



TECHNICAL REPORT

NAVIGATING MORAL PRACTICE ONLINE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL MEDIA USERS AFTER THE CHRISTCHURCH MOSQUE ATTACKS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media figured strongly in many people's experiences of, and responses to, the Christchurch mosque attack on 15th March 2019. This study aimed to examine the online moral practices of some New Zealand citizens and residents over this time. It explored some of the affordances and limitations of the social media platforms for responding to an event involving nationally unprecedented violence, explicit online material, objectionable and racist speech, and real and anticipated trauma. In framing itself around "anthropology of the good", the study also emphasised the agencies of online social actors, highlighting the nuanced everyday moral systems they developed (and continually, collectively renegotiated) in response.

The report presents data from a multimethodological, qualitative research project. This centred on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 self-selecting participants, while also including an analysis of the highly successful online crowdfunding campaign for the victims, and observations and fieldnotes from an extended period of digital ethnography. Interviews were conducted between one and three months after the attack, and were designed through a phenomenological lens, to capture lived experiences of being on and using social media over this period. Thematic coding was applied to both interviews and crowdfunding donor comments, with emergent findings triangulated between these, and fieldnotes and observations, for additional validity. Shaped by ethnographic, critical, and interpretive lenses, analysis sought to situate findings within the specific socio-political contexts of contemporary Aotearoa.

Research findings are organised into five major themes including: information management as care; moral witnessing through social media; communicating care through (and beyond) words; negotiating conflict in the digital public sphere; and charitable actions (re)shaping social relations. The conclusion provides a discussion of key aspects of these, including phenomenological and critical perspectives on 'being' online, being together, and being with others; the social, relational, and political aspects of information sharing; and efforts to discern what the possibilities for real action, real change, or real care through digital spaces could be.

CONTRIBUTORS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dr Susan Wardell was the primary investigator for the research summarised in this report. Dr Wardell is a researcher and lecturer in the Social Anthropology Programme (School of Social Sciences) at the University of Otago. Her research interests include emotion and affect, care, health and wellbeing, mental health, grief and trauma, and collective memorialisation.

Two research assistants assisted with the project: Dr Ella Robinson, who undertook some transcription work during Phase 1, and Beth Garey, who contributed to data management and thematic coding of media material during Phase 2 (see 2.1).

Thanks to conference funding from the University of Otago, a conference paper featuring emergent data from Phase 1 was presented at the AAA/CASCA conference in 2019 under the title “They Are Us: Care Performances among Digital Publics after the Christchurch Mosque Shooting” (Wardell 2019).

Phase 2, which followed on from the phase reported in this technical report, was funded by a University of Otago Research grant, “They Are Us: Practices of care in digital environments, after the Christchurch mosque attacks” (2019-2021, PI Susan Wardell).

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 CONTEXT OF THE REPORT

Nearly three years on from the Christchurch mosque attacks, we are still working to understand the many ways that this event has shaped the nation of Aotearoa New Zealand. Academics, policy-makers, and the public all contribute to these discussions, and are likely to be doing so long into the future.

One aspect that has received considerable attention, and which is the focus of this report, is the way that both experiences of the attack (via the terrorist's livestream and social media news streams) and public responses to it (via crowdfunding donations, social media campaigns, and online memorial activities) were heavily mediated by digital and social media technologies. While much of the formal response – including the Christchurch Call – has focused on hate speech, radicalisation, or explicit content, emphasising platform or provider responsibility and government regulation as part of the pathway forward, a need for better understanding of user journeys has also been noted (Arden and Macron, n.d.). Social scientists have a clear role to play in providing insights to the more everyday aspects of online behaviour in relation to platform infrastructures and algorithms, but also in taking seriously the social strategies and agencies of social media users in responding to traumatic events in real time. This approach aligns with scholarship in which the digital world is increasingly acknowledged as a site of complex moral negotiation and action.

1.1.1 Aim and objectives

The qualitative research outlined in this report aimed to explore the moral frameworks, values, and practices that New Zealand citizens and residents used to navigate digital spaces in the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque shootings. Towards this goal, it focused on gaining in-depth, phenomenological insights into the emotional, social, and embodied quality of their experiences online to build an understanding of the thinking (and feeling) behind their actions.

In addition, the research was shaped by an ethnographic lens in that it aimed to situate and contextualise (rather than generalise) findings by considering how these choices related to the specific social, cultural, historical and political landscapes of New Zealand.

The report also aims to contribute to the wider body of scholarship analysing and theorising the digital sociality. It diverges from a body of work that examines this with a focus on hate speech, abusive behaviour, explicit or objectionable material, and censorship. Instead, it builds on momentum in the ‘anthropology of the good’ (Robbins, 2013) to elucidate practices of empathy, care, wellbeing, time, hope, and change in a way that maintains critical attention on the structural and socio-political contexts in which different ‘goods’ are evaluated and pursued.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

1.2.1 The social context of Aotearoa New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand is a post-colonial settler nation in the South Pacific. In 1840, Te Tiriti o Waitangi | the Treaty of Waitangi was signed, cementing the relationship between Māori as tangata whenua (people of the land, i.e. the indigenous people of New Zealand) and the British Crown. This formed the basis of the nation-state but also foregrounded many more years of colonial land dispossession and cultural suppression against Māori. Today New Zealand is a highly secularised and (ostensibly) bicultural society (Pratt, 2010). At the time of the 2018 census, 70.2% of the population was of European descent, 16.5% identified as Māori and 8.1% as Pacific Islanders, and 17.8% identified as belonging to other ethnic groups (Stats NZ, 2020). Among the many legacies of colonialism, Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) remain over-represented in structures of power and fare better statistically in education, employment, and home ownership, while Māori and Pasifika people still experience higher rates of incarceration and material hardship (Pearson, 2018).

1.2.1.1 Islam and multiculturalism in New Zealand

Shifts of migration policy and waves of migration have shaped the nation’s current demographics. As of 2018, approximately 1.3% of New Zealanders professed an affiliation to Islam (Stats NZ, 2020). This percentage represents a diverse and growing population of whom about a quarter were born in New Zealand, with the rest coming from the Pacific Islands, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (2013 census, Nisa & Saenong 2019; Pratt, 2010). As many as 45 different nationalities are represented in the Christchurch Muslim community alone (‘Messages from the Mosque’, n.d.). Many Muslims in New Zealand identify as ‘Kiwi’ and actively identify with the country’s positive international reputation for multiculturalism (Pratt, 2010, p. 405). However, multiculturalism as a political discourse was introduced to

New Zealand government policy as recently as the 1980s, and has many variations. It has been argued that its current manifestation remains based on an implicit Pākehā norm from which other groups may diverge only in limited and controlled ways – with categories such as ‘culture’ used to assign ethnic difference – and in which distinctions between tolerable and intolerable aspects of the community are prevalent (Clarke, 2006).

Scholarship on Islam and New Zealand often highlights the ongoing presence of essentialising stereotypes and simplifications of Islam as a monolithic entity, or as represented by a simple dichotomy of radical and moderate Muslims (Clarke, 2006). Attitudes towards Muslims in New Zealand are additionally shaped by media portrayals imported from the USA (Rahman 2020, p. 363). These portrayals foster anxieties about terrorism and wider colonial anxieties, which depend on an exoticisation of the “Muslim other” that remerged strongly after 9/11 (Macdonald, 2006, p. 20). This is despite the fact that New Zealand is known as a relatively safe country, with extremely limited incidents of mass violence, mass shootings, or gun violence in general. Although a body of international research examines the lived experiences of Muslims in both Muslim-majority countries and diasporic or minority communities, there are calls for more attention to first-person perspectives (Dobson, 2013). Foroutan (2017) addresses the need to give greater attention to specific factors such as gender, age, socio-economic position, and ethnicity in understanding the diversity of Muslims in Aotearoa New Zealand.

1.2.2 The Christchurch mosque attacks

On 15th March 2019, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a 28-year-old white male and Australian national, entered Al Noor Mosque, in central Christchurch, during Friday prayers. Tarrant opened fire on the worshippers with a semi-automatic gun and rifle before driving to Linwood Islamic Centre, where he also entered and opened fire. He was apprehended 19 minutes after he first opened fire – 18 minutes after the first emergency call – as he was driving away from the second site. The attack resulted in 51 deaths and more than 50 injuries.

1.2.2.1 Manifesto and livestream

Directly before the attack, Tarrant sent a 17,000-word manifesto to the Prime Minister’s office and a range of media outlets (more than 30 recipients in total) outlining his white supremacist/white nationalist ideologies. The manifesto was also shared on the 8chan website, along with links to a Facebook livestream. Tarrant streamed a 16-minute, 55-second-

long video of the massacre, recorded via a helmet camera. Facebook reported that the livestream footage was viewed just 200 times during the live broadcast, but 4,000 times in total before it was removed. Over the following 24 hours, there were 1.5 million attempts to re-upload it, including 300,000 different versions appearing on this platform alone (Porter, 2019).

1.2.2.2 Media and social media responses

This event – which was subsequently referred to as the “Christchurch mosque attack”, “Christchurch mosque shooting”, “Christchurch terrorist attack” or “Christchurch terror attack” – dominated Aotearoa New Zealand’s media for a period of time and generated significant international attention towards the small Pacific nation, particularly among Muslim-majority nations. Both official and public responses to the attacks, in the days and weeks following, were commended worldwide. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s presence and attention permeated the media circuit and marked a committed formal response and a unified national response; her statement of “they are us” quickly became a viral catchphrase. The wider New Zealand public also offered intense performances of collective grief: flowers and hearts piled up outside mosques in Christchurch and around the country, and tens of thousands attended public vigils in most major cities.

Much of the public experience of, and response to, the event was digitally mediated, from exposure to the terrorist’s livestream to a proliferation of profile frames, emotive images, and messages of love directed at ‘imagined communities’ of Muslims throughout the country. Nearly 100,000 people donated money to online crowdfunding campaigns for the victims’ families. Alongside the high level of press coverage, public vigils, speeches, and musical tributes were also livestreamed for the public. At the one-year anniversary of the event, looming COVID-19 concerns led to the cancellation of the planned national remembrance service just 24 hours before its scheduled time, with the city’s mayor suggesting that commemorations would have to “continue online”. A public service was held on the two-year anniversary in 2021, featuring the Prime Minister, Christchurch City Mayor, and a variety of representatives from the Muslim community. This was also livestreamed.

1.2.2.3 Policy responses: The Christchurch Call

Two months after the attack, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron called on other government leaders and leaders of the tech sector to work towards

eliminating violent extremist content online. This was entitled the Christchurch Call. After an initial summit in Paris, another summit was held on the second anniversary of the attacks.

1.3 EMERGENT ACADEMIC LITERATURE: A SELECTIVE REVIEW

Academic writing on the mosque attacks from a number of disciplinary perspectives is emerging slowly into publication.

This writing includes investigations of the social context of the ‘alt right’ in relation to the role of social media in spreading and enabling new forms of decentralised right-wing terrorism, including via specific platforms such as 8chan, and its weaponisation of extremism (Lowe, 2019, Sparrow, 2020; Waldek, Ballsun-Stanton and Droogan, 2020; Baele, Brace and Coan, 2020). A report by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism analysing Brenton Tarrant’s radicalisation and attack planning (Veilleux-Lepage, Daymon and Amarasingam, 2020) also covered this factor. Other articles have used context and comparison to analyse the social factors surrounding the attack and the responses to it, including a focus on the lens of religion in driving the ideologies of terrorism (Pratt, 2020), attitudes to religious groups in New Zealand (Greaves et al., 2020), perceptions of terror threats by security sector practitioners (Battersby, 2020), a comparison of ISIS and far-right discourse (Buckingham and Alali, 2020), and a comparison of white supremacist skinheads in the 1990s and contemporary internet-driven alt-right groups (Gilbert and Elley, 2020).

Macklin (2019) provided a timely overview of the unprecedented context of the viral livestreaming of the attack. Others have looked at the livestream as part of the ‘banalisation of evil’ (Ibrahim, 2020), or a weaponisation of liveness (Tikka et al., 2020). The book *Critical Incidents in Journalism* includes a chapter on livestreaming that considers the responses to this by journalists and the general public (Jenkins et al., 2020). Brzuszkiewicz (2020) wrote about jihadism and far-right extremism in relation to the spectacularisation of violence. Others have directly examined the Christchurch Call in relation to censorship (Hoverd, Salter and Veale, 2020) or terrorist and extreme content removal more generally (van der Vegt et al., 2019). A piece by Mazer (2020) similarly considers the performative aspects of the attack (including the role of social media), but adds a discussion of performative responses to the attack, and Willis (2021) focuses on everyday performances of inclusivity and exclusivity.

Psychologists have contributed to this literature by considering radicalisation, ethno-nationalism, and more. Examples include an exploration of tokenistic inclusion versus allyship (Mirnajafi and Barlow, 2019), a discussion of building social cohesion (Louis et al., 2019) and an article analysing the psychological and societal enablers for the rapid gun control reform (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). A sentiment analysis of tweets one month after the attack also focused on mapping “public emotions” and social cohesion (Abdelkader A. Aboualhuda and El-dosuky, 2021).

Analysis of news reporting after the attacks has been covered by a variety of people (Batoool, Fellow and Malhi, 2020). This included papers on journalists as first responders, the effect of distance on media coverage, and the construction of Muslim identity (Ellis and Muller, 2020; Rupar, 2020; Rahman, 2020). Thiruselvam (2019) has taken this further by investigating the role of narratives of the “grateful refugee” and “model minority” in a post-colonial feminist observation of care ethics following the attack.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 OVERALL PROJECT DESIGN

This report covers findings from the first phase of a project that then expanded to encompass 18 months of multi-methodological research on the social responses to the Christchurch mosque attacks, with an emphasis on digital contexts, texts, and behaviours. Figure 1 shows the two distinct but related phases of data-gathering and analysis. This report focuses solely on data from Phase 1, but its interpretive validity has been enhanced by the additional contextual awareness gained from engagement with the aggregate data of both parts.

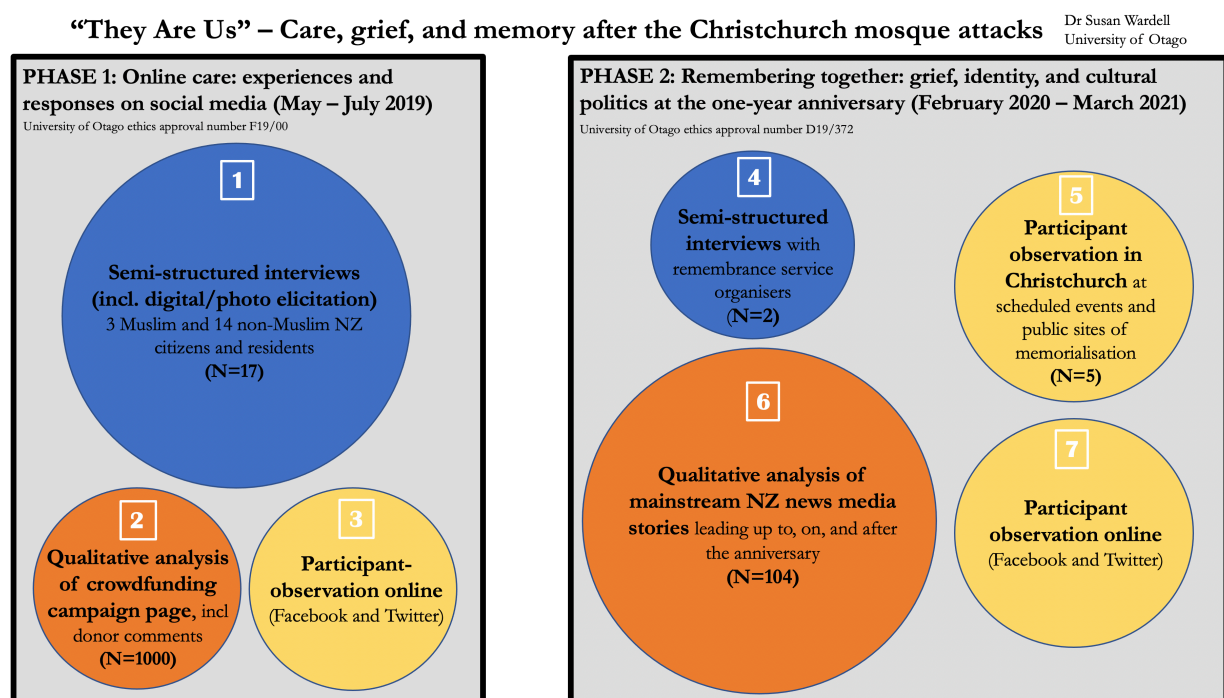


Figure 1: Map of overall research design

2.1.1 Phase 1: Online care

The first phase of the project commenced six weeks after the attack, with data-gathering spanning May to July 2019. It focused on the ways that care – alongside grief and/or solidarity – was expressed and experienced in online spaces in the immediate aftermath of the attack, by whom, for whom, and via what embodied and online practices. This report responds to the section of the overall study that focused on digitally networked ‘publics’, as comprising mediated relations between strangers that were challenged and reformed through the shooting. Based on a series of semi-structured, in-depth and phenomenological interviews, this phase aimed to consider subjective experiences of navigating digital spaces in

the immediate aftermath of the attack and the relationship between senses, embodiment, and moral frameworks. This stage also included close attention to the viral Givealittle crowdfunding campaign, and specifically an analysis of several hundred donor comments.

2.1.2 Phase 2: Collective memorialisation

The second phase of the research, which was funded by a University of Otago Research Grant (UORG) and ran from February 2020 to March 2021, focused on collective and public processes of memory and memorialisation. It aimed to consider the ways in which the events were being woven into collective regional and national identity and the social or political tensions that this might elucidate. This phase focused on the planning of the national remembrance service at the one-year anniversary of the attacks. It included interviews with two key planning committee members and involved participant observation at a number of memorial events in Christchurch. In addition, the first and third authors undertook an analysis of 103 media articles published before, during, or after the anniversary. This eventually included articles responding to the cancellation of the planned national remembrance service. Digital ethnography on social media at the time of the anniversary was also key both before and after this time. Field notes taken as a participant-observer in the consumption and circulation of news articles, viral images, messages of grief and solidarity, fundraising links, social media campaigns, and more aimed to document additional aspects of affect, public sentiment, mood, rhythms and temporality in these spaces.

2.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The findings represented in this report responded to the following primary research question:

- How do New Zealanders understand (and navigate) the moral qualities of their actions in digital spaces in the aftermath of the mosque shootings?

Some sub-questions guiding the research design and analytic focus were:

- In what ways did the aesthetic, material, and dialogical qualities of digital spaces shape affective and embodied experiences of the shooting?

- In what ways has the mobilisation of affect in digital space since the attack formed, reformed, or reinforced different layers of national, regional, religious, and racial identity and belonging?

