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Keeping on[line] farming: Examining young farmers' digital curation of identities, (dis)connection and strategies for self-care through social media

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the geographies of digital curation and self-care among young farmers in the UK, examining how virtual and digital spaces are having a significant impact on how young farmers negotiate their identities, (dis)connection and self-care within their everyday lives. Drawing on interviews with 28 young famers in the UK, we observe how farming identities are (re)produced and practiced online, via carefully curated social media, and how these might constitute practices of self-care in overcoming issues such as disconnection and rural isolation. Our analysis reveals how social media posts are more than simple connections, they are curations of the self that are complexly bound up in the emotional, spatial and temporal contexts of the author's identities. We examine how digital curation is not just an act of the self, but something drawn relationally to others. Attention is given not just to what is posted, but how others are (dis)engaged with, and how posts of others are reacted to, or endorsed, implicitly or explicitly. Through our examination of young farmers' social identities, we therefore argue that digital identities are produced, practiced, managed and understood in very specific ways 'online', in ways that carefully overlap with other geographical identities.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the geographies of digital communication and self-care among young farmers in the UK. There has been a good deal of media attention, particularly associated with the COVID19 pandemic, which has considered the geographically isolated and isolating nature of farming occupations and the allied implications for mental health, loneliness and sense of belonging (Maye et al., 2018; Farm Safety Foundation, 2020; Mental Health Foundation, 2019).[1] Whilst such attention has focused on the structural, geographical, and community aspects of the farming occupation (Holton et al., 2022), this paper considers how virtual and digital spaces are having a significant impact on how young farmers negotiate (dis)connection and rural isolation within their everyday lives. This is important in producing new knowledge on how digital technologies have permeated contemporary society, particularly within cultures – like farming and agriculture – that are traditionally considered to rely on more analogue, proximate connections (Riley et al., 2018). Through paying attention to what we refer to as 'everyday digital agriculture', we seek to extend extant literature by considering the various ways that young farmers curate their digital identities online to alleviate and combat issues of rural isolation and disconnection and promote self-care. Examining how 'the digital' intersects with young farmers' everyday farming experiences, encounters, and practices helps develop new understandings of how an ontological sense of being in the world can be challenged and reconfigured through digital technology. In doing so, we acknowledge how relationships with technologies and virtual spaces are reconfigured when access to physical space is challenged. Specifically, we examine the role of the digital subject in curating individual online identity practices and mediating the inclusion and incursion of others online – considering how farming practices, representations and networks are (re)worked online and how such (re)presentations of the self are impacted by notions of self-care.

Whilst the social science literature focused on agriculture has noted the importance of farming neighbours in providing help, support, and social capital (Sutherland and Burton, 2011), as well as the challenges that farmers may face when living in geographically isolated locations (Bryant and Garnham, 2015), our paper brings together findings from two research projects to examine how remote technologies extend, and

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[1] See for example: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-59319869 and https://www.fginsight.com/farmersstrivetothrive/strive-to-thrive—articles/loneliness-is-a-key-factor-in-feeling-depressed-farmers-confirm–110876.

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intersect with, these offline relationships. In so doing, we set out three specific objectives that help reveal the unique interplay between geographical and virtual care. First, we seek to consider the ways that young farmers practice farming 'online'. Understanding how farming practice is articulated virtually reveals how digital and geographical spaces imbricate one another in ways that draw together knowledge, practice and care in highly productive ways. Second, we explore how online spaces connect or distance young farmers. A critical evaluation of the connectivity associated with digital spaces reveals the complex agency young farmers invest into digitally curating their online identities, in ways that extend simplistic notions of the public and private. Third, we examine how young farmers mediate their digital identities in virtual worlds. This complements the presentational dimensions of digital curation with discussion of the role of mediation and self-censorship to create more self-reflexive opportunities for digital self-care.

In responding to these three objectives, we investigate the ways in which forms of digital curation and self-authorship shape everyday practices of care and self-care for young farmers. We argue that digital curation as a process is ideally placed to mitigate the ill-effects of isolation and disconnection through a combination of everyday farming practices; digital representations of farmers and farming life; and the (im)materiality of digital identities. For example, issues pertaining to mental ill health can hide within curated online identities, being edited out of posts to avoid the stigma of exposure. Moreover, as the COVID19 pandemic has attested to, the ill-effects of isolation can also be explicitly or implicitly revealed, either as an individual cry for help, or to identify support mechanisms or share experiences that destigmatise mental ill health, isolation and loneliness among other things, among young people (Phillips et al., 2022). So, digital curation sits at the nexus of the virtual and the geographical creating "[c]onnection-friendly communities" (Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, 2017, p.21) that provide multi-dimensional support which moves between both physical and virtual spheres. These exist as both an extension of self-care and caring for others, whereby support becomes a reciprocal responsibility of the self and other. Following an outline of the conceptual framing - in which we bring the discussion of farming identities into conversation with the discussions of rural isolation, self-care and online curation - we present the methodological contexts of the projects from which our data is drawn, before considering how farming identities are developed and curated online and the practices of self-care which intersect with these.

