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## Utilizing social media for social work: insights from clients in online youth services

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored and conceptualised service users' experiences in online outreach projects supported by the Hong Kong SAR government. Fifteen active users were interviewed. The study used thematic analysis to explore service users' experiences that might not have been possible without technology. Participant utterances were non-mutually-exclusively tagged with a specific theme. Each utterance reflected an aspect of user experience which combined a technical component with a service-need component. Six themes were identified, including: (i) Personalised newsfeeds help identify service information and news, (ii) Online status indicators improve service accessibility, (iii) Online communications enable a disinhibition effect, (iv) Asynchronous communications facilitate continual feedback loops, (v) Incomplete communicative modalities may cause misunderstanding and (vi) Asynchronous communication may disrupt conversations. The findings reveal that there are middle-level concepts between broad social work concepts and ever-changing technology. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Social media; outreach;  
hidden youth; affordance;  
social work

Social media is a general term covering a range of interactive internet-based applications allowing for the creation and exchange of user-generated content, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). More than 60% of smartphone users noted that they usually visit social network sites when using their phones (PEW Research Center, 2012). Research also shows that social workers increasingly use social media in their practice (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Chan, 2016b; Chan & Holosko, 2018; Goldkind, 2015; Valimaki, Athanasopoulou, Lahti, & Adams, 2016).

While it is not uncommon to see social work practices use social media to promote their services or for public relations activities such as fundraising (Goldkind, 2015; Young, 2017), only a few of them use social media as a medium to conduct interventions (Freddolino & Blaschke, 2008; Hussain et al., 2015; Schwartz et al., 2014). This is partly because social media is a third-party platform and social service agencies may need to consider ways in which this data can be used ethically (Chan & Holosko, 2017). In some countries, such as the USA, interventions conducted via some social media platforms may not be covered by insurance (Reamer, 2015).

One of the most actively researched regions is Hong Kong (Chan & Ho, 2017; Chan & Holosko, 2017; Leung et al., 2017; Li, Liu, & Wong, 2017; Wang, Cheung, Leung, Chan, & See – To, 2017). There are three main reasons why social media based practice has become popular in this city. First, Hong Kong does not have regulations limiting the use of social media for human service practice or counselling. Second, the technological infrastructure of Hong Kong facilitates online practice. In 2015, more than 7.3 million people resided in Hong Kong and 84.9% of those aged 10 and over reported that they were regular internet users (Census and Statistics Department of the HKSAR, 2016). In February 2016, the residential fixed-line penetration rate was 94.83% and the mobile subscriber penetration rate was 228.7%. This equates to more than one mobile phone number per person (Office of the Communications Authority of the HKSAR, 2016). Third, the *hidden youth* (youth at risk of socio-economic exclusion) issue in this territory has reached an alarming level, and the government believed that social media could be an effective method to reach *hidden youth*.

The term *hidden youth* means those young people who are socially-withdrawn, marginalised and prone to emotional disturbances, a phenomenon originally recognised in Japan (called Hikikomori) which then spread to Hong Kong (Wong, 2009). A closely related term often used in English speaking regions is *NEET* (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). However, the meaning of hidden youth covers a wider scope, as some of the hidden youth do have some short term trainings or employments. NEET is a global phenomenon. According to a 2016 report, the prevalence rate of NEET in the 16–24 age group was 15.0% in the United States, and ranging from 5.2% to 21.4% in different countries (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2016). In Hong Kong, the prevalence rate was 6.7%, second to Japan (6.9%) among Asia's developed economies (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2016). The rate has remained stable at 6–7% since 2005, after peaking at 9.7% in 2003. Fluctuations in the number of NEET youths are strongly affected by the macro socio-economic environment. Those with less education and fewer economic resources are at a higher risk of being marginalised from traditional employment and mainstream society. Meanwhile, perspectives about non-engagement are polarised – some view it as an individual choice for self-reorientation, while others show a lack of financial security and thus suffer from extreme isolation (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2012).

