

**Practising Identity:**  
Emerging adults,  
digital social technologies  
and contexts for self

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With grateful appreciation to the Designer Explorers  
who took to social media with gusto  
and certainly did not censor themselves.



## Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work in this dissertation has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Jennifer Hagedorn

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Solitude is different from loneliness,  
in solitude we're in dialogue with ourselves and the world,  
loneliness makes us isolated and tongue-tied.

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## Abstract

The emergence of digital social technologies throughout the lives of digital native emerging adults has had significant implications for the identity practices of these individuals, and consequently creates a diverse and emergent space for researching digitally networked practices. The pervasiveness of digital social technologies across blurred digital and physical boundaries has led to these technologies becoming heterogeneous spaces in which temporal and spatial contexts are destabilised. Now, these individuals are operating within networked publics, where the functions of digital social technologies enable contextual information to flow between individuals and their audiences in the form of visual and textual media.

These complex networked social linkages, characterised by the collapse and circulation of context, assist digital native emerging adults in developing a greater understanding of themselves and the identities they present to the world. However, as they traverse their social contexts through the multiplicity of digital social technologies available to them, unfixed contexts mean they are continuously drawing on their locational, material, situational and social contexts to develop identity performances. This research finds that the willingness of these individuals to adopt digital social technologies as part of their daily habits and routines has led to the creation of specific activities that give rise to an enduring context creation practice.

There are a number of methodological issues for digital ethnographers. Ethnography in digitally networked circumstances has, so far, been reliant on context as a stabilising factor, however what does it mean when context is destabilised? This research maps out this context creation practice by first asking how do digital ethnographers observe context, then, how do digital ethnographers *make sense* of context.

Situated within the field of design, this research takes a mixed-method approach to analysing the complexity and dynamics of context made visible through the identity performances of digital native emerging adults. It draws on digital ethnography methods, combining visual data analysis and interviews, to interpret the contemporary milieu of networked publics. It specifically focuses on the visual and textual aspects of visual media content produced

through Instagram. The key theoretical and methodological contributions of this research are a demonstration of how, through a digital ethnographic investigation exploring the identity practices of first year design students at a university in Sydney, Australia, it is possible to chart how contextual elements are drawn together by these young people within networked publics.

Through comprehensive exploration of the ways in which these digital native emerging adults establish activities of practice to negotiate the collapse and circulation of context, the research identifies four core activities that participants demonstrated particular competences in: coping with context collapse, negotiating the network, performing roles and circulating feedback. Exploring these dynamics demonstrates the ways in which digital native emerging adults embrace the changing typologies of digital social technologies as they negotiate the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In tracing a contemporary understanding of the role of context as a key part of emerging adult identities the research contributes to new understandings of digitally networked practices.

**Keywords:**

Identity, Practice, Digital Social Technologies, Emerging Adults, Digital Natives, Digital Ethnography.