2. (Dis)connection, self-care and farming identities in a digital world

As Ash et al. (2018, p.25) argue, we are currently in the midst of a digital turn in geography, whereby contemporary geographies are "produced through, produced by, and of the digital". This work has recognised the ways that digital and physical lives are complexly and individually imbricated. As Kinsley (2013, p.345) suggests, we "need to move beyond the frictionless immateriality of 'virtual geographies' towards a greater attention to the material conditions of contemporary digitally inflected spatial formations", meaning virtual space is not just 'out there,' it reacts and interacts with humans, spaces and places. An area which has puzzled geographers for some time is the (often simultaneous) positive and negative associations with digital technologies. Whilst technologies like social media may be extremely supportive for some – something highlighted during increased social media usage, especially amongst younger people, during the COVID19 pandemic (Lisitsa et al., 2020) – they may be destructive for others, with the significance varying across the life-course (Akram and Kumar, 2017; Holton and Harmer, 2019).

One such focus has been on isolation and its association with digital technologies. Digital technologies are ostensibly designed to connect people and therefore may be highly useful tools for mitigating the negative impacts of rural isolation (Waite and Bourke, 2015). Indeed, among young rural people, forms of digital technology, such as smartphones, mobile apps and social media, are reported as essential tools for generating belonging and embeddedness within rural communities (Pavón-Benítez et al., 2021), initiating what Wilson (2016, p.283) describes as "technologies of self-care". In many ways, this is not about finding connections at the farthest corners of the globe but reaching out to those that are closest – to friends and family within local communities – to develop intimate bonds (Kinsley, 2013). That said, digital technologies are not a panacea for disconnection and social isolation, and discourses of over-reliance on social media, the passivity of scrolling through content and not actively posting material, and the disengagement with the 'real' world suggest that disconnection and isolation can be compounded by digital technology as much as they can be alleviated by them.[2] Batsleer and Duggan (2020) extend this by questioning the impacts of inflated digital connections made available through social media. Their argument steers away from social media providing greater quantities of friends towards a focus on the agency involved in changing the quality of these relationships and the associated challenges, pressures and risks of managing social connections online. This links into contemporary discussion associated with digital care, whereby digital technologies, such as social media, can be utilised as tools for "caring at a distance" (Schwiter and Steiner, 2020, p.2) that, through the haptic interaction with mobile phone screens, have the capacity to act as emotional and affective conduits for both proximate and distanced care giving (Longhurst, 2013).Whilst there is an abundant literature on farming identities – especially as they relate to the discussion of gender and age (Brandth, 2002; Riley, 2021) – this has focused largely on the importance of spatial context and emplaced encounters. This work has considered, for example, how farmers might derive a sense of identity from the farming landscape in which they are situated (Rogge et al., 2007), as well as the role that geographically proximate others, especially other farmers, might play in framing and reinforcing a relational sense of identity (Sutherland and Burton, 2011). Given the common observation that "agricultural land becomes a display of the farmer's knowledge, values and work ethic" (Rogge et al., 2007, p.160), Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lexicon is useful, wherein the farming landscape can be seen as a prop within the performance of farming identity – standing as evidence of the farming capitals which are displayed to, and read by, those proximate farmers who help reaffirm an individual's social standing within the farming field. Goffman's (1959) thinking, however, is centred around a particular set of space–time relations, with his reference to the "bounded regions" (Goffman, 1959, p.106) which are embodied in the oft-cited terms 'front stage' (where one presents an ideal version of themselves in relation to a particular position or role) and 'backstage' (where much of the hidden work of the performance takes place to those people who are known and are not the front stage audience). Online and digital technologies, of course, open up such performances to a much broader audience and blur the distinction between front and backstages and who constitutes the audience for each of these. In framing these online performances, we follow Hogan's (2010) extension of Goffman's ideas in drawing a distinction between performance as *ephemeral* act and performance as *recorded* act, and how the nature of performance may change as it becomes less spatially and temporally bound. Hogan (2010) offers the metaphor of an exhibition, which gives recognition to the enduring nature of online posts and how these may be designed with a particular audience in mind, but how this might be different to the eventual audience. Whilst curation has most often been considered in relation to material contexts such as art and marketing studies, Davis (2016, p.770) notes "curation is a key mechanism of sociality in a digital era" – as online curation allows a move away from these professionalised spaces of the museum or the gallery toward spaces of the home and the mobile

[2] https://theconversation.com/does-social-media-make-us-more-or-less-lonely-depends-on-how-you-use-it-128468.

phone. Hence, technologies such as social media enable a much wider audience than previously possible.

We therefore seek to broaden our conceptual focus beyond *performance* towards *curation*, and in doing so recognise the role of self-authorship and curation in developing, presenting and managing social media identities and opening space for the more or less conscious acts of care and self-care online. Hogan's (2010) application of the ideas of curation to online technologies considers how posts may be filtered prior to their presentation and ordered in ways that are different to, and not possible with, real-time performances. Conceptually, this is useful as it allows a recognition that whilst there may be near-real-time communication across technologies such as social media, the performance is more than a live event, leaving digital traces which might be engaged with by a wide variety of audiences well beyond the point in time of their original posting. As Baym (2015) accordingly cautions, online curation can thus be problematic given the lack of social cues which might have been previously important. This idea of curation is fruitful in aiding critical understandings of rural disconnection and isolation as it moves attention beyond the live performance and recognises that there is a level of conscious reflection, allowing us to acknowledge that although social media is highly agentic, the sharing of information is done so in intentional ways. Social media users have therefore become very adept at styling the content they choose to share, alongside what they, and the social media providers, want to view. We characterise this as a form of 'digital curation', whereby content is shaped and edited to suit the activity, intention, tone and audience of the consumer. Moreover, our approach to digital curation attends to the aforementioned care and self-care associations with isolation and disconnection. We therefore extend discourses of the digital farmer in terms of efficiency, enterprise and performance (Brooks, 2021), to include technologies that provide farmers the tools to maximise the potential of their farms. This nuances the notion of the digital farmer as something more altruistic, whereby digital technologies provide opportunities for farmers to care at a distance through the generation of novel forms of supportive co-presence.