Since 2011, three NGOs have launched online youth projects funded by the government (SWD, 2011). These include the Nite Cat Online operated by the Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA); the uTouch platform operated by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG); and the Infinity Teens channel operated by Caritas Hong Kong. After their first evaluation in 2015, these projects received further support from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust in 2016 for another 3 years. These initiatives have provided first hand data to some of the earliest accounts of social media-based practice in social work literature. For example, Leung et al. (2017) examined the experiences and processes of a pioneering cyber project working with young people involved in drug use and the sex trade in Hong Kong. Thematic analysis of online communication records and interviews has yielded practice insights, such as the importance of 'social presence', 'autonomy' and using text messaging and images. Chan and Holosko (2017) explored the perceived utility of social media in online youth outreach engagement. Their findings showed social workers see

that social media has enabled the initial search, first encounters, icebreaking and networking. Chan and Ho (2017) studied a technology enhanced case management practice targeting youth at risk of social exclusion and showed that social workers have some tacit knowledge supporting them to identify, adapt and develop technologies/resources relevant to their practice processes.

Nonetheless, these earlier studies are based on inferences by the researchers or practitioners rather than experiences of the service users. Although there is a growing recognition that service users have unique insights into what works and what does work (Siriwardena, 2010), there are some practical reasons that prevent researchers to include online outreach service users in evaluation studies, such as the one-off nature of some online counselling cases, anonymity of service users, service users' willingness, and diversity of experience in the programmes of the service users. Yet an opportunity to engage service users in the study came after the authors successfully analysed the fan pages of the online youth outreach projects using social network analysis techniques in a previous study (Chan, 2018). In the study, the authors were able to accurately identify those have more experience in interacting with online interfaces of the services, and receive their consents to share their first-hand experiences. The authors grasped this opportunity to fill the research gap, hoping to explore and conceptualise the strengths and limitations of social media based practice with reference to service users' experiences.

## A heuristic lens

It seems to be straightforward to use service users' experience to inform practice, but in technology-supported social work, it is very often that such experience cannot transform to a useful body of knowledge. There are two common hurdles:

First, many technology-enhanced social work interventions present a kind of 'black box' scenario (Chan, 2016b; Chan & Holosko, 2016), in which they usually present what outcomes are achieved without elaborating on the processes or skills used. This is partly because many of these interventions are bundled with specific commercial products or computer programs which do not really reveal and explicate the processes (Chan, 2016a). If service users do not know much about the process, they may not share much about how a programme has helped them. It ends up that they may talk about some general benefits which may not be necessarily related to the use of technology, for example, the attitude of the social workers is good, the activities organised by the agencies are enjoyable, etc. These feedbacks will be useful for general programme evaluations, but not for knowledge development.

Second, in technology-supported social work, there may be too much jargon and technical language which does not have relevance for frontline social workers (Chan & Holosko, 2016). For example, the fact that a computer has 128GB of memory, a modem, a CD-ROM drive, a VGA monitor and uses the Windows 10 operating system tells a service user or social worker nothing about how it may contribute to their practice. In addition, technology is fast-moving and certain devices can become obsolete or outmoded in a number of years. Also, step-by-step technical details cannot directly inform social workers how to use technology for interventions.

To develop a useful body of knowledge of technology-supported social work, we need to identify and examine transferrable skill sets that might not have been possible without the technology, and they need to be understandable to practitioners. Neither outcome evidence nor technical details alone can help social workers acquire the necessary skill sets. We need to know the practice wisdom supporting social workers to relate particular practice tasks with particular technology functions.

Chan and Holosko (2017) used the concept of affordance to conceptualise the skills used by social workers in online outreach practice. Affordance refers to an object's latent utility (Gibson, 1977), and the utility of any device is dependent not merely on the intrinsic features of the object, but also on the social actors' intentions and experiences (Norman, 1999). This concept has been widely applied in a range of studies examining the interaction between humans and technology (Bower, 2008; Hammond, 2010; Leonardi, 2011). In Chan and Holosko's (2017) study, social media affordance is defined as the latent utility of social media, dependent upon both the intrinsic features of social media and the perceptions of social workers. Chan and Holosko (2017) identified techniques used in online youth outreach practice, such as snowballing (starts from an initial small group and grows to a large network), online rapport building before initial encounters and ice-breaking facilitated by the multimedia authoring capabilities of social media.

In this study, we further adapted the concept of affordance to explore service users' experiences that might not have been possible without technology. We used thematic analysis to analyse service users' experiences. Each theme presented in the 'Results' section reflects an aspect of user experience and has combined a technical component with a service-need component. Operational details will be introduced in the 'Methods' section.

## The case

The study explored and conceptualised the service users' experiences in the three online outreach projects supported by the Hong Kong SAR government (ie the online youth outreach projects implemented by BGCA, HKFYG and Caritas, as noted in the introduction section). These projects served young internet users under the age of 24, particularly those at risk of socio-economic exclusion, that is, the hidden youth/NEET populations.

