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Conversations on Creativity and Communication

Carmilla Floyd

How do children and young people use social media as a creative outlet? As a journalist specialising in children and youth culture, I have travelled extensively in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the United States, collecting stories about children and young people's lives.

For this book, I decided to reach out through my network to a select number of youngsters who have sparked my curiosity through their social media feeds. From teenagers to young adults, they all seem to master the media in the sense that they have taken control of their digital identities. Using visual imagery and words, they decide how they want to be perceived by others, not the other way around.

The conversations took place online and some asked me not to publish their real names or @handles.

- In my home country Sweden, I spoke to Alex, DJ, law student Valeria and high school student Xuan, who posts aesthetically about everything from lipstick to kpop and xenophobia.
- In Shanghai, China, I chatted with Tony, who uses his social media skills both privately and for profit, promoting luxury brands online.
- Ayanda “Yaya” Nhlapo, TV host and fashion designer, shared her ideas from her home in Johannesburg, South Africa, for example about ‘making her dreams a reality one sequin at a time’.

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- In Los Angeles, United States, Xicana¹ activist and DJ Roseli explained why she thinks that people of colour should use social media to 'carve out their own culture'. In LA, I also chatted to Erik, student and gay/queer activist who shared his feelings about being creative but also stalked and threatened online.
- Finally, Phuong, from Hanoi in Vietnam, communicated from her temporary home in Berlin, Germany, where she studies photography.

Below, read some excerpts.

Tell us a little bit about why and how you use social media

Erik: I use all of them relatively differently but also use them all together. So there are things that I will post on Instagram that will always show up on my Facebook and my Twitter. These will range from selfies to places where I've been, but mostly selfies. I use a lot of # so that people can look it up. Snapchat is more of a tool I use to send pics and chat with people safely without giving my number out.

Phuong: I like to share both my photos and my opinions about world politics, the environment, and social affairs, especially relating to children and women, culture, and entertainment. I share stuff like breaking news but also interesting stories, videos and photo essays that have inspired me and that I think can inspire others.

Yaya: I use a wide range of social media platforms and each platform has its own use, although many are similar. I go according to the use of each one, feel and vibe, as well as the audience and reach. For example, on Instagram and Facebook I share what I do in fashion and other areas while I use Pinterest to be inspired, Snapchat for fun and Twitter for information and news.

Alex: I use both Facebook and Instagram to promote when I am going to DJ somewhere. For inspiration and ideas, I go on Instagram and Youtube.

Roseli: For me, as a Xicana, social media is definitely an important way to communicate with other people of colour, a way for us to 'carve out our own culture' instead of being interpreted and appropriated by others. It is via these social networks I have met many of the people that I've

collaborated with on creative projects, as a model, an artist, DJ and more. Social media is also usually the platform where we release the projects we work on together. Social media is also my news outlet, where I find out about issues in real time, often before they break in the established news channels. I used to be active on more platforms but currently I only use Twitter and Instagram, where I publish events related to activism, my personal life – mainly my dog – and music. I also promote events, hosted by friends, or that I am part of in any way. I used to have a Tumblr and that definitely was an inspiration because of the amount of images I was seeing being posted by the like-minded people I followed. Most of them were also Xicanxs, queer and gender non-conforming people of colour. It made me feel like I wasn't alone and became a sort of lifeline.

