrinsically good (Lutz, 2017), I considered it essential to stay neutral when it came to public participation on SNS as good or bad.  However, some interesting issues came about during the research process. First, the informants in the interviews, especially in the third round that focused more on Facebook, often expressed a strong normative view of participation. They considered participation as inherently good, both in terms of public participation and SNS activity. The political interest in media questions often comes with normative pressure imposed on the research field, a normativity that is also present in the methods of communication research (Rothenberger et al., 2016). Rothenberger, for example, problematises the investigation of deliberative democratic norms and ask if it is likely that people have "alternate opinions" (2016: 178). Normativity presented itself through language, as the vocabulary describing established forms of observable activity seemed most accessible. The informants would use words such as *posting, sharing or discussing*, and hardly ever volunteered information about *thinking, feeling, or the process of making up their opinion*. It seemed that only the activity that involved observable participation was considered worth talking about, and this was also what the informants thought that I, as the interviewer, was interested in. For the most part, the result was that activity that they had been involved in was then considered a non-activity and therefore was initially not mentioned brushed off as *nothing*.

Knowing from the onset that most users are not observably active in public discourse on SNS, I considered it important to open up and allow the informants freedom to describe their experience and activity. Therefore, a method inspired by card sort (Conrad & Tucker, 2019) was useful. This method involved a set of cards with different types of activities, including non-observable SNS participation (see Appendix 4 for a full description) and asking the informants to talk about the activities that applied to what they would normally do. They were also given the option to add activities that were not covered by the cards. Introducing a range of

activities observable and non-observable was considered a neutral way to open up such a conversation and to remind the informants of the existence of a wider range of activities beyond posting or sharing. As such, it was a method of handling the normativity of the subject.

The informants' understanding that only observable activity counted and that participation was always good was an interesting finding and potentially deterring the research process. Introducing these activities verbally was not considered a viable option as it was likely to result in a string of "no, I do not do that" and potentially fortifying the notion of observable participation as good. As such, it would make the openness I wanted with my informants more difficult. While using card-sort is an established method that I only took inspiration from, my contribution is arguing for the value of using cards to open up a potentially closed-up conversation.

## 7.6 Practical implications

The results from this thesis supports the need to question the 'taken for granted-ness' that SNS are public arenas for all users, nor that they are one space. Publicness in SNS have multiple layers that are experienced differently not only from one platform to the next, but also within the different settings of platforms, such as Facebook. It also suggests that there is a discrepancy between how these spaces are perceived in general, connected to notions about how they ought to be used, and how they are used in everyday settings.

In addition, we need to question the understanding that not participating in an observable way equals passivity. This thesis highlights the gendered complexity in public participation in SNS. Women's use of Facebook is saturated with gendered feelings, experiences, rhetoric and discourse. The dichotomy of participation versus non-participation obscures what is really going on when users log on to SNS and in some way or the other connect to the Norwegian publicness.

## 7.7 Implications for further studies

For further studies, all the previously mentioned contributions relating to theory, method and empirical findings might be relevant. As described in the section about methodological implications, exploring the topic of public participation in SNS might require additional methods, to move away from not only the researcher's potential normative assumption, but also that of the participants.

For future research it would be valuable to look more closely at men's experience of Facebook as an arena for public discourse, and how the concept of emotion work applies to them.

Research literature suggests that women are particularly exposed for misogynistic and sexualised abuse in online debates, yet the women in the follow-up interviews did not think that this was the case, and therefore this point was not given attention in the articles. However, it is a point that may be interesting for further research. When the informants in the follow-up interview were asked if they considered women to be exposed for such abuse, the answers mostly turned into talk about the politically right versus left debates that were considered abusive, and a worry about immigrants being harassed online. One informant had received unwanted attention from a Facebook friend after posting once, but this was not considered abusive and nor was it related to what she posted. The notion that women should be particularly targeted did not seem to resonate with these informant's experience. This is interesting, yet it remains unclear why it is so, since the informants also expected angry or abusive comments if they were to post an opinion. It could be a Norwegian or Scandinavian experience. Furthermore, it is likely that it can be attributed to the angle of the mass media coverage, as the picture painted in the news media, were found to frequently inform the informant's perception. Still, this only a tentative finding, which needs further exploration and research.

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# 9. The articles

# A digital public sphere -Just in theory or a perceived reality for users of social network sites?

## Hilde Sakariassen

*Abstract*

*Social network sites (SNS) have the potential of providing new and more egalitarian spaces for public deliberation, and researchers, media and politicians often discuss them in those terms. Still, little attention is given to how ordinary users perceive SNS as spaces for public deliberation. This study addresses this gap by investigating how SNS generally are perceived by the users as potential spaces for public deliberation and if this perception is conditioned by demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, level of education, use of Twitter, and activity in SNS. The study draws on users of SNS in a nationally representative survey from Norway (N=1699). The results show significant differences in the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation according to both demographic characteristics and activity. More importantly, even if people are aware of SNS being portrayed as spaces for public deliberation, few are found to use them in such a way.*

*Keywords*
*Social network sites, social media, public sphere, public space, public deliberatition*

**Introduction**

In the decade that has passed since social media, and more particularly social network sites (SNS) made their entry, researchers have discussed their potential to provide new and more egalitarian spaces for public deliberation (Neuman, Bimber, & Hindman, 2011; Schäfer, 2015). Due to the architecture of the internet, the expectation was that all users could be equal, have the same access and possibility to take part and that this could have a democratising effect (Neuman et al., 2011; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Storsul, 2014). However, there is now a general understanding that SNS have not lived up to this potential (ibid.). Moreover, it is debated if it is meaningful to discuss SNS as public spheres for reasons such as fragmentation (Bruns & Highfield, 2015), little and non-egalitarian active participation and the unclear impact of such participation (Dahlgren, 2013). Nonetheless, SNS are frequently discussed in terms of public impact, not only by researchers but also by politicians and the mainstream media. These discussions often centre around the derogatory tone and incivility that is seen to be a part of the debates on SNS (Rost, Stahel, & Frey, 2016) and reflect a concern about the negative impact this might have on public deliberation in general. Regardless of whether the SNS discourse is framed as constructive or destructive, the underlying premise is the same – that SNS are taken for granted as spaces for public deliberation, and as such, are taken seriously as public spaces. This article proposes that there is reason to question this premise, since *how* 'ordinary users' actually perceive SNS as spaces for public deliberation is mostly overlooked. Therefore, this study is concerned with the way these platforms are regarded, understood or interpreted in terms of societal relevance by its users. This study goes beyond the existing discussions about the role SNS have or should have in society, and instead, asks how the users perceive SNS as spaces accommodating public deliberation. Instead of exploring visions of what may or could be, this empirical study, using survey data, provides an overview and potential systematic differences in actual perceptions of SNS users by following two lines of inquiry.

The first research question is, *Are SNS perceived by their users at all as spaces for public deliberation?* This question explores the perception of added value, importance and accessibility of SNS as spaces for deliberation. Furthermore, demographic characteristics provide us with insight into potential differences in this perception based on age, gender and education. Additionally, the use of Twitter is included, since the use of this platform is expected to influence the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. The first line of inquiry is then twofold; there is the question of how users perceive SNS as spaces for public deliberation, and what influence demographic characteristics and the use of Twitter have on this perception.

The second research question is, *Does the view on SNS as spaces for public deliberation correspond with type of activity in these spaces?* Information about this can provide insight into *why* some participate while others do not, beyond the effect of the demographic characteristics explored in the first line of inquiry.

The study is conducted in Norway. Almost all Norwegians have access to the internet (medianorway, 2018), with 4 out of 5 Norwegians being users of SNS; the big platforms such as Facebook are used regardless of age and level of education (Statistics Norway, 2018). Norway makes a compelling case for this study, since the widespread and egalitarian use of SNS in combination with a society that is characterised by equal rights and freedom of speech (Freedom-House, 2018; Reporters-without-borders, 2019), should provide the best possible scenario/backdrop for SNS to live up to their potential as spaces for public deliberation. However, in Norway, like other countries, harassment of, for example, politicians and minorities in SNS has provoked a general question whether these debates are a [worthy] contribution to public deliberation on important public issues. This has in turn sparked a national campaign for a 'spring cleaning' of the online commentary fields (NOhate, 2019), drawing even further attention to this as a topic in the Norwegian public.

**Theoretical perspectives**

This study deals with SNS as spaces for public deliberation, which is intertwined with the notion of *the public sphere*. Commonly described, the public sphere is the space where people can interact; where public opinion is formed; where citizens deal with matters of general interest and express and articulate their views (Habermas, 1991). Social network sites have been pointed out as new public spheres, with potential for rational deliberation; the internet ostensibly provides an architecture in which all users are

equal and may interact directly with one another (Neuman et al., 2011; Storsul, 2014). In these potential public spheres supported by online social media, participation is open and available to all who are interested and discussion of common interests takes place through a process that is visible and accessible to all (Schafer 2015). Still, it has been found that the majority of users do not actively take part (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009).

While some researchers follow this Habermasian concept of a unified public sphere, others believe that this internet-induced structural transformation is so radical that we ought to abandon such a concept (Webster 2013), or at least that it cannot be the single approach (Dahlgren 2005). One central characteristic of this structural transformation is fragmentation (Bruns & Highfield, 2015) – not a single type of fragmentation, but diverse types of public spheres (e.g. political or cultural); publics defined by their main medium of communication (e.g. Twittersphere), or temporary publics that emerge around a particular theme, issue or event, with all of them characterised by immediacy, with fast-moving timeframes that can fade away just as suddenly as they come into being (Bruns & Highfield, 2015). In other words, we are not talking about one digital public sphere, but instead, 'networked microspheres' (Dahlgren, 2013).

Another central point in this discussion is that despite the fact that the Internet and related technologies have created new public spaces for politically oriented conversation, the technology itself cannot transform this public space into a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). Papacharissi makes the distinction explicit by stating that public space is not the same as the public sphere; a virtual space enhances discussion, but a virtual sphere enhances democracy (ibid.). Therefore, public space is a public sphere only if the conversation can be interpreted as a contribution to a democratic society, and the question is whether new communication technology can foster democracy, promote rational discourse and also represent equally the diversity of different public spheres of different social players (Papacharissi, 2002). Moreover, Dahlgren (2013), argues that what he refers to as microspheres are disconnected from the traditional decision-making processes which govern society, and are thus unlikely to enhance democracy.