2.3 METHODS OF DATA-GATHERING

2.3.1 Interviews

The first and main feature of Phase 1 was a series of 17 in-depth, ethnographic interviews conducted in May and June of 2019. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 3.5 hours each. They were conducted at a location of the participant's choosing or convenience, or via Skype, Zoom, or using a written app such as Gmail chat or Facebook messenger, based on participant location and preference.

The interviews used a semi-structured and open-ended interviewing technique and were designed to elicit phenomenological insights – emphasising experience, emotion and affect, cognition, decision-making, and the senses. To further enhance this, most interviews included photo elicitation techniques, using personal devices and the participants' own social media accounts, with participants (optionally) sharing individual images or screenshotted records of their online activities.

Recruitment advertisements were placed on different (public) places on social media, and all participants self-selected for this study by responding to one of these.

2.3.1.1 Interview participants

A brief overview of the participants is given in the table below. All names given (and used throughout this report) are pseudonyms. Demographic information in the table below, and throughout the report, is also limited to further protect anonymity.

Table 1: Interview participant summary

No.	Participant pseudonym in this report	Location	Demographic details	Occupation	Religion (if specified)	Method of interview
1	<i>Hannah</i>	Christchurch	Adult (30s), female, Pākehā	Nurse		Zoom

2	<i>Ursula</i>	Dunedin	Young adult (early 20s), female, European	Tertiary student	Christian	In person
3	<i>Pauline</i>	Rural South Island	Older adult (70s), female, Pākehā	Retired	Buddhist	In person
4	<i>Tina</i>	Christchurch	Adult (50s), female, Pākehā	Teacher		Skype
5	<i>Jessica</i>	Palmerston North	Adult (40s), female, Pākehā and Māori	Yoga teacher, tertiary student		Zoom
6	<i>Crystal</i>	Dunedin	Young adult (early 20s), female, Pākehā	Tertiary student		In person
7	<i>Jasmine</i>	Dunedin	Young adult (early 20s), female, South-East Asian	Tertiary student	Muslim	In person
8	<i>Hayley</i>	Dunedin	Older adult (60s), female, Pākehā	Retired, volunteer worker		In person
9	<i>Sasha</i>	Dunedin	Adult (30s), female, North American	Caregiver	Muslim	In person
10	<i>Joanne</i>	Wellington	Adult (40s), female, Pākehā	Non-profit worker		Messenger
11	<i>Tim</i>	Dunedin	Young adult (mid 20s), male, Pākehā	Activist		In person
12	<i>Albert</i>	Christchurch	Adult (50s), male, Pākehā	Musician		Messenger
13	<i>Molly</i>	Christchurch	Adult (30s), female, North American	Caregiver, educator	Muslim	In person
14	<i>Amelia</i>	Wellington	Adult (30s), female, Pākehā	Civil servant		Zoom
15	<i>Marie</i>	Christchurch	Adult (30s), female, South-East Asian	Tertiary student	Catholic	Phone
16	<i>Brenda</i>	Wellington	Adult (40s), female, North American	Speech and language therapist		Zoom

17	<i>Christopher</i>	Central Otago	Young adult (20s), male, Pākehā	Hospitality worker, tertiary student		Zoom
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These 17 participants are by no means intended to be a representative sample of the New Zealand population since, as the table shows, this group has substantial diversity in some areas and a strong demographic skewing in others. Eleven participants identified as Pākehā (New Zealand European) and only one identified as Māori. Six participants (all of whom also identified as immigrants to New Zealand) identified with other ethnicities, including three North Americans, two South-East Asians, and one European. While the study didn't ask all participants to specify a religious affiliation, it is important to note that the sample did include three Muslim participants, including one who had family members injured in the attacks. The majority of participants (13) were currently based in the South Island – a region closer to the location of the attacks and with lower urban concentration and its own demographic profile in terms of ethnicity. The significant majority (14) identified as female.

2.3.1.2 Interview questions

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style, meaning that not all questions were determined ahead of time. Instead interviews included some question prompts and additional responsive questions, with questions rearranged as needed to allow the interview to follow natural conversational paths. The general line of questioning was based on the following prompts:

Can you tell me a bit about your normal modes of engagement with the digital and with social media?

- *How does it fit into your day-to-day patterns of living?*
- *What patterns of engagement, action, do you have when you are on there... clicking and scrolling... deliberate posts, deep reading vs scrolling?*
- *What particular platforms do you engage with?*

Can you tell me a bit about how you first became aware of the attack?

What sticks in your mind from social media in those early hours?

- *Any specific things? Images or articles?*

- *Any general impressions?*

Could you tell me a little about how the attack affected your offline life?

- *Things you did or actions you participated in offline in response?*
- *Conversations you had or other social interactions you participated in?*
- *Feelings, your own sense of wellbeing?*

Did you observe any particular shift or progression as time rolled on to what you observed or felt in digital spaces?

- *Was there anything others were doing that you felt tense or uncertain about?*
- *Was there stuff you observed that made you feel particularly good or positive?*
- *Who was most present? Or most vocal?*
- *Who did you feel close to? Or distant from? Or angry at?*

What did you yourself spend time doing when you were accessing digital platforms? Where and what?

- *Did you make posts of your own? Tell me a bit about the thought and feeling processes going on for you when you were putting those together.*
- *Were there any moments where you felt tense or uncertain about your own posts online?*
- *Were there any contributions you made online that you were particularly proud of or happy about?*
- *Who were you aiming your posts at, or talking to?*
- *Who did you feel close to? Or distant from?*

Suggestions of sharing screens or screenshots were made at any relevant point, with some participants choosing to provide visual material for discussion before, some during, and some following the interviews. When provided before or during the interview, this material provided the basis for additional tailored question prompts.

All participants were also given an opportunity at the end of the interview to bring up anything else they wished to share or add.

2.3.2 Crowdfunding campaign analysis

The second aspect of Phase 1 of this study involved a qualitative content analysis of media and social media activity surrounding the crowdfunding campaigns established for victims of the Christchurch mosque attack. This campaign was started by Victim Support, a New Zealand-based NGO that provides practical and emotional support for people affected by crime and trauma. The campaign was set up on Givealittle, New Zealand's national non-profit, donation-based crowdfunding platform.

The campaign was created on the day of the attacks and ran for just over 12 weeks, during which it amassed a total of \$10,903,966 from 97,923 donors. Other campaigns related to the attacks – often for individual families and set up by family friends or other private citizens – ran parallel to this major campaign, many also successful to a lesser degree.

2.3.2.1 Characteristics of crowdfunding donors

Donors on Givealittle have the option to include a name or remain anonymous. Based on donor names and the content of donor comments, donations came from individuals, families, workplaces (where a collection had been organised between staff), churches and other religious organisations, and sometimes corporations or businesses. Some donations were tied to particular activities or fundraiser events, in which case they represented donations from a wider variety of people, typically collected offline by a primary person or organisation. Donations were also made by businesses as part of their profit from selling specific products (such as t-shirts or jewellery) or as a percentage from services sold (such as hairdressing). Other times, donations were stated to have been requested 'in lieu of gifts' by a particular third party – for example, on birthdays.

Donors on Givealittle have the option to leave a comment with their donation, which is then visible to the public when viewing the campaign page – or, in the case of a high volume of donations, by clicking through the numbered pages of donation comments. Comments typically range from a few words to a paragraph, with emojis in common use throughout. Due to the high volume of comments, approximately half of the comments were analysed as part of this study – representing thousands of individual comments from individual donors (the exact number of comments analysed through this method being impossible to determine as the interface does not show page numbers or distinguish between donations with and without comments attached).

2.4 ANALYTIC APPROACH

Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, including detailed emotion and non-verbal codes throughout. Any supplementary visual material provided by participants was inserted into the transcripts, near their relevant referents in the discussion. The resulting document was then analysed using an iterative process of open coding. The main text of the Givealittle campaign page was analysed with the same open-coding technique, and donor comments were also coded this way. Notable comments were recorded through notes and screenshots. Digital ethnographic field notes were reviewed for additional insights in interpreting and refining the code list. A sense of data-saturation was approached, in that many interviewees were referring to the same material (discussions, digital texts or accounts, or events) as each other and as had been recorded by the researcher as a (digital) participant-observer. This included various links between participants and the crowdfunding campaign.

The code list created from the first round of analysis included some emic codes (i.e. derived from the actual vernacular language used by the participants themselves) and other etic codes (drawn from pre-established academic terms to frame or label patterns of behaviour or experience referenced in the interviews). Initial codes were reviewed a second time and organised into broader themes that are represented in section 3 of this report. Each of these themes draws its validity from being based in data from multiple participants, which is in turn triangulated with other insights from digital ethnographic field notes or observations, including the crowdfunding page analysis, where relevant.

2.5 ETHICS

This study was conducted with full ethics approval from the University of Otago's Human Ethics Committee: Phase 1 approval number F19/00, Phase 2 approval number D19/372.

The study followed ethical principles of informed consent. Participants were provided with full information about the study and were given an opportunity to ask clarifying questions before agreeing to participate. Participants had the option to withdraw or end their participation at any time. Care was taken with interviewing, due to the extremely sensitive and distressing nature of some of the discussion points, with the interviewer offering the options of skipping questions or ceasing the interview in moments where participants became emotional.

Anonymity was adopted as a default in all reporting on this data. Participants were given access to drafts of any talks or publications (including this report) so they could review and approve any quotations ascribed to them or other references to them.

The report does not directly cite any of the visual material provided by participants, which is more difficult to fully anonymise as it typically involves screenshots from private groups or accounts, which include the names of multiple non-participants.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 OVERVIEW OF THEMES

In this section, the findings of Phase 1 of the project (see 2.1) are outlined in themes regarding online experience and behaviour in the wake of the mosque attack. The major themes under which the research findings are organised are **information management as care, moral witnessing through social media, communicating care through (and beyond) words, managing conflict in the digital public sphere, and charitable actions (re)shaping social relations**. Each of these themes emerged from an open-coding process across multiple data sources, including analysis of interviews, the crowdfunding campaign, and digital ethnographical observations.

In the following sections, each of these major themes is broken into subsections that detail specific findings, highlighted with select quotes (rather than complete datasets). For reasons discussed in 2.5, visual material is not included.

3.2 INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AS CARE

This theme presents findings pertaining to practices of information management on and through social media in the wake of the mosque shooting. It highlights the way that information about the attacks connected people to the event, and also to other people.

The sections outline different practices of accessing and circulating information online, and the goals and considerations shaping these, under the following headings: **information seeking, disseminating information, framing information, and filtering information**.

3.2.1 Information seeking

Many participants described a strong compulsion to seek information when they first learned about the attack and in the early aftermath – a time when official reporting provided only a partial picture of what had happened and many key facts (such as the number of terrorists, the likelihood of additional attacks, and the death toll) were not yet known, were reported differently by different news outlets, or were being continually updated.

For some interviewees – particularly the Muslim participants around the country and any participants residing or working in central Christchurch near the location of the attack – the

impulse to seek information related to concerns about personal safety. There were similar implications for those who had friends or family members who lived closer to, or were more likely to be affected by, the attack than they were. However, even those without any direct social or geographic connection to the event reported feeling distressed or concerned by a lack of information and the sense of uncertainty this caused. Seeking information was thus a process intended to alleviate emotional distress. It was also important for participation in social life at a time when the attack was a major topic of conversation, with participants wanting to be up to date in conversations with others.

3.2.1.1 Strategies for seeking information

All participants had strategies for information seeking. These varied between individuals. For some people, information seeking involved a direct path to a particular news source – such as the website of a particular media outlet. Others Googled key words and decided what to click on, and still others regularly checked or refreshed different social media platforms or personalised feeds to watch for updates across the numerous sources collated there.

Key factors were the sudden and shocking nature of the event and the speed at which new information emerged. For many people, this precipitated a deviation from their normal patterns of social media use. Hannah, for example, explained that she usually used a Facebook blocker on her phone during the day (so she received notifications but could not access her newsfeed), but disabled the blocker on the afternoon of the attack based on a “need to know what’s happening”. Christopher similarly wanted to “keep up” and so switched from Instagram (where he usually spends more time but which he perceived as mostly “pictures”) to Facebook (because “that’s where all the news, articles and stuff go”).

Information was also sought within more restricted or private facets of social media infrastructure. For example, on the day of the attack, Hannah used a longstanding group chat with friends she had studied with to swap information and “work out what was happening”. She reasoned that “everyone only knew a small amount” and “it was kind of hard to know who had the *best* information”, but the chat enabled them to share, compare, and evaluate. This further related to the material assemblages involved in accessing social media. The use of small personal devices – frequently cellphones but also tablets or laptops – facilitated a different type of shared information seeking or consumption experience than other forms of media (such as television). While hyper-connected, they were also individualised, as evident

in one participant's description of following the news of the attack with "three adults in the room all on their own screens, following their own Twitter feeds, getting a different piece of it" (as explored further in 3.2.1.3).

3.2.1.2 Media modality and "real news"

Uncertainty based on either insufficient information or unclear and potentially misleading information was described as causing discomfort and distress. One participant elaborated that a lack of information can create a "lacuna", into which rumours may come. Another participant similarly noted that "when they didn't release numbers [shakes head], the rumours started *flying* and you hear things". Others associated the rush of the news media to offer information as promoting speculation or "guessing". As such, the data showed that practices and experiences of information seeking were tied to media chronotopes and the fast news cycle, with one interviewee describing their information-seeking processes being driven by a desire to "get ahead of the story". At the same time, they evaluated different points of information as they emerged, categorising them as belonging to the "rumour mill", "conspiracies", or "fake news". This also meant that rather than being a passive consumption of news, information seeking involved many practices of rapidly applying understandings of modality in order to find "real news".

Participants' choices about how to navigate online spaces to seek information were not purely about the accuracy of reporting but also acknowledged that different online spaces had different types of information or different ways of framing information (see also 3.2.3). An example from Jasmine is as follows:

Facebook had, like, real news. Yeah, yeah of news articles and reports. But Twitter had, like, other people *tweeting* things, which can be like, really *negative* things. Because it's just a person, you know?
Not an author, or a reporter.

Similarly considering the authority of different sources, Pauline sought "facts" and avoided "somebody's 'reckons'".

Given the networked qualities of digital media, the paths that information seeking took them on could be winding, passing through official and unofficial, primary and secondary forms of

information. This was evidenced by Tim, a young activist in a nearby South Island city, who typed some details into Google upon hearing about the event and then “within minutes” found his way to the terrorist’s Facebook page, his manifesto on the 8chan page, and a link to the livestream video – which had not actually loaded at the time, to Tim’s later relief (see also 3.2.4.1).

3.2.1.3 Navigating digital geographies

Seeking news on social media, in a literal sense, typically involved opening and/or unlocking a digital device, such as a cellphone or laptop, and clicking or tapping a button to open a specific app. Several interviewees described it as “jumping onto” social media. Different embodied practices were then involved in navigating or moving through these spaces to seek information – including clicking, scrolling, and looking. However, entering online spaces does not necessarily involve disengaging from physical place or social contexts, but may involve switching attention and co-presence. Indeed, several interviewees described gathering in the same room as family members, friends, or flatmates to engage with news of the event via digital devices as a group because “we’d rather experience this together than apart”. Christopher, who is self-employed, chose not to work and to instead stay home with his flatmates, going through and discussing articles. Jessica spoke of reading news aloud off her phone to others in the room, while Amelia and her housemates sat in the same room, and each independently followed the news via their own devices.

Social media was defined by one person as a “big space”. However, many others emphasised the view that it should not be considered a single shared space at all since content was individualised by site algorithms and curated personal networks. As another person put it, “You say ‘on Twitter’, but actually there is no such thing as Twitter, there is just my Twitter feed, and your Twitter feed and somebody else’s Twitter feed.” “We all curate our own *feeds*, right. So it’s not like we’re seeing the same *thing*,” as another said. Yet another person reflected on social media as an “echo-chamber”, and another noted that the Facebook algorithm “knows me too well, and then it’s only putting up stuff that’s related to my thoughts”. In this way, as one interviewee said, social media was not a single big world but just “your little world”.

Most participants in this study regularly used more than one social media platform, and they often also recognised that each platform had different qualities, which related to different

social norms – a different “etiquette” as one person put it – that in turn were related to the dialogical qualities of the interface. For individuals it was also related to the networks they were connected to on different sites, and their chosen settings on each. At an intermediary level, community processes of administration and moderation in each space also changed the content and character of a digital space. The relationship of the online space to geographic spaces or cultures was also acknowledged at times, such as by one participant who reported noticing where in the world specific articles on Facebook had been written or published. This all contributed to some platforms being described as “dangerous” and others as “safe places” in the period after the attack (see also 3.2.4.1).

3.2.2 Disseminating information

Many participants in this study appeared to be people who were reasonably confident in finding and evaluating reliable news – likely due in part to the self-selecting recruitment strategy – and many described actions they had undertaken to disseminate information they had accessed and found valuable. Dissemination included both online and offline practices (such as the participant who spoke about reading news reports aloud at a dinner party on the evening of the attack, see 3.2.1.3) and practices that moved information between platforms or networks (such as the participant who took screenshots of the livestreamed press conferences she was watching on Facebook to share as images on her Instagram).

3.2.2.1 Countering inequalities in access to information

The demographics of the faith communities of the two Christchurch mosques – which include many immigrants – made information about the event relevant not only to those living in the city or to the New Zealand Muslim community but to many people around the world, including networks of family and national governments. A number of participants were also aware of the structural and geo-political barriers and inequalities that others faced in accessing information. Joanne, who coordinates a non-profit social venture in Wellington, noted her awareness that there were “a lot of overseas people who were wanting to connect or know what was going on” and thus described her role on Twitter as less about providing original content and more about “being a postman for them” in retweeting other relevant information. At the same time, Joanne was aware that not all information was worthwhile, so used the very public Twitter account she was in charge of at that time to “ask people to be careful what they shared as there seemed to be malicious misinformation out there”. Another example is one South-East Asian participant, who was studying in New Zealand. She

discussed an “affliction of fake news” in her home country in South-East Asia as her motivation for passing on “more reliable” news to family and friends back home. She did this by taking screenshots of local newspaper coverage or national news streams on her laptop to then “post it for my friends for information” on Instagram. In these ways, participants’ dissemination practices were often tailored for particular communities.

3.2.2.2 Allaying fears within personal networks

Molly, a Muslim convert whose two immediate family members had been injured in the attack, experienced a flood of communication from people who were worried about them in the days after the attack – a time period when she was under huge pressure attending to her family in the hospital. At the same time, she was aware the rumours about her loved one’s supposed death were causing stress among his family and friends, who lived in a country she described as very prone to fake and sensationalist news reporting. Molly sought to allay others’ worries by sharing some of the more accurate local reporting, along with personal updates about her family’s situation. Several other participants with personal or geographic links to the attack also found that a personal message on social media, often accompanied by links to other sources of information about the attack, could be an efficient way to let people know that they were okay since it could be read and accessed simultaneously by large numbers of people in their networks.