Xicana activist and DJ Roseli uses social media to carve out her own culture

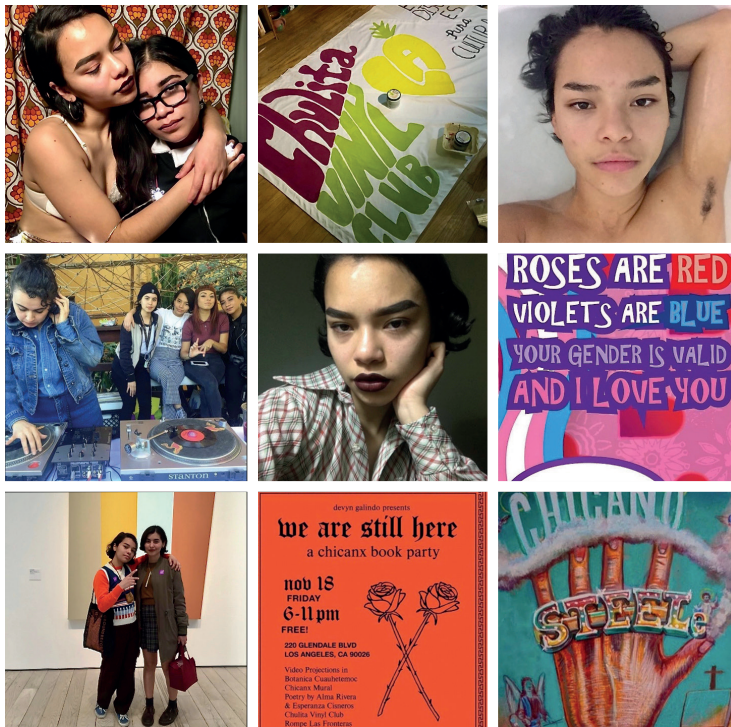


Image 1. Roseli's images

Valeria: I use Instagram to express myself, and to desperately try to stay a tiny little bit creative while trying to stay alive in the world of academics. I mainly use Facebook and Snapchat for communication with friends, and for collaborating with people in different projects. With my Chinese friends, I have to use WeChat, due to censorship and the 'great fire wall of China'. I post and chat there to make sure my friends remember me and don't think I'm dead. I actually think WeChat and its multitude of cute smileys are way more creative for chatting than the stuff offered on Facebook.

Tony: I use only WeChat, I see it as a self-marketing tool. Not to further my career, but as a way to show my personality and myself in the way I want. When like-minded people see what I post, it gives me a chance to meet interesting people and to build relationships. From a marketing perspective, they are my 'target audiences' that consume my content. But I don't want them to buy a product, only to get to know me. Of course, I also use social media for information and inspiration in general.

Xuan: I use social media for creative expression, to connect with friends and new people, to promote my interests, and get inspiration, information, and news. Facebook is mostly to communicate with friends, others, and to call out racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. If I experience racism or prejudices IRL (In Real Life), I will sometimes share that story on Facebook, to let people know how they should not act. Snapchat is for spontaneous fun and communication. I also use Tumblr to be inspired and inspire others.

What type of content do you post?

Valeria: Instagram is the only creative outlet I have online where I post stuff that I create myself. I post more personal content there, though my followers might not realize that, as I rarely explain what a particular picture means to me. It might be a photo taken when meeting someone I love, when doing something I hate, or from when I'm feeling down and sick and tired of everything and everyone.

Alex: I use my Instagram as a photo-diary so I can post pretty much anything there. Facebook is a little more private so I don't want too much weird stuff there. I post things about my life that I think are interesting

to my friends. Cute stuff or selfies gets the most reactions and likes. A photo of homemade food does well too.

Yaya: I post to inspire people and to influence them for the better. I also post content that people can relate to, which affects the reactions on my posts.

Phuong, from Hanoi in Vietnam, studies photography in Berlin, Germany and uses social media to communicate and share her images and ideas.



Image 2. This is Phuong, in Hanoi, **Image 3.** Berlin Wall, **Image 4.** Berlin Street

Phuong: I post mostly my own documentary and street photos. I also raise arguments, give my point of view about social problems, especially on environmental issues and stories relating to journalistic ethics. And I share my feelings about places, cities I live in or travel to.

What don't you share on social media?

Alex: I don't like to advocate for issues I feel strongly about on social media. It feels too private.

Phuong: I mostly try to be objective and I prefer a well-organised and minimalist look. I rarely share private stuff, personal information, or photos of family, publicly.

Valeria: On Facebook I never share anything private anymore. No feelings, good or bad, no anxieties, no life happenings, nothing. Facebook is overloaded with information, why would my information be more important than others?

Does your social media activity reflect who you really are?

Tony: I never share content that I feel doesn't relate to me or reflect myself. I like to be spontaneous, the moment I feel like it, I share and post.

Xuan: It reflects the person I want to be on that account. Who I want to be can change over time. I often change my handles to reflect that change, and I have a lot of different accounts on, for example, Instagram. Some are private, some public or semi-private. I allow my mother on some but not on all! I often erase accounts, or my whole feed, and start fresh with a new style.

Erik: What I put out there is really I. All my social media without a shadow of a doubt screams I am a Queer, POC², Native American and more.

Valeria: My Instagram reflects who I am way more than Facebook does. I feel like I mainly use Instagram for myself. Sometimes when I wonder, "wth am I doing with my life?" I look through my feed over these last two years or so, and I feel better. My Instagram is a storyteller, maybe not to my followers, but to me, about myself.

Do you put in a lot of work when creating your content?

Tony: No, I don't think it is creative to do too [much] stuff on social media on purpose.

Yaya: I do both planned content that is well thought of, and spontaneous content as a channel of self-expression, which I post with a little less structure and thought, and more freedom. I always stick to high quality, visually stimulating images and videos. My captions are also of a high standard, in the sense that I write to express myself and share my story. That's what primarily gets me the most reactions or likes too.

Ayanda “Yaya” Nhlapo, TV host and fashion designer in South Africa, shares glimpses of her life and work on her SM accounts, and tries to inspire and influence her followers for the better.