3. Methods

Our paper draws on interviews with 28 young farmers under the age of 30 in the UK. These interviews were drawn from two projects – the first focused on younger farmers' perceptions and experiences of loneliness and rural isolation, and the second focused on farmers' use of social media. Whilst these projects were distinct in their initial foci, they overlapped in their attention to farming (dis)connection and isolation within everyday farming lives and specifically the use of online technologies. Interviews were conducted remotely between September 2020 and April 2021, coinciding with the COVID19 pandemic and across a period in which the UK was in its third state of national lockdown. Participants were recruited via social media and using snowball sampling. The sample we draw on here comprised of 12 women and 16 men and a mixture of first generation (8) and family succession (20) farmers representing a mix of farming types – including dairy, sheep, beef and arable – and geographical locations across the UK (20 in England, 2 in Wales, 4 in Scotland and 2 in Northern Ireland).[3]

Interview respondents were given the option of online or telephone interviews, and whilst the majority of respondents opted for interviews via the video conferencing platform Zoom, some preferred telephone interviews to overcome issues of broadband connection and also to offer the flexibility to talk whilst undertaking some of their everyday farming activities. Interview guides were created for each project that were designed to elicit knowledge of social media usage, farming loneliness and rural isolation respectively – asking farmers to talk about their motivations for, and experiences of, using remote technologies and social media, how they connect to and interact with others in their virtual and non-virtual worlds, as well as how they seek to represent farming lives through posts they place on social media. Alongside this, farmers were asked about their perceptions and experiences of loneliness and rural isolation, and how this intersects with personal connections, everyday interactions and contemporary farming pressures (e.g. Brexit, climate change, financial struggles, the anti-meat agenda etc.). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The ensuing transcripts were analysed thematically (following Braun and Clarke, 2006), with the initial descriptive coding process taking place in tandem with analytic memos to document synergies across codes which were developed into themes discussed in the following sections.

4. Producing digital farming identities

We start by considering the ways that digital technologies produce specific types of farming identities that provide both opportunities for connection with other farmers and develop a particular type of presence in online platforms. The long-held discussions around digital technologies feed directly into contemporary notions of (dis)connection, isolation and self-care, with extant literature debating whether digital technologies offer, on the one hand, an unparalleled chance for social connection or, on the other, lead to the erosion of face-to-face contact and hence increased isolation (Patulny, 2020). Our analysis sits somewhere between these poles in recognising that digital technologies might "reorganise socio-spatial relations between different activities such as work, rest and mobility" (Ash et al., 2018, p.33). Observing the digital from this perspective is fruitful in understanding the agentic potential digital identities may afford those experiencing the ill-effects of rural isolation and the attendant opportunities to manage their evolving sense of self. The most prevalent finding from the interviews was the relevance of social media's affordance to transcend spatial boundaries (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016; Riley and Robertson, 2022) and, in so doing, offer unprecedented levels of connection for the young farmers interviewed:

> "Like obviously on Instagram, you've got a lot of people showcasing what they're doing every day, which is really good for the public. And also, I think […] Twitter's really good. Like, you can post a question and there's like just a lot, you get a lot of replies. Like, I posted about what we want to do, we want like to do this water truck outside. And I got some good replies from them" (Ailsa, 24, Beef and Sheep Farmer).
>
> "I've built up quite a few good relationships via social media, and there were people from different walks of life – like we're all, most of us are all agricultural, we're all farming. But just from different places and seeing different things and experienc[ing] different things" (Catie, 26, Livestock and Arable Farmer).
>
> "It's a good way of connecting with other people, more my own age […] hearing about different stuff […] I've got some good neighbours who know a load about farming, they're a great help, but they're mainly older boys" (John, 28, Beef and Sheep Farmer).

Such narratives feed into the current discourse surrounding internet-based technologies as providing a supportive mechanism for combating isolation within rural communities (Waite and Bourke, 2015). Whilst previous work on agricultural identities has focused on the importance of geographically proximate others as a source of social support (Sutherland and Burton, 2011), Ailsa's extract points to how social media may act, at least partially, as a substitute for, or extension of, this proximate support. Important, for her example, is how it can overcome a sense of isolation associated with young farmers' agricultural knowledge, when they might feel out of their depth and need support from others. More instrumental approaches have considered the role that social media technologies may play in complementing traditional forms of information dissemination within more formal agricultural activities

[3] To preserve the anonymity of our respondents, pseudonyms have been used and specific geographical locations are not given.

(Chowdhury and Odame, 2014). Ailsa's response advances this by illustrating how there might be a more speculative and two-way form of connection that can extend beyond simply sharing farm business and technology information.