This study does not examine SNS contribution or connection to the decision-making processes, but instead, how SNS are perceived by the users to be a part of the public sphere by providing spaces for public deliberation. The examination of SNS as potential spaces for public deliberation needs to go beyond addressing these platforms as merely public spaces but instead look at how they are understood as potential public spheres, and as such, as spaces that are understood by users to have a democratic function. The terminology 'space for public deliberation' is used in this study in an explorative manner, as it encompasses more than a space being understood as public (as compared to private), and should instead be seen as an indicator of a digital public sphere.

**The impact of social networks**

The aim of this study is to look at the user's perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, which makes the way they experience these platforms essential. Social network sites (SNS) are described by boyd[1] and Ellison (2007) as networked publics, 'publics that are restructured by networked technologies'. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice' (danah boyd, 2010, p. 39). The second part of this definition is central, as this study questions what kind of collective the users imagine being part of when they log on to SNS. Do they understood SNS as spaces for publicly oriented conversations, or do they imagine them to be something unrelated to such notions of the public? There are fuzzy boundaries in SNS, as users move back and forth between unevenly distributed levels of personal and public topics. The expectation is that this perception will differ from one user to another, as it is shaped not only by the architecture and affordances of social media, but additionally by people's social contexts, identities, and practices (Baym & boyd, 2012). These spaces based on communication and everyday use are of different sizes that overlap and interconnect (Keane, 1991). Therefore, the assumption is that a user who

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[1] Intentionally lower case

predominantly connects with close friends through personal topics and private chats will probably have a different perception of SNS than users who take part in debating news and politics on these platforms, and who are part of a digital network of friends that also do so (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008). Moreover, the user's practice and personal experience of these spaces are likely to be linked with how they, in general, perceive the role of these platforms, the societal function of these sites, and how they ought to be used. To sum up; the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is likely to be shaped by user practices and the type of online network the user is involved in (Baym & boyd, 2012).

**Three conditions for SNS as spaces for public deliberation**
By adhering to the argument that public space is not the same as a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002), 'the publicness' of SNS needs to be problematised rather than assumed. Indeed, SNS do provide a public space, but for these spaces to be perceived as spaces for public deliberation, one could argue that they also need to be spaces where people's ideas, conversations and minds meet. This argument goes beyond the idea of what public versus private space is and requires the consideration of an additional democratic perspective. The perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is therefore divided into the following conditions in this study: 1) SNS cannot be seen as private; 2) the quality of deliberation must be considered to have some added value; and 3) SNS must be considered as spaces where public deliberation is understood to, and does, take place.

The privacy issues regarding these spaces involve both how social network sites are perceived in a more general manner, and more specifically, the individual's perspective on SNSs for personal use. Some users are found to be more concerned about privacy and feel less at ease when participating and thus more restrictive in their posting behaviour (Burkell, Fortier, Wong, & Simpson, 2014; Fenigstein, Scheier, Buss, & Maher, 1975; Snyder, 1974). While this study concerns itself with the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, and not directly with users´ underlying posting behaviour, it is likely that this perception is influenced by the level of privacy in use. Moreover, with such unclear boundaries between public and private (Burkell et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2015), SNS has been described as private spaces where users engage in 'privately public conversations' – not behind closed doors, nor in full view of the public (Papacharissi, 2015). In addition, we have an unknown audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011) that may just be our friends, but can also be wider circles of people unknown to us, meaning that what we think we say to a select few is also a public opinion of sorts, with potential, if nothing else, to reach many people (Hermida, 2014). Such unclear boundaries between private and public will not only relate to the audience, but also to the kind of topics that are raised and, furthermore, the way these are discussed. Therefore, participants in this study are asked how they make sense of SNS. Are they indeed seen as primarily social and mostly connected to interaction with groups of friends, or are they seen as arenas where information and communication are part of the wider public deliberation? This understanding is mapped using statements concerning whether the user predominantly chats in closed groups or private chats, and if they consider what is posted in open forums to be part of a wider debate or simply an exchange between friends[2].

The *value of the debates* in social network sites is frequently discussed. The online exchange is often criticised for its robust tone, and it has been suggested that the participants are more interested in shouting at each other than engaging with substantive ideas (Hermida, 2014: 41-42). The dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity and lack of cues are some of the aspects found in online communication, which foster deindividuation, as described in *SIDE-theory* (Joinson, 1998; Walther, 2011), and what is known as *the online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2005). Such explanations for the more aggressive debate-climate on SNS suggests that users are able to detach themselves from their online behaviour and take less responsibility for one's actions (ibid.), thus promoting a behaviour that is both antisocial and contagious (Brown, 2000: 10-11). It has been argued that even if social network sites do not cause someone to be rude or make derogatory comments, they have made such attitudes more transparent than before (Hermida, 2014: 42-3). When people take social cues from others, this kind of behaviour can spread, insofar as observing derogatory remarks may make it more acceptable to be rude and offensive (ibid.). Various studies recognise the presence of comments that display

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[2] No distinction is made between SNS on websites and apps.

disagreement with the views of others, both denying and disrespecting these opposing views (Hwang, Kim, & Kim, 2018; Ruiz, Massip, Micó-Sanz, Díaz-Noci, & Domingo, 2010). Such incivility is argued to be a matter for concern, since it harms democratic values and favours polarisation (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014). Following this line of thought, participants in this study are asked to evaluate the content or debates in social network sites, where the assumption is that the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation will have a positive correlation with the evaluation of the content in the very same space. To put it another way, if the content is perceived to consist mainly of incivility or nonsense, it is unlikely to be considered as a valuable space for public deliberation, regardless of whether this view comes from direct personal experience or from the general way mainstream media or society discuss these spaces.

The last dimension is the *understanding of SNS as spaces where the public deliberation is supposed to, and does, take place,* which is concerned with what the participants expect of the function of SNS from a societal perspective. The question is if the users´ understanding of SNS is predominantly about everyday social interaction with friends and where public information, news and debates do not belong, or on the contrary, as a public space, where such deliberation should take place, or somewhere in-between. One would expect such an understanding to be related to the specific platform, and therefore Twitter and Facebook are both considered, since they are arguably the platforms most relevant as potential spaces for public deliberation, albeit for different uses. Twitter is highly associated with sharing opinions and information (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010), and is broadly found to be a platform where people check, share and comment on the news (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). With Facebook, however, most users log on to interact with friends; very little of public concern is shared and half of the users do not even want news to be part of their newsfeed (ibid.). Another critical difference between the two is that, unlike Facebook, Twitter predominantly consists of communication practices that are public, meaning that posts are visible to every user by default and that the system of 'hashtags' and 'mentions' allows the creation of audiences around specific discussions regardless of group creation (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). The two platforms are in general perceived differently; Facebook is primarily seen as social, while Twitter is seen more as a public space (see Marwick & boyd, 2011 for further info). The participants in the survey were asked to evaluate SNS as spaces for public deliberation based on their perception of the function they understand them to have from a societal perspective. These questions relate to the feeling of how users could or 'ought' to take part in public debates happening on SNS, rather than their actual participation in these spaces. We asked in such a way since democratic ideals are often vague or implicit (Kweit & Kweit, 1981), and consequently understood in abstract terms that tend to evoke affective rather than a cognitive response from individuals (Moynihan, 2003). However, in the second part of the analysis in this study, the perception of SNS spaces for public deliberation and actual activity in SNS are both used in the analysis.

## Method
Two research questions guide this analysis: (1) Are social network sites (SNS) perceived as spaces for public deliberation by their users? (2) Does their view on SNS as such correspond with activity on social network sites?

### Participants and data collection
An online survey was chosen as the most appropriate method of data collection for this exploratory design for two reasons. First, the research question called for quantitative data to provide an overview and look for systematic differences, and second, because the target group are users of social media, which means that they are all users of the Internet.
The data originates from an online panel with 1699 participants[3] that was conducted as part of the MeCIn Public connection project in the fall/winter 2017 (Hovden & Moe, 2017; Nærland, 2018; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018), and that addresses Norwegians public connection (Couldry, Livingstone, &

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[3] MeCIn Public connection survey (late 2017), is a nationally representative web panel of Norwegian citizens over 18 years of age. The total number of participants in the online panel was 2064.
https://www.uib.no/en/project/mecin

Markham, 2007). The sample is overall statistically representative of the Norwegian population according to three demographic properties; age, gender and education. The mean age is 51 years (min 18, max 89), 48 % of the participants are female, and 45 % has a degree from a university (3 years or more). When it comes to age and education, our sample is a little skewed towards the higher age groups, and a higher education level than the average population (SSB, 2017) – the analyses are weighted to rectify this. The 1699 informants that are included in this study are all weekly or more frequent users of SNS, which is 82% of the total sample from the online panel. Out of these 1699, 94% report to be users of Facebook and 16% are users of Twitter. Less than 1% use Twitter without also using Facebook.

## Measurements and method

The participants were presented with eight statements about *SNS as spaces for public deliberation*[4] and asked to assess them on the following scale 0 = not correct, 1 = do not know, 2 = somewhat correct, 3 = correct. Such a scale was used to allow the respondents to choose the option that best supports their perception[5]. These statements address the three conditions for the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation; *the societal role of the platform, the notion of private versus public, and the perceived value of the content* (see Table 1).

   *SNS-activity* was measured by how often users reported doing ten different activities in social network sites (see Table 1). The informants were asked to answer on a five-point scale (Several times a day, Daily, Weekly, Rarely, Never) and every activity that was reported to be weekly or more frequent was counted as a 'yes', while less frequent activities were counted as 'no' (dichotomised variables). The activities were then split into two categories which are used as index variables in the analysis, each with the possible values ranging from 0 (none) to 5 (all) according to the number of reported activities; *Public SNS activity* (alpha 0.89) which are contain types of activities related to public deliberation, and *Social SNS activity* (alpha 0.61) which activity that are more private or related to socialising (see Table 2).

   *Demographic characteristics* (age, gender and level of education) were included, as they are found to be differentiating factors related to political efficacy (Beaumont, 2011), general public participation (Morrell, 2003), and SNS-participation (Song, Lew, & Kum, 2017).
*Use of Twitter* was also included as a variable since we know that this platform (as earlier discussed) is associated with sharing opinions and information (Hughes et al., 2012; Kwak et al., 2010).

Exploratory hierarchical multiple (OLS) regression models are used to explore each of the statements measuring 'perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation' as dependent variables. For every statement, the first model uses demographic variables and the use of Twitter as predictors of perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. In the second model, activity in SNS, both public and social, are added as predictors.