However, Molly also wrestled extensively with how much information to share about their situation and experiences, and with whom, at a time when her family’s personal details were being sought or co-opted as public information or news. Much of this information circulating in the news media involved quite “intimate details” as she put it – including details about the type and location of injuries and medical prognosis. Other reports included upsetting explicit visual representations of her family members, such as images of her husband partially naked in the hospital bed during recovery, or a video of both family members (one of whom was a child) lying injured on the floor of the mosque. While she sought to share some information about what had happened, she did not necessarily want any and all information circulating and thought carefully about how to control this, as discussed in more detail in 3.2.4.5.

3.2.2.3 The ambiguous effects of sharing information

Despite the perceived benefits, many participants found that sharing information with others was not a simple or straightforward good. A number of participants recounted, with horror or

chagrin, how they had found themselves accidentally breaking the news about the attack to people in the very early aftermath. These and other discussions in the interviews showed that care was taken with how, where, and by whom information was shared, and in what contexts (see also 3.2.4). For example, some participants who were parents talked about the role of teachers in terms of sharing information with children, and the interviewee who was a teacher in Christchurch also reflected carefully on this. However, the desire to protect children from the bulk of potentially distressing information about the attack was not an option for everyone. As Sasha explained:

normally I wouldn't share these things with my children. But it also felt very *relevant*. Because their friends, like in our social circle, you know, our Muslim friends, *they* might be directly affected.

She poignantly described telling her (primarily school-aged) children about the attacks on the afternoon they occurred because “I thought it was really important to try” and trying to remain calm even while the tears rolled down her face.

3.2.3 Framing information

Disseminating information (as discussed above in 3.2.2) is not a neutral act. Information is framed by what is included or omitted, by the particular language, narratives, and images that are used, and also by emotional tone. On social media, even ostensibly neutral information sources, when circulated by individuals, can be additionally framed through the written comments that accompany retweets, reshares, links or screenshots attached to private communications, or by using visual means such as filters, emojis or reacts, and more. Data from the interviewees in this study made it clear that a number of editorial decisions are typically involved in this process. These choices could be based on personal interest, such as one university student participant who noted that she included anything about gun laws when selecting news items to share via social media, since she had an interest in that. Or they could include consideration of the demographic make-up and specific interests or needs of the audience (see also 3.2.2.2 and also 3.4.2.1).

3.2.3.1 Care for vulnerable audiences

In the hours after the attack, Jasmine anticipated that many of her international and Muslim friends were likely to be sharing her own state of shock and fear. She described that in

sharing local news via her own social media accounts, she purposefully selected bits in which the Prime Minister was “saying reassuring things” in order to encourage them. Joanne, who was involved in leading a nonprofit regularly, and at the time was also managing a large public Twitter account, similarly described how she

tried to share good news, loving responses, examples of goodness and kindness to help people who felt overwhelmed by sorrow and anger. I really wanted to try to show some light. Everything was very dark, but there were lots of beautiful things happening and I wanted that to shine though.

This was because she perceived the state of the general public to be fragile - a belief heightened by her interactions with one person (not previously known to her) who was suicidal.

Jasmine had to consider the impact of not only of general information and “news”, on her networks but personal information as well (see also 3.2.2.2). At one she point shared a “dark” photograph of her own view from inside the flat, where she had locked doors and closed curtains, highlighting her sense of isolation and fear at that moment. However, she later went back to delete it because she didn’t want the information about her current physical and emotional state to cause others to worry. Her process of weighing up how to frame content she either created or circulated from elsewhere related to the different audiences of different platforms, preferring Instagram over Facebook for most things, since she found Facebook “too public”, and later explained that “my grandma calls me if I post anything depressing there”.

3.2.3.2 Official framings, political sense-making

Information is also often framed, both consciously and unconsciously, to line up with official political or ideological messages. This is obvious in the patterns of language that recur online, but many participants were explicit about the fact they had intentionally aligned their online practice with Jacinda Ardern’s early request that the media and the public refrain from using the terrorist’s name, for example. This was socially policed to a degree. One participant recalled mentally preparing themselves to jump in if they “saw people deviating from what the script was like not using the shooter’s name” but found they didn’t have to as it was broadly accepted. Brenda, an American citizen, noted her sense that the general adherence of the media to this rule, and to generally more respectful framings of the tragedy, was

nationally specific, noting in awe that she hadn't seen a "single image" of violence or injury, except for a few people "cleaned up and in hospital". She contrasted this to US coverage where "you'll see lots and lots of bodies" and an emphasis on violence and the "blow by blow" details in the "political" and "gorier" coverage, along with an emphasis on the offender. Another participant noted that when a few journalistic outlets did defy these protocols it was strongly policed by online publics:

There were lots of people saying exactly the same thing of "we don't need to *see* this", "we don't need to *know* his name", "I thought we agreed not to use his name", and "we don't need *images*", you know, "if we want to see anyone we want to see the people that were heroes, we want to see people that tried to help".

In this case, people were "saying" things in the form of comments underneath news stories.

Language helps to organise and frame information, and so do the dialogical features of social media. Hashtags are an example of the architecture of social media that provides social cues as to how to make sense of the event. Hannah noted having observed a change in hashtags at a certain point in the stream of news she was following on Twitter: "I realised it was quite significant from when things turned, like the hashtag turned, from like 'Christchurch', or 'Christchurch shooting', into 'Christchurch terror attack'." Jessica was also aware of the moment when the word "terrorism" came suddenly into use. Her practice of this was intentional – in line with online commentators who recognised the history of associating terrorism with black or brown bodies and with Muslims and who positioned this terrorism as white – saying that "I was quite aware of the way that terror can be *framed*. I was very aware of *wanting* to use the terrorist *word* as much as I could. At the same time, knowing that it was kind of tripping the wire for some people." It is clear here that not only information but also its framing shaped collective experience of the event.

Analysis of comments made by donors on Givealittle similarly showed the ways that individuals incorporated wider social, political, and moral frames into their understandings of the event (the comments then themselves becoming part of the dissemination of wider social information and sense-making about the event due to their public visibility). For example, comments sometimes specifically mentioned white supremacy (e.g. "White supremacy

sucks” or “punch nazis”) or racism (e.g. “give nothing to racism”, “may this horror wake up all of us to the horror of ‘casual’ racism”), tolerance, diversity, or multiculturalism (e.g. “diversity and freedom of expression are core values of civilized society”, “everyone should feel safe and be safe in Aotearoa, Regardless of race, religion, gender, beliefs”).

3.2.3.3 Public relations for New Zealand

Another extremely common theme in the Givealittle campaign was statements about New Zealand or New Zealanders. Data from interviewees similarly showed that many people experienced a higher awareness of the global eye on the country at this time and a desire to counter potential negative perceptions. Jasmine, a Muslim, person-of-colour, and immigrant to New Zealand, described how she specifically curated the things she shared online to have a positive tone, in order to give a “fuller picture” of the nation and people of New Zealand to people overseas at a time when the media was focused on the violent, racist, and unsafe experiences of minority communities in New Zealand. She was later recruited by her university to write a blog piece about her positive experiences at the institution and in New Zealand. The Givealittle comments show very similar attempts to emphasise the positive qualities of the country, for example:

this incident was loathsome and polar opposite to who kiwis are by nature

I believe [New Zealand] to be a peaceable and accepting society and country

NZ is a wonderful country

[NZ is] one of the global safe-havens

[NZ is] a beacon of peace and harmony

As part of this, many comments, especially as time went on, emphasised the response to the event over the event itself:

christchurch has shown the world how to react to such hate atrocities

Very proud of the New Zealand people in the amazing reaction after this tragedy

the way that NZ is coping with this is an example to the whole world

80,000 donors to one act of terrorism

This last comment points to the fact that information about the crowdfunding campaign provided a quantifiable sense of public sentiment or support (see also 3.3.3.2). Interviewees expressed a similar intention in their practices of responding to the attack online.

Another aspect of public relations was the heavy use of comparison. Mostly this centred on comparison with the USA, often in relation to mass violence or gun legislation but also more generally in relation to racism or public responses to mass violence. Comparisons were also made with Australia, especially when the terrorist was revealed to be an Australian national. One participant described the mass violence of the attack as “a thing that *happens*, but it, it doesn’t happen *here*, you know, it’s, it’s a horrible thing that happens in, mostly in, the United States, but occasionally in Europe”. It was because of that, they reasoned, that it “really *struck at* our national identity, like our sense of what, what New Zealand *is*” which was another reason for the efforts to rehabilitate or revise the potentially negative view of New Zealand that the event created, and to specifically reassert the nation as distinct from those places – if not in the ability of such an event to happen, then in the response. One interviewee described, proudly, that America had set “the *norm* [of] how you deal with a terror attack of a gun nature, and we [New Zealand] turned around and went ‘that’s how you deal with it, but we’re not going to’.”

In this way, the public attention on New Zealand was turned towards the positive as the weeks went on. Sasha, an immigrant from North America to New Zealand, echoed this pride, describing it as “really cool for this teeny tiny country, in the bottom of the world. And not a lot of our news gets shared on a wider scale media platform, you know... So this is at least the first time that *I* took notice of our news, not just being a one off, you know, five-minute read, being an ongoing media thing around the world. And then people followed it.”

3.2.4 Filtering information

While information could allay fears and calm nerves, it could also heighten anxiety in many cases and, in some, seriously traumatise. One person said there was “so much crap out there, [that] isn’t helpful or comforting”. Another described sitting on the corner of a street in central Christchurch, opening up Facebook and seeing all the posts about the mosque attack:

I just had to close [social media]. I couldn’t watch it, I couldn’t read it, I just -- at that point I just couldn’t, even though it may have given me information, I just couldn’t look at it, it was just too much. And I didn’t look at, other than maybe like one or two articles that were *directly* related to like the gore of what happened. I didn’t ingest any news for almost two weeks.

This is just one example of the various strategies that social media users developed for controlling or filtering incoming and outgoing information.

3.2.4.1 Exposure to explicit material

Anxiety circulated about the explicit nature of the material available online – specifically the livestream video and explicit violent still images from this video or from the aftermath of the attack where injured people and dead bodies were visible from the street. These images had a serious impact on many who saw them. Joanne, who was inadvertently exposed to some of the footage in the afternoon of the attack, had to stop and throw up afterwards. Christopher described how his flatmate had seen some of the video as it was streamed live, and he went to her workplace to be with her for a while that afternoon as she was “pretty shaken”. In a longstanding Facebook chat group Hannah had with friends, one member sent a link to the video. The group then hotly debated the appropriateness of sharing the video as a form of information, with Hannah herself horrified because “I don’t want the trauma of seeing people *shot?!*”

All of the participants in this study expressed a belief that these materials could cause psychological/emotional harm when viewed. At the same time, there was a strong sense of the information being spread so rapidly and extensively that it was now “everywhere”.

“You couldn’t avoid it for a few days,” said Crystal, who kept her TV off because of this, though she came across screenshots from the livestream more than once while scrolling on

Facebook. It “made my skin scrawl,” she said, in revulsion. Metaphors of contagion, “exposure” and “spread” were prominent in the language used to discuss this. As Tina, a teacher in Christchurch and high social media user before the attack, explained:

The fact that they wouldn’t stop the video being shared, and I got a real fear that video was going to go through my timeline without me even being able to control that.

Participants frequently expressed fear about not only the harm the material might cause but also the lack of control over if, how, or when they (or a loved one) might encounter it. While they wanted to be able to “chose” how they consumed information, the site’s infrastructure meant they instead worried about the ability to “stumble upon” something in an unplanned and sometimes repeated manner. This relates somewhat to the different mediums for news coverage, some of which afforded more control than others. Molly, for example, did engage with news reporting but explained that she preferred to “ingest it on *my* terms” rather than have it “*thrust* at me” or be “forced into it”. For this reason, she preferred to read articles rather than watching television news. With her own family reeling while her two close immediate family members were treated for injuries in Christchurch hospital, she was thus upset to be “exposed to it” by walking by a TV set in the hospital. References to the visual nature of much of the troubling content, and the nature of engagement with visual media, were common. Participants emphasised that you “can’t unsee” what you have seen, expressed wishes that they could unsee, or described how they can “still see” particular images or clips. “It’s just like one of those things that’s probably gonna haunt me my whole life,” another person said.

The impact of this sort of material also differed, of course, based on the person’s relationship to the attack. Molly dealt with this to a unique degree, regarding video taken inside the mosque in the direct aftermath of the shooting – apparently via cellphone, though she did not know who had filmed it or how it had become public. Her husband and child are visible in the video, lying injured and bleeding on the floor of the mosque. Her husband is holding a cellphone, and she estimates the video was taken at almost the same time he had briefly called her (which was the first she knew something was wrong) before lapsing into unconsciousness. This video circulated extensively online, as did screenshots from it – and Molly admitted unhappily these were likely “*never* going off the internet”. She also described

“hundreds of times” when people would send her a snippet of the video via direct message on social media or tag her husband (when she was managing his social media accounts during his recovery), leading her to be exposed to the upsetting images yet again. “I never want to see those pictures. Unless like I *choose* to see them,” she emphasised, flummoxed as to why people felt the need to link her to them. In order to control her exposure to this sort of thing in the general social media stream, she had her settings blur the screenshots of any videos appearing in her personal feed. However, she also spent time going through social media to report the appearance of any of this material (see 3.2.4.4). In order to report content – and, in fact, to check what it was at all – she had to unblur it, but this caused the video to automatically start playing. She emotionally described an afternoon in her living room when she unblurred a video she suspected might need to be reported, only to have the sound “of agony and terror and wailing, and people talking in multiple languages” flood out of her laptop. The video was the one from inside the mosque, and it was “the exact *sound* that I heard when my husband called me,” she tearfully explained, narrating her frantic scramble to stop it playing on her laptop.

3.2.4.2 Strategies for filtering incoming information

Attempting to filter information coming into one’s digital space was a practice almost all participants undertook to some extent. Different practices could represent complementary or escalating strategies. For some, it involved physically “putting down” a personal device to take a break for a little while when it became “too much” or when they “felt overwhelmed”. Another strategy could be “logging off” the social media accounts on particular personal devices. However, some participants recognised that being able to “tune out” in any of these ways was a privilege and not possible to the same degree for everyone.

For some, a sense of control was enhanced by changing a user setting on a particular social media platform. For others, it involved temporarily leaving a social media platform (or all social media platforms) for periods ranging from a couple of hours to weeks or months. This typically came after evaluating a particular platform as more or less safe than the others (see also 3.2.1.3). For example, Jasmine decided not to use Twitter because it automatically plays videos, and she didn’t want to be exposed to the livestream again. However, she noted that she also had to weigh up the people involved in her different networks, such as her grandmother, whom she did not wish to worry by going silent on a certain platform. A few people permanently left a social media platform – a process of deleting accounts, which one

participant found technically difficult and time-consuming but persisted with as a way of “keeping myself safe”. Those who took more temporary breaks expressed a high degree of nervousness and caution when “going back on”.

Blocking certain individuals who had an established pattern of sharing explicit information, or information framed in ways the individual found distressing or harmful, was another strategy of self-protection, and yet this action was also morally nuanced (see also 3.5.3.1).

3.2.4.3 Protecting others

The sense of risk that propelled the need to control or filter information was not only about the individual’s own exposure, but related to caring responsibilities for others too. Parents and teachers among the participants indicated concerns about children being exposed to this material. Amelia, whose son was six at the time of the attack, described how all of the adults in the room of her home – where she lives with her partner and a flatmate – followed the news via their individual devices (laptops or phones) on the afternoon of the attack but spoke about it using coded or veiled references. She indicated that their use of individual screens provided more control than a larger shared screen, saying:

So I was really glad we didn’t turn the TV on, because I didn’t want my six-year-old exposed to that [matter-of-factly].

Exposure to distressing or explicit information about an event in which even the basic facts were distressing was not always within their control, however. Tina discussed her primary-aged son being sent a screenshot from the video by a schoolfriend. Their work to control or filter information reaching their children was not only about limiting what they themselves shared but also involved strategies of suspending accounts and limiting, moderating, or supervising use.

Participants were concerned not only for those they were directly responsible for but also for non-present others – i.e. the general online public. These concerns fuelled strategies to filter, block, or remove harmful content by engaging with the formal reporting infrastructure of the site. Actions taken included reporting objectionable material to moderators, officially lodging complaints, and so on.

3.2.4.4 Platform responsibility

Many individuals recognised a powerful ‘they’ – of social media platform owners and administrators – who in theory had the power to filter or control this material in a more top-down manner. Yet participants often received minimal, no, or lengthily delayed official feedback from platforms on the outcome of their complaints. Their comments about this evidenced an awareness of tensions between community and corporate responsibility for social media spaces. One participant spoke with disgust about “Facebook’s pathetic excuses when they wouldn’t stop the video being shared. The choices of some to leave the platform was a direct response to the sense of a lack of care or responsibility by the platforms, necessitating actions to keep oneself safe. Tina explained of her choice to delete her Facebook account:

the *feeling* that Facebook was -- it just you know, they are not interested, they are interested in money and they are not interested in keeping us safe. And I needed to make sure I was kept safe.

This stance also drew on earlier instances of being aware of Facebook’s lack of action over reported content, including racist, Islamophobic, or violent content. While most participants were frustrated by a lack of response, some noted that moderation could occur quickly in certain situations. Many discussed the government’s role in blocking the livestream immediately after the attack, with one participant noting that the government had shut down or silenced “problematic and gross” social media accounts within a week of the attack. Others discussed the removal of specific pieces of content after they had been reported by someone – noting that their awareness of this often came from traces left. Seeing a thumbnail that, on clicking, led to a notice that the content had been removed (without seeing what was blocked or removed) is one way in which the processes themselves left evidence via visible gaps. Practices such as shadow-banning similarly left sometimes subtle traces of the top-down control of the information space.

While many of these actions were about filtering one’s exposure to certain types of (visual or explicit) information about the suffering of others that this attack represented, the participant whose immediate family members were injured also discussed her efforts to prevent information about them from reaching wider audiences – again showing how these processes are positioned. As discussed in section 3.2.4.1, Molly committed significant time to reporting

unauthorised and often confronting images of her family members that were circulating on the internet. Her distress was less about their identifiability and more about a sense that she should have ownership or control over the images. She undertook the laborious process of going through all the images those family members had been tagged in (on their behalf, on their account), and/or clicking (to unblur the image, which is necessary before you can report it) and then reporting it, as well as blocking the person posting them. The complexity here is apparent in that it was not possible to do this labour on behalf of her family, and the general public, without exposing herself to images that were uniquely traumatic to her. In addition, she felt that the platforms emphasised the blurring as a safety mechanism, when for her “It isn’t *about* that, it’s about the fact, this is my photo and it’s not supposed to be out on the internet, but like they [the platforms] didn’t really get it.”