One of the established approaches in Hong Kong is to build online platforms to link service providers and users. In addition, the use of social media has been found to be more effective in eliciting self-disclosure than conventional methods such as face-to-face contact (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Walter & Boyd, 2002). It also allows users to selectively participate in discussions in continual feedback loops which enable them to be more aware of their thoughts over time (Gillispie, 2007; Haythornthwaite & Nielsen, 2007). As of 20 July 2017, the three projects had accumulated 615 cases. All of them came to the programme via the internet. This included applications such as Facebook/Instagram, various websites and instant messaging services.

These projects adopted a community-based case management model with two basic aspects – enabling and facilitating (Moore, 1990). Practitioners focus on both enabling individuals to better reach their potential and on facilitating more effective interaction

with local social systems. Under this service framework, all cases were initially engaged online. Besides using a project website, the practitioners also used a range of social media platforms (e.g., a Facebook Fan Page) to identify and attract potential clients, including a full professional profile on their social media account profiles. The users were from different districts in Hong Kong and not from one particular physical catchment area. After practitioners engaged the participants online, they assessed their needs and suggested a variety of online and/or offline support services, such as social activities, training, job referrals or counselling.

This study interviewed 15 active service users from these three projects, and aimed to explore and conceptualise the strengths and limitations of online youth outreach based on their experiences.

## **Methods**

**Identifying service users:** Service users among the top 10% active fans of the Facebook fan pages in 2016 were identified, selected and invited for interviews. The three fan pages were NiteCat Online <https://www.facebook.com/nitecatonline/>; Infinity Teens <https://www.facebook.com/caritas.infinityteens/>, and UTouch <https://www.facebook.com/utouch.hk/>. 'Active fans' describes those with the most connections with other users and included actions such as reacting to, sharing and tagging posts. 'Activeness' was determined by the total number of these connections. Data was imported from the respective Facebook fan pages using NodeXL. Participants were interviewed in groups, in person or by phone, depending on their availability.

## ***Ethical approval***

Ethical approval was sought from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and participants' consent was obtained before the interviews. Aliases, instead of real names, were used when analysing the data. All names used in this article (eg Fai, Yee) are not participants' real names.

## ***Interviewing service users***

Interviews were conducted between 25 March 2017 and 23 May 2017. A total of 15 active users from the 3 agencies were interviewed: 9 males and 6 females. Among all the interviewees, 9 were interviewed in a group, while 6 were interviewed by phone. All interviews used the same format. The questions discussed included: (i) The users' most common online activity, (ii) significant Facebook posts that caused users to contact the service, (iii) online events that resulted in users contacting the service and (iv) the advantages and disadvantages of online youth services.

## ***Coding the interview transcripts***

This study applied thematic analysis to identify patterns within data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The basic unit of analysis was an utterance. There were altogether 701 utterances: 316 belonged to moderators and 385 to participating service users. Among

the 385 participant utterances,  $N = 159$  were non-mutually-exclusively tagged with a specific theme. Utterances that did not belong to any theme were tagged as NA. We defined a technology-supported user experience theme as a value judgement statement (which can be positive or negative) on a concrete experience that has combined a technical component with a service-need component. For example, 'a 24-hour telephone hotline facilitating timely emotional support' was identified as a theme. Some utterances reflected more than one theme and in this case the more prominent theme would be selected and tagged. Based on this conceptual structure, users' experiences were classified into different themes. This classification process was driven by both our initial conceptions and the raw data. As our interpretation cycles progressed, we further developed and conceptualised the themes. An inter-rater reliability check was also conducted. The first author and a research assistant independently coded the articles using the same set of working criteria. Results were compared and utterances having differences in coding were reviewed and discussed until all discrepancies were agreed upon consensually.