## Analyses
### Are SNS perceived as spaces for public deliberation by their users?
When it comes to the idea of public versus private, only one-third of the participants consider what is posted in social network sites to be public. When half the participants post things, they predominantly understand this as communication with their closed circle of friends and not as an exchange of opinion happening in the wider public sphere. It is also worth noting that 16 % is unsure whether they think posting in SNS is public communication or not. This unclear boundary when it comes what is considered private and public, therefore, seems to be part of a general contradiction between users supporting the idea of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, but still considering their own SNS activity to be happening in private spaces.

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[4] Given that the word «deliberation» (deliberasjon) is not commonly used and less known, the word «debate» (debatt) was used in the survey.
[5] Ideally this scale should have more alternatives, but it was reduced to four, allowing for better functionality for those respondents who answered the survey using smartphones (estimated to be 50 %).

One of the conditions for perceiving SNS as spaces for public deliberation and part of the public sphere is that these spaces must be considered as public, and used as such. However, only one quarter reported not communicating in closed groups or private chats, which is further supported by two-thirds saying that SNS might be spaces for public debate, but are not used as such by themselves and their circle of friends, also indicating the extent to which their friends are taking part in public debates in SNS.

Over a third (41%) think that debates in SNS are not as important as public debates taking place elsewhere, and just as many (42%) think that it is not important to take part in the debates happening here. The view on whether or not public debates belong on SNS is thus quite divided. However, there is a majority that thinks that it is positive that

Table 1: Statements about SNS as spaces for public deliberation.

| Perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation | Correct | Some-what correct | Do not know | Not correct |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *SNS as spaces where public deliberation is understood to take place:* | | | | |
| 1. Debates on social network sites are equally important to public debates taking place elsewhere. | 7 % | 42 % | 10 % | 41 % |
| 2. It is important to partake in debates on social network sites if one disagrees or can contribute with a new perspective. | 7 % | 36 % | 15 % | 42 % |
| 3. Debates about important social issues belong on social network sites. | 14 % | 35 % | 13 % | 38 % |
| 4. It is positive that social network sites make it easy to partake in public debates. | 18 % | 51 % | 12 % | 19 % |
| *Private versus public:* | | | | |
| 5. What I and others write on social network sites is expressed privately and not part of any public debates. | 15 % | 37 % | 16 % | 32 % |
| 6. Most of what I post in SNS happens in closed groups or as part of private chats. | 35 % | 33 % | 9 % | 23 % |
| 7. SNS might be a place for public debates, but not used as such by my friends and me. | 26 % | 38 % | 11 % | 25 % |
| *Added value of SNS deliberation:* | | | | |
| 8. Most of the debates on social network sites are of little value. | 28 % | 45 % | 11 % | 16 % |

Note: N=1,699.

Table 2: SNS activity indexes. Descriptive statistics.

| Activities in each index, 0-5: | alpha | mean | Std. Dev. |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Public SNS activity index includes:* 1. Write posts about society or politics / 2. Start debates/discussion threads / 3. Participate in debates / 4. Post links to news about society or politics / 5. Comment on news posts about society or politics | .89 | .31 | .84 |
| *Social SNS activity index includes:* 1. Write "everyday" status update, post photos / 2. Find out what happens among friends / 3. Finding out about cultural activities / 4. Create events and send out invitations / 5. Participate in groups related to myself, or children's social life | .61 | 1.80 | 1.09 |

Note: Composition of "SNS activity indexes" (public and social), N=1,699.

social network sites make it easier to participate in the public debate (69% correct/somewhat correct). Therefore, even if SNS are overall not considered to be spaces where deliberation on important issues

take place or where it is important to participate, it is generally acknowledged that SNS can be an accessible way to participate for those who wish to do so. Still, most users (84%) think that the debates occurring on SNS are of little societal value.

The results suggest that SNS, due to the current level of debate, are not generally seen as beneficial spaces for public deliberation, but that most people seem to be open to their potential for other uses. Along these lines, it also seems that the blurred lines between public and private might stem from a user's perception of these platforms being used for public deliberation by others, yet not using them in such a way themselves. These results can indicate that we might be dealing with a gap between how SNS are discussed by researchers, media and politicians, as spaces for public deliberation and used as such by a 'selected few', and how they are perceived by the majority of users who use these platforms as a part of their everyday life and who observe very little of these debates.

### What influences users' perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation?

Two questions are proposed in this study: 1) if the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is related to demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, level of education and the use of Twitter, and 2) if this perception also is related to activity in SNS. To answer these questions, hierarchical multiple regression models with three types of predictors (demographics, use of Twitter and SNS-activity) was used for each of the eight "perception of SNS statements".

The first model explores the *demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, level of education in addition to the use of Twitter*'s ability to predict the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation (Model 1, Table 3).

Some distinctive differences associated with *age* are detected. Older people more often express that it is important to take part in debates on SNS and that the debates here are of value. Nevertheless, they also perceive that expressions on SNS are private, and do not use

Table 3: Demographic background, use of Twitter and SNS-activity's ability to predict the eight different indicators of perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation.

| Debates on SNS is equally important | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| age group a | -0.002 | -0.001 |
| male | -0.075** | -0.068** |
| higher education | -0.103*** | -0.107*** |
| twitter | 0.065** | 0.028 |
| public participation SNS b | | 0.199*** |
| social participation SNS c | | 0.113*** |
| N | 1647 | 1647 |
| R-sq | 0.018 | 0.081 |
| adj. R-sq | 0.02 | 0.08 |

| It is important to take part in debates on SNS | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| age group a | 0.067** | 0.065** |
| male | -0.004 | -0.001 |
| higher education | -0.042 | -0.044 |
| twitter | 0.115*** | 0.065** |
| public participation SNS b | | 0.293*** |
| social participation SNS c | | 0.112*** |
| N | 1642 | 1642 |
| R-sq | 0.019 | 0.131 |
| adj. R-sq | 0.02 | 0.13 |

| Public debates do not belong on SNS | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| age group a | -0.008 | -0.008 |
| male | 0.055* | 0.051* |
| higher education | 0.057* | 0.059* |
| twitter | -0.088*** | -0.067** |
| public participation SNS b | | -0.121*** |
| social participation SNS c | | -0.060* |
| N | 1646 | 1646 |
| R-sq | 0.012 | 0.034 |

| SNS makes it easy to take part in public debates | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| age group a | -0.006 | -0.006 |
| male | 0.016 | 0.021 |
| higher education | -0.035 | -0.039 |
| twitter | 0.085*** | 0.055* |
| public participation SNS b | | 0.170*** |
| social participation SNS c | | 0.091*** |
| N | 1645 | 1645 |
| R-sq | 0.009 | 0.053 |

| adj. R-sq | 0.01 | 0.03 |
| --- | --- | --- |

| **Debates on SNS are of little value** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| age group a | -0.081*** | -0.082*** |
| male | 0.177*** | 0.174*** |
| higher education | 0.136*** | 0.138*** |
| twitter | -0.056* | -0.047 |
| public participation SNS b | | -0.049 |
| social participation SNS c | | -0.035 |
| N | 1647 | 1647 |
| R-sq | 0.057 | 0.061 |
| adj. R-sq | 0.05 | 0.06 |

| adj. R-sq | 0.01 | 0.05 |
| --- | --- | --- |

| **Expressions are private, not public** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| age group a | 0.194*** | 0.199*** |
| male | -0.008 | -0.002 |
| higher education | -0.063* | -0.067** |
| twitter | -0.038 | -0.029 |
| public participation SNS b | | -0.074** |
| social participation SNS c | | 0.030 |
| N | 1647 | 1647 |
| R-sq | 0.049 | 0.054 |
| adj. R-sq | 0.05 | 0.05 |

| **Use mostly closed groups or private chats** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| age group a | -0.185*** | -0.176*** |
| male | -0.113*** | -0.103*** |
| higher education | 0.096*** | 0.088*** |
| twitter | -0.041 | -0.020 |
| public participation SNS b | | -0.160*** |
| social participation SNS c | | 0.038 |
| N | 1641 | 1641 |
| R-sq | 0.064 | 0.087 |
| adj. R-sq | 0.06 | 0.08 |

| **Not how my friends and I use SNS** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| age group a | -0.094*** | -0.086*** |
| male | -0.021 | -0.016 |
| higher education | 0.062* | 0.057* |
| twitter | -0.028 | 0.002 |
| public participation SNS b | | -0.205*** |
| social participation SNS c | | -0.015 |
| N | 1644 | 1644 |
| R-sq | 0.015 | 0.058 |
| adj. R-sq | 0.01 | 0.05 |

*Note: N = 1,699. Exploratory hierarchical OLS regression analyses. Standardised beta coef- ficients; \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001; a age group = ordinal (7 cat), b public participation SNS = index 0-5 (5= highest), c social participation SNS = index 0-5 (5= highest).*
*Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity.*

SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Thus, there seems to be a discrepancy between how the older age-groups think about SNS as spaces for public debate and what they experience in their own use. The younger age groups, on the other hand, are more critical of the value of the debates in SNS and report to post mostly in chats or private groups.

When it comes to *gender*, men are not only more likely to find the debates on SNS less important than debates happening elsewhere, but also that public debates do not belong on SNS, and that the ongoing debates are of little value. Thus, in general, men can be said to be more negative regarding the societal function for SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Women, on the other hand, are inclined to be more positive, but still, post mostly in closed groups or private chats.

Moreover, *education* is shown to be significantly related to the perception of SNS, and those with higher education are found to generally be more sceptical to SNS as suitable spaces for public deliberation. Users with higher education do not find the debates happening here equally important, and also that these debates are of little value. Besides, they report posting mostly in chats or private groups. Even if those with higher education understand posts in SNS to be public rather than private, and understand them as spaces for public deliberation, they nevertheless tend to use SNS less in such a way.

The *use of Twitter*, as expected, has a significant positive relationship with the perception of debates in SNS being important, that it is important to take part, and that it is good that SNS makes it easier to take part in public debate. The use of Twitter also has a negative relationship with the view that the debates in SNS are of little value. Twitter is, as expected, associated with perceiving SNS as beneficial spaces for public deliberation.

What we then find is that perceptions of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is related to demographic factors and the use of Twitter. In short, the younger age-groups, men and those with higher education are more critical of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. The opposite is the case for users of Twitter, as they are more likely to have a more positive perception of SNS in terms of them being spaces for public deliberation.