3.2.4.5 Ownership of, and right to, personal information

Those whose personal lives were suddenly proximate to a major international news event had to filter not only incoming but also outgoing information – that is, information about them that they provided to others or that circulated independently about them.

Even in sharing information with immediate family (as discussed in 3.2.2), Molly worked to evaluate who was owed what degree of information, evaluating layers of kinship entitlement and degrees of prior relationship. At the time, she was checking/using her (adult) family member’s Instagram – while they were in hospital and unable to – to correspond with their networks and relay information. She described replying to a person from her loved one’s hometown who requested information about his condition:

I commented to her request for information about his condition. I said “we are not sharing his information,” in [local language] I said this: “we are not sharing this information with anyone who, you know, isn’t family you know, or isn’t, in our inner circle basically”... she was *so* rude to me. She told me to get *off* of my [family member’s] Instagram. She told me that she thought, because she is from his hometown, that she is more entitled to information than I am to withhold it.

The language of ownership of information is also invoked, as she also commented:

Y'know that's *our* information, that's *his* information... you know what I mean, and that's – that's like that, those are something like, I don't *need* to highlight to the world the *area* of my body, area of my [family member's] body his injuries are in exactly. They don't need to *know* how many gunshot wounds he has. They don't need was it shrapnel or was it a bullet. They don't even need to know how many entry and exit points, like... like people don't *deserve* to know, [corrects self] *very few* people deserve to know the specifics of... personal health things, you know.

She also resisted the commoditisation of information by journalists and individuals as a form of social capital (see also 3.3.1.1) by being selective and guarded in her processes of disseminating information, even to her existing social networks. Her wariness was not unfounded as a close personal acquaintance from the country that she had previously lived in passed a personal photo/update she had sent just to them via private message onto a neighbour, who passed it on to someone else, eventually leading to it being picked up in the national press of that country and it once again becoming beyond her control.

3.3 MORAL WITNESSING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

This theme summarises findings about the role of social media in shaping how people individually and collectively bore witness to what was a landmark historical event for this small nation. The data pertains to temporality, space and place, embodiment, co-presence with others, and ways of interpreting (or enacting) public action and sentiment through a digital interface.

This theme is presented under the subheadings of **witnessing a historically significant event, collective memorial activities and digital co-presence, sensing (in and through) the online social body, performing personal transformations in public, and active listening through micro moral action.**

3.3.1 Witnessing a historically significant event

The nature and death toll of the Christchurch mosque attack made it an unprecedented event for the small nation of New Zealand. Many people described the mosque attack as a 'where

were you when it happened' moment – expressing their awareness that they were experiencing a historically significant event, even as the news broke. Brenda, a North American in her 40s, living in New Zealand long-term, compared it to her experience of hearing about 9/11. Although many first learned about the attacks via online or social media sources, the 'where were you' trope encompassed the expectation that the memory would be fused to the real world time and place in which this occurred. Participants recounted what they had been doing or who they were with when they first heard, as well as how they found out – ranging from a text message from a friend to seeing an article link on the side of a different news story (about a celebrity's sister) that they were reading.

Crystal, who is in her early 20s, reflected on the death of Princess Diana or the fall of the Twin Towers as similar moments for other generations, but said that for her this was "the *first* super like influential thing that happened in my lifetime". She described a sense of the world having changed forever: a "new reality... a *new kind of world* of being opened up to, of just [thinking about] what we're gonna do now".

3.3.1.1 Emphasising connections to the event

In many ways, the New Zealand public took the mosque attacks as something that had happened to the entire country. Yet this was in tension with recognition that the event targeted a very specific religious and ethnic community and occurred in a specific geographic location. Still, data in this research showed a common communicative trope in which people both personally and publicly emphasised any geographic or social connection they personally had to the event.

Geographic proximity to the site of the shooting was a significant factor in the first instance. In the uncertainty following initial news reports, in which local schools were on lockdown and rumours of possible car bombs in the area or of multiple shooters were spreading, social media allowed for the circulation of information both to assess one's own safety (see 3.2.1) and to check in on others who were similarly or more closely positioned to potential danger than oneself (something many participants described doing). But the same mechanisms that allowed people to report their safety – Facebook's mechanism for reporting oneself safe during an emergency, for example, and informal measures such as posting one's location – were ways of making public the proximity to danger, or potential danger, that one had

experienced. Some of the participants critiqued this as being overly performative. As one person expressed it:

I just don't need to hear people dramatising about how they once strolled down that street and it could have been them, or you know – people trying to get in on the action almost.

In a similar vein, Tina noted her particular fury at seeing some white Christian friends doing this publicly on Facebook, describing her frustration at their lack of awareness of the privilege that made them extremely unlikely to have ever been a target of this violence, given its racialised and Islamophobic focus, even if they had been in the same location.

Many donors commenting on the Givealittle page prefaced their comments with a reference to their geographic or social connection to the event. Some simply stated what part of the country or the world they were from. For those overseas, a noted trope was to mention some connection to New Zealand, such as a family member who lived there or having visited the country. Here and elsewhere, alongside geographic proximity, many people located themselves in relation to the event by mentioning a connection to the people directly involved or affected – whether through an ongoing relationship, a memory, or a shared network.

Those who had a social connection to someone directly affected by the attacks tended to reach out privately (often using social media platforms) even if their existing relationship was not intimate. This practice had ambiguous potential. Molly, whose family members were injured in the attack, described how she was inundated with distant acquaintances messaging her out of the blue through social media, alongside well-meaning strangers: “Lots of people drawing you know, making some kind of connection to their own life, something that resonated with them connected me, connected them to *my* story in some way,” she explained. While some made very genuine offers of assistance, which warmed her heart, she sensed that others seemed to just want “a piece of the tragedy pie” (see also 3.4.2.4).

3.3.1.2 “Real time” and surreal time

Experiences of “living through” this event, were tied to media chronotopes. Interviewees spoke of watching the event in “real time” or “as it is happening”. As a student in her early 20s, Crystal perceived the fact that “we get to see it like in the *now*, as it's happening” as

specific to her generation's experience of media, and the advent of social media in particular, comparing this to other generations that might have learned about it "that night on TV" or "a week later in the weekly paper". Indeed, media technologies made this possible during the massacre itself (via the livestream) and through the emergency, political, and public responses.

A key example of the way that "real time" was experienced through social media was watching the death toll numbers rise during the afternoon of the attack – with online news articles updating numbers frequently and social media users' discussion comments (under news stories or on their own homepages/walls) also referencing these. In a similar way, a lot of people watched the crowdfunding donation tallies rise, or "build up", and this too marked time.

For some, the event created a temporary distance from normal life – including normal rhythms and temporality and, for a few, spatiality. For example, Jasmine retreated to the flat where she lived alone, choosing not to go out for several days due to not feeling safe with her headscarf visibly marking her as Muslim. Closing her curtains and skipping her university lectures, she stayed inside and used social media heavily in the week after the attack, "reaching out" for emotional support via Instagram. Over the same period, Molly was "stuck" in the hospital where her family members were being treated for serious wounds sustained in the attack. She recalled feeling that "I can't *actually* engage with *real* people in *normal* life, like other people can right now" and so spent long and late hours on the internet instead, where she also fell down "rabbit holes" – this term indicating a distortion of time and space.

While many people reported that a unique clarity was ascribed to the moment of hearing the news (as in 3.3.1) as well as "certain things I'll never forget" in the weeks following, their overall recollections were more frequently described as "a little bit of a blur". Some participants struggled to remember when certain media events had happened, and others struggled to remember any specifics of where or what they had seen (online or offline) even when they had a strong *overall* impression of it (see also 3.3.3.1).

For those more directly affected by the tragedy, including Molly, work to resolve this uncertainty felt important and was supported by social media as an archive of time-stamped details – an external databank of memory. She described her personal memory of the day

itself as “fuzzy” – a blur of personal trauma and emotion over “hours that I had no control and no knowledge”, in particular while waiting for news about her family members’ status. She later used her phone records and media reports to piece together a clearer timeline for the day, describing this as something important she “needed” to do, something tangible to regain a small sense of control to “understand *exactly* what happened... even though it has no bearing on like the fact *that* it happened”.

A sense of the surreal surrounded the event (both online and offline) for many people, some of whom described shifting between not feeling anything and having it hit them “like a tonne of bricks”. This sense of unreality concerning the extreme nature of the event was seen as positive and protective by some (see also 3.2.4.1). Tina, a teacher and mother, mused that “for children that age it’s all of that abstract... almost and almost like *make believe*, it almost isn’t *real*”. Rather than resolving, for many participants the blur was increased by the passing of time, and indeed was associated with the speed of time’s passing, with people making statements such as “I can’t believe it’s been two months, it feels like it’s just last week.” Sasha discussed it taking a while for her to feel “normal” again. At a certain point, one person described a decision to “try to just start looking forward” instead. Another interviewee noted a sense of guilt for “going about my day-to-day life” while aware that others were still struggling.

3.3.2 Collective memorial activities and digital co-presence

Participants who were not immediately affected by the attacks made a variety of efforts to better understand and publicly acknowledge the significance of the event. These efforts included engagement with public memorial activities, such as the spontaneous memorial activities at the sites of the shooting (vigils of protection/support, laying of tributes and cards) and well-attended public vigils in several major cities. There were also various online activities, both collective and individual, which can be understood as extensions of memorial practice. In turn, engagement with events based in physical locations was heavily inter-related with online activity. These events were officially livestreamed, and at the same time individuals present shared their experiences online.

3.3.2.1 Place, event, and digital co-presence

Amelia was at home with a head cold when her city hosted a vigil drawing 11,000 attendees, nine days after the attack. These events were officially livestreamed. However, she reflected

on the specific modality of digital technologies, stating that it was more than “just *watching* the ceremony itself” and that “there was something about social media that makes you feel more connected to that then, than if it was a TV”. This was because coverage of the events was provided not only by official sources but through informal reporting by thousands in attendance. As Amelia described it:

you kind of get this weird composite view of what it was like to be there, because you see twelve or fifteen people’s different perspectives of the crowd, shot from where they were. So you do kind of get that sense of *connection* with the place.

This sense of connection extended beyond finite events into spaces of ongoing memorial activity. For example, Hannah, who lived in Christchurch but didn’t participate in the tribute walls or activities outside the mosques, appreciated the “actual user-generated content” on social media, which included photos people shared of these memorial spaces and their activities there. Social media was also used to connect physical attendees at large events. Brenda, who physically attended the same event that Amelia missed, spoke about being stuck in the enormous queue outside, where “everyone was using social media to figure out what was going on inside”. To do this, they checked Twitter, where others who were already inside were posting pictures to assure those outside that there were still spaces. This meant “you could kind of string things [together], you could see what was happening in here,” she said.

A sense of connection to the place or event went beyond the informational. People shared photos and videos of the physical space and the content of the speeches and musical tributes; they also shared personal responses to these. Amelia described following the feeds of several friends who were connected, and “hearing what they have to say, how they are reacting to [the ceremony]” or “things that resonated” with them personally as a key part of her experience. This sharing of more personal or sensory types of information showed that online engagement was not only about sharing the facts of what was happening, where and with whom, but rather about sharing sensory, social, and affective information – the “vibe” as she put it. She elaborated that “it was almost like, like watching with a group of people”. Brenda similarly shared a belief that posts she made from inside the vigil could “create that sense of solidarity and community” for others around the country, including people who “missed a chance” by missing the vigil.

3.3.2.2 Recording the moment, being in the moment

While the above data shows social media as providing wider public access to memorial activities, the common public discourse of social media and personal devices as a distraction from full presence in the physical (and face-to-face social) world was also present at times.

Brenda described that she “really wanted to capture when everyone was singing” but she also wanted to “be in the moment”, so chose not to record anything on her phone for most of the event. Overall, Brenda’s perception was that the event was not as “overly documented” as some other events – such as concerts held at the same venue – because people were, like her, “living in the moment” and not posting as much. She spoke about this positively, even while expressing her sense of value in sharing the event with those who couldn’t make it, choosing what she did post quite selectively so as not to create more “noise” online (see also 3.4.1).

Even rituals based on embodied sensory and/or non-visual cues, such as silence, had a way of translating into, or through, social media contexts. Brenda, who comes from a workplace where “people are always on their phones”, also participated in the national moment of silence on the Friday after the shooting. She described how she and her colleagues “listened” to this on the radio. She also noted that people used social media to figure out when it was happening, and she noted the absence of people tweeting or commenting during the minute, a sudden quietening of her feed when instead “they were just experiencing”. The sense that deeper or more significant layers of experience are found outside the digital is an interesting contrast to data showing that poignant experiences could and did occur via the digital; the paradox in itself is a relevant finding.

3.3.2.3 The impact of the crowd

Physically attending events was given a particular weight by both those who did and those who didn’t attend. One participant indicated that it was important to physically turn up at an event rather than just “saying” you are going by clicking the attending button, as this has “become too easy”.

Sasha, a Muslim woman living in a nearby city, noted that one of the few times she turned on her TV during coverage of the attacks was to see the remembrance ceremony and concert happening in Christchurch. She shared that she appreciated:

all of these things together like seeing that, the *volume* of *people* who essentially are saying that they support me and my family, you know, they support people who are in my community.

Molly, who consumed news mostly in the form of written news reports that she accessed online, similarly indicated that “seeing people come together for vigils” had an impact on her. Sasha emphasised that by “showing up in the concert you say a lot of things”. Attendance itself was thus communicative, and not just physical attendance, but digital attendance, which in turn connected to social actions reporting and witnessing through social media.

3.3.3 Sensing (in and through) the online social body

Social media was both a place where things happened and a place where things happening elsewhere, in the offline world, were reported in a way that provided a sense of the mood or vibe, as well as the facts (as above 3.3.2.1). Both had an impact on social media users. “Oh yes there was a lot of beautiful stuff happening. I cried for hours that weekend, firstly because of the horror, but then often because of the love people were showing,” as Joanne said. Social media, as a record of public activity in response to the attacks, enabled people both within and outside the country to interpret what an imagined collective – such as “New Zealand” or “the public” or even just “people” as Joanne said – were doing, saying, thinking, or feeling. This was not individual people but people as a group. Data from this theme assists in unpacking how these interpretations were made based on specific features of social media interfaces and engagement.

3.3.3.1 Dialogical sense-making

The ability to perceive something about the attitude or stance of a larger social body was not focused solely on events featuring large physical crowds but also on a perpetual, rotating crowd of networked individuals moving through social media spaces. Amelia described Twitter use as giving her a “strong sense of what the whole community is talking about” but was also clear that “it’s not just like *one* thread, it’s like the conversation that built up over multiple threads across several days”. As such, a sense of a/the social body is cumulative and dialogical. This analysis is supported by the fact that, for the most part, interviewees had a strong sense of the public response over this time, and yet typically recalled very few specific images or posts even when they stated they had been significantly impacted by them (see also

3.3.1.2). The exception was typically a few viral images or photographs that circulated heavily, and thus were themselves communicated in a multi-sited, participatory, and dialogical manner.

The Muslim interviewees in this study also reported practices of gauging public attitude via social media, at a time when their sense of safety relied closely on this. Jasmine, a young, hijab-wearing, Muslim woman in a nearby city that had originally been planned as the focus of the attack, was scared to leave her home in the days immediately after the attack. She shared that “when I scroll online, and there’s like, so many positive things about Muslims. It just feels better.” These comments were made in response to “all the feelings, all the doubts I have, I have felt you know, for being a Muslim, of being ‘am I actually accepted’, ‘do people like me here?’”. She elaborated by referring to a viral cartoon by Wellington artist Ruby Jones that she observed circulating on social media after the attacks and to the phrase “this is your home, you should feel safe here”. She joyfully described this as “cute” and said that “seeing those things did make me feel safe”. Her words made it clear, however, that it was not only the content of the image but “the fact that people were sharing it online” that communicated safety to her. Again, the emphasis is on “people” (plural) in the networked public taking an action. The impact was in the action itself, and the number of people taking it, rather than the original artist’s single voice.

Molly described how seeing collective solidarity and caring online “did kind of help to balance out all the negativity” – yet her process of weighing up, interpreting, or sensing the balance of public sentiment or support was established through fleeting rather than deep attention to reporting on this. She elaborated that even when she didn’t have time to read an article, she found she could absorb “the front page and the breakdown of what was happening as I scroll through”. She described her overall approach to online engagement as active, describing how she had to “wade through” the “crap” online to find caring people and “little nuggets of good stuff” that balanced out the negative or uninformed content she saw, even when it was in the minority. Among the varying modes of attention people used, including scrolling, repetition communicated the significance and force of particular opinions or sentiments. Amelia talked about sometimes navigating her own consumption on Twitter based on the view that “you are like, oh, okay, well if *two* people I know thought it was good enough to retweet then I really should read [laughter] like I really should give that my five minutes of time”.

3.3.3.2 *Quantifying care through social media metrics*

Sasha, another Muslim participant, also used quantified terms to describe her sense of public attitude or response to the attack:

I would say a good 95% of it was positive saying “oh my god, I can’t believe this happened, so much love, you know, thinking of your community” those sorts of things. There was the odd idiot that will put something really *silly* or really *hurtful*.

Sasha’s reading of the public response was not only via comments or her impression of overall tone but also through the metrics of platform reacts to news stories visible below the Facebook posts. Recalling reading a story about the rising death toll in the hour immediately after finding out about the attack, Sasha recalled that “people were laughing”. By this she referred to seeing ‘laughter’ or ‘haha’ reacts appearing under the news story, her phrasing indicating the ease with which micro moral actions online are interpreted as real social responses (see also 3.3.5.1). Metrics played into this as well:

You know, people are putting those laughing faces. And I’m like, “I don’t understand how it’s funny. Surely somebody’s clicked that by accident?” But you know, when it’s 100 people, you know, it’s not.

Molly further reflected on how the sense of public sentiment influenced others’ online practices, suggesting that:

if there is an article where 90% of [the comments] are positive, a lot of those people that have horrible, hateful things to say, feel a little bit intimidated to put those horrible..., because they know that a lot of other people are going to be then directly responding to them. Whereas if you go on to a post, and... it’s about a 50/50 split, this is a much safer space [for those people] to be negative. Yeah, you know, and negative people are drawn to those negatives.

Crystal similarly observed people holding alt-right views as “banding together” at certain points when they discovered someone who “thinks what I think”.

3.3.4 Performing personal transformations in public

People experienced the new and shocking nature of the event as creating change in their own views or awareness. This, too, was entangled with social media spaces in which they both engaged with new perspectives and shared their progress in doing so.