## Results

### *Personalised newsfeeds help identify service information and news*

In the interviews, the role of personalised news feeds was commonly mentioned by the service users. Among the  $N = 159$  utterances, 28% (44 utterances) concerned how personalised news feeds helped users identify service information relating to issues such as public examinations, study skills or stress-relief methods. The users shared an experience which sounds like a 'natural experience' to many of us nowadays. For example, Fai initially mentioned that social workers 'promote different activities on Facebook... many activities, many topics, more daring and open', and when he found them interesting, he would 'look into the details'. A question was: how did service users know that such activity news was posted before they read the details of the official websites? This was not the reading experience people generally had some decades ago. This apparently 'natural' experience is in fact a matching process enabled by the algorithm and hyperlinking of social media platforms. When further asked, Fai elaborated:

Fai: I first contacted with the Nite Cat [the name of the project] because a friend shared a link on Facebook... when I clicked the link, I saw Nite Cat promoting their programme on YouTube. When I first looked at the Nite Cat page, I thought it was about games as it looked like a game page. But I saw that there was a live chat function and we could communicate. Since then I know about Nite Cat. They shared links on YouTube or Facebook to let people know their activities/programmes... I had contacted the official page by first watching their YouTube videos. After we chatted via the page for several months, one worker suggested us to chat via Facebook.

Other users also noted similar experiences, for example:

Sang: I first contacted with Nite Cat because of the Pokemon Go. Some people from Nite Cat talked about playing Pokemon Go together on forums. I registered for the activity because it was easy to register for. After having contact with (the



workers/users of) Nite Cat, we started playing together. Those activities attracted us and fitted our needs. It was happy to play with many other people together.

Service users do not proactively browse the service agencies profile pages daily and then find out about activities, but they do see newsfeeds when they launch social media apps. This process is computer-mediated. Service users contacted the official page after being exposed to information on social media. The social media functions, such as grouping, sending requests, adding users and tagging, concordantly constituted a snowballing spiral. This is made possible because of the associative capabilities of social media. Users connect with other individuals and content, and then connect with other online platforms via hyperlinks. Social media companies have analysed individual users' profiles and match different users with content based on the similarity and relevance of key terms. Thus a public profile rich in details may be more effective than a profile with little information. For example, if a worker indicates his/her interest in particular online games in his/her profile, the algorithm of social media may likely connect that worker to people who are also interested in those games. These capabilities are supported by the data generated by service users' online activity. Effective activity promotion is dependent on social workers' online relational skills (eg how to write a blurb using social media slangs, how to say hello in ways that fit young people's cultures) as well as the algorithm of the platform (eg protocols informing the connections between specific social media users with specific social media pages, protocols determining the sequencing and priority of newsfeeds). While social media companies use this data to improve their advertisements, social workers generally have little knowledge about the use of this data and algorithms.

### ***Online status indicators improve service accessibility***

Social media and mobile phones can facilitate service provision and help young people access services while overcoming geographical/physical/time restrictions at when they need to seek help. For example, Yan told us that there was an occasion around 11pm to 12am at night when she had some urgent issues and tried to contact a social worker. In this instance, the social worker replied immediately. Among the  $N = 159$  utterances, 23% (37 utterances) concerned such an experience.

Service accessibility is important for engaging the NEET/hidden youth populations. Because if these populations seldom show up and open up themselves, whether social workers can grasp any spontaneous engagement moments will become critically crucial. That is why some counselling hotlines need to be 24/7, available any time, every day, requiring extensive manpower and resources. In Hong Kong, there are several 24-hour telephone hotlines (e.g., The Samaritans Befrienders HK, Caritas Family Crisis Support Centre), and there are social work services which operate overnight (e.g., Overnight Outreaching Service for Young Night Drifters).

Participants in this study commonly see hotline-based or community-based services as not as good as the online social media based services they have experienced. In some way, these service users might just 'feel' that they could conveniently access the service. The online youth outreach services examined in this study, in fact, were not a 24-hour service that they could access anytime, that is, the office hours of these online services



are, in fact, shorter than many existing telephone hotline services. So, what are the differences? Why do they see the service as being so accessible?

In traditional outreach settings or offline service settings, social workers may show up, introduce themselves and exchange contact information with service users whenever appropriate. On social media, the process seems to be the other way round – workers and clients exchange information before they meet. The online presence of a social worker is enabled and limited by the features of the platform. Social media makes communication, behaviour, knowledge and social network connections extensively visible (eg showing oneself online, indicating one's availability). Before a real dialogue began, the level of personal visibility of social media largely determined to what extent both sides of the communication could access information about the level of 'presence' or 'readiness' of each other, for example:

- Yee: I messaged him/her online via WhatsApp, asked him/her if it was okay to chat... and then s/he said okay.
- Kei: Um... maybe it can further... because nowadays young people often check-in on Facebook... and therefore social workers could easily identify young people who wants to do 'stupid things', e.g., commit suicide... to stop them immediately... they can seek help immediately... this could prevent such unhappy things to...
- Tin: I also had contact with the services via WhatsApp first, it is more convenient, have a higher level of privacy, now young people are more likely to use mobile phone to access the internet, they may not very often visit Facebook, but the message of WhatsApp comes out automatically, it is more convenient and you can reply immediately.