### *Does activity influence the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation?*

In the next line of inquiry (Model 2, Table 3), the relationship between the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation and activity is to be explored. SNS-activity was divided into *social* and *public* activity (see Table 2), and these two types of activities are found to have a small, but significant, correlation (.316) (Spearman, 1904). In this study, social activities are much more frequent than public activities: while less than 14% engages in activity that is here considered to be a public way, two-thirds report to take part in social activities. Still, some of the social activity-items included can be said to require less effort (e.g. find out), which might attribute to the difference in frequency between the two modes of activities that we observe here. In this step in the regression models, I explore the ability of *public* and *social activities* to predict the perception of SNS as public spaces after controlling for the influence of the earlier discussed democratic characteristics (age, gender, and education) and the use of Twitter.

Activity is, in general, a strong predictor for perceiving SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Moreover, engaging in public activity in SNS has a significant positive relationship with the perception that debates in SNS are important, that it is important to take part in these debates, and that it is good that SNS facilitates this. Furthermore, those who engage in public types of activities are more inclined to perceive that such public debates do belonging on SNS, that what is expressed on SNS is not private. They also post less in chats or private groups and use SNS in ways considered less private. In short, the more one is active in SNS, in what is here categorised as a publicly oriented, the more it is not just more likely that one perceives SNS as a space for public debate, but also that one disagrees with the statements about SNS being a private space rather than a public one. Engaging in social activities, on the other hand, also predicts support for statements that describe SNS as favourable spaces for public deliberation but differs with a more unclear view of SNS being private or public. It could be understood as those who are active in ways that are here categorised as socially oriented, do see the value of SNS as spaces for public deliberation but are more uncertain about the distinction between what is private and public in these spaces.

### Discussion

This article started by questioning the taken-for-granted quality of SNS as actual spaces for public deliberation since the perception of ordinary users of these spaces is mainly overlooked. The findings indicate that users are familiar with SNS being discussed as spaces for public deliberation, and yet their own use and experience of these spaces neither seem to be characterised by that type of use, nor do they necessarily observe much public deliberation among their friends. Such perceptions are not only influenced by SNS-activity in general and the kind of activity, but also by demographic characteristics and use of Twitter.

### *Blurry boundaries between private and public*

The respondents were asked if they perceive what they and others write on SNS as public or private. Some years back Burkell et al. found that Facebook users considered what they wrote in online social spaces as public rather than private revelations (Burkell et al., 2014), thus viewing and treating these spaces as public venues. By contrast, this study finds less evidence of that, and instead, more uncertainty; half the respondents perceive what they write on SNS to be private communication. This applies especially to the older age-group, and an additional 16% answers that they are unsure. The uncertainty might be attributed to SNS changing over time, where at least in the Norwegian setting, chat functions have now become an important part of social media use (Moe & Sakariassen, 2018). However, a low correlation between understanding expressions to be private and mostly communicating via chats indicates that this is only part of the explanation. In that sense, these finding

are somehow unclear, as we cannot be sure of what kind of posts the respondents had in mind when answering, but it is, however, clear that the aspect of privacy is an important one, thus supporting Burkell´s argument (2014) that the line between private and public seems to be quite blurry for users of social media.

## *Debates belong in SNS, but the use of SNS is not directed towards deliberation*

This study finds an overall low regard for the value of deliberation on SNS, but nevertheless that debates about important issues are understood to belong here. The users, like researchers, appear to be aware of the potential of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, but this potential might be prevented from being realised by the low opinion of the worth of the current debates on SNS. That few feel they ought to take part and voice their opinion on SNS, furthermore, indicates a lack of affective response (Moynihan, 2003) to SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Parallels can be drawn to worthwhileness, a concept that suggests why some news media and not others are chosen to be part of one´s media repertoire (Schrøder, 2015). The opinion that the debates in SNS are of little value would make it unlikely that users find it worthwhile to participate in these debates, but would also elicit less feeling that one 'ought to participate' in these debates. There is not, however, a symmetric relationship between worthwhileness and feeling of duty. If we use the case of voting as an example, it is normatively seen as a civic duty, even when we know that no single vote will alter the outcome (Jones & Hudson, 2000). For the case of the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, the findings point to a lack of normative expectations and varying understandings of citizen rights and obligations on these platforms, thus underpinning the idea that these are not generally taken seriously as spaces for public deliberation. Nonetheless, the various platforms are perceived differently, as previously found (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011), and the use of Twitter is in this study found to have a positive association with perception of SNS being positive spaces for public deliberation.

## *Level of attention is more important than then demographic differences*

In this study, the findings show that there are demographic differences with respect to perceiving deliberation on SNS to be of value and important to take part in. Nevertheless, this becomes a hypothetical view of sorts; our respondents see SNS as spaces for deliberation utilized by 'others', as they neither tend to be active, nor see much activity among their own friends' networks either. While there is a difference between the older and younger generations, between males and females, and between different education levels when it comes to the perception of SNS as spaces for deliberation, the common denominator is that their everyday experience is characterised by such debate to a very small extent, if at all.

What is found, however, is that SNS-activity, both public and socially oriented, generally have a positive relationship with perceiving SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Out of the factors considered in this study, SNS-activity explains most of the variation. This suggests that it is not the exact type of action that counts, but instead, that activity is an indicator of being present and paying attention to what is going on in these spaces. This is supported by earlier research finding that level of engagement and attention is a relevant factor for online participation (Dahlberg, 2001).

## Limitations

This study used a survey with statements to map users' perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, which has some limitations. First, more statements should ideally have been included to get a more comprehensive picture, as there is always the potential for a blind spot using quantitative methods. Besides, the three conditions for SNS to be perceived as spaces for public deliberation were not equally mapped, as the added *value of SNS deliberation* is covered with a single statement.

Second, the multitude of spaces where deliberation can occur within the different SNS platforms, are not taken into account. Newspaper comment sections are, for example, distinctly different from posts by friends that appear on one´s feed, or perhaps in a closed group. This study falls

short of exploring the contextual side of understanding SNS as spaces for public deliberation, and further studies are needed to gain further insight into this.

**Conclusion**

This study set out with the intention of getting an understanding of 'ordinary' users' perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. The idea of public versus the private, the value of current content on SNS and the evaluation of SNS as a platform was used as the underlying structure for analysis.

The study uncovered a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to users' understanding of SNS as public or private. Moreover, deliberation on SNS are perceived to have little value, which both comes from the evaluation of the current debates in SNS, but is also shaped by the general perception of SNS as spaces for deliberation. By asking users to provide us with information, we found that SNS are perceived less as spaces for public deliberation and instead are mostly used for social or private use. This raises the point that perhaps only certain users will see the public debate happening in these spaces, and even if people know that such deliberation exists, it is not equally accessible to all users. What we find, then, is that the theoretical discussions and the expectations we might have of SNS as spaces for public deliberation are quite far from what ordinary user's experience. Such a discrepancy between how SNS theoretically should or ought to work as spaces for public deliberation and what users perceive is important to understand more deeply, not only by researchers who are already debating this but also by media, politicians and those few who are active debaters. The results of this study imply that we portray SNS as spaces for public deliberation but that for most users, they are not.

*Appendix: Attitudes to social network sites versus selected background variables. Correlations.*

| | SNS public activity[b] | SNS social activity[c] | age group[a] | male | higher education | Twitter |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Debates on social network sites are equally important to public debates taking place elsewhere. | 0.23* | 0.16* | 0.01 | -0.06* | -0.10* | 0.05* |
| 2. It is important to partake in debates on social network sites if one disagrees or can contribute with a new perspective. | 0.34* | 0.18* | 0.07* | 0.01 | -0.05 | 0.11* |
| 3. Debates about important social issues belong on social network sites. | 0.15* | 0.12* | 0.02 | -0.01 | -0.01 | 0.08* |
| 4. It is positive that social network sites make it easy to partake in public debates. | 0.21* | 0.13* | -0.01 | 0.03 | -0.03 | 0.09* |
| 5. What I and others write on social network sites is expressed privately and not part of any public debates. | -0.06* | -0.05 | -0.10* | 0.16* | 0.14* | -0.02 |
| 6. Most of what I post in SNS happens in closed groups or as part of private chats. | -0.06* | -0.02 | 0.21* | -0.01 | -0.10* | -0.06* |
| 7. SNS might be a place for public debates, but not used as such by my friends and me. | -0.17* | 0.03 | -0.20* | -0.12* | 0.13* | -0.04 |
| 8. Most of the debates on social network sites are of little value. | -0.21* | -0.05* | -0.10* | -0.03 | 0.08* | -0.02 |

*Note: N= 1,699. Pairwise correlation, Pearsons R; * p<0.05; [a] age group = ordinal (7 cat),*

[b] *SNS public activity = index 0-5 (5= highest),* [c] *SNS social activity = index 0-5 (5= highest).*

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# Why so quiet? Exploring inhibition in digital public spaces

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## Abstract

Social network sites have been considered as important arenas for public debate, but as a large proportion of users do not actively participate, there is a need to further our understanding of a phenomenon as hidden, unnoticed and invisible as non-participation. We argue that inhibition is a valuable socio-psychological lens to study non-participation, usefully extending the conceptual framework of political communication regarding non-participation, and offering a more precise way of theorising the intent behind this apparent passivity. Using representative survey data collected in Norway in 2017 ($N$ = 2064), we first sensitise the multi-layered concept of inhibition through combining different dominant approaches: the spiral-of-silence theory, the harsh debate climate, political efficacy, and specific properties of social network sites related to identity and impression management. Second, we show that inhibition functions as an in-between concept balancing participation and non-participation in social network sites. Through factor analysis (principal component factor), we integrate established theories that allow us to define overarching dimensions of inhibition, demonstrating that it is a complex phenomenon not easily understood through one specific theoretical perspective.

**Keywords:** social network sites (SNS), participation, inhibition, the silent majority, public debate

## Introduction

The majority of Internet users do not actively or visibly participate in social network sites (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Sun et al., 2014; Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009), and thus far we know little about these users. In this study, we ask what inhibits people from actively participating or contributing to public debates on social network sites (SNS), in particular when they actually wish to voice their opinion. Hayes et al. (2005) describe inhibition as a balancing act between wanting to express something and worrying about potential risks. In line with this definition, we propose inhibition as a valuable socio-psychological lens to study online public non-participation for two reasons. First, it provides insight into what stops people from voicing their opinion or being active, visible participants in SNS. Second, by studying inhibition, we also indirectly study the intent to participate, because only those who want to take part may have experienced inhibition. This study analyses the

multidimensionality of inhibition as a way of advancing our understanding of online public non-participation.