Moreover, Catie's and John's quotes start to illustrate how social media might enable more tailored and conscious forms of connection that, in turn, may serve to author particular aspects of their farming and non-farming identities. Whilst 'context collapse' (Marwick and Boyd, 2011) has been seen as a negative aspect of social media – as it can disrupt the rhythms of performance to different audiences dependent on the geographical contexts where they are engaged with – Catie and John illustrate the potential advantages. For Catie, social media offers the potential for experiences and connections beyond their "narrow daily existence[s]" (Williams, 2006, p.600), not only in a geographical sense but also in engaging with others beyond the farming occupation and enabling them to experience, vicariously, 'different places and things'. John's example is significant in highlighting the potential, for young farmers, of misalignment between physical and social (non)isolation. Whilst John would not be classified as isolated under a conceptualisation of having others in close proximity – specifically other, older, farmers offering forms of social capital such as those observed by Sutherland and Burton (2011) – his example highlights what might be seen as generational isolation, with the lack of proximity of others of his own age, meaning social media affords digital connection and the chance to 'hear about different stuff' from that available through his proximate connections with older farmers.

In addition to these spatial aspects, the temporal affordances of social media are also significant. As Ailsa's response points out, the ability to receive near-instant support and knowledge is a key reason for engaging in social media. So too, the longer temporal affordances of social media are also significant:

> "[Showing interviewer their social media posts] Yeah, that's my South Devons, yeah. So if you like scroll down to like two years ago when the shows are on you'll see pictures of me showing. [I] like to keep it up to date with all the results I get" (Beth, 24, Sheep Farmer).
> "I look back at what I posted […] it's nice to see what I was getting up to […]. I've calmed down now [laughter] but it's good to see how I've come on" (Danny, 27, Dairy and Sheep Farmer).

Beth's example is reflective of many interview responses that highlight how the durability of social media posts mean they not only serve the function of broadcasting and offering a point of connection, but also as a way of "archiving life experiences and reflecting on identities" (Greengard, 2012, p.15). For Beth, those posts which began as a method of connection to others – through displaying her participation in an agricultural show and, perhaps, implicitly displaying the capital embodied in her livestock (cf. Yarwood and Evans, 2006) – serve, over time, to be an archive of the self to be curated. In this instance, social media allows Beth moments of self-reflection and self-care, whereby viewing her timeline allows her to document (to herself and others) the progress that she has made over time (in terms of improving her results in competition) and the development of her farming skills and achievements. Here we see a progression from understanding the effective management of technology and content to the handling of emotion in and through online spaces. This is illustrative of the ways in which emotions are expressed 'in the moment' through posting, but also how posts have their own durability in that they reflect specific emotional and temporal contexts that may not correspond with the author's current identities (Kaufmann, 2015; Longhurst, 2013).

This form of self-archiving, and noting how the young farmers had 'come on', is also discussed by Danny, with his case showing how this digital archive – and the re-curation of it through processes such as re-posting and retweeting which were touched upon in several interviews – serves not only to re-live and celebrate past, and cumulative, achievements, but also offers the chance for self-reflection. His reference to "I've calmed down a lot" – which he defines in his interview as working fewer hours and being less reckless in operating his farm machinery and vehicles – highlights how such timelines enables a reflection not only on successes, but also allows for self-development and self-care through (re)considering potentially harmful activities and unsustainable work patterns. Both Beth's and Danny's experiences therefore illustrate ways of producing digital self-care that occupies the spaces in-between young people's lives, and expose the exogenous capacities of digital technologies to powerfully affect, connect and organise the owner's everyday life (Van Doorn, 2013). These depictions of the power of social media archives thus add a temporal dimension to existing discourses of digital identities that balances the evolving presentations of the digital self alongside "constructing a liveable niche in which 'to be' in difficult circumstances" (Wilson, 2016, p.290, emphasis in original).

5. Curating digital farming identities

Hinted at within the last paragraph of the previous section is how there is a sense of intentionality in terms of the digital content that is produced and shared. An important aspect of this, emerging from the analysis, is the subtly different affordances that diverse social media platforms offer. It has been observed that the context-collapse offered by social media limits the 'audience segregation' that Goffman (1959, p.57) refers to as ensuring "that those before whom [they] play one of [their] parts will not be the same individuals before whom he [sic] plays a different part in another setting". Although this context-collapse is common across all digital and social media platforms, the interviews bring forward evidence of young farmers using respective platforms in consciously different ways to curate and perform online identities and enact practices of self-care. Whilst there are variations in the type of use amongst those interviewed, Chantelle's and Catie's approaches are illustrative of a common trend:

> "Twitter I use for just for general stuff, supporting hashtags, cheering a cause, stuff like that […] Insta [sic] is more for stories […], that's especially good for selling the farm shop stuff […]. I do that on Facebook too, but manage the settings so that I can have private stuff on there with my mates, which I don't want the world to see" (Chantelle, 20, Beef and Sheep Farmer).
> "Like, this past year, the interaction with farming profiles on social media has just been phenomenal […]. I don't go on Twitter that much. I kind of just lurk on there. But I do quite a lot on Instagram" (Catie, 26, Livestock and Arable Farmer).

Connecting, in part, to the potentially negative aspects of social media, and also in trying to have a level of intentionality in who they reach, these examples highlight how a form of virtual audience segregation is consciously performed by the younger farmers through working with the respective affordances of different social media platforms. For Catie, Instagram is the platform used for the majority of posts and connections and more conscious forms of curation, whereas Twitter is used in a more passive sense – more akin to an audience member than curator – as a way of keeping abreast of information, rather than consciously curating and commenting. Chantelle is more explicit in this curation and her case can be used to extend Hogan's (2010) exhibition metaphor in illustrating that curations are not necessarily singular nor representative of the whole self. We may, instead, see that different platforms – or museums or curation spaces if we use Hogan's thinking – may coexist. Whilst there may be clear similarities and connections between these, they are curated in different ways, and audience segregation may be managed through self-censorship and utilising the different privacy settings to restrict who has access to the respective curations and displays – with Facebook used in Chantelle's case to limit the more personal and private content that she does not want 'the world to see'. This echoes some of the aforementioned strategies for facilitating self-care among the participants, in ways that insulate the individual from perceived harm by mediating what is shared, who the appropriate audience is, and which platforms are deemed suitable to share or engage

with content (cf. Batsleer and Duggan, 2020).