Various kinds of online status indicators, such as 'available', 'checked-in', 'busy' or 'typing' have formulated a system of observable signals reflecting different levels of readiness/availability at both ends of a communication exchange, and this has facilitated in-depth communication. As Yee mentioned, a user may message a worker online via WhatsApp to see whether s/he is available. If that social worker replies that s/he is ready for a conversation, they will then have a more in-depth dialogue. On some occasions, workers and clients may not have a serious conversation, but they may subsequently have a more in-depth conversation. This 'foot-in-the-door effect' – the tendency for individuals who have complied with a small request first to agree to a larger request later – has long been noted by social psychologists (Bem, 1967). Social media has effectively made these 'small requests' visible and noticeable. It has created a number of availability indicators which have facilitated the gradual development of more in-depth communication.

Among different social media platforms, there are significant differences in how the status of the user is represented. Different platforms have very different modes of visibility. For example, if a Facebook user is online, there is a small green light beside his/her icon. For other platforms, the status of a user is less transparent. In short, notwithstanding the social workers' attitudes and skill levels, online presence or availability depends very much on the technical features of the platforms themselves.

### ***Online communications enable a disinhibition effect***

Social media and information and communication technology can enable a disinhibition effect, which helps users discuss sensitive issues more easily, such as suicide or sex. Among the  $N = 159$  utterances, 20% (31 utterances) concerned these topics. Users explained this in various ways, for example:

- Yee: On the internet, we cannot see each other, we would not say 'wow, s/he is so ugly'. We only focus on what we talk about.
- Hei: It is easier to accept [the services], because... I think many young people with emotional problems do not prefer face-to-face interactions... and they are more likely to prefer using WhatsApp... and instant messaging to communicate with others and to talk about their own problems... in case they can use WhatsApp to talk, they could have less barriers, they communicate several times before they really meet, young people would then feel easier and more comfortable to talk about or express their personal issues.
- Ho: I do not visit the centre. If I need to go to the centre, my friends would know. Thus, online services ensure higher privacy.

Due to the limits of online communication, users do not need to (or cannot) expose all aspects of their communication modalities (eg texts, voice, face, smell, etc.), and they may need to use their imagination to fill in information gaps. This in turn supports a disinhibition effect that yields higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face contact. This may also partly explain why service users perceived online social workers as younger than social workers in other service settings and more in touch with youth culture. For example:

- Ho: In the organisation that I approach, they [the workers] are younger, and look easy going. Sometimes, first impression is important. Older workers may talk about principles and values, and young people may tend not to find them.

However, based on the information provided by the three service agencies, social workers working for these online services are not clearly younger than workers in other youth services. It is likely that social media may have provided online social workers with some specific language which enables them to better immerse themselves in the world of these young people. Many communication activities, such as using humorous digital images such as emojis, and 'liking' a post are possible in online communication but not in traditional face-to-face communication. These practitioners used emojis frequently in their communication with clients.

These observations are in line with findings from recent research that indicate that a disinhibition effect supported by social media would yield higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face contact (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Lin & Utz, 2017; Walter & Boyd, 2002). In traditional face-to-face contact or phone conversations, workers use more verbal or textual language to start conversations with potential service users. On social media, communication often shifts from formal written language to a wide variety of slangs, symbols and activities (eg giving a 'like', instead of saying 'hi' using language). Therefore, social media users use their imagination to fill information gaps. This in turn allows them to demonstrate higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face contact.

### ***Asynchronous communication facilitates continual feedback loops***

Asynchronous communication can facilitate continual feedback loops, in which the conversations are segmented, but continued. Among the  $N = 159$  utterances, 12% (19 utterances) were classified as conforming to this structure. This asynchronous nature allows users to selectively participate in discussions at their convenience. For example:

Tin: Let me add one point. Meeting needs to be in a fixed time. Using internet, we can communicate before work or when having a meal. The time of communication can be separated. We do not need to talk about everything in one single period of time.

With such an extended process, the reviewability of social media enabled service users to be more aware of their thoughts over time, for example:

Tin: If we speak and we speak something wrong, we cannot correct it. But we can correct the words when texting. Texting is more convenient. Also, it can enable us to talk some more in-depth things which are hard to talk about verbally.