Setting the tone early for a rejection of the terrorist and his values, the Prime Minister stated “This is not who we are.” Many individuals followed this statement by emphasising their moral distance from this person, and what he stood for, in their online comments about the attack. Yet this approach was countered by other public voices who critiqued the approach of individualising the terrorist’s actions as distancing New Zealand as a whole from a white supremacist framework that is strongly present in its national, colonial history.

There was clear discomfort in being able to see oneself, demographically, as similar to a violent perpetrator. Jessica discussed this, in observing the difficulty of the (white) men at a social gathering with her on the evening of the attack, whom she had observed were extremely quiet throughout the discussions she was having with her other friends:

And a couple of the guys that I know that were Pākehā, saying, “I didn’t know how to *respond* because he was one of us Yeah, he was *white*. He was *male*. He was my *age* or he was my, you know. That’s one of *our* crew, and we’re not very happy about that.”

In this way some white males experienced the event as placing an extra onus on their actions and responses as being representative of a group perceived as dangerous, or linked in some ways to these radical ideologies and affects. Tim, as a young white man, found himself reading a few of the articles with information about the terrorist’s background and upbringing, including “the story of how he was radicalised”. As well as fuelling his activist work by providing information on whether the terrorist had connections to other groups in New Zealand that he needed to be aware of, Tim described his motivation as stemming directly from an awareness of “my proximity to white supremacy”. Locating his demographic connection spurred an even greater need to “be a good citizen... And stay clued-up on it, and

actively look for it, and... do my bit in countering it?” In this way, recognising one’s social positionality, and how this placed one in the social context of the terrorist attack, was a precursor to personal growth or change.

3.3.4.1 Being opened up

A number of participants described seeking out information about Islam as a way of “educating themselves”. As one (non-Muslim) participant put it, “I kinda felt the way that I kind of cared for my own grief and the grief of Muslim community was like *learning* a bit more about it”. It was clear that practices of online engagement went beyond seeking information or facts (see 3.2.1) to seeking instead a glimpse into the lives and lived experiences of others – in the case of the white or Pākehā participants, mostly meaning Muslim and/or non-white people. Rarely did the process simply involve reading about them; rather, it was embedded in social media and involved practices such as listening to people, interacting with others (online users) who they “normally wouldn’t”, following new people, or taking additional time and attention to read things written by these people (see 3.3.4.2).

A sense of being ‘opened up’ to a new way of seeing the world was considered to be valuable to the growth and development of the self. At the same time, it was seen as having social value; many of the interviewees described seeking to engage with and understand others’ experiences to develop greater critical awareness of the relationship between particular experiences and structural and systemic issues of racism in wider society. Examples participants gave included hearing Muslim New Zealanders’ stories about the sense of risk or vulnerability they associated with being a Muslim in public and developing a different perspective on guns and gun laws. Another participant described how “It has allowed me to get a *glimpse* of some of the problems that exist, socio-economically and otherwise, in New Zealand, and not just New Zealand.” One participant described “noticing more” things about Islamophobia on their social media feeds after the attack.

For a number of (white or Pākehā) participants, the process of deliberately seeking to be ‘opened up’ in this way was a response to an initial sense of shock or disbelief after the attack. This seems to have highlighted an aspect of their own ignorance that they actively sought to counter. Reflective discussion about public reactions to different identities and histories evolved in online discourse and media commentary. As Tina said:

I think just about everyone that I read started with “this is not New Zealand” which I did as well, and then over the hours and the days, it worked [to] well what “actually you know, it kind of is” no, no, not on that scale we’ve never seen anything like that before, but these *ripples* are there all day every day.

Similarly, Amelia described that:

a lot of the racism and a lot of this sort of stuff has been *hidden* from view, um, people particularly white people, you know, um, and that [slight pause], you know, we just weren’t, we weren’t *listening* enough [slow, thoughtful], you know, so that it’s not that, uh, from when we were *shocked*, we, almost didn’t have a right to be shocked, like we *shouldn’t* have been shocked.

This process of reflexively considering their reactions in relation to the prior knowledge or awareness afforded or obscured by their positionality was directly related by many participants to their subsequent actions of seeking to educate themselves. The following sections elaborate on this.

3.3.4.2 Curating feeds for diversity

As participants recognised their own social positionality, they also expressed awareness that this meant their view of the world, through social media and in general, was partial. This involved a recognition of what is often described as an ‘echo chamber’, within the personalised algorithms of social media (see 3.2.1.3). Many of their actions were therefore to recognise others whose voices could provide a different or fuller understanding of the event, and the world in general, and to then curate their feeds accordingly. As one participant explained:

I was seeking *out* voices that I have not necessarily followed before, I was following lots of Māori activists, so that I can learn, ‘cause that’s not *my* world view, so I can learn -- but not *Muslim* voices so I was seeking out voices and trying to amplify those *into* my timeline so that I was hearing a point of view that I wouldn’t normally *hear*. And

so when you know following lots of new people and only I am following a handful of those and for obviously my timeline itself, and is still Eurocentric, but is then, has got this sizable and Māori component of a Pasifika component, but that's probably where it ended, and so I realised that I needed to make sure I was hearing other voices as well.

In practical terms, for some people this meant following new accounts on Twitter. For some, it was more a choice about what links to click or what articles to read, as filtered through their Facebook feed. For some, it meant paying more attention to public voices that they felt provided these important perspectives. One participant, for example, spoke about paying particular attention to the New Zealand Greens' politician Golriz Gahraman's response to the attack, as "a view that was more connected". Although they had been following her for a while, the significance of whose opinion it was suddenly changed, or was weighed differently, and so their modes of attention shifted too.

In the same way, learning to identify the social position of voices could also be part of *refusing* attention. This included practices of not sharing the terrorist's name or viewing the video or manifesto. One participant spoke about muting a few people she called "the usual suspects" – those known for sharing provocative opinions to stir up controversy – in the periods after the attack when she felt emotionally raw. She subsequently experienced "a nicer Twitter". Other participants spoke about removing, unfriending, or blocking friends who expressed a view of the attack they found objectionable (see also 3.5.3.1). Other people did not take concrete actions to filter content but found they were giving less weight to the opinions of people who had less personal or social connection to the attacks. As Crystal described:

it was just like if it's a white author of this article, I'm not gonna give it as much *weight*, as I'm going to a *Muslim* author because it is just like, this is an actual victim at this situation writing about, they're actually and like victim impact statement type of thing. And it was like their intended *audience* is the *community*, and their intended agenda is their *experience*.

This is less about who has the right to speak, and more about whose words will give a different, new insight – not one based on expert or authoritative status but the alternative moral authority of lived experience, which gives “more credibility”, as one person put it, to talk on a particular issue.

3.3.4.3 *Public confession and reflection*

The process of being ‘opened up’ was not only, or not always, internal and invisible. Many times it became part of the visible public response on social media platforms as mainstream New Zealanders chose to use these platforms to publicly reflect on their past and changing self. Tina observed that “People were mostly willing to reflect, on the fact that you know this -- these big things actually stop as small things and we’re going to look at the *roots* of the problem.”

This was reflected in brief in the Givealittle crowdfunding comments, where people reflected on the origin and cause of the attack but also described their internal socio-moral and affective experience and transformations and declared their intention to carry out particular actions (see also 3.4.2.2). For example, people described “new found awareness”, and being “broken hearted but not broken”. On their personal platforms, social media users did similar things in more extended ways. Strategies included discussing past mistakes, insufficiencies, or areas of ignorance, alongside new areas of awareness. As a public figure with a reasonable audience on Twitter, Amelia described this as “almost like a *mea culpa* where like an acknowledging or apologising to people that, that you hadn’t done as well as you could have in the past” or, as she later put it, “putting my hand up and saying yeah, you know, I’m part of this problem”. In this sense, her imagined audience included the wronged group (Muslims, people of colour). But it additionally, or at other times, included a wider audience of mainstream (white) New Zealand, or people in a more similar social position to her, which she expressed by discussing how she undertook these public confessions as part of “modelling” a particular pathway for transformations that others could also take. These actions were thus not only about publicly documenting the individual’s growth but were also seen as something that could contribute to wider social change.

At the same time, they were risky. Public self-reflection was experienced as vulnerable – with the possibility for individual negative responses or even public ‘pile-ons’ (depending on their audience and account settings). People who posted detailed or personal public self-

reflections shared experiences of their own anxiety about what to post and while waiting for public responses. Their actions included checking back on responses to the risky post (which alleviated the anxiety). Indeed, interview data from the perspective of on-lookers indicated that this type of action could at times risk being critiqued as performative or attention-seeking.

3.3.4.4 Visibility, authenticity, and tokenism

Data showed that evaluation of moral actions was about both their results or impact and the motivation that drove them. One interviewee perceived that a lot of people seemed to use the occasion to “demonstrate their values” and specifically to demonstrate “superior tolerance or attitude” as way to position themselves morally through public performance, enabled by social media. A variety of terms were used to define actions that were taken primarily for this purpose, rather than as a more authentic expression of care. One term was “tokenism”, with many participants taking care to both define what tokenism was and avoid it in their own actions. Another was “virtue signalling”. The highly visible, and indeed highly visual, types of responses were referred to in relation to this, as well as responses that were “temporary” or short-lived. The ease with which an action could be taken often placed it in suspicion of tokenism. The quickness of a profile banner change, for example, meant that there was less time and consideration behind that action. It also connected back to the question of the efficacy of actions (see also 3.6) in that questions about how long it took were linked to questions of “how long would it last” in terms of impact or effect.

Hannah described her discomfort with the selfie activism campaign of #scarfday, based on several of these principles:

I felt like that was kind of a performance aspect, like, you’re putting on a costume... [small pause] for four hours, and then you’ll take it off later... It was just a *day* thing for you, like you will never really... have that kind of action or thought, really, again.

As evident in these quotes, authenticity was also weighed by a match between the public self and what was perceived as the real self. This could include people who had been perceived as racist in previous interactions suddenly using/sharing anti-racist imagery or language online (following prevailing social trends on that platform). It sometimes went beyond the perceived

characteristics of individuals and more towards social categories that were suspected of being entrenched in privilege. An example is one interviewee's distasteful reference to the "ladies that lunch" as enacting charity in a tokenistic or inauthentic way.

3.3.5 Active listening through micro moral action

Part of being with others online (see also 3.3.2.1) was witnessing their feelings and responses. Social media provided ways to not just observe (or 'listen'), but to actively communicate the fact you had observed others' responses to them. "I think the comfort is simply in having an outlet to say a thing and have it acknowledged," as Joanne explained. As such, witnessing the experiences of those directly and secondarily affected by the event was an act of care. The digital infrastructure both afforded and limited this, as is discussed in 3.4.2.4.

3.3.5.1 Liking and hearting as support

Analysis of interview comments and digital ethnographic observations showed that liking or hearting content posted by others also represented a form of witnessing or solidarity. It was a way of marking your attention, however brief, and making this visible to the person who produced or shared that content as well as other onlookers (see also 3.5.2.1). Amelia, who was a prominent Twitter user, described herself as very liberal with her use of hearts for others' content. She described the meaning of this practice as:

I've read what you had to say, I *heard* you, I listened to you, and actually even if you don't *agree* with them, even if you've just *listened* to them, that's all -- that is caring, you know.

Listening was a way of expanding one's personal and social awareness (as discussed in **Error! Reference source not found.**), but at the same time "Listening is care" as another participant shared. Amelia continued to say:

And so actually the, the act of even just clicking the like button [laughter, clicking gesture] um, is kind of saying, you know, "I see you and thank you for sharing that" and, you know, "we are all in this together". "I agree with you." You know, like it was, so there was –

almost I think even just for tiniest little actions of, of liking a post *is* actually *does* create kind of a solidarity or sense of community.

Public posting was also often framed as a directed activity, a way of sending particular messages or emotions to a particular community. While she described liking as a form of “feedback”, Amelia’s comment also indicates it was a phatic communication act that worked to convey support or care rather than a specific intellectual stance on the content, aided by the fact that these affects are connoted by the terms and symbols used (hearts, liking).

3.3.5.2 Sharing or retweeting as amplifying other voices

The purpose of identifying the positionality of other voices (as discussed in 3.3.4.2) was not only to listen to (or not) but to actively respond, which involved working out which other voices to lift or amplify by sharing or retweeting. Interviews showed that many of the participants who identified themselves as part of the ethnic or religious majority consciously took steps to share content from minority-positioned groups or individuals. One person described offering people from the Muslim community a chance to briefly take over the management of shared accounts or platforms to make use of their broad audience base. Another explained her practices of sharing content as being a conduit for “voices that wouldn’t have normally been heard... by the people that follow *me*” – linking together the processes of reflecting on your own positionality and audience and on other voices (see 3.3.4.1 and 3.3.4.2). One person said, “I was re-tweeting, um, other voices who probably had *more* to offer than *I* did, you know.” Indeed, the efforts to lift other voices through their platforms were paired closely at times with a choice to limit or reduce their own voice.

3.3.5.3 Strategic silence

A number of participants had observed harsh or negative public responses to those white and non-Muslim people who expressed grief or shock on public social media platforms. Joanne explained that on Twitter:

I noticed at some stage late in the weekend that some people started being pretty judgmental about how others were responding. And I asked people to remember that everyone responds differently and to give others a break.

While a range of people acknowledged that those so privileged should be taking up less space than those more directly affected, they also countered that it is your “absolute right” to be upset and to feel those things, and that “we have to *allow* people that space” as part of the process of responding to the causes as well as the effects of the attack. They needed to be “handled with a bit of tenderness as well” as they went through the process of learning, another person suggested.

However, data also showed that many people recognised a sort of hierarchy of rights to be heard or witnessed online at this time (also discussed in 3.3.4.2). In this context, for white and non-Muslim people, holding back your own voice – choosing quietness or even complete silence – was an act of care, respect and recognition when “it’s not my story to tell”. There was a sense in this that stories or events belong to some people more than others, even when being claimed as a landmark national event with a broad public response. As one person put it:

I think, I think the big thing for me is that why it was easy to leave it, because I was sitting there with my -- I mean I talk a lot you can tell, and I write a lot, and I -- I sat there with my fingers poised, often, and thinking “well what can you say?” What have I got to say, what have I got to contribute to this, *really* -- that isn’t being said by people with *more* information, or *better* knowledge, or a better way of saying it. And that sometimes it’s your time to be quiet. And I remember just sitting there most of the time with my fingers poised thinking I literally have nothing valuable to contribute.

This was not always a purely altruistic or strategic choice; staying quiet could be at once a choice emerging from reflections on one’s own positionality in relation to the event and an experience of frustration or failure in formulating an adequate response, as the above participant continued:

And I would just be sat there, *wanting* to feel better, but not knowing what to do. Fingers poised. Because I sat there fingers poised that’s normally how I make things that’s normally how I *act* to change things.

Another shared that “This wasn’t *mine* to deal with and it wasn’t *mine* I certainly couldn’t *undo* it or change it and so I just felt completely useless.” Brenda similarly explained she “didn’t want to be yet another white person chipping in on something I don’t know anything about”. There were also people for whom silence related to a fear of saying the wrong thing – of hurting or offending. This similarly related to awareness of their own and others’ different social positionality, experience, and the limitations of their perspective, while being somewhat different from those who choose silence for the other reasons stated above.

3.4 COMMUNICATING CARE THROUGH (AND BEYOND) WORDS

This theme shares findings about how intentions to care for others online were enacted through words. The data presented speaks to the social contexts, relationships, audiences, and intentions of online communication, as well as the characteristics of different forms of writing used for expressing support, sympathy, and solidarity.

Findings are organised under the two main subheadings of **the temporal context of ‘tragedy time’** and **the social dynamics of speech**.

3.4.1 The temporal context of ‘tragedy time’

A unique kind of tragedy or crisis time shaped the quality of interactions on social media after the mosque attack. Participants offered striking descriptions of the special and different feeling of many social media sites in the time directly after the attacks – estimating this to have lasted for around a week before slowly transitioning back into more normal modes of online use and interaction.

One person said, “I felt like everybody was not *tentative*, but just, just *slower* and, and moving more carefully so as to not to *break* things.” Another suggested, “I think everybody was just trying to be quite *caring*, I think everybody recognised that we were all pretty shaken.” Another person simply described it as “kinder”. Unpacking what particular visual, verbal, or aesthetic markers created this feel – making this care or kindness visible or tangible and distinguishing the ‘trauma time’ after the attack from the ‘normal’ time before and after –

was challenging (see also 3.3.3). Cumulatively, participants suggested the following characteristics.

- Shorter and simpler posts.
- Posts with a more positive, gentle, calm, or philosophical tone. One participant described it as “astonishing” and “amazing” that of all the posts she saw there was “not one angry word”.
- Heavy use of emojis that evoked an embodied response (e.g. hug emojis, various different hearts emojis, sad crying face) in place of written responses: “not actually *writing* anything, because what can you say?!”
- Slower modes of reaction/interaction (including more time between posts and responses).
- Fewer written responses to posts overall, and more reliance on likes, hearts or other reacts, without elaboration.
- Fewer argumentative responses.
- People known for argumentative, provocative posts making no posts/responses, or fewer posts/responses, i.e. “gone quiet”.
- People not normally engaged with political topics as part of their social media activity presenting thoughtful comments on these.
- Fewer judgemental responses or responses to call out individuals.
- Fewer posts or discussion about “unimportant things”.

3.4.1.1 Suspended communication norms

Prevailing among all interviewees (and also observed through digital ethnography) was a sense that normal conventions were suspended by mutual agreement among social media users in recognition of the mosque attack as an exceptional social circumstance. One person described “stopping myself” before following through on what she described as a “stupid” and “ridiculous” impulse to attach a GIF to convey sadness to someone else’s post about the attack. She described going to click on it, then looking at it and thinking “Get a grip – this is not the same this is not the same as anything you’ve had to reply to before.” While GIFs are typically used across a range of social media platforms to convey an emotional response, her negative labelling of her initial reflexive impulse shows both how the normal rules were suspended and how social media users were able to recognise this and mediate their own patterns of use accordingly. Another interviewee self-censored a mundane online action that they thought “would be a little bit selfish of me right *now* to do that, um, even though there

might be a time for that in later date”. Again, actions were context dependent, and a greater degree of reflexivity was required at this time.

The presence of an implicitly agreed revision or suspension of the normal rules of engagement, across different platforms, was further evidenced in how others described their evaluations of behaviour. Analysis of language that participants used to describe online actions they found morally inappropriate showed that they often marked them as so by reference to the timeframe specifically. For example, one person objected to another online user “being a gross bigot *so soon* afterwards”. Crystal described her sense of people circulating what she considered rumours as “insensitive”, based on a stance that “you can have your conspiracy and you can have your thoughts, but when it happened like six hours ago [sarcastic] maybe not the time to be posting it”. “People are currently still *dying* in hospitals,” she added. Another interviewee described her (internal) reaction to an aggressive online conversation she was witnessing as “guys, time and place!” Others acknowledged the work of informal platform moderators (such as group admins) in policing more strongly at this time by making it “very firm that if you post anything, *you will be banned*” – even in the case of “shit-posting”¹ groups, as one participant shared.