Another point relating to digital curation within the extract from Chantelle's interview is the way that social media may be used as an element of 'platform capitalism' (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). In its most overt sense, this relates to how the young farmers curate their social media in such ways as to directly sell either products (most often their farm produce) or their skills and services (such as livestock management or machinery operation). More indirectly, this is about putting forward a positive picture of the industry, whereby the direct financial benefit to the individual may be more diffuse. Jennie and Thomas provided examples of this:

> "I didn't know about stories or reels or like, how you get people to like your things, and how you get people to like the hashtags and everything. You know, like, before, it was just like me riding my horse, you know, hanging out with friends and stuff. And just like pictures of the dogs, and you know, just hanging out. And now it's all you know, like, trying to promote what I do, and showing people what, you know, what I'm all about, and all my lifestyles like and things because people do want to know, like, the person behind the brand" (Jennie, 24, Sheep Farmer).
>
> "I put stuff on there to sell. You can reach a good audience […]. I've picked up shearing work through it, showing pictures of what I've done, cute sheep and stuff […] and then some more forceful advertising" (Thomas, 28, Beef and Sheep farmer).

These examples highlight how the more passive and active approaches to sharing and disseminating information may evolve over time, as well as how they coexist as curative practices. For Thomas, his is a more overt and functional use of social media for marketing his own specific services. In both Thomas' and Jennie's examples, though, there is evidence of how the blurred boundaries between business and leisure, and home and work – which has been well-noted within the discussion of the micro-geographies of agriculture (Riley, 2012) – is magnified, and even harnessed, online. For Jennie, initial posts that present separate leisure and work activities, and are less consciously curated, become interlinked, over time, as they evolve toward more consciously curating a 'lifestyle brand'. How these more implicit and explicit forms of curation coexist, and might be used interchangeably, over time is also see in Thomas' case. Whilst Thomas' shearing services are routinely advertised explicitly, he is conscious that repeated posts that are more 'forceful' may annoy his audience and so his curation also involves the presentation of his work – through posting pictures and videos (including 'cute sheep'). Ostensibly, these posts appeal to a broader audience who can enjoy pictures of cute animals, but more implicitly it can demonstrate Thomas' farming skills to a more specific audience of farmers, who are likely to understand the embodied cultural capital (farming skill) that goes into managing this livestock (Burton et al., 2020) and which might encourage them to offer him work. In terms of self-care, Jennie's and Thomas' very conscious and particular curation of their respective online presences extend existing tropes surrounding the 'over-sharer' or 'social media addict' by underscoring the agency of young people in managing how their lives are presented online in relation to other, more 'problematic', online identities.

What is apparent through such discussions of online technologies is that online curation itself is a form of emotional labour. Whilst the previous example saw how there was potential for audience segregation, this offers a potentially negative outcome, with David explaining:

> "It is not just a question of who you follow, but who you retweet and what you 'like' and what you don't 'like' […], it's a minefield" (David, 28, Arable farmer).

Such extracts point to how curation is not simply an issue of self-presentation, but what may be seen as a presentation-by-implication, wherein connections made to others – more explicitly through practices such as 'following' (on Twitter or Instagram) or being friends (Facebook) or implicitly through liking or sharing posts – can themselves form a significant part of the curation of the self online. These interactions, the interviews reveal, are important factors in (re) shaping how digital identities are performed:

> "[…] in the farming industry, people whinge about doing long hours and they also brag about it. So they say 'I'm so tired, I've been doing long hours'. And then you'll see the same person doing a Snapchat at 2am, hauling straw, going 'Oh, my God, still going, crack on' and all this. And it's like, you've got to pick a struggle. You either want to work long hours or you don't" (Frank, 30, Arable and Beef farmer).
>
> "[…] another thing that winds me up is how people portray our industry on social media. […]. There is [sic] people that portray us very, very well on social media, and just give facts and that is what we need. We don't need all this fluffy, bullshit off people, you know, who think they're farmers or are farmers' wives and, you know, they're ambassadors and all that, you know, stuff on Instagram. […] And I think people idolise other people, especially [in] farming, because they spend a lot of time on there [social media], and they think 'why is my life not like that?'" (Simon, 26, Dairy Farmer, Dorset).

These examples are two of several which point to the (re)creation of normative farming identities online. Indeed, as Batsleer and Duggan (2020: 108) argue, contemporary youth have "[grown] up online and in public" through social media, whereby 'likes', re-tweets and comments become the currency through which connections are communicated publicly. Whilst social media is seen as having many potential benefits to reducing disconnection and isolation through connections to proximate and geographically distanced others, it also allows potentially more partial and damaging curations of the farming industry to quickly spread. In Frank's case, the long-reported depiction of the (particularly male) farmer as being associated with the qualities of ruggedness and stoicism (Riley, 2016) – and which themselves have been shown to be potentially damaging to gender relations and mental health (Bryant and Garnham, 2015) – arguably become perpetuated, echoed, and cast to a wider audience.