The term public can be said to encompass 'any issues affecting how we live together that require common solutions' (Couldry et al., 2007) and 'connotes ideas of citizenship, communality and things not private' (Papacharissi, 2002). Public participation, similarly to political participation (Verba et al., 1995), can therefore generally be described as activities that engage with such issues. Non-participation could, in line with the definition of participation, be described as not being involved or not participating, which in this study refers to users not commenting on news stories or not voicing their opinion in a debate or otherwise engaging in what may be considered public SNS-activities.

Even though it concerns most users, there are few studies of non-participation in SNS and those that do exist mostly attempt to reformulate why non-participation should be considered a valuable activity (Crawford, 2009; Sun et al., 2014). We propose that studying inhibition can provide valuable insights into the intention behind non-participation in SNS. However, to advance our understanding of non-participation in SNS, we need to look beyond single concepts that exist when it comes to inhibition. We have identified four dominant explanatory frames that highlight different aspects of inhibition: spiral-of-silence theory, the harsh debate climate, political efficacy and specific properties of SNS related to identity and impression management. In this study, statements representing these different aspects of inhibition are integrated into one survey to allow us to explore the multi quality of what it is that inhibits users from voicing their opinion and taking part in debates on SNS. Norway makes a compelling case for this study. Most Norwegians are users of SNS (Statistics Norway, 2019); it is a society that is characterised by equal rights and freedom of speech (Freedom-House, 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2019), and yet, Norwegians are not particularly active in online debates (Moe et al., 2017). We ask whether Norwegian users feel inhibited from taking part from such public SNS-activities and why.

This study focuses on the experience of inhibition when wanting to post or actively participate in a public debate on SNS.1 It offers important insights into reasons why people who are active in the public sphere nevertheless feel inhibited on SNS. Our aim is to advance our understanding of non-participation by studying inhibition by combining four different theoretical approaches that rarely communicate across. We employ exploratory factor analysis to find the overarching dimensions of inhibition in SNS. The intention is not to pit one theoretical angle against another, but rather to study them together as dimensions of inhibition that may be separate or intertwined and overlapping. We consider the exploration of the multidimensionality of inhibition as a prerequisite for bridging different concepts and theoretical frames, in which inhibition plays a crucial role but which are rarely considered in their mutual interaction. Next, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to explore whether there are certain users who experience more inhibition than others, to what degree inhibition makes users refrain from taking part in public SNS-activity, and whether

certain types of inhibition affect active participation more or less. The analysis and variables used are described in detail in the methods section.

## Literature review

Active and political participation is generally seen as beneficial for the legitimacy of political decision making. Accordingly, active participation is usually framed as a distinctly beneficial phenomenon (Jenkins, 2006; Putnam, 2000) and, conversely, non-participation as negative – as defined not by what it is but by what it is not: the absence of the more desirable active citizen participation.

SNS represent digital forums similar to places where citizens can take part in everyday political debates (Neuman et al., 2011, p. 11), but there are divergent understandings of the implications these spaces have for participation. Proponents of mobilisation theory claim that the Internet facilitates democratic participation because all users have equal opportunities (Neuman et al., 2011; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Storsul, 2014). In contrast, reinforcement theory proponents claim that the Internet might deepen the traditional divides, as users with high socio-economic status will benefit from higher quality resources available also online (Norris, 2001). Again others argue that online political participation would mostly reinforce already established forms of engagement, leaving the state of affairs principally unaltered (Calenda and Meijer, 2009; Norris, 2001). Such theories describe the connection between online and offline participation, yet the common theme in this debate is, again, the normative assumption that active political participation2 is intrinsically good (Lutz and Hoffmann, 2017) and that non-participation is less good. Consequently, participation tends to be discussed, and non-participation tends to be ignored.

While online participation has predominantly been understood by researchers as content creation or actions that can be observed and counted, non-participation has remained under-theorised so far despite the established fact that most users do not contribute content themselves (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Sun et al., 2014; Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009). Even though non-participation might involve considerable cognitive and emotional effort (Ewing, 2008), scholars tend to overlook this majority.

Non-participation can be understood as activity as opposed to a passive non-behaviour, and some researchers argue that actively logging in and paying attention online also contributes to the community by providing a gathered audience for others; in other words, listening can be seen as a form of participation (Crawford, 2009; Sun et al., 2014). Users can even choose to refrain from activity to further a cause considered socially undesirable, which may follow from collective or individual political choices (Casemajor et al., 2015). From these perspectives, deliberately choosing non-participation will also qualify as active, and therefore these scholars suggest to looking for intent rather than observable results. Conversely, Morozov (2011) puts the self-evident nature of participation in social media into perspective by presenting it as 'slacktivism': merely a form of self-staging, which fails to translate into offline participation or

political change. How intention matters in questions of participation or abstention is therefore suggested as an important research angle.

What we find is research dominated by a normative understanding of political participation as something countable, active and beneficial, while we know little of the intent behind non-participation online. Along these lines, we argue that the socio-psychological lens of inhibition advances our understanding of non-participation as a way of theorising such intent.

### Existing theories relating to inhibition

Inhibition plays a part in different theoretical perspectives, yet even if these separate theoretical frames are closely related and might overlap, they tend to be applied in isolation. The main theoretical perspectives found in the research literature point to different aspects of inhibition. First, the so-called spiral-of-silence (SOS) theory frames inhibition as self-censorship. This theory argues that in a polarised opinion climate people are more inclined to keep their opinions to themselves if they seem not to have the support of the majority (Hayes et al., 2006, 2013; Kwon et al., 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Research on students using Facebook concluded that the desire for social approval does influence the extent of opinion exchange on SNS (Kwon et al., 2015). SOS theory was operationalised by asking about worry about others disagreeing, being potentially wrong or being misunderstood. In addition, a statement about starting to write but choosing to self-censor is included.

Second, inhibition can also be related to incivility (Papacharissi, 2004) and social contagion in online debates (Hermida, 2014: 41–42), which may cause people to worry about being harassed or attacked. The online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2005) assumes that being online somehow detaches people from responsibilities and inhibitions they have in 'real life', thus allowing them to say whatever they want without facing the consequences. Another explanation for the more aggressive climate on SNS is offered by the SIDE theory (Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects). This theory describes how visual anonymity and lack of cues (Joinson, 1998; Walther, 2011) lead to deindividuation, which, in turn, prompts an in-group or out-group dynamic and in that way allows for negative attitudes towards others (Bennett, 2012). Such theories mostly focus on incivility in an aggressive online debate climate and do not relate directly to inhibition. We argue, however, that the tone of the debate is relevant, not only because people may want to shield themselves from potential hostile responses (Stroud et al., 2016), but also because people who perceive the online debate to be of a low standard may be less inclined to take part themselves (Springer et al., 2015). Inhibition due to fear or avoidance of incivility was operationalised by asking about the participants' feelings regarding criticism or harassment.

Third, inhibition may also be related to properties that are unique to computer-mediated settings when compared with unmediated ones, such as an unknown audience, potential context collapse, and blurring the lines between private and public (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Moreover, SNS-specific affordances such as persistence, searchability, replicability and scalability (boyd and Ellison, 2007) may induce the feeling of being less in control of what is posted. People feel

inhibited, in this case, not because of their perception of the opinion climate, but rather because of their understanding of the SNS platform itself. Still, the judgemental and sometimes even derogatory tone in online debates can form a backdrop for the readers' feeling of having less control and ability to shield oneself from potential attacks (Bazarova and Choi, 2014; boyd, 2008; Litt, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Meyrowitz, 1985; Storsul, 2014). Inhibition pertaining to SNS-settings was operationalised by asking about worry about the amount of response, being misused or taken out of context, finding it difficult to express disagreement on SNS or preferring face-to-face settings.

Finally, we included in our analysis the perception of SNS as arenas for public debate and the feeling that one ought to, or can, voice one's opinion. This feeling is associated with the idea of internal political efficacy (Campbell et al., 1954), as well as with efficacy linked to posting on SNS. Internal political efficacy refers to the users' perception of their ability and competence to understand and participate effectively in politics (Balch, 1974). A low sense of internal political efficacy can then translate into inhibition based on lack of self-confidence that erodes one's motivation to express oneself. Social media political efficacy bears a resemblance to external political efficacy (Campbell et al., 1954), but relates to the user's evaluation of SNS specifically as a place for public or political participation (Velasquez and LaRose, 2015). Inhibition, along these lines, would derive from considering SNS not to be the correct venues for this type of activity. Inhibition relating to political efficacy is operationalised by asking if it feels natural to take part, or if one feels obliged to respond, if one finds self-expression difficult, if one feels one has nothing to say, or that it would not make a difference.

We expect that different dimensions of inhibition related to these theoretical frames are intertwined, and we, therefore, discuss all of these dimensions in this study.

## Data and method

Our data originate from an online panel collected in fall/winter of 2017 by the MeCIn-project,3 which resulted in a dataset composed of 2064 Norwegian participants, 18 years and older. The sample intended to be statistically representative of the overall Norwegian population based on age, gender and level of education; however, it ended up a little skewed towards the older age groups, and higher education levels (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2017) and analyses are weighted to rectify this. Only weekly or more frequent users of SNS are included in the analyses, which leaves us with 83% of the total sample (N = 1720). We chose to include the questions about inhibition in the MeCIn-survey because something as untraceable as non-participation or inhibition will only be uncovered through interrogation, and not through non-reactive content analysis (Ruiz et al., 2011).

The analyses consist of exploratory factor analysis (PCF) to find the overarching dimensions of inhibition in SNS, followed by two hierarchical (OLS) regression models that investigate the inhibition factors as predictors of inhibition, and use demographic variables and inhibition as predictors of public SNS-activity.