3.4.1.2 Political and apolitical responses

Sasha, a Muslim woman living in a nearby city, shared that “most of the comments that I could see around New Zealand were positive, at least in the first couple of days. It shifted a little bit as the weeks progressed” (see also 3.3.3.1). Some people linked the transition out of this, and back to more political and politicised modes of discussion, to the announcement of new gun legislation a week after the event.

While political and ideological framings of the event were present in many ways (see 3.2.3.2), being political at this early time was not generally seen as positive. Brenda also spoke negatively about the “politicisation” of mass violence in the US compared to New Zealand. Another interviewee said that, at a time when everyone was “already really sensitive”, those who wanted to “push your agenda on what you think is appropriate” were essentially “rubbing salt in the wounds”. Christopher factored this into his own responses too.

¹ Groups devoted to sharing humorous content that is often characterised as potentially offensive because of its aggressive, irreverent, or mocking characteristics. Though often dealing with politicised subjects, it is not typically defined as political in intention.

He described deciding to add a banner to his profile picture on Facebook because “I don’t like to get super political. I think that it was just like just, you know, just enough to make a point, but [laughs] yeah, but without getting too political.”

3.4.2 The social dynamics of online speech

Despite often being described as a highly visual medium, social media communication remains closely embedded in written and textual forms. Words can be spoken or sent through a variety of channels on most platforms and, depending on user settings, can include public comments, responses to others’ comments or content, and direct messages.

Some saw online communication as limited or less worthy, or less real, than other forms of communication. One participant suggested that “writing a physical letter – especially nowadays when we barely do that anymore – has got so much more power than writing an email or a message on Facebook”. However, others were ready to defend social media. Hannah said that “I know people think social media is really insignificant, but... it *is* a really good way to connect with all these people across the world.” The nature of the medium, however, has shaped the various practices of writing or speaking that were possible, and also the linguistic practices involved in any individual instance of speech. Data from this study made it clear that different ways of using words as a form of care after a shocking mass tragedy were embedded in particular social relationships.

Although speech here was written rather than verbal, many of the social acts undertaken can still be described as speech acts, partly because participants used language indicating they experienced text as speech in the ontological setting of digital space but also because it follows patterns established as having performative, rather than just communicative, features.

3.4.2.1 Speaking to – addressivity and imagined audiences

Despite the broad platform and overlapping networks that many social media sites represent, participants could generally articulate clearly who the audiences were on each of their different platforms. Sometimes this was more literal (as with private accounts whose audiences were limited to those added as friends or accepted as followers), and other times it involved a process of imagination (as with public accounts that were available to almost anyone). Either way, data from this study made it clear that a user’s idea of who their audience was shaped their online communication. Christopher, for example, talked about his

decision about what actions to take online – including changing his profile picture and making a public post on Facebook – describing how he mused at the time that he “couldn’t really imagine many of my friends on Facebook being Islamophobic” and so was more hoping for “friends that are Muslim to see it” and feel that they had support and could come directly to him for support if needed. Brenda also spoke about realising that a lot of her friends’ teenage children were connected to her on Facebook, which shaped her online activity because she didn’t feel like she could call them up directly to discuss the attack, but still “wanted them to see how we were reacting” (see also 3.5.2.3) as part of their moral development at a crucial time.

Both the size of the audience and the demographic make-up of its members added weight to choices about how to frame online comments. Jessica shared a sense of responsibility attached to her awareness that her yoga business page profile had a reasonable sized following and thus quite a few people “within our community” would read anything she wrote. She explained:

I also feel a big responsibility *because* we’ve got a multicultural and very diverse community. And a lot of them are really *scared* in, in this has brought out a lot of fear around the vulnerability as *people* and as religious groups... and to know that the yoga teacher at least is keeping it going as a little bit of... I don’t know... it’s important. It feels important.

Jessica always tried to keep “that big picture of the big group of people in my mind” when writing her posts.

Even when the audience is technically unknown, however, online speech patterns show a process of assuming or imagining a particular audience of readers. As evidence of this, donor comments on the Givealittle page were often phrased to directly address the Muslim community, the victims or families of the dead (i.e. “those affected”), the city of Christchurch and/or its citizens, or New Zealanders in general – even with no particular guarantee that these donor comments would be seen by any particular person or group. This process was also often associated with speech acts of promise or declaration’. Examples include “I promise to fight in the name of peace”, “We will support the families and stand against

terrorism always”, “I pledge to help change NZ for the better, not just with financial support but by calling out racial and minority prejudices [sic] when I see them – no more watching in silence”, “we will do better”, “I will work to help change attitudes in our communities”, and “The silver lining of this tragedy is that I promise to now step into every single day without an inch of prejudice, without fear of calling out others that are racist, without anything but love for every single religion/race/human.”

3.4.2.2 Speaking with – collective voices and speech acts

As well as speaking *to* an imagined collective, many participants also sought to speak *on behalf of* an imagined collective or online public. A Givealittle donor comment that showed this linguistic feature is “Much love you have a whole country supporting you xx.” As this example shows, the collective voice was often evident in the use of collective pronouns such as “we” and “our”. These comments sometimes included platitudes such as “together we stand strong” or “coming together as one”. Other comments referred more specifically to the attack, as in this example: “unity and togetherness will always beat a lone gunman. You are us. They are us. We are one. Not-alone as comfort. I am you, you are me. We are one. Xx.” Some of these comments made reference to political and ideological frameworks that emphasised collective belonging. For example, “Let’s transcend, tribalism, sectarianism, and nationalism and unite as one group – humanity”, “One People, One Nation, One New Zealand”, or “we are all kiwis”. Ontological claims were sometimes made: “There is only one human race”, “part of the same human family” and “Our skin may be different... Our cultures may be different... Our beliefs may be different... But when our blood is spilled... It is always the same colour...” or “one big whanau”. Often these comments also implied emotion as something experienced by the collective not just the individual. An example was “our tears are falling alongside yours, our hearts are breaking alongside yours”.

In parallel to the promises and declarations mentioned in 3.4.2.2, many online comments appeared designed to spur others to further action through the trope of rallying. Examples were “we must ensure this never happens again”, “Stay strong in the face of evil my beautiful country. Fill and strengthen our hearts with love and compassion for we are one during our time of grief. Let’s stand always for what is good and right”, “We all have an individual responsibility to take an active stance in making this a safe and inclusive nation”, “As individuals do not be silent bystander when you see and hear injustice – STAND UP and CALL IT OUT!”, “things must change now”, “let NZ show the whole world”, and “do not stop until

we leaave [sic]our children a legacy of peace”. These are additional types of speech acts that involve imperatives in the form of pleas or commands.

3.4.2.3 Speaking for – finding the right words for someone else

Jessica spoke directly about the posts she made on her yoga business’s Facebook page, saying these were a way of speaking specifically on behalf of people who can’t or don’t know how to say it. She stated that one of the “big” observations she had heard many of her connections make about their reactions to the attack was that they couldn’t “get words out” or “say what we’re thinking”. This related to being scared, embarrassed, or shy about making a public comment, and to being aware “but not knowing *how* to do it”. Jessica thus used carefully written responses, posted as long Facebook comments, to speak both to and on behalf of her community, expressing a strong belief that “finding the right words” would be healing and empowering for them.

The process of crafting the right words also involved a careful awareness of audience, as discussed above: “trying to capture a response, that was big enough, but personal enough”. Similarly, Joanne attempted to summarise feelings that went beyond herself on a large Twitter account she happened to be assigned to managing that week. “There seemed to be lots of people responding to my posts, with ‘thanks for saying that, that’s how I feel’ type messages,” she reported.

3.4.2.4 The relationship of words to bodies and affect

Even those who chose words to accompany their donations on Givealittle made comments such as “words mean little and cannot describe or convey” and “no words just tears”. However, other practices showed that words themselves were ascribed powerful ontological qualities, such as carrying wishes, emotions, warmth or good energy.

Participants sometimes selected words that drew on specific religious or cultural frameworks to achieve this. Pauline, a Buddhist, used the term “Namaste” to convey respect and togetherness; a term she explains as meaning “the divine in me, bows to the divine in you.” Crystal, a young Pākehā woman, observed the widespread use of the Te Reo Māori word “aroha” online after the attacks – noting that she also often left comments on others’ posts stating this. She expressed that “love” or “I love you” felt insufficient but explained the

visceral way she experiences “aroaha” as distinct from, and embodied/experienced differently to, love:

to me Aroha is like your whole body feels warm and like safe and like included I guess and so it's just like different things like love I feel like whole of my body, but Aroha is specifically in like the chest kinda thing.

Words shared on social media connected to and evoked the body, rather than being separate from it. Joanne added that her repertoire of responses included saying the physical actions (i.e. “sending hugs”) or using emojis. Words were also enhanced by the multi-media contexts in which they were often embedded. For example, the viral Ruby Jones images that almost every interviewee noted as impactful to them included an image of embracing women, overlaid with the words “You should have been safe here.” Several interviewees indicated that the iconic relationship of the image to their own embodied experiences was part of its impact. Jessica, for example, experienced hugging and crying with a Muslim woman in her neighbourhood, with whom she had had few encounters before and who spoke little English. This influenced her attachment to Jones’ artwork and her choice to make it her profile picture for several months following.

Jasmine also felt a sense of safety and belonging when looking at people sharing this image (as discussed in 3.3.3.1) while physically alone in her flat, and could recall the words on it almost exactly. Another participant recalled being extremely overwhelmed and “bewildered” in the aftermath of the attack, and then looking at the responses and saying, “I just remember that the feeling of the responses was just kind of that people were wrapping their arms around [the Muslim community].” Thus, while hugging represented one of “the things you *can't* do online”, data also showed a more complex entanglement between embodied action and affect and mediated communication online.

3.5 NEGOTIATING CONFLICT IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

This theme presents findings on how social media users navigated not only action but also interaction through social media – expanding on previous sections that have addressed this in relation to listening and speaking, with a focus now on the potential for, and management of, conflict. The data speaks to the participants’ understandings of the varied goals, rules,

benefits, or risks involved in discussion, debate, or disagreement with other people online – including strangers and people from their existing social networks – and how their experiences of this unfolded in the tense aftermath of the mosque attack.

Findings on these topics are presented under the subheadings of **choosing your battles**, **doing conflict for an audience** and **protecting personal relationships**.

3.5.1 Choosing your battles

Conflict is an established part of social media platforms – a norm of some more than others – but this is not without rules and parameters, and once again this dataset showed a considered awareness of the ‘how’, ‘when’, and ‘why’ of engaging in disagreement with others. Some participants indicated that avoiding conflict was part of their framework of intentions.

However, there was a broad acknowledgement that having hard conversations and calling out problematic positions was important, with real world implications. One participant shared their decision to be “stronger” in their language and “to make quite a concerted effort not to let it go back to sleep and I said to people that that’s what I was going to do was keep it alive” – a statement in which “it” was a newly reinvigorated conversation about racism and white supremacy in New Zealand’s history. Most people did not disengage from all conflict but rather carefully selected when and how to engage.

3.5.1.1 Weighing emotional costs

There were several possible reasons for avoiding – or only selectively engaging in – online discussion or debate. The potential emotional cost was one key factor – with participants needing to preserve emotional resources, particularly at a time when they were already feeling sad or strained. Hannah recalled her stance at the time as: “I don’t *really* have the energy to fight about this, like, I can see points on both sides, but I just want to sit there and absorb it, to be honest.” Despite Christopher’s acknowledgment that “it is important to have those conversations sometimes”, he similarly said that because of the degree of what had happened “whenever I saw a bad comment or bad article, I just kind of [slight pause] didn’t look just swiped away, yeah, [slight pause] I couldn’t really comprehend or deal with that hatred, at such a time”.

Among the Muslim participants in the study, limited emotional capacity to respond was a factor to a much greater degree, but a choice to simply disengage was also less straightforward. Sasha explained that:

normally, I would just steer clear of the chaos. I don't *read* a lot of comments on a lot of... hot button topics. You know, vaccination, children crying it out, all these sort of things. I know it's toooooo... ahhh [inhales]... what's the word? It's too upsetting. Yeah, you know, everybody just accusing everybody of being shitty. And I'm just like, I don't want to be involved, not going there with a 10 foot pole.

However, she did comment on some news stories that she felt strongly about in the months after the attack. On top of this, she took screenshots of particularly horrible racist comments when she spotted them, with the intention (which wasn't fulfilled in the end) of tracking down details about where they worked and emailing the screenshots to their employers. Molly also commented on articles from mainstream news sites, often to correct what she saw as misconceptions about Muslims, and yet found that the intense and sometimes vitriolic responses (in the form of comments from other users responding to her original comments) often made it too much emotional labour.

Participants often reflected not only on their emotional capacity but also on whether they could realistically have an impact on the situation; they also weighed the likelihood that someone else might be able to do it instead against their tendencies to "jump in" to debate. As one person expressed:

It's like *negotiating* of like how much can I *give* to the situation and to this individual person, because after this person there's *twenty* more that have got same opinion that I could now go through and so it's only like I'm only one person!

As another person said: "I don't have energy to [laughs] reach all, reach them, I'm not the right person to do, to try, reach out to some guy who's angry and he's got a gun." Some people noted that when a conflict was happening online, they would "keep an eye on" the

debate for a while before deciding whether their voice was useful or necessary among the many other people already participating. “Sometimes I’m heartened by the crowds in that, I think, okay there are enough of them doing that. I don’t need to do it,” Hayley said. Weighing this up was difficult though, and a sense of doing one’s part in a collective effort also came through, with one participant stating, with a sense of guilt, that “I didn’t fight as many battles as I probably could have, or should have.”

3.5.1.2 Weighing effectiveness of online debate

Some people weighed up which engagements were likely to be effective in terms of actually changing someone else’s mind – and not just “a losing battle” or “a hill to die on”. Tim, who engages in a lot of online debate and discussion, shared the following: “The times when there’s actually a good outcome is like so – especially with people I haven’t met – is like *really* small.” Ursula also stated that while it can be “important” to challenge people online, “it’s also just a waste of energy”.

The value of discussion was seen as depending in large part on the qualities of the individual on the other end. Both before and during interactions with others, there were ideas of “good faith” versus “bad faith” interactions. One person described two kinds of disagreement: one being “genuine disagreement” with “people who are actually open minded trying to engage with what is a very difficult issue” and the other being described simply as “yelling” and defined by a performative, close-minded, or time-wasting approach. The latter was associated with people who were likely to “shut down” or “not open to learn” or who were “trolls”. “It can be hard to tell the difference,” as Tim said. As another person described:

so you know what their buzz is. And I think the interesting thing about that was like, I got to a point of actually just... saying to the person, like, “Can you tell me why you are engaging in this? Is it because you want to help everybody’s understanding and create a better – in creating a safe world? *Or* are you just like, being a dickhead or trying to support racism?”

In a similar way, the mode and style of communication could both indicate a bad faith actor or in itself preclude productive outcomes. Tim described getting into conversations online about free speech – often linked to key events, like the controversial visits of Lauren

Sutherland and Stefan Molyneux – where “you just get into big back-and-forths where they’d end up writing longer and longer replies to you... in comment threads”. As such, it was a time sink in a situation where there was no guarantee of the effort having an impact. In a similar vein, to preclude too much investment in bad faith actors, Amelia had a rule that she wouldn’t respond to someone more than three times. The ability to engage in productive disagreement – evaluated by both parties having a willingness or ability to learn from it – related to specific skills of interpersonal engagement (see also 3.5.2.3).

3.5.1.3 Weighing up the harm of words

A final facet of ‘choosing your battles’ was weighing up the degree of harm or offense in the other person’s comments. Debates about what counts as hate speech came into this and, as one participant shared, this was not clear-cut in the public eye or the legal-bureaucratic systems for policing content:

each country defines, hate speech in a different ways. What is hate speech in America is not the same as what is hate speech in New Zealand. What is hate speech in the UK... the online world becomes more complicated when you are dealing with people that come from different places and have different rules about this. *Everybody* you are talking to is interpreting what you are saying with different sets of [laws, languages, culture].

Most of the participants did not refer directly to hate speech, dangerous speech, or any other formal terms. However, there were still strong emotional descriptions of, and reactions to, certain anti-Muslim or white supremacist content they encountered. The people making these comments were described in informal pejorative terms, such as “bigots”, “racists”, or “cockroaches”.

Often these were not ‘unknown’ strangers but known public figures or known individuals in their social networks (see also 3.3.4.2). But awareness of the more serious effects of this kind of talk became apparent after the attacks, in a new and shocking way. Thus decisions about what to tolerate were tied to the emotional reaction to the specific event. The idea of identifying rumours and/or correcting misinformation (see 3.2.1.2) was fuelled by an awareness that information is linked to social perception, beliefs or stereotypes that can have

a concrete impact in the world. Sasha also noted that people would have seen many rude or racist jokes in the past but considered it “not worth” doing something about them. However, the mosque attacks:

got people’s attention so that we can’t not call out our bias... Suddenly, it felt very personally felt very important to *do* it. Suddenly was important to say “actually, no, this is not *okay*. Look at what’s happened. This is not okay.”

She saw this as a positive thing, long term. It lines up with the sense many other people gave of being willing to mark a difficult or unpleasant engagement as “worthwhile” when it was perceived as part of an overall tide of work towards a more inclusive and progressive society.

3.5.2 Doing conflict for an audience

Findings showed that responding publicly to problematic opinions or views was not done only with the hope of changing the views of the original commentor. Rather several participants described an awareness that enacting conflict or debate in public could affect or benefit wider audiences and observers.

A process of observing other people’s discussions without necessarily participating was well documented. Participants described reading other people’s conversations or debates, often based on spotting comments and “scrolling back up” to the top of the thread to “see what people have been saying” and “see what people’s thoughts are”. The medium presents this ability to follow asynchronous and polyvocal conversations in a semi-linear manner. Again, this contributed to a sense of public sentiment or stance, more as a cumulative effect (see 3.3.3.1) than due to the effectiveness of any specific comment or argument. But adding to the public record could still be a motivation for individuals to engage in small public actions to counter objectionable or harmful posts.

3.5.2.1 Speaking back for the benefit of vulnerable observers

One reason for visibly disagreeing with racist attitudes online – by commenting to respond to or call them out – was to show support for members of vulnerable communities who might be watching but not themselves feel safe or empowered to respond.