Indeed, as Simon moves on to show, social media 'influencers' can be important in making such characteristics normative. The latter part of Simon's extract is significant in highlighting that social media may lead to a sense of comparison, which has been noted elsewhere, as having a strong association with problems, such as isolation and loneliness (Lim and Yang, 2019). It has been established within the literature on farming cultures that farmers commonly observe their proximate neighbours – in a process referred to as 'hedgerow farming' (Burton et al., 2020) – as the basis through which to judge these farmers and to accordingly emulate, or avoid emulating, their practices. Social media, as Frank's and Simon's extracts testify, arguably extend the geographical boundaries of this approach, with the hedgerow becoming replaced by the social media screen as the place of assessment and judgement of others and, by extension, the self. For those farmers who spend much of their time on social media and rely on it for connections, 'upward comparison' (Warrender and Milne, 2020) is the only type available to them. This is extended by George, who referred to how this type of practice becomes normalised:

> "You get tagged in stuff or you like it, then you end up posting in a certain way […]. You see their followers and what gets liked and you start using the same hashtags and same terms, then you realise you're sort of telling a story" (Paul, 26, Sheep and Dairy Farmer).

What is significant here is the process of what we might call curative entrainment, wherein the younger farmers such as Paul noted that the curative affordances (Hanckel et al., 2019) of different social media – such as being able to tag people in particular posts, to share with others, and to 'like' posts – can serve to reinforce particular online practices and identities. As a result, we might begin to see similar styles of posts and content types being (re)produced. On the one hand, and echoing the sentiment of Simon, there is potential for this to offer up, or perpetuate,

a sense of isolation in that their life is seen as not the same as that or, in the case of Paul, there can be a discord between the curation of what is presented online and their actual everyday lives (cf. boyd, 2014). Relating to self-care, and in particular disconnection and isolation, Gentina and Chen (2019) discuss this in terms of self-disclosure – the revealing of personal information to another. They argue that social media presents a platform that passively connects people together through weak ties. The sharing of emotional information elicits emotional responses which may, therefore provide emotional rewards, albeit often temporarily. Hence, all of these participants' comments are infused with practices and expressions of self-care. As boyd (2014) argues, it is vital to move beyond simplistic notions of the public and private when attempting to understand young people's relationships with digital technology. The digital curation of each participant's identity through what they choose to post, what they leave out, how they receive others' posts and how they interact with others online are all strong indicators of how young people's digital and geographical lives – and the technologies used to share and view such content – are complexly imbricated, chiming with Fraser's (2019, p.193) suggestion that "[t]he spaces of [and] for (human and non-human) life are inescapably infused and bound up with the digital".

6. Curating everyday practices of self-care

As intimated in the previous section, the relationship between digital curation, connection and self-care is complex and multi-dimensional, meaning there is no universal way of recognising these linkages and their implications. The quotes below provide an opportunity to explore some of the contrasting ways in which digital curation is understood by our participants:

> "Um, I've got a few people that work sort of on their own, and they live far from family and a few of them, I've seen they've posted messages saying that during the depths of lockdown, like with loneliness and I've messaged them saying 'look, literally we can talk' – Zoom calls aren't the same" (Frank, 30, Arable and Beef farmer).
> "I think social media has helped as well because there is a lot more females coming into farming. And I think a lot more farmers in general are starting to sort of go on social media and publicise what we're doing. And it's making more people aware. […] you know, I'm showing what we do day in, day out, what I get up to, and kind of showing that we can do it, and that there's a lot of people like me" (Nora, 22, Livestock and Arable Farmer).

Frank's quote highlights how practices of care may flow through social media. Although it has often been noted that social media may involve more numerous, but often weaker, sets of social connections (Gentina and Chen, 2019), this often forgets the ways that these online connections intersect with, and augment, offline connections, as shown in Frank's example. Although Frank ultimately states that online connections are far from a replacement for face-to-face connections, his extract both reminds us of the different forms of isolation – in this case, both geographical and social – and also a convenient way to 'check in', especially during COVID19 lockdowns. Whilst Frank's example shows a more conscious and overt approach to online 'checking in', Emma speaks of a more implicit approach:

> "[…] just liking a post, or adding a comment like 'love that, you all good?' offered the opportunity to make connections with others without 'making a big deal of it' […] and without being in their face or suggesting that they are suicidal or something" (Jane, 27, Dairy farmer).

Whilst Bowlby (2011) has noted that face-to-face emotional care requires proactivity, Jane's example extends further on Frank's in highlighting how social media can offer a route to a more passive form of checking in, wherein it is combined with more routine and incidental interactions. These acts of care-for-others can exist within meaningful and reciprocal socio-spatial digital relationships, which require less time investment – particularly given the large spatial distances between some of these farmers – and, more significantly, for a group historically reticent to engage in support-seeking activities (Bryant and Garnham, 2015) – this can take place without 'making a deal of it'.