The exploratory factor analysis contains 15 measures of inhibition. We started the project investigating the existing theories that relate to inhibition and then operationalised these into 15 statements to cover the whole range within one survey (described in the text earlier and in Table 2). The intention was to bridge these differently framed and constructed concepts of inhibition and combine them into one multi-layered concept of inhibition as a prerequisite for using inhibition to study the intentions that underlie non-participation in SNS. Even if the statements are based on different theoretical approaches, they overlap at times and are thereby not limited to a single theoretical perspective. For example, it is debatable whether worry about criticism (Q61f) relates to SOS theory (i.e. criticism of opinion) or the harsh debate climate (i.e. criticism of person) – perhaps both. In the same way, self-censoring, as described in SOS theory, is likely to be enhanced by the asynchrony in SNS debates. In fact, as described earlier, we expected these theoretical frameworks to be intertwined.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of background and social network sites-use.

| Variable | M | SD | Weight | Min | Max |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Gender (male) | 0.49 | 0.50 | 1,768.21449 | 0 | 1 |
| Age group | 3.57 | 1.70 | 1,768.21449 | 1 | 7 |
| Education high | 0.48 | 0.490 | 1,761.03788 | 0 | 1 |
| Income level | 2.08 | 1.01 | 1,713.72009 | 1 | 5 |
| Public SNS-activity | 0.34 | 0.91 | 1,768.21449 | 0 | 5 |
| Use of Facebook | 0.93 | 0.25 | 1,768.21449 | 0 | 1 |

N = 1720. The mean age is 45 years (min 18, max 89), 50% of the participants are male, and 48% have a university degree (3 years or more). Descriptive statistics for 'inhibition variables' are included in Table 2.
[a]Age group = ordinal (7 cat).
[b]Income level = ordinal (5 cat).
[c]Public SNS-activity = index 0–5.

In the regression models (OLS), the control variables, demographic features, and public SNS-activity (alpha.89) are used in connection with the inhibition measures. The demographic features – age-group, education and income levels, and gender – are relevant to include, as they are known to be related to efficacy (Beaumont, 2011), general public participation (Morrell, 2003) and SNS participation (Mossberger et al., 2007). Public SNS-activity is an index (0–5), whereby each participant has a number corresponding to the activities he or she reported. The five types of SNS-activities included in this index are (a) write posts about society or politics, (b) start debate/discussion themes, (c) participate in a debate, (d) post links to news about society or politics, (e) comment on news about society or politics. Public SNS-activity is crucial to include because it represents the visible action in SNS that inhibition, in theory, would reduce, allowing us to explore to what degree inhibition makes users refrain from participating and whether or not there are certain types of inhibition that affect such participation more or less than others. Two regression models are included. The first shows if there are particular groups of users more prone to experience inhibition, and the second shows to what degree inhibition and demographic differences impact public SNS-activity.

**Results**

Almost 90% of the participants reported that they experienced one or more types of inhibition related to participating actively in SNS, leaving only 11% reporting that they do not feel inhibited from actively participating. Furthermore, 84% say they never voice their opinion, share or comment on posts related to society, news or debates on SNS (public SNS-activity). Although the questions about inhibition on SNS do not concern one specific SNS platform, it is reasonable to think that the participants mostly answered in terms of Facebook, as this is the platform predominantly used (93% use Facebook).

Table 2. Inhibition dimensions.

| There are several reasons why you might limit yourself from posting, sharing or commenting on news or opinions of societal relevance in SNS, even if you want to speak out. Here are some potential reasons. Chose all, if any, that applies to you … | Factors | | | | M | SD | Origin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | | | |
| I worry that I will be criticised (Q61f) | 0.97 | | | | 0.09 | 0.30 | DC |
| I worry that my post will not get sufficient response (Q61i) | 0.79 | | | | 0.04 | 0.21 | SNS |
| I worry about others disagreeing with me (Q61k) | 0.78 | | | | 0.03 | 0.19 | SOS |
| I find it hard to express myself well (Q61c) | 0.59 | | | | 0.14 | 0.35 | IPE |
| I worry that I will be misunderstood (Q61g) | 0.55 | | | | 0.22 | 0.41 | SOS |
| I worry about sharing something, that might be wrong (Q61j) | 0.52 | | | | 0.14 | 0.35 | SOS |
| I I feel like I have nothing to say or contribute with (Q61b) | 0.51 | | | | 0.13 | 0.34 | IPE |
| I worry about being misused or taken out of context (Q61l) | | 0.83 | | | 0.24 | 0.43 | SNS |
| I worry that I will be harassed or bothered (Q61h) | | 0.51 | | | 0.12 | 0.32 | DC |
| I prefer discussing with people in f2f settings (Q61e) | | 0.34 | | | 0.51 | 0.50 | SNS |
| I do not feel I ought to respond in SNS (Q65f) | | | 0.80 | | 0.34 | 0.47 | SMPE |
| It does not feel natural for me to take part (Q65e) | | | 0.75 | | 0.34 | 0.47 | IPE |
| I might start to write, but stop myself from posting (Q65b) | | | 0.55 | | 0.27 | 0.44 | SOS |
| It is more difficult for me to express disagreement in SNS (Q65c) | | | 0.53 | | 0.19 | 0.39 | SNS |
| I do not believe sharing/posting will make a difference (Q61d) | | | | 0.65 | 0.20 | 0.40 | SMPE |
| Eigenvalue | 4.82 | 1.78 | 1.05 | 0.63 | | | |
| Horn's parallel analysis (PA) | 4.93 | 2.14 | 1.38 | 1.07 | | | |
| Variance explained | 52.17 | 19.27 | 11.41 | 06.82 | | | |
| Cronbach's alpha | .65 | .27 | .75 | N/A | | | |

Rotated factors (oblimin) on polychronic correlations. KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) Test = 0.734; Bartlett $\chi 2$ = 3813.261; df = 105; p < .001 (N = 1703; variance explained: 89.66%). Dichotomous values: 1 = experienced; 0 = not experienced. Origin of statement: SNS = social network sites; DC: debate climate; SOS: spiral of silence; IPE: internal political efficacy; SMPE: social medial political efficacy. Factor 4 has an eigenvalue below one, which might be understood as reason for this factor to be omitted. However, it was kept as Horn's parallel analysis (PA) supported that four factors should be retained. Adjusted eigenvalue according to Horn's PA is included in the table.

The first factor (Factor 1) has to do with worry connected mostly to others' behaviour or reactions, but also with worry about one's own ability to voice an opinion. This factor seems to unite the different ideas of SNS as 'hard and dangerous' places that are frightening or difficult to take part in. This factor is found to be a dimension across variables from all the included theoretical angles. It encompasses worries about others' reactions, such as being criticised or that others might disagree with what one posts, but also not being able to control the outcome when posting, such as being misunderstood, being wrong or not getting enough response from

others. Furthermore, it includes feeling unable to express oneself well or having nothing to contribute. We refer to this first factor as social discomfort.

The second factor (Factor 2) captures what we summarise as scepticism of SNS as appropriate spaces for debates. It consists of three statements: worries about having what one says misused or taken out of context, worry about being harassed or bothered, and the preference for discussing face-to-face rather than on SNS. Since these statements are within the context of SNS, and harassment or misuse appears as issues often associated with online debate (Hermida, 2014; Papacharissi, 2002), this can be understood as an evaluation of the platforms. We interpret this as a factor that indicates a dismissal of public SNS participation. We label this second factor dismissal of SNS as a venue for debate.

The third factor (Factor 3) seems to capture a feeling of not being obliged to participate in SNS debates. It includes survey statements concerning the opinion that it is not natural or that one ought not to take part, and preferring to express disagreement face-to-face instead of via SNS. Although they do not feel compelled to take part, they use last-minute self-censorship, which involves initially starting to write a response or post, but then choosing not to post it. We refer to the third factor as preferring presence over participation.

The fourth factor (Factor 4) consists only of one variable, which is not believing that sharing/posting will make a difference. This factor was retained as Horn's parallel analysis (PA) supported four factors. However, it consists of one variable, which makes it difficult to interpret and is thus omitted from the following analysis and discussion.

The first three factors discovered in this analysis do not fit squarely into one theoretical frame or the other. This does not mean, however, that there is no evidence to corroborate these theoretical approaches; rather, they do appear as intertwined and overlapping dimensions, whereby it is not easy to separate one theoretical approach from the other.

Next, we turn to the question of whether there are particular groups of users more prone to experience inhibition (Table 3). Social discomfort (Model 1) and Dismissal of SNS as a venue for debate (Model 2) are found to not have a significant relationship with any of the demographic characteristics included. One might expect Social discomfort to be gendered (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010), but in our analysis, the relationship with gender is not significant. Preferring presence over participation is found to have a statistically significant relationship with being older (0.057) and having a lower income level (−0.119) (Model 3). Preferring presence over participation is the only factor that has a statistically significant relationship with any of the demographic characteristics, but where essentially very little of the variation (2%) can be explained by demographic differences.

To establish to what degree inhibition and demographic features impact public SNS-activity, we performed another regression analysis (Table 4). Being male is the only demographic feature with a significant positive relationship with public SNS-activity in all the models (0.074–78), which supports earlier research that has found that men use SNS to express their opinions more often than women (Rollero et al., 2019). Surprisingly, Social discomfort, the factor that explained most variance (Table 2), is found not to significantly impact public SNS-

activity (Table 4, Model 2). That means that this may be a type of inhibition that is most experienced, but also that this is the type of inhibition that is least likely to stop people from taking                                                                                  part.

**Table 3.** The characteristics of those who experience inhibition in SNS.

|  | Social discomfort | Dismissal of SNS as a venue for debate | Preferring presence over participation |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
| Male | 0.049 | −0.044 | −0.014 |
| Age group[a] | 0.003 | 0.015 | 0.057* |
| Education high | −0.031 | 0.023 | −0.012 |
| Income level[b] | 0.010 | −0.041 | −0.119*** |
| N | 1,645 | 1,645 | 1,645 |
| $R^2$ | 0.004 | 0.005 | 0.017 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 |

N = 1645. Ordinary least squares regression analyses on factors. Standardised beta coefficients. SNS: Social network sites.
[a]Age group = ordinal (7 cat).
[b]Income level = ordinal (5 cat).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

**Table 4.** The impact demographic features and inhibitions have on public participation in SNS.

|  | Public participation in SNS[a] | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
| Male | 0.078** | 0.076** | 0.074** | 0.075** |
| Age group[b] | −0.004 | −0.003 | 0.004 | 0.001 |
| Education high | −0.035 | −0.037 | −0.037 | −0.038 |
| Income level[c] | −0.010 | −0.011 | −0.018 | −0.019 |
| Social discomfort |  | 0.010 |  |  |
| Dismissal of SNS as a venue public debate |  |  | −0.077** |  |
| Preferring presence over participation |  |  |  | −0.068** |
| N | 1,660 | 1,645 | 1,645 | 1,645 |
| $R^2$ | 0.007 | 0.007 | 0.013 | 0.012 |
| Adj. $R^2$ | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.01 |

N = 1699. Hierarchical ordinary least squares regression analyses on public participation in SNS. Standardised beta coefficients. SNS: Social network sites.
[a]Public participation SNS = index 0–5.
[b]Age group = ordinal (7 cat).
[c]Income level = ordinal (5 cat).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The other two dimensions of inhibition – Dismissal of SNS as a venue for public debate and Preferring presence over participation (Model 3 & 4) – both have a significant negative relationship with public SNS-activity (−0.077 & −0.068), which means that experiencing this type of inhibition is associated with less public SNS-activity.