Data showed that this did have a positive impact on the Muslim participants, either by participating themselves or observing others doing so. For example, Molly had observed people using a laughing react in response to the initial news stories but also observed that another person – not themselves a Muslim or a person of colour, she emphasised, but a “Kiwi” – had gone through and recorded the names of everyone who made this response. She summarised this as “people were trying to like show their support and call the assholes out”. Molly also noted that seeing these and similar responses online was encouraging because:

it shows me that people are willing to not just think it and walk by but they are actually gonna *say* something when they see people being jerks. And *those* are the kind of people, because – when you think about a lot of atrocities that have happened in history, they *happen* because people did nothing. They had it because people who seem like “oh, yeah she or he is a nice person, good neighbour or whatever”. Doesn’t matter how good you are it matters how you *respond* in the moment when you need to respond.

A willingness to act online on behalf of her and her family (as Muslims and victims of the attack) seemed to bestow a wider sense of public safety for her. She continued:

Now it’s not really about hiding Jewish people in a cupboard, about, you know, now it’s about coming out and saying how you actually *feel* on these very, you know, about these issues, these fiery issues of immigration, of you know, Islam of all these things, it’s – it’s being able to confidently state your position on that and not being afraid of what people are going to think about you.

The moral good of ‘fighting’ with people whose speech was harmful or threatening to Muslim (or other) minorities was implied to be inherent in the task rather than based solely on the outcome.

3.5.2.2 *Spurring others on to the “good fight”*

The idea of “real action” was sometimes contrasted to the idea of “just” talking. However, the connection between words and other forms of action was not straightforward. “Fighting the

good fight” in the public eye was seen as potentially having positive effects in the wider sphere by encouraging vulnerable observers, as above, but also by inspiring others to join in (see also 3.3.3.2 and 3.4.2.2) and possibly turning the tide for progressive change.

While this theme was often more about cumulative tides of social sentiment or response, as discussed above, individuals became recognised for taking action. Individuals that were identifiable doing this were labelled by participants as “champions” or “advocates” – terms notably invoking imagery of conflict, via (physical or legal) battles. As another point of evidence for this, some individuals were elevated to folk hero status over this period. Crystal enthusiastically discussed “Eggboy” in this vein – an Australian teenager who videoed himself egging Australian senator Fraser Anning after Anning blamed Muslims for the terrorist attack. The performative and viral qualities of this interaction allowed his actions to “speak” widely. “He was speaking for the little man,” as Crystal described it, but at the same time he was clearly speaking to other young white people, several of whom, in their interviews, described “liking the memes”, circulating them to others, and/or saving them on their phones, as well as following the posts he made afterwards. Crystal described Eggboy as “the *only* high point of the whole like couple weeks, it’s just like this is like this is you know a kid here fighting *a good fight*”. Others, however, debated whether his chosen approach was an appropriate model for others, which is discussed further below.

3.5.2.3 *Modelling civil disagreement*

Countering the occasional suggestion (by these participants and more widely) that engagements on social media were somehow *less* real than other forms of social engagement, data indicated many participants took seriously the ambiguous power of social media and the responsibility involved in using it. As one person put it:

you have to be very careful how you *choose* to interact, like social media is this thing where it’s just this vehicle, it’s just like a car you get in like you got to make sure you don’t have to go crashing into the curb right?

The sense that social media can be difficult to control, and requires care and deliberation, was elaborated on:

you have to like you get in the driver seat and you can't just push the go button expect it to take you where you want to go, not yet anyway and – and this is the thing with social media is *when* you get in you suddenly have this responsibility... that you take care of or you don't.

They followed up by noting that whatever you did was then “out there and accessible to everyone”. In this way, the responsibility was also related to accountability, which in turn related to the medium's public nature.

When conflict with other social actors online was deemed necessary or worthwhile, various logics were applied to the question of how it should be undertaken – “how to have the conversation” as one participant said, or how to “use the platform in a productive way” as another put it. Participants typically evolved a guideline for their actions, but yet again the visibility of these actions put extra weight on their choices.

The idea of modelling civil interactions to others was seen as another act of public service. One person described their motivation for disagreeing with a public pundit as being “for other people to *see* you disagree with him. And again, I think to see you disagreeing with him in a way that's quite, like what I *hope* was relatively moderate.” In this way, the medium was part of the message. “Moderate” here was an example of a value being applied to guide action and tone, as was “balance” and the idea of “seeing both sides” or “translating” in other interviews. While battle metaphors were common, participants also drew on metaphors more related to diplomacy. The metaphor of “maturity” was similarly used to define the good, right, or moral way to engage in disagreements. One participant described the need to “be grown up about it”. Crystal, a student in her early 20s, criticised one person's response to her attempt to speak to them privately – which was to then make a *public* comment about her – in these terms “It, was just a bit like, are you like 13? Can you just like, you know, you're 21 years old?!” It was interesting though that not only younger people used “maturity” as a positive goal; Pauline, a woman in her 70s, also reflected on some of her choices using the same metric, noting that when she left a group due to objectionable content (see also 3.5.3.3) she reflected to herself that “I don't think this is the most mature, wise, um, tolerant way of dealing with this. Part of me said that. And the other said, ‘Too bad!’” Pauline, who is a Buddhist and very active in political commentary on Twitter, reflected wryly at one point that “If I could stop fighting, I'd be a good person.”

“Civil” or “good” disagreement was often evaluated in reference to emotion or emotionality. Holding back emotion was seen as preferable. Sometimes this was a matter of personal comfort, such as for one participant who described being able to tell that the other person in an online conversation was angry but appreciating that they were holding back because “They have the right to feel anger, [but] I’m grateful that they are making the effort to not take it out on me, you know.” At other times, a contrast was drawn between emotional reactions (as quick, thoughtless, and dangerous) and “calm and philosophical” conversations. A slow, measured response was seen as a more responsible and effective way to change people’s opinions. Crystal shared that:

I really have to like *take* a deep breath [slows down] because it’s like go in hot and heavy into someone who doesn’t have the same *opinion* or understanding as you do, isn’t gonna help the situation, it’s just gonna make them like shut down and be angry as well.

This in turn related to the fact that being emotionally reactive is often pejoratively described as being triggered – a term entrenched in the moral politics of political partisanship. Crystal, for example, described being dismissed by a friend she tried to engage with online, based on accusations that she was “just this upset, upset leftie, and all lefties are the same”.

As a very visible public champion (discussed in 3.5.2.2), Eggboy also formed a touchpoint for debate about how to disagree, the efficacy of different approaches in creating social change, and the role of force. Christopher reflected that:

I loved what he stood for, but at the same time, I was like a little bit torn, because I – I very much believe in like trying to go about things and, uh, you know in a positive way and trying to like maybe discuss it, but, at the same time, I know that communication was someone like, you know, um, can’t remember his first name, Anning, the Australian guy, he is, he wouldn’t change his mind, I don’t think, um, and I doubt he is open to the concept.

Crystal also noted that, despite her enthusiasm for Eggboy, she had an extended conversation with a friend who “disagreed” with Eggboy because “violence wasn’t the answer”. Even though participants in this study rejected and distanced themselves morally from the terrorist (see also 3.3.4), they were suspicious of forceful or violent undertones to conflict – even when it was directed at those they found deeply objectionable. This was discussed in relation to an image that circulated online and in a particular city via (hand-drawn) street posters after the attack. The image showed an outline of New Zealand with shark fins in the ocean and an arrow pointing to the ocean that said “racists belong here”. A couple of the interviewees expressed moderate discomfort with the image’s allusion to violence or punishment, via shark attack, even for racists.

Responding to her friend’s critique of Eggboy’s non-harmful but forceful actions in egging a senator, Crystal reasoned that “he could have definitely gone about it, you know, a better way, but at the end of the day this 16-year-old boy egged an old man, the old man punched him twice and he got tackled by *three* grown men, so I don’t have *any* sympathy for anybody in that situation, *but* the kid because he was a *child* and you guys used extensive force”. This comment indicated that acceptable degrees of force were clearly evaluated in relation to social position and power.

3.5.3 Protecting personal relationships

While the above section discusses how people engaged in debate with strangers, or not, the data included many stories about how the participants navigated disagreements with people they knew. The data again showed that the social contexts of conflict were factored into moral decisions about both if and how to engage.

3.5.3.1 Managing what you hear

Many times, individuals acted to reduce their exposure to distressing or objectionable opinions from a particular person (as with distressing or objectionable information in general, see 3.2.4.1) by using strategies to manage their social media feeds that did not always involve interacting directly with the other user. These strategies including ignoring and scrolling past their comment or temporarily muting them. At other times, it involving blocking that person. However, some interviewees hesitated to use this mechanism, due to its association with “silencing” or controlling someone’s voice. Several participants referred to “free speech” and to others’ rights to express opinions they disagreed with. They also recognised, with regret,

that when they undertook these measures, they closed down the possibility of further interaction that could change their mind or be a positive feature for audiences, as discussed above.

These indirect strategies could also be a way to protect that relationship from the potential outfall of personal distress, offence, or interpersonal conflict.

3.5.3.2 Private contact to protect others

When people decided to directly engage with a person they disagreed with, having an existing social or online connection with that person offered options and considerations for how to respond. For example, Brenda's strategy is that if she knows the person, she sends them a private or direct message. One reason for this was to protect the pride or dignity of the people they were responding to – to help them “save face”. Private call-outs were also used to avoid potential pile-ons by wider audiences the interaction was visible to – something which could quickly escalate beyond the initial commentor's control and exert a force beyond what was deemed (or hoped) necessary to change their mind or behaviour. On both counts, it was hoped that the care for the other party's social status and emotional wellbeing, shown by choosing private contact in the first instance, would help to preserve their relationships with this person and make them more responsive by reducing any initial defensiveness.

An example came from Crystal, who described seeing a friend frequently posting content she found objectionable in the days after the attacks. She was concerned that it was “highly inappropriate” at that time (see 3.4.1), but the frequency and persistence of the friend's posts caused her to decide “enough is enough” around one week after the attack. She narrated that she didn't publicly comment on this content “because I didn't want to publicly humiliate her”. Instead Crystal sent her friend a private message, asking her to reconsider these posts and the effect they could have on the victims' families. They fell into an exchange of (private) messages until well after midnight that night. At that point, Crystal asked for a pause as they were both tired, telling the friend “if you want to talk to me in person tomorrow, you're welcome to”. The next day she waited, and when she received another message from the friend still trying to explain her stance, Crystal initially felt “more peaceful, and then I was like, ‘Okay, let's just agree to disagree.’” However, the friend continued with her public posts, and Crystal eventually decided to mute the person on social media, so she

didn't have to see the objectionable posts any more. When they later met in person, Crystal continued to try to be friendly, but she also privately maintained a feeling of intense anger.

3.5.3.3 *Losing relationships*

The possibility of losing relationships over a choice to express disagreement, either publicly or in private, was seriously weighed up. Hannah considered whether “opinions” were really worth losing a friend over. Other participants, however, weighed opinions as a genuine and sometimes insurmountable barrier to friendship, such as one person who said that “I lost a *friend* from this because it was just like I – I can't be friends with you with your opinion, it was just like [speaking quickly, as if to this person] ‘you are bigoted and gross and I'm gonna go over here no’.” Molly also shared that “I have cut so many people out, because of how they have *treated* us. People that I was very, very close to, people that it hurts to cut out but I have to.”

Group relations could be similarly compromised by conflict, diverging opinions, or values. Pauline described having to draw a “line in the sand” by leaving an online group related to a chronic pain condition, an online community that had provided important support for her for years prior. She described how people in the group were spreading “lies” and spouting American political rhetoric right after the attack. She said that when she called it out, others in the group responded to suggest that she herself was unacceptable for disagreeing and asking them to stop. Leaving social relationships or social spaces was never easy for participants and left painful markers, and yet these were also sometimes a source of moral pride and righteousness. On the flipside, as the following section addresses, acts of care and solidarity with the Muslim community formed new relationships and connections.

3.6 CHARITABLE ACTIONS (RE)SHAPING SOCIAL RELATIONS

This final theme considers some of the more overt ways that giving and charity were enacted on and through the internet. It unpacks different social goals and strategies, and particularly how these both reflected and constituted wider social relations in Aotearoa at this time. This theme includes data about both how different forms of charitable action were weighed up – as authentic or efficacious – and the socio-moral complexities of receiving help.

Data pertaining to these topics is summarised under the subheadings of **impulse to act**, **promotion and performance**, and **the social obligations of receiving**.

3.6.1 *Impulse to act*

One interviewee described how, after hearing about such a terrible event, “immediately you want to *do* something, in a crisis like that, people want to *act*”. Molly similarly described her perception that “in the wake of what happened” people wanted “to piece together things they could *fix*. Tangible things they could change. That makes people feel good.” Joanne, who runs a non-profit that involves the public in small practical acts of kindness, also perceived that many people were driven by “a need not to feel helpless” elaborating that:

my opinion is that feeling helpless is the worst feeling. So people reach for ANYTHING they can do that’s not nothing. Like going to a vigil, making cake for a police person, or giving some money...

Many interviewees in this study reported their sense of distress associated with a perceived lack of ability to act, which was then a motivation to find some way to act (see also 3.4.2). Indeed, Christopher noted that he donated to the Givealittle campaign because he felt helpless. But at the same time, he and many others found that the options they realistically had for helping in response to the attacks were often limited or “small”.

Access to particular types of action/response also related to the positionality of the individual. People who had a direct geographic or social connection to the event seemed to act more, and with an emphasis on that connection. For example, when Jessica, who lives in a North Island city, “discovered a link to our community” with one of the victims, she shared a Givealittle crowdfunding page related to that particular victim on her Facebook page. However, not everyone had these connections.

As one person explained, “it wasn’t happening to me or to anyone close to me that I could *help* them. It was happening *around* me and *affecting* me, but it wasn’t – it wasn’t *mine* to fix so to help, and so [there was] that lack of control and that feeling.” Social media, as a digital public sphere, created opportunities to connect and respond beyond one’s immediate social networks. However, these were also ambiguous relations of power.

Where people found possibilities for action and service, there was a sense of bonding between the carers. Hannah described “people who wouldn’t normally talk, checking in on

each other” in person – for example, at a food drive she attended. This data speaks similarly to the social implications of charitable actions enacted in digital spaces.

3.6.1.1 Crowdfunding as acting together

The crowdfunding campaign run by Victim Support and hosted on Givealittle, was one of the defining features of the public response to the mosque attacks. While crowdfunding campaigns for affected individuals or families were also set up on Givealittle or GoFundMe, this main campaign circulated the most frequently online and had the most overwhelming response in terms of donations. Many interviewees noted their awareness of it at the time (see also 3.3.1.2). The donations created an asynchronous crowd (see also 3.3.3) and a sense of doing something with others (see 3.3.2.1) that data showed contributed to a sense of connection, belonging, and pride across New Zealand.

Generally a positive response to the campaign and feelings of awe and pride accompanied these recollections. One person described the crowdfunding campaign as “really powerful”. Another talked about the public response as “just crazy”, and another described in amazed tones the “millions” (of dollars) that flowed in.

As discussed in other sections, the crowdfunding campaign became a site for framing the event (3.2.3.3), for rallying others to action (3.4.2.2), and for addressing words of care to those most affected (3.4.2.1). But the messages did not only affect these intended recipients. Several of the non-Muslim participants also described reading through the donor comments, which are displayed in a series of screens that can be clicked through. Christopher recollected this as encouraging and even heart-warming – a place of “good people out there who want to come together”. The emphasis on the comments as evidence of “good people” was particularly significant at a time when this image was threatened by an attack from a person of the ethnic majority against an ethnic minority (see also 3.2.3.3). “80,000 donors to one act of terrorism” as one person memorably said. This quote indicates (as similarly covered in 3.3.3.2) that the metrics of both the total amount donated to date and the number of individual donations were part of how donors, potential donors, and anyone else following the success of the project gained a sense of the general public as caring and generous.

3.6.1.2 Debating donations as effective action

Several interviewees donated to the campaign. Their reflections, however, spoke to emotional ambiguity about whether donations bestowed a sense of agency and/or could be counted as an effective form of action. Their comments indicated that this ambiguity stemmed from a desire to do something (see also 3.6.1) and yet having limited options. One person stated that donating “doesn’t feel like action like, you know, and I guess [I did] this because I couldn’t really take action”. This comment implies that donating replaces real action and is driven by constraint.

Many comments similarly indicated a particular hope about what the donation might do or achieve (e.g. that “you may feel uplifted in some small way”) or just a general hope that it would “help” while overall expressing a lack of agency (e.g. “feeling pretty helpless at the moment, so hopefully this helps a little”) or referring to the general limits or insufficiencies of money. Many people expressed a wish they could give more or described their donation as small, for example: “Least we can do”, “just a token”, “drop in the ocean”. This was related to a culturally grounded performative aspect to giving – downplaying the donation so as to appear humble or reduce any sense of obligation on the recipient’s part. However, it appeared at other times as a genuine acknowledgement of the poor fit between donations and the broader social issues that the attack represented or revealed.

Several participants – and not only those who donated – also showed interest in following the results of the crowdfunding and the eventual use of the money by the organising charity, Victim Support. A vested public interest in – or holding to account for – the use of these funds was clear, including in later media controversies about how it was being managed.

3.6.2 Promotion and performance

Social media platforms are multi-purpose spaces, in which personal, charitable, and commercial activities may appear side by side or intersect. Social media interfaces are often used creatively and strategically to leverage this. Participants’ discussions of their online activity showed they frequently evaluated the performative aspects of crowdfunding, charitable fundraising by businesses, and other entanglements of giving and caring, financially, through social media.

3.6.2.1 Businesses

Large corporations and smaller local businesses have a social media presence through official accounts or pages in their name. Even when run by an individual, the brand name and title give these pages a distinct public presence that means any online activity they make can be seen as a form of advertising or promotion – making themselves more visible to their ultimate benefit. Many different businesses chose to make some public response to the attacks. These responses ranged from general statements of support to fundraising or charitable strategies such as offering a portion of sales from a particular item or time period to be sent on as a donation, or organising other fundraisers under the name/banner of the business.

Participants in this study reflected on how authentic these responses were – several pondering whether their alignment with the new highly popular cause (of supporting Muslim communities in New Zealand in response to the tragedy) was wrongly motivated. “At times it felt like people were almost trying to get something from it,” one interviewee said suspiciously.

Jessica, who runs a local business (a yoga studio) in a medium-sized North Island city, but also has a long history of activism and social engagement, was aware of this tricky terrain in navigating her responses. She posted a lot from her businesses social media account, with care of the audiences/followers connected to that account in mind (see 3.4.2.3). However, when she organised other actions in her neighbourhood – including the painting of a memorial wall – she avoided posting anything at all about it on Facebook “because I didn’t want anyone to be able to interpret it as *promotion*.”

3.6.3 The social obligations of receiving

As a family member to two of the victims, Molly spoke about her experiences of being at the receiving end of the public giving gathered through the crowdfunding page, along with other more dispersed and sporadic acts of charity. Molly was inundated with thousands of messages to her personal social media accounts over this time, ranging from those asking for information or updates (see also 3.2.2.2 and 3.2.4.5) to those offering help. These messages came from close connections, distant acquaintances, and complete strangers. The experience was often overwhelming. Some of those trying to offer care were somewhat aware of the boundaries or social conventions governing this as well. Christopher suggested that

Givealittle was ideal for sharing messages of care, for example, because it could be done there “without being overbearing”.