This also enabled social workers and service users to have an extended process to refine and deepen their interactions:

Sze: I am a person who needs to speak out immediately when having something in the mind... there is an advantage [of online services], they will reply you anyway... it is actually a praise... if s/he [the worker] does not reply me for one or two times, I would no longer find him/her... but if s/he replies me, my message would not disappear, and the worker can get back to me after several hours or even after several days... the messages are kept there... s/he can get back to me even at night... If there are records, we could look back even when we forget something, it makes me feel like s/he [the worker] really remembers those things about me.

These observations are in line with recent research showing that the asynchronous nature of social media allows users to selectively participate in discussion in continual feedback loops which enable them to be more aware of their thoughts over time. (Gillispie, 2007; Haythornthwaite & Nielsen, 2007). In a nutshell, because both workers and service users can participate in discussions at their convenience, they can think carefully about their messages before posting them. These continual feedback loops enable both ends of the communication to be more aware of their own thoughts and changes over time.

### ***Incomplete communicative modality may cause misunderstanding***

There were occasional misunderstandings caused by incomplete communication modalities, some of which were noted in the interviews. Among the  $N = 159$  utterances, 8% (12 utterances) described such an experience, for example:

Yan: On the internet, you cannot see the facial or physical expressions. It is hard to know whether you are really unhappy or pretend to be happy...

Sze: There are individual differences in text message. Even someone cares about you, you may get a wrong meaning. Sometimes, when I get used to talk to you, I do

not want to talk to another person. Some may suggest me to talk to others. Then I would think, 'does it mean that you do not like me?' They must say no. But is it really what they think? You cannot tell. As they need to create a positive image to talk to you... I think this is the problem. You do not know whether s/he is really happy, you do not know whether s/he really wants to talk to you.

Yee: In case I want to commit suicide but only type 'I go to sleep now', then do not reply to the worker for a long time. S/he may think there is a serious problem. Actually, I may just sleep. S/he would be very worried and call the police, and call my friends... then you would have a bad relationship with that social worker.

These observations are in line with many earlier studies which have long pointed out the potential for miscommunication in online therapeutic practise (Childress, 2000). Due to the limitations of communication media, users cannot expose all aspects of their communication modalities. Thus users may need to use their imagination to fill information gaps which could yield inaccurate information. This in turn makes users feel less secure because they cannot be sure about the responses from the person on other end of the communication.

### ***Asynchronous communications may disrupt conversations***

Another disadvantage of online youth services is that asynchronous communication can sometimes make conversations disjointed. Service users mentioned some occasional misunderstandings caused by interrupted communication. Among the  $N = 159$  utterances, 3% (5 utterances) were about such experiences. For example:

Hung: Let me add one point, when you get a reply from the worker after a while, your emotion state may have already changed.

Yee: Because I have a bipolar disorder and my emotions are unstable. Even in just several hours or 10 min, my emotional conditions can swing significantly. I originally talk about when to eat tomorrow, after 10 min, my emotions could be totally different. The worker could not follow my emotions... It always happens... the worker needs to spend another 30 min to figure out my problem. But at that time, my emotions would have probably changed again.

Kwong: Sometimes, I send a message to him/her [social worker], I need to wait for some time to get the reply. It sometimes takes one to two days. S/he may reply to other people first, may not be able to respond to me so quickly.

Although recent research showed that asynchronous online communication allows users to selectively participate in discussions in continual feedback loops (Gillispie, 2007; Haythornthwaite & Nielsen, 2007), it has both favourable and unfavourable consequences. If done well, asynchronous online communication can facilitate continual feedback loops. If done incorrectly, it can make the dialogue broken and disjointed.

## Discussion

### *Guiding concepts and transferable skill sets*

As noted in the beginning of the article, many technology-supported social work interventions present a type of 'black box' (Chan, 2016a; Chan & Holosko, 2016) scenario in which they usually present what outcomes are achieved, but do not elaborate on the processes or skills used, and this raises the question as to what extent the experiences and skill sets are transferrable (Chan, 2016a). Yet, social media may provide new opportunities to address the transferability of these skill sets. In this study, service users knew the 'black box' inside out. Compared with past computer technology, social media is more transparent, and different social media products have some common affordances, including their visibility, reviewability and associative capabilities (Boyd, 2010; Faraj, Jarvenpaa, & Majchrzak, 2011; McAfee, 2009; Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Wagner, Vollmar, & Wagner, 2014). Moreover, the concept of affordance reminds us that the utility of social media is dependent upon both the intrinsic features of social media and the perceptions of social media users. It is social media users' conceptualisation that makes social media functionalities alive.