## Discussion, conclusion and limitations

This study sought to advance our understanding of non-participation in SNS by studying inhibition by combining different theoretical frameworks that tend to be applied separately. Our analysis demonstrates the complexity of inhibition, with overarching dimensions that appear intertwined across these different theoretical frameworks. What is more, we found that most users do experience some type of inhibition vis-à-vis SNS and that this seems to be unrelated

to demographic characteristics. Besides, we found that not all dimensions of inhibition seem to impact public SNS-activity equally.

## Inhibition shows intent

Our results provide an argument against the claim that the large number of users who do not actively take part in commenting, creating or sharing content on SNS are simply not interested in doing so. Most users report to experience inhibition (almost 90%), which means that they paid attention to what is going on in the domain of SNS, and, arguably, that they have also felt an urge to express something. Building on this notion, studying inhibition, by proxy, becomes a study of paying attention and listening in (Crawford, 2009; Dreher, 2009). We argue that the feeling of inhibition is a meaningful distinction between those in the 'silent masses' on SNS who care, want to take part and are listening in, and those who do not care. As such, it can be understood as an in-between concept balancing participation and non-participation in SNS that provides us with an indication of intent.

Particularly, the factor Preferring presence over participation (Table 2, Factor 3) is relevant for discussing inhibition as an indication of intent. This dimension is about making a conscious choice to not have a voice or be visible, but about being present without feeling that it is natural to become more actively involved. To feel inhibited, one must pay attention. Preferring presence over participation is arguably about listening in and paying attention, and, at the same time, feeling inhibited about using SNS as places for debate. Moreover, as demonstrated in Table 4, this type of inhibition is found to have a significant negative impact on public SNS-activity, meaning that those who experience this type of inhibition are less likely to participate actively, also compared with those who experience the type of inhibition we labelled Social discomfort.

## Worry as a central aspect of inhibition

The first factor we identified is Social discomfort (Table 2, Factor 1), a dimension uniting the different ideas of SNS as 'hard and dangerous' places where it is frightening or difficult to voice one's opinion, thus combining different types of worry. We, therefore consider the concept of worry to be central to the dimension of Social discomfort. In terms of psychology, worry can be defined as negative thoughts or emotions that come from a proactive cognitive risk analysis, done to avoid or solve anticipated possible threats and their potential consequences (Schacter et al., 2011). As such, worry is understood as a natural response to anticipated future problems. We argue that since worry is conscious and involves mental labour (Freeston et al., 1994), it should be understood as an activity. In this study, worry is a dimension of inhibition which appears to be an amalgamation of variables that initially stem from all four included theoretical angles: efficacy, harsh tone of the debate, the affordances of SNS and SOS theory. Worry can therefore be understood as an overarching dimension of SNS inhibition. Furthermore, Social discomfort does not correlate with views on politics, efficacy and political participation outside of the context of SNS, suggesting that this is a psychological dimension connected to the

concept of worry rather than to political dispositions. Still, Social discomfort is found to be the type of inhibition that is less likely to stop people from taking part in SNS, meaning that both those who are active in public SNS-activity as well as those who are not.

Social discomfort overlaps with SOS theory, a theory suggesting that worry about others disagreeing stops people from voicing their opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Worry about disagreement is, in this case, found to be closely related to other types of worry, and Social discomfort is the most influential factor in the analysis (Table 2). The underlying concept of worry about disagreement, according to SOS theory, is fear of social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Critics of SOS theory have suggested that fear of isolation may be one of many factors (Salmon and Kline, 1983), or not a factor at all (Salmon and Neuwirth, 1990). Even though this study does not provide insight into what, exactly, underlies worry about disagreement, worry about others disagreeing is part of the same dimension as worry about a range of different things, making the feeling of worry itself central, rather than the specific reason for worrying. This finding implies that worry about disagreement, rather than appearing in isolation in the context of SNS, is part of a more layered phenomenon of worry.

**Inhibition seems intertwined with identity management on SNS**

The experience of inhibition in SNS seems intertwined with self-presentation (Brown, 1998; Goffman, 1978). Dimensions found in this study, such as Social discomfort and Dismissal of SNS as a venue for debate, can be said to indicate different aspects of inhibition that also concern identity management in SNS.

Dismissal of SNS as a venue for debate (Table 2, Factor 2) consists of statements that, when combined, summarises scepticism of SNS as appropriate venues for debate. This factor could be understood as not just scepticism about individual debates, but a more general dismissal of SNS as appropriate public spaces in which to stage debates. Moreover, this suggests a particular view of the people who do participate; they harass or bother others, or they misuse what people say or take it out of the intended context. Non-participation can thus function as a sign of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). These 'non-participators' have an idea of how a debate should be conducted and where the proper debates are carried out (f2f), and also believe that people debating in SNS do not possess this knowledge. Such inhibition can, therefore, be understood as giving rise to an elitist practice. This type of inhibition whereby people consciously choose to not take part in SNS out of what they consider to be good taste can be interpreted as a part of a personal identity project (Giddens, 2008), which is in line with earlier findings that suggest that online political participation is strongly influenced by social desirability (Vitak et al., 2011).

However, this personal narrative that can be created through public SNS-activity must be affirmed by others (Goffman, 1978), since performing identity is never a solo-project but a collaboration with those around us. Consequently, a public display of not articulating oneself well or being misunderstood, wrong (and potentially corrected) or criticised in the domain of SNS might feel like a threat to one's personal narrative. The dimension Social discomfort,

therefore, can be seen to share a similar connection with identity management. If we incorporate this view into the setting of SNS, we find that the affordances specific to SNS (boyd, 2010) will make whatever gets posted more visible as each post is permanent, searchable and potentially distributed to more people than intended. Moreover, this visibility not only applies to the post itself but also to other people's reactions to it (Hermida, 2014). Not surprisingly, then, it was found earlier that users of SNS actively use strategies for suppression (Strano and Wattai Queen, 2012) to maintain their identity. Alternatively, as in this case, they feel inhibited from posting anything in the first place. This type of inhibition may be understood as anticipating others' reactions and, not being willing to risk exposing oneself to them, as clashing with one's narrative of self.

To choose to abstain from taking part in debates on SNS may be meaningful for people's self-presentation strategy, yet for other users of SNS, this appears as non-participation. It is not surprising that self-presentation becomes a topic when discussing the use of SNS, as many previous studies have emphasised the importance of identity management here (see for example Bargh et al., 2002; DeAndrea and Walther, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008). However, we also find that the private/public distinction seems blurred; we ask about inhibition related to news, society or politics, but self-presentation appears central. Such findings are supported by earlier research on SNS (Burkell et al., 2014).

### Limitations

While using an online panel survey enables us to get a broad understanding of inhibition as a phenomenon, it also has its limitations. First, there is the potential problem of the participants providing an ex-post rationalisation regarding why they do not engage in online discussions in order to reduce cognitive dissonance regarding why they are not engaging even though society might expect them to do so. If this is the case, the answers may lean towards folk theories (Palmer et al., 2020) or stereotypes of what they think is going on in SNS. Second, the items that are included in the survey to measure inhibition do not function as an SNS-inhibition scale4 and creating such a scale would require further data and testing. This is particularly evident from Factor 4, which only consists of one variable and therefore is hard to fully explain. Moreover, not all initial theoretical frames are equally represented or represented in such a way we can be sure they are mutually exclusive. Still, our study demonstrates the importance of finding ways of studying intent behind apparent silence in SNS, while also providing a fruitful starting point for developing an SNS-inhibition scale. Third, this study falls short of exploring the contextual side concerning inhibition on SNS, in particular with respect to Facebook, where the perceived audience and the perceived nature of the communication might be contextually different, and further studies are needed to gain further insights into this. Finally, contrary to studies of SNS participation (Mossberger et al., 2007), we found little association between inhibition and demographic characteristics. However, we did not include ethnicity, which might be a relevant background variable in terms of inhibition.

## Conclusion

Inhibition is a complex multidimensional phenomenon, particularly in relation to digital platforms. There are many reasons why users of SNS feel inhibited from taking part, some of which are similar to the feeling of inhibition in offline situations, and some are specifically related to SNS. In this study, we argue that inhibition can advance our understanding of online non-participation since it functions as an in-between concept to study the intent behind apparent passivity in the world of SNS. In other words, we claim that inhibition should be understood as a conscious activity and as a way of theorising such intent. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the majority of users of SNS experience inhibition and that certain dimensions of inhibition are significantly related to users engaging less in public SNS-activity. Therefore, we consider the study of inhibition to indeed function as a study of the silent majority, often overlooked in the research of SNS. This study also demonstrates that we cannot easily understand inhibition through one specific theoretical angle. It explores the floating boundaries that exist between private and public in the world of SNS, where we find that inhibition from voicing one's opinion and public non-participation is mostly related to insecurity associated with the platform and other users' reactions, as well as with people's efforts at self-presentation, rather than with their civic role. Focusing on inhibition allows us to sidestep the current debates; instead of determining what should and should not count as participation, we focus on why people chose to refrain from participation, allowing us insight into the intent that lies behind these choices. Future research should refine and develop an SNS-inhibition scale, and more research is needed to understand the interaction between inhibition, cyberhate and other forms of online victimisation.

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### Notes

1. Posting, sharing or commenting on news and opinions (of societal relevance) in the realm of SNS.
2. The authors understand political participation to be part of the wider concept of public participation, which incorporate 'issues affecting how we live together' and politics outside the traditional definition of electoral politics (Couldry et al., 2007).
3. MeCIn Public connection survey (late 2017) was conducted by the research agency Kantar, using their pool of pre-respondents to select a nationally representative web-panel of Norwegian citizens over 18 years of age with approximately 2000 participants ($N = 2064$). The content of the survey was created by researchers in the MeCIn Public connection project. https://www.uib.no/en/project/mecin.
4. Cronbach's α of .62 shows that the underlying factor structure and internal consistency do not support adequate validity and reliability for this to be treated as a scale.