Nora's example also indicates everyday practices of self-care to be scaled, moving from the person-specific to the more generalised forms of support that might be offered online. There is an abundant literature which has focused on the multifarious challenges that women in agriculture may face (see Bryant and Pini, 2011), and Nora highlights how social media can be used to offer more collective forms of support, especially through women in agriculture sharing their experiences – something which might be seen as an example of 'everyday activism' (Vivienne, 2016) online. As the earlier reference from Chantelle to 'cheering a cause' suggests, collective action on social media can have a significant impact in championing farming-related issues and politics (cf. Rodak, 2020) and this has been seen in several of the campaigns around mental health within farming[4]. Nora's example focuses less on awareness raising of a particular cause to, instead, a type of everyday activism which is centred on sharing more subtle and everyday experiences. Crucially, such altruist performances offer an example to others which, as Vivienne (2016) suggests, may work in conjunction with similar posts in having the impact of challenging the current status quo – in this case challenging the patriarchal structures of farming and demonstrating, in Nora's words, that "we can do it".

In addition to these examples of support-seeking and support-offering activities online, the interviews revealed that another characteristic of self-care was that of self-censorship in their curation:

> "I put pictures and posts up and that's obviously me, but I don't pour my heart out about everything like some people […] it's not the place for that for me" (Emma, 22, Arable and Sheep Farmer).
> "Or whether you're getting slated on social media. I no longer put anything on Twitter which has got a picture of an animal or anything, because if a vegan gets hold of it, they start accusing you of all sorts of things. And so yeah, now I just don't put anything of any animals on, on a picture. I mean, I've been called a murderer, a rapist and all sorts" (Andrew, 30, Livestock and Arable Farmer).
> "I post pictures of animals up, something that people like seeing […] it shows them doing well […] those who know me, mates and stuff, know that it's my way of saying everything's okay, but without actually saying it [laughter]" (Darren, 24, Beef, Sheep and Dairy Farmer).

Taken together, these can be seen as examples of what might be called 'decontextualising' and 'depersonalising' approaches to digital curation. These operate in much the same ways as the content presentation processes discussed in the previous sections, but have distinctly different motivations and outcomes. For Alison, the construction of boundaries around personal feelings and emotions are part of her self-censorship, acknowledging that the public nature of the platforms are 'not the place' for that and revealing that she might consider seeking more personal, one-to-one support if it was needed. Andrew's approach to decontextualising is a very particular filtering. For him, and echoing those discussions of online debates around animal welfare and meat-free diets, experience has taught him that showing pictures of animals offers the potential for online criticism and negativity, so he takes the approach of filtering out such posts.

Darren's example falls somewhere between those of Emma and Andrew. His online curation, unlike that of Andrew, involves the presentation of pictures of his livestock, but the accompanying text of these focuses on the positive aspects of his work with them – highlighting their healthy nature, good progress, and the clear care that they are receiving.

[4] For example the Agriculture Mental Health Awareness Week in 2021 which used the hashtag #AgMentalHealthWeek.

As with the earlier examples in the paper, such posts can be seen as a display of these young farmers' identities as a 'good farmer', but, as with Andrew's account, they also serve as a more coded message, or proxy, to his friends to show that he himself is doing well and that things are progressing well. This can be seen as an extension of audience segregation, as whilst these posts are ostensibly front stage demonstrations – of work completed and their good stockpersonship – which are available to everyone, there is a backstage element too presented in a more disguised or coded message to those with whom they have an offline connection and who can read this without the author needing to explicitly state how they are feeling. This links into Yau and Reich's (2019) suggestion that those able to perceive situations from a third-person perspective are more likely to understand how to manage their digital identities. While these authors do not explicitly mention digital curation as a practice, it can be inferred through our participants' experiences that understanding the implications of posting content is part of identity management and self-care. As several studies have noted, male farmers are notoriously reluctant to share their feelings and emotions, or to seek wellbeing support – sometimes with severe consequences (Bryant and Garnham, 2015) – and these more virtual forms of communication can arguably be seen as offering a new form of communication, albeit heavily coded, in this realm of farming self-care.

Whilst the discussion of curation has focused on particular content on online platforms, the interviews also revealed how this curation expands out into types of engagement with technologies themselves:

> "I see so much constant bile and nonsense that I've stopped following them, got them off my timeline […] just stick with stuff that's interesting" (Thomas, 26, Arable Farmer).
> "I'm careful what I like and stuff, or you just end up being bombarded with stuff" (Sean, 27, Beef and Arable Farmer).
> "Generally, like when I wake up I'll look at my messages, because I go to bed quite early. So I've got like loads of messages when I wake up [laughs]. And then yeah, when I'm out on the farm, I try not to look – well I've got my phone with me in case anything happens or like phone calls or whatever. But I'm pretty much too busy to look at it, you know, constantly. So when I come in for breakfast, I'll have a catch up. And then, like, take my phone out with me again just in case for any important phone calls or whatever, then I won't look at it until lunch. And then yeah, same again in the evening. Won't look at it until the evening, really. Like, you've got to have time away from your phone as well. Because if you're on it all the time, you'll never get nothing done" (Beth, 21, Beef and Sheep Farmer).

For Sean and Thomas, their related approaches to managing their social media usage can be seen as acts of self-care. For Sean, this selectivity involves the practices of liking, sharing and (in the case of Twitter) retweeting content in order to avoid connection with certain individuals or being sent content or advertising by social media platforms. For Thomas, who echoes the earlier reference to how the 24-hour nature of social media can be negative, this is taken a step further to include the act of unfollowing to avoid the content of these more negative users. For our broader understanding, these examples highlight how curation, and the processes of filtering and ordering, is not limited to an individual's own content, but also how it intersects with that of others online. Curation, for these participants, involves not only their own posts, but the relational curation of others – through either the decision not to follow them or endorse their content, and through liking or reposting. This more virtual form of curation, beyond the participants' own content, was extended upon in the case of Beth. For her, and running parallel to the curation of others noted by Thomas and Sean, her self-care extends beyond the virtual elements to more literal routines of engagement with digital technologies. For the young farmers, structuring social media engagement around their farming activities and existing patterns, means that the aforementioned positive benefits of connection, and opportunities for identity expression, remain available to them. Moreover, the literal boundaries of engagement offer a form of self-care that overcomes the all-consuming nature of social media platforms and provides opportunities for clear periods of necessary disengagement and the compulsion (or need) to continually post content.

7. Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricate geographies of social media, rural (dis)connection, isolation and self-care. We have examined both the ways that farming identities are (re)produced and practiced online and how these might constitute practices of self-care in overcoming issues such as disconnection and isolation. In broadening the conceptual focus beyond performance towards curation, and in doing so recognising the particular affordances of social media, this paper has shown the agency and intentionality of young farmers in self-authoring and curating social media identities. The paper has observed some of the more conventional ways that online technologies may (re)shape geographies, such as the breaking down of distance by allowing connections with non-proximate others – something which was significant to these younger farmers who often live in geographically remote locations and may face geographical isolation. Yet, beyond this, the paper has seen the significance of social media in overcoming other forms of social disconnection. The analysis reveals that even where young famers have proximate others – such as neighbouring farmers – there may be temporal or generational disconnection and social media may be used to offer connections to geographically-distanced, but temporally and socially connected others. The paper has examined the nature of these connections and recognised some of the nuanced processes of curation which are at work. Social media posts, it has been seen, are more than simple connections, they are curations of the self that are complexly bound up in the emotional, spatial and temporal contexts of the author's identities. Whilst there are more instrumental uses – such as those targeted at selling products or services – posts might often be identity-enhancing as they display, implicitly and explicitly, the skills and achievements of the young farmers. In addition to their value in connection with, and displaying to, others, the paper has highlighted how the process of curation may be one of personal reflection and, by extension, self-care. Being able to use social media posts to reaffirm achievements and chart development was therefore seen as important from a personal perspective that garners certain emotional rewards.

In advancing knowledge of the more performative characteristics of social media, through digital curation our findings reveal some of the potential negatives of social media. Yet, they also highlight the various levels of care and self-care that are deployed and developed through particular curative uses of social media – for example, a range of more active and passive approaches to virtually 'checking in' with others. For other young farmers, acts of care were less targeted and more diffuse – with posts around farming success, particularly by young farming women, designed to challenge some of the more patriarchal norms of agriculture and help the general case of challenging this status quo. This reveals digital curation to be an even more implicit two-way process as posts are coded in ways to ensure that intended audiences (particularly farming friends) are able to be read as an indication of the wellbeing of those posting.

The observations, here, contribute to our broader understandings of social media use, and its potential for self-care. Whilst the literature on identity performance has talked of the context-collapse online, we have seen that a level of audience segregation may still be achieved. Here, privacy settings, the differing affordances of respective platforms, and different styles of post – which might include those coded for a very particular audience of friends or fellow farmers – are harnessed to selectively curate online identities. Our discussion also highlights how practices of self-censorship may be deployed as a form of self-care. This self-censorship may take the form of both decontextualising and depersonalising – wherein posts are selectively edited to remove personal details, feelings, or emotions, or to avoid presenting contentious material such as that associated with issues of animal welfare. What

these examples offer for our wider understanding is how digital curation is not just an act of the self, but something drawn relationally to others. Attention is given not just to what is posted, but how others are (dis) engaged with, and how posts of others are reacted to, or endorsed, implicitly or explicitly.

In drawing this paper to a close, we return the focus back to broader relationships between social media, rural (dis)connection, isolation and self-care. Our findings perhaps show often very pragmatic ways of understanding how the digital curation and self-authorship of social media can be supportive in disseminating knowledge and practice, and presenting positive representations of individuals' and groups' evolving identities. Through our examination of young farmers' social identities, we therefore argue that digital identities are produced, practiced, managed and understood in very specific ways 'online', in ways that carefully overlap other geographical identities. While social media provides opportunities to follow the well-trodden path of digital connectivity by bringing often spatially disorganised groups together, it operates as an important platform through which to share practice in ways that extends typical notions of virtual and physical identities as ostensibly separate. The allusion of altruism our interviewees conveyed reveal a sense of supportive co-presence through which digital technologies provide opportunities for our participants to care, and be cared for, at a distance. Moreover, in advancing the ways in which online spaces connect or distance young people, we have noted the agency involved in curating and self-authoring social media identities. This extends beyond simply the uploading of material to identify the importance of, and implications for, styling content and learning how to maximise the potential reach and audience of posts. This process of digital curation therefore produces particular identities and articulates specific information and knowledge. Yet, furthermore it promotes – and disrupts – care and self-care among users and viewers in ways that can both support those experiencing disconnection and embed problem isolation in destructive ways. This is particularly problematic when considering the role of social media in mediating self-care, making it a blurry space of care, support, self-censorship and criticism. The shift from sharing digital identities between privately managed groups into the public sphere often destabilised our participants and they found they had to adopt strategies to manage feedback from their followers. This reveals digitally curated self-care to be an act of power and performance for young farmers. As McEwan and Goodman (2010) argue, "Care can thus very much be a problematic 'performance' for those who need it, who give it and for those who arrange care for others".

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mark Holton: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. **Mark Riley:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Supervision. **Gina Kallis:** Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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