Image 5. “Yaya”

Xuan: I do mostly, but sometimes I just get lucky with a shot. Angles, location, and lighting is vital. I take a lot of selfies in the restroom in my high school restroom, because I like the clean look of fluorescent lights and white tiles. I always work with the images, picking filters and colours that go with the tone and look of my different feeds.

Xuan uses social media for creative expression, and always works with the images, picking filters and colors that go with the tone and look of her different SM feeds.



Image 6. Xuan showing of her nails and a new bag, **Image 7.** Xuan showing off her brand new velvet shoes, **Images 8 & 9.** These two photos were taken at an exhibition by Doug Aitken at MOMA in Los Angeles

What do you like and dislike most about social media?

Alex: I like that I can connect with people, and that I can brag about stuff if I want.

Erik: The thing I dislike most is being too exposed. I have had death threats, stalkers, and unwelcome attention, but there was not much I was able to do other than change some privacy settings. The other thing is the social shame that is connected to some of the content that I provide, because it is considered taboo. I find it disgusting that employers check Facebook to see if people are 'employable' by their social media appropriateness. Also, it is unfortunate that people are driven

by likes and sometimes to disconnect from life in order to connect to the Internet. I don't like sacrificing real life myself.

Erik, student and personality, brands himself online as #gay #gayinked #queer #poc #indigenous and more.

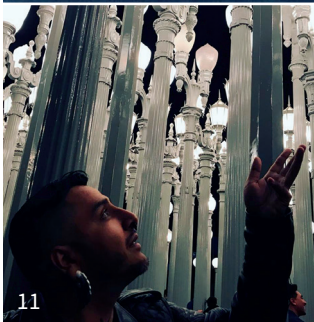


Image 10. Erik hanging out doing homework, **Image 11.** Erik posing with the lamp post exhibit at the LACMA museum in Los Angeles, **Image 12.** Caption on Instagram: “When I bathe my dogs always hang out right next me. The company of my pups are the best. Sometimes Appa insists that I wash behind my ears and if I don’t he will.”, **Image 13.** Caption on Instagram: “Just hanging out like a Leather Mary. Rocking my leather jacket”.

Xuan: I love having access the world at my fingertips. I hate the ignorance, racism, exotism, and sexism. Stupid comments and questions from narrow minded people or douche guys (that I immediately block). Followers asking: 'Are you from Japan or Korea,' because stereotypes tell them that cool Asians must be from there? But I like that social media offer me and other young people a platform and safe spaces where we can talk about our feelings, norms, and discrimination. Some of the accounts I follow forbid white people to comment, although they can read the posts and comments that POC and WOC³ make. I think that's really good, because social media is so full of hate and stupid comments, sometimes we want to say stuff without worrying about being attacked.

Rosie: Just the fact that it is available, I like. I believe that the reason why young folks create and share via social media is because the reality of our present and future is so overwhelming. We need any outlet to express ourselves, support others, and unwind with memes.

Alex: Sometimes I get annoyed when people close to me write stupid stuff.

Valeria: I like that social media lets people express themselves freely, and can connect with other people they've never met before. I like that it can be used for activism, for sharing knowledge, and for questioning the status quo. I also dislike when people are too private. Some of my friends, classmates and family members love to spill everything on Facebook – even their arguments with other people. It's embarrassing and annoying.

Do you ever get tired of the digital life?

Xuan: Nope, although I just got an Instax camera that uses really expensive film. It's weird because I can take endless shots with my phone and fix them in different apps. But with this camera I have to be careful. I click and out comes a tiny photograph that I can't change! But it gives me a good feeling! All my friends want that camera too.

Law student Valeria uses Instagram to express herself and stay a tiny bit creative as opposed to what she can be in the academic world.



Images 14 & 15. Valeria's pictures

Roseli: Well, I do have a lot of vinyls, and I DJ together with the Chulita Vinyl Club in LA. A lot of my friends make artwork that is physical and three dimensional. But then we share promote our stuff online, so it works out well.

Valeria: Sometimes. I think it comes from the overload of information we receive online all day, every hour, every minute and second. Then I turn to something analogue, like a DVD or a vinyl record. Analogue creativity takes us back to the roots, in a sense. It lets me relax for a minute, and disconnect from the world. When I listen to my vinyl records I live in the moment, not through the screen of my phone. I can't switch from one artist to the next in a second. I have the albums I have, the songs I have, and that's enough. But only until I pick up my phone and have access to *everything* and nothing is ever enough. And that's great too! There's always something new to learn and discover.

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Notes

1. Xicana: a female Mexican-American.
2. POC: abbreviation for *people of color*, as in everybody except caucasians.
3. WOC: abbreviation for *women of color*.