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# 10. Appendices

**Appendix 1: Interview guide – first round of interviews (MeCIn). Translated.**

*Note: This is not the full interview guide, but an extraction of the questions pertaining to use of social media.*

**<u>Background</u>**

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Follow up points:

- work
- family
- children
- partner/partners work
- area you live in
- interests/spare time activities
- member of union or active in organisations

**<u>Media use</u>**

Can you describe an ordinary day? Please emphasise the type of media you use in different situations throughout the day.

[This is a question that is important and we need to dwell on. We are interested in stories about the everyday life of the informant connected to media use. Let the informant talk and make a note of what is said for follow-up questions.]

**<u>How do you use social media (for example Facebook)?</u>**

- What are the positive or negative sides of social media use?
- Based on the things you have talked about; how would you say that social media functions compared to traditional media?
- How does your own use of social media relate to the positive and negative sides that you see? [Follow-up with specific social media platforms the informant has mentioned using]

- [If the informant has not yet mentioned Facebook] Do you have a profile on Facebook? Why/why not? How often do you use Facebook and for what?

- [Question for those who use FB on a minimum weekly basis, NB important to make generous notes and descriptions for the sake of the recording] I would like to ask you to check Facebook now, on your phone or whatever you prefer. Can you tell me about what is in your news feed? Would you say that this is typical for what you might see on Facebook?

- [If the informant mentions news stories, debates etc] Is this something you would click on and read? Comment? Like? Why? Why not?

- If you post something on Facebook, what would that typically be? Can you, for example, talk about the last things you posted?

**Finalising questions**
- Is there anything you would like to add to the topics we have talked about?
- Would you like to add something I have not asked about?


**Appendix 2: Translation of relevant survey questions**

*Note: This is an extraction of the questions about SNS that were used in the analysis and not the full MeCIn – public connection survey which contains approximately 80 questions.*

Q006 – Think of an average week: How many days do you...?

- Use social media (1. 5 days or more/2. 3-4 days/3. 1-2 days/4. less often/5. never/6. do not know)


*(Only to those who said that they use social media received the following questions Q006 = 1, 2, 3, 4 or 6)*


Q058 – Which social media platforms do you use? More than one answer is possible

1. Facebook
2. Twitter
3. Snapchat
4. Instagram

5.  LinkedIn

6.  Other social media platforms


Q059 – How often do you do any of the following on social media?

|  | Several times a day | Daily | Every week | Less often | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Write 'everyday' status updates, post photos of myself/friends |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Find out what happens among friends |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Finding out about cultural activities |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Create events and send out invitations |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Participate in groups related to myself, or children's social life |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Share something related to work |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Write posts about society or politics |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Start debates/discussion threads |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Participate in debates |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Post links to news about society or politics |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11. Comment on news posts about society or politics |  |  |  |  |  |

*(Only to those who said that they use social media during an average week received the following questions Q006 = 1, 2, 3)*

Q061 – There are several reasons why you might limit yourself from posting, sharing or commenting on news or opinions of societal relevance in SNS, even if you want to speak out. *Here are some potential reasons. Chose all, if any, that applies to you…*

1   My position in society (for example work) limits what I post in social media

2   I feel like I have nothing to say or contribute with

3   I find it hard to express myself well

4   I do not believe sharing/posting will make a difference

5   I prefer discussing with people in f2f settings

6   I worry that I will be criticised

7   I worry that I will be misunderstood

8   I worry that I will be harassed or bothered

9   I worry that my post will not get sufficient response

10   I worry about sharing something, that might be wrong

11   I worry about others disagreeing with me

12   I worry about being misused or taken out of context

13   Other reasons

998   None of these apply to me *Exclusive*

*(Only those who have answered alternative 7, 8,9 10 or 11 on Q059, receives the following question)*

Q062 – What motivates you to comment on news and opinions on social media? *More than one answer is possible*

1 Wish to share information that is useful to others

2 Wish to let others know my point of view

3 Wish to speak out when I consider others to be wrong

4 Wish to share things to show others the kind of person I am

5 Wish to share entertaining and funny things

6 Wish to get in contact with others that share my view

7 Wish to communicate information about things I am engaged in

8 To show that I am informed

9 Wish to start debate

10 My role in society (for example work) involves me posting/sharing in social media

11 Other reasons

998 No particular reason *Exclusive*

Q064 – What is your view on the following claims?

|  | Correct | Somewhat correct | Not correct | Do not know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Debates on social network sites are equally important to public debates taking place elsewhere | | | | |
| It is important to partake in debates on social network sites if one disagrees or can contribute with a new perspective | | | | |
| Debates about important social issues belong on social network sites | | | | |
| It is positive that social network sites make it easy to partake in public debates | | | | |
| Much of the debate in social media is of little value | | | | |
| Mine and others expressions on social network sites is expressed privately and not part of any public debates | | | | |

*(Only to those who said that they use social media received the following questions Q006 = 1, 2, 3, 4 or 6)*

Q065 – To what degree does this describe your use of social media?

|                                                                                          | Completely | Partially | Not at all | Do not know |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| Most of what I write on social media is in closed groups/in private chats                |            |           |            |             |
| I might start to write when I get engaged, but I will not post it                        |            |           |            |             |
| It is easier for me to express disagreement in social media than in face-to-face situations |         |           |            |             |
| I follow people, pages, groups that I thing are important for public debate              |            |           |            |             |
| It is natural for me to take part if a topic that engages me is discussed                |            |           |            |             |
| I feel like I ought to respond in if others write things, I deeply disagree with         |            |           |            |             |
| It might be that social media are places for public debate, but that is not how they are used by my friends or I |  |  |  |  |

**Appendix 3: Overview of informants from the interviews, both rounds**

| Pseudonym | Age | Work | Data collection |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sissel | 36 | Culture worker | 1 |
| Bianca | 32 | Architect | 1 |
| Synne | 37 | Social worker | 1 |
| Tina | 34 | Teacher | 1 |
| Venke | 67 | Retired speech therapist | 1 |
| Elin | 38 | Nurse | 1 |
| Aina | 35 | Hairdresser | 1 |
| Vera | 62 | Cleaner | 1 |
| Lene | 40 | Preschool teacher | 1 |
| Heidi | 63 | Librarian | 1 |
| Magnhild | 32 | Unemployed | 1 |
| Kari | 62 | Retired manager | 1 |
| Astrid | 43 | Secretary | 1 |
| Sara | 46 | Priest | 1 |
| Grete | 47 | Economist | 1 |
| Anne | 50 | Public health nurse | 1 |
| Yasmin | 25 | Recently graduated – art degree | 1 |
| Stine | 28 | Works at a call centre | 1 |
| Turid | 47 | Store manager | 1 |
| Unni | 50 | On disability benefits | 1 |
| Elisabeth | Mid 60s | Artist | 3 |
| Thea | Early 20s | Nurse | 3 |
| Rakel | Mid 70s | Retired/runs a volunteer organisation | 3 |
| Kristine | Mid 30s | Architect | 3 |
| Dagny | Mid 40s | Communication advisor | 3 |
| Eva | Late 40s | HR consultant | 3 |

| Maria    | Mid 20s    | Social educator | 3 |
|----------|------------|-----------------|---|
| Anna     | Mid 50s    | Beautician      | 3 |
| Mia      | Late 30s   | Lawyer          | 3 |
| Birgitte | Early 50s  | Unemployed      | 3 |

**Appendix 4: Translation of the interview guide from the follow-up interview**

Information about consent and the recording of the interview. Informant is given the consent form to sign and if there are any questions, they are answered.

Can you tell me about yourself? (work, educational background, age, current life situation, children, partner, interests, spare time activities)

Could you talk me through what an ordinary day is like for you, and how you normally use social media? (if informant does not know where to start: Maybe you could start with the morning and describe the day chronologically)

- Platforms used
- Time spent
- Attention towards and different use of these platforms at different times of the day

What kind of things do you use social media for in your everyday life? (What kind of functions social media have)

How would you describe social media to someone who do not use them (for example your grandmother)?

What are the positive and negative sides of using social media for you? Is it different for different platforms?

Can you tell me about a time you were informed about a news story or something happening in society though social media?

- Do you normally come across such information? (Where?)
- If you think about those times you have come across news stories or about something happening in society through social media,
    - Were these stories that you saw also in the news? If so: were they the same or different in any way (angle, perspectives that are left out, personal framing etc)

The questions so far have been about social media, but from here I would like to focus on Facebook.

Can you tell me about a news story or an issue of societal relevance (in Norwegian: samfunnsaktuell sak) that you wanted to share or comment on, on Facebook? Did you share or comment?

How would you define what a news story is?

…and in your opinion what is an issue of societal relevance (there is no right or wrong answer, I just want to hear your opinion)

There are many ways to engage with news stories or issues of common interest on Facebook. Here are some examples (set of cards laid out),

- Have you done any of these?
- Do you do it on an average basis?
- Do you see other people doing any of this?
- What do you think about it?

Set of cards (laid out on no particular order):

Read

Look for more information

Write a status update

Share news stories (on profile/in chat)

Share issues of common interest

Make up my mind about things

Comment on news stories

Comment on issues of common interest

Start a debate

Take part in a debate

Post in closed groups

Chat with friends/family

Do you do anything that is not covered by the options on the cards?

Can you tell me about a time you wanted to express an opinion on Facebook?

- Did you post anything? (if no: what happened)

- Have you ever felt that you had to limit yourself?

- What was that limitation about? (feeling/reasons)

- Did you post what you wanted to say, or moderate your opinion?

- Was this experience typical for you?

What kind of reactions have you gotten when you have posted things about news and issues of common interests on Facebook? (positive/negative)

What kinds of reactions do you expect to get? What kind of reactions do you see/hear about others getting?

Do you think that women, when posting on Facebook, are particularly exposed for harassment and if so? (if yes: is this particularly related to Facebook/does this affect your posting?)

Can you tell me about settings/situations where you express your opinions, discuss or engage with issues of common interests outside of Facebook? (like attending public meetings, writing debate articles, demonstrate, discuss with friend/family/colleagues)

When you post on Facebook, do you feel like you represent someone or something other than yourself? (Do you talk on behalf of others? For example, women, mothers, work profession, interest groups)

- If yes: is this connected to activities happening outside of Facebook?
- Does this influence what you post?

If you choose to post or share, who do you imagine will see your post?

- does your audience vary, in which way?
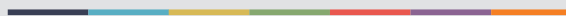- do you ever use settings to control who will see your post?

Who would you say is responsible for things that happen on Facebook?
(connect to what the informant has spoken about)

Is the anything that relates to what we have talked about, and that you would like to add?

uib.no