Between broad social work concepts and operational details of social media platforms, we see guiding concepts in the middle that help enhance the transferability of certain skill sets. In this study, each of the user experience themes includes a value judgement statement on a concrete experience combining a technical component with a service-need component. The findings indicated that technology components such as personalised newsfeeds, online status indicators, online communication, and asynchronous communication have respectively enabled unique user experiences. Reading these user experiences from a practitioner perspective, we derive practical knowledge about: (i) how to distribute service information and news in ways that can proactively reach the hidden youth/NEET populations, (ii) how to set social media accounts in ways that can enhance service accessibility, (iii) how to leverage the disinhibition effect to facilitate clients' self-disclosure, and (iv) how to utilise continual feedback loops to deepen conversations.

As such, we see that technology is not applied for technology's sake, it is applied for practical purposes. In addition, these practice insights are transferrable. Social media is commonly used in almost all countries, and the NEET/hidden youth phenomenon is not uncommon in developed economies. Although these technology-supported user experiences are from particular service projects in a single city, they can be comprehended and used by practitioners across different settings and localities.

### *Guiding concepts and app appraisal*

These guiding concepts may support social workers to assess the performance of social media tools with respect to their 'effects' on service users. To date, social workers lack metrics or frameworks to assess the usefulness of different technologies (Chan & Holosko, 2016). In some other behavioural science disciplines, such as business or education, there have been studies exploring the ways particular tasks can be supported professionally by particular technologies. For example, in business studies, Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) classified the functionalities of social media,

such as supporting conversations, advertising and building reputations. They also discussed how businesses can develop strategies for using social media. In the same way, the advantages and uses of social media noted by service users may help develop some parameters representing the performance of social media in social work. These include the ability it affords service users to receive service information, access services, experience a disinhibition effect and engage in continual feedback loops. We contend that these may support social workers to conceptualise and compare different tools in the context of their day-to-day practice.

This also implies the possibility that social work research can address the relationship between technological capabilities and social work processes. Instead of solely focusing on a particular social media product, research can evaluate a particular function across products. For example, research can examine the disinhibition effect noted in this study while using Facebook as an example. Social work researchers can consider research designs exploring the relationship between intervention practices and specific technology functions. While certain devices may become outdated, the features and capabilities they enable may have a longer shelf life.

Therefore, we see ideas derived in particular settings may create metrics which help assess technology in other settings. Transferable knowledge can be generated for technology-supported social work practice.

### ***Go beyond technological determinism***

There is a tendency for researchers who are fond of technology to over-advocate the positive aspects of a new technology (West & Heath, 2011). Yet the reality has never been that simple. Technology is a double-edge sword – which may accidentally injure the person yielding it. Social media can enhance your practice but it must be used correctly.

In this study, the idea that ‘asynchronous communication can facilitate continual feedback loops’ and that ‘asynchronous communication making dialogues discontinued’ are referring to the same set of technological features. In a similar vein, the idea that ‘online chatting can enable a disinhibition effect’ and that an ‘incomplete communicative modality may cause misunderstanding’ are also referring to the same set of technological features. The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up.

The utility of any device is dependent not merely on the intrinsic features of the object, but also on the social actors’ intentions and experiences (Norman, 1999). Therefore, both the technologies and the users’ conception of them have informed each other, and they co-construct the possibility of social media use (Chan & Holosko, 2017). As a result, the true potential of any new technology can only be fully actualised in social work if the profession can take a more proactive role in using technology.

### ***Concluding remarks***

This study has some inherent limitations. First, the interviewees were the most active service users in the service projects and their views clearly do not represent all participants in the projects. Second, these social media based service projects are situated in a particular geographical region and they do not represent all other practices

across different settings and countries. Third, the social media platforms mentioned in the study were limited to Facebook and some other apps that might be popular in Hong Kong but not in other countries.

However, it is these particularities that give practical research flesh and blood. The findings in this study have demonstrated how practice insights in particular settings may contribute to discussions in other contexts. We see transferable skill sets in technology-supported social work. Practitioners across the globe can now teach each other in a mediated world. It is a professional exchange that might not have been possible without technology.

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