The overwhelm could have positive or negative qualities, depending on the context, Molly suggested. While she was struggling with some of the people she was engaging with most immediately – including medical and administrative staff at the hospital, social workers and others – she found the kindness of strangers flooding into her inbox and a GoFundMe account her friend had set up for her moving and somewhat jarring in its dissonance, “with this one reality in my day-to-day life and then this other reality in which people are just throwing *money* at me”. On the other hand, with many of the presumptive messages she was receiving from obscure connections or total strangers, she felt that people had simply “latched on” to her “to make themselves feel helpful” (as discussed in 3.6.1).

3.6.3.1 Assessing genuine help

Being socially positioned as needy was uncomfortable and unpleasant. Molly shared that “It’s *very* weird for me, because number one, I’ve always taken care of myself... I never *asked* somebody for money, I have never, I don’t even like to *need*.” Despite this she had certain things she was “desperate” for help with in the immediate aftermath when she was spending days and nights at the hospital with her injured family members. She thus spent long late-night hours on her laptop in the hospital, filtering through the many messages to work out both who was genuine and whose offers might be useful to her. Molly used several key markers to assess whose offers of help were genuine.

One was “people asking *directly* for what was needed. Rather than people donating a whole lot of random things.” An offer from a local woman, which she deemed genuine, worked this way. This person private-messed her and asked what she could do. Having rushed out of her house to the scene of the attack, on receiving a phone call midway through making lunch, Molly was concerned about the mess left in her kitchen. She eventually gave this woman instructions for accessing her house and allowed her to go in and clean up for her – an act that was enormously relieving and which she spoke about emotionally as a great kindness.

Another was people who asked for nothing in return – not even a response. As she explained:

My favourite thing: “I know you have a lot of messages right now and I don’t expect to you respond to this, but”. *That!* [laughter]. That tells me someone gets it [...] and they *don’t want anything back*. If I decide to give them something back it’s up to me and they’re not going to hold it against me if I *don’t*.

An issue with potential reciprocal obligations of gift-giving was clearly something she thought about generally, as well as specifically. Molly received funds from a specific GoFundMe campaign set up for her family by an acquaintance. However, she had no control over who donated to this and shared strong feelings about receiving donations from semi-estranged family members in her home country of the USA, whose political and religious ideologies she disagreed with strongly and whom she felt were now acting at odds with their initial negative responses to her conversion to Islam by offering financial support. She was concerned that expectations of returned relationship were being established by these donations, especially at a time when her emotional resources were low:

Yeah like you gave \$10 to my GoFundMe – wish you would have kept it! Because like I *don’t* want to deal with you right now! Like [laughter] if that came with strings, please take it back! [laughter]

Molly wished there was a way to selectively return money to individual donors, but this was not possible through the platform, which she was not administering herself anyway.

3.6.3.2 *Victims caring back*

Christopher (as discussed in 3.6.1.2) noted that crowdfunding pages provided a good vehicle to communicate care to the Muslim community in a way that was non-intrusive and didn’t include any expectations of emotional labour in return. He explained that:

I think that’s another thing I’m trying to be aware of as well is that, that they are suffering more I am, I don’t want to put my emotional dependency on them, just I’m like I feel better, like, if that makes sense, like, I want them to know that I would support them without being overbearing.

It is true that, at times, a considerable burden of acknowledging care and support – or speaking about the solidarity and compassion-based grief of the non-Muslim majority – did fall back on the Muslim community, a burden of which many participants were aware. This included many expectations of public media comments, interviews, consultation about official events (such as vigils or memorials) and so on. But it also included interpersonal interactions.

Pauline described going to the supermarket a couple of days after the attack and being concerned to see few Muslim women there. When she did identify some women wearing hijab, she went up to them:

And I told them I was so glad to see them, they were the only ones I'd seen wearing hijabs, and then I said I was sorry, and then I started crying, just like I'm going to do now [voice sounds heavier] and then they comforted *me*!

Return support, or acknowledgement of care given, was not always given unwillingly, but sometimes with willingness and joy at the more reciprocal nature of the exchange. For example, Jasmine, who found the #scarfday campaign very moving, spent the whole afternoon looking at the selfies that non-Muslim women all around the country were posting of themselves in hijab and liking/hearting these, as well as commenting beneath them with enthusiastic thanks for their participation. Sasha committed to helping people tie scarves at a similar local event, which she felt connected her more intimately to those around her.

3.6.3.3 Over-sharing in the attention economy

Many of the Muslim participants worried about the effects of “over-sharing” information about the attacks or of calls for different kinds of support and care for the Muslim community. Sasha noted that, just a few weeks after the attacks, she was already seeing articles that she wanted to share but chose not to because she felt she had already shared too much: “And people are like going to be like ‘*enough* with it already’.” This also related to temporality (see also 3.4.1) and a slippage of interest or newsworthiness so that, as Sasha perceived it, “As time progressed, the tolerance level slowly slid. Just a little bit, you know, people’s focus was diverted elsewhere.” It also related to political feeling and social relations between the majority population and the Muslim minority. Sasha elaborated that:

I've already noticed a lot of people saying "we've gone Muslim mad, we've gone Muslim crazy". There was a lot of things that were done after the Christchurch attack that we were incredibly thrilled about. But we were also very conscious as a Muslim community that if too much of this was happening, that it might actually start to make people resentful. And that was a bit worrisome. That people are going to say, oh, we're doing the vigil, oh, now we're doing another vigil, oh, now we're holding this, and then we're having this ceremony, you know, doing this and this. And we're like *this is so lovely*... but if we don't stop soon people are going to hate us again. That's, that was kind of the general feeling. It is because it's lovely and beautiful what people are doing, but we knew that not everybody *supported* it, you know, and suddenly, you don't want it to go from like a 90/10 split, to suddenly, you know, a 60/40. I am worried about it, *really* worried about it.

Molly shared a similar perspective, with her comments placing the worries into the sense of a competition for attention and public empathy. She described reading "angry" online comments complaining about all the support that the victims' families were getting, while other social groups in need – such as those affected by the Christchurch earthquakes, eight years prior, many of whom were still seeking support and compensation, or Māori communities, who remained structurally disadvantaged – were not. "I think *looking* at all that and recognising that all these things can exist at the same time is important," she said. But she noted experiencing guilt in comparing her needs to these other groups.

I have seen these things played and they are all, they are all *valid* I mean, they are all totally valid and I feel almost *bad* some days that the -- that my family and people in the Muslim community are *getting* as much attention and money as we are when... I'm not saying it *shouldn't* be that way and I'm not saying, I'm just saying that maybe ... *other* things should have been done in a better way, you know.

She subsequently researched some of the other social needs specific to her region, and eventually shared onwards some of the donations her family received from a private Givealittle campaign.

4. CONCLUSION

The previous section aimed to organise findings in a way that provided structured insights on the experiences and practices of some New Zealand citizens and residents in the wake of the Christchurch mosque shootings. This final section concludes the report with an integrated discussion of how these themes speak to bigger questions around the affordances and limitations of digital and social media, for moral practice in a broad sense. The discussion stops short of any detailed engagement with existing literature or theory – despite a great many potential links – as the scope is too vast to include in this report. It instead focuses instead on making overarching comments and connections between the different themes, before concluding with notes on the limitations of the research, suggestions for future research directions, and recommendations for policy makers.

4.1 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The following sections discuss, interpret, contextualise, and connect the themes presented in the findings section of the report. They first speak to phenomenological and critical perspectives on ‘being’ online, being together, and being with others; then addressing the complex relational aspects of information sharing, as part of both care and collective sense-making; and finally considering efforts to discern what possibilities for real action, real change, or real care, through digital spaces could be.

4.1.1 Being online, being together

Ways of being present online as an embodied, temporally bounded, social actor are important to understand as part of the capacity for social and moral action in these spaces. The research took care to attend to the felt, embodied, and imagined qualities of the digital spaces in which participants were experiencing and responding to the mosque attacks. Collectively, the data on ontological facets of ‘being’ online shows how the varying aesthetic, dialogical, and structural features of social media platforms provided both affordances and limitations to witnessing, connecting, and caring for other individuals and communities in this context.

Social media users who participated in this research embedded spatial and geographic metaphors to describe their experiences online. Digital platforms – and sometimes specific pages or groups within them – were spoken about as ‘places’, that is, sites you can go to or leave, in which there is “stuff happening”, and in which social actions (or interactions) can be

undertaken. The nature of these places was ambiguous, complex, and risky – bearing “contrasts between the very *hellish* and the helpful” as one participant put it. In addition, it is appropriate to see social media as interconnected spaces rather than as a single space (3.2.1.3), and social media users as comprising multiple and overlapping networked publics. Participants proved to be competent navigators of and between different digital places. They were able to articulate different features of their digital ‘landscape’, and make choices about where to go, or not go, in order to fulfil their needs, protect themselves from harm, or enact perceived good.

Online spaces are also not independent of wider social or geographic arrangements, and bear complex and varied relationships to *offline* spaces, events, and actions. The data showed this in relation to inequalities in access to information (3.2.2.1), experiences of ‘real time’ in relation to media time and online activity (3.3.1.2), digital co-presence at events (3.3.2.1 and 3.3.2.2). All of these were pertinent to collective rituals and practices for witnessing and mourning after mass tragedies. Many social media users experienced a form of participation in major memorial events (3.3.2), even at a geographic distance. This was based on engaging with multi-media, multi-sited, and subjectively framed ‘reporting’ by others who were attending the event, and with whom they experienced a sort of mediated co-presence with (3.3.2.1). However, people also experienced a sense of connection to , and participation alongside, people who were co-present *only* digitally, and in absence of a specific place-based activity or event. Thus the data speaks to the question of whether there is such a thing as a digital crowd; and what the implications of this are, for collective social experience in a digital age.

The findings provided evidence that social media users’ experiences of being with others online were based on an ability to gain a ‘sense’ of the mood, sentiment, or affect of a larger collective from asynchronous engagements with online interfaces (3.3.3). This easily led to interpretations of, or statements about, the larger collectivities that these digital publics ostensibly represent. It is essential to keep issues of digital access in mind when considering this, recalling that the online social body does not represent the total social body (of a particular city, country, community, or demographic group). As well as needing to account for presence and absence due to access inequalities (i.e. the digital divide), and the layers of privilege and recognition that still pervade the digital public sphere (in terms of voice and audience, see also 4.1.1.2 below), we know that this is no single digital public sphere.

Instead, opinion and sentiment, and online social norms vary between platforms, between different private and public spaces (groups, pages, etc) within them, and based on individual users' algorithmically curated feeds. As such the sense of a shared sentiment, stance, or response to the attacks, from an imagined collective such as 'New Zealand' is inevitably partial and constructed, even when it becomes reported as part of the official narrative of the event (see also 4.1.2.1 below). Social media users are generally quite aware of these complexities and factor them in to both their interpretation of online environments, and their own activities there. This includes reflexive attention to the social positionality of those they are connected to, listening to, or speaking on behalf of (3.4.2). In this way (and as the next two sections unpack) the study reveals how wider social formations can be mapped onto digital spaces, and become part of patterning moral practice.

4.1.1.1 Imagining the other

To a degree the mosque attack was taken as something that happened to the whole of the New Zealand public. The extreme and nationally unprecedented nature of the violence, as well as early public exposure to some of the explicit content via social media, led to shock and grief widely among the general population. Making space to acknowledge this, and to care for each other in multifaceted and multidirectional ways was important to many social media users. At the same time, different degrees of impact, trauma, and suffering were afforded to different people and groups, according to their social proximity to the event. As the victims of an attack which *was* targeted at a very specific minority group, Muslim New Zealanders were, of course, at the centre of this, and became the focus of many caring responses. The Prime Minister's viral statement of "they are us" strongly set the tone for this, and was echoed repeatedly around the internet in written, visual, and other forms. It is a phrase that invokes care, solidarity, welcome, and belonging in the face of crisis and loss. However, it also establishes a 'they' and an 'us', as distinct categories against which different people could position themselves.

Empathy is an act of imagination. For mainstream, white, non-religious New Zealand to enact the Prime Minister's call to extend care and welcome to "the Muslim community" - , this community had to be actively 'imagined' as a distinct and identifiable social whole and care object. But it is important to consider what the assumptions or gaps are in this process, including the assumption of homogeneity of views, emotions, or experiences among Muslims in New Zealand, who are in fact an ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse group.

Indeed, even the Muslim participants in this study demonstrated diverse responses to various issues, such as the level to which they felt safe on the street afterwards, the appropriateness of the Scarf Day event, or the value of crowdfunding as a means of support. Data spoke to some of the ways white New Zealanders engaged with sensing, interpreting, imagining, and anticipating the thoughts, feelings, and needs of Muslims in New Zealand, on and through social media, in order to determine what their responses or actions should be. This was seen in relation to practices of information sharing (3.2.2, 3.2.3., 3.2.4), in specific patterns of speech or adapted communication norms (3.4.1, 3.4.2), and ways of responding to objectionable views in public debate (3.5.2).

The ability of members of the Muslim community to sense or interpret what wider New Zealand publics were thinking or feeling, was also extremely important in order to determine *their* actions and responses, amidst a sense of instability and risk as recent targets of extreme violence. The ability to see, hear, read, and in many ways *feel*, the care, solidarity, and shared mourning of the wider New Zealand public, was often experienced as comforting and affirming (3.3.3, 3.4.2.4). At the same time it could be stressful and confronting for them to see hateful or uncaring attitudes made publicly visible, even when these were in the numerical minority (3.3.2.3., 3.3.3, 3.5.1.1). In addition they relied on a sense of the public's secondary response, to the initial flood of care (via memorial tributes, crowdfunding, media coverage, and more), to anticipate what their longer-term social position might be – monitoring the amount and type of attention, and limiting themselves from claiming too much space in the online attention economy, in case of potential backlash (3.6.3.3). As part of this many participants took time to respond online, with gratitude and warmth, to the expressions of solidarity and care they were receiving (3.3.1.1, 3.5.2.1 and 3.6.3).

4.1.1.2 Voice and Power

The moral practices documented in this research relied heavily on social media users ways of interpreting other people's positionality or social identity, and reflecting upon their own. This was part of how they circulated information and other content (3.2.2, 3.2.3, 3.2.4, 3.3.5.2, and discussed further below in 4.1.2), but also how they made decisions about who to listen to, support, and amplify (3.3.4.2, , 3.3.5); if, when and how to speak (3.4.2.1, 3.4.2.2, 3.3.5.3) and who to invest energy in debating with online (3.5.1.2, 3.5.2.1, 3.5.2.2). The persistent use of the root metaphor of 'voice' in relation to this is revealing; speaking to what it means to be

online as a positioned subject, and being used in two distinct (and meaningfully interrelated) ways.

First, voice refers to the way that communication is stamped with the markers of identity. This can include individual and social identity; including, in this case, demographic proximity to the attack. In practice users were invested in identifying Muslims, migrants, and BIPOC voices, even amidst a ‘noisy’ online setting. The internet has been held up optimistically by some elements of public and scholarly discourse, as a democratic or egalitarian space. Part of this egalitarian-ness has been attributed to the idea that when online individuals can communicate in a way that is detached from potentially discrediting (or routinely marginalized) aspects of their social identity, such as their gender or skin colour. As stated above, this study has very much countered this perspective. It shows how users reflect on, express, and interpret their own and others’ social identities in numerous ways, and how this is an essential part of determining their online decisions and practices; ranging from being opened up (**Error! Reference source not found.**) and curating feeds for diversity (3.3.4.2) to speaking with (3.4.2.2) and speaking for (3.4.2.3).

Secondly, and relatedly, voice refers to the ability to speak and be heard; to the relative power of one’s communicative acts, as defined by audience reach and authority. This involved assessing not just the *rights* of specific individuals and groups to speak and be heard, or the *relevance* of what they had to say, but also their relative power to do so. The massively politicised rhetoric of “free speech” erases the reality that participants in this study understood well – that not all social media users had equal ability to speak and be listened to, either on these platforms or in the wider public spheres. Also involved was a recognition of the competitive qualities of social media; invoking the idea of the ‘attention economy’ to express a sense of public attention or care as a finite, fragile, and limited resource. Thought was given, accordingly, to which voices had disproportionate space, reach, or power, and actions were taken to limit over-exposure of dominant voices — including through enacting ‘silence’ (3.3.5.3), something that could be explored much more, as part of civic action and activism online – and to the costs and consequences of taking more space (3.6.3.3). In this way vernacular use of the term voice showed the way participants’ online moral responses were connected to questions of power and presence in the public sphere, to a reflexive awareness of their own and others position within a social and communicative field marked by the inequalities of the wider world.

4.1.1.3 Embodying care

Findings showed the complex relationship of words to bodies and affect, in the case of online social interaction generally (3.4.2.4). This connects back to the topic of digital presence, and the question of responding to the suffering of others. As some of these themes show, the presence of absence of the body – and specifically, the ways of invoking sensory, affective, or embodied responses through digital interfaces – shaped the moral possibilities of the space. This was particularly true of the question of how care (or solidarity, or acceptance; or indeed other moral emotions such as anger, disgust, or disapproval) could be communicated to digitally co-present others. In turn, forms of embodied action, included looking, listening, and paying attention through digital platforms, and the small embodied actions of looking, clicking, or commenting represented moral responses and real social actions - both to those enacting them, and those they were visible to.

4.1.2 The social life of information, and the information of social life

‘Information’ is a reified and yet morally ambiguous category – one increasingly acknowledged, in a digital and ostensibly post-truth age, as requiring interrogation. The findings of this study spoke to the way that official and unofficial forms of information about the Christchurch attacks were circulated through social media (3.1). Social media users’ reflections on how they participated in this showed that information both connected people to the event, and connected them to other people. It was thus both embedded in and constitutive of social relations.

Even amidst complex infoscapes, social media users experienced and enacted multi-layered agencies in their engagements with news about the attack. Rather than simply consuming information, most had an active role in framing and disseminating it, as ‘prosumers’. This involved a variety of practices, which varied according to the dialogical capacities of different platforms. These ranged from liking/hearting, to tweeting/reblogging/sharing, to posts or tweets microblogging one’s own commentary, and many other ways of producing and reproducing visual and written content, through memes, stories, livestreams, and more. The strategies that individuals developed for doing this were tailored to their own social contexts and accompanying socio-moral goals, while also being sensitive to broader shared (spoken or unspoken) social values or norms (3.2.3.2, 3.4.1, 3.5.2.3).

The way people set and pursued these goals showed an awareness of the potential (positive *and* negative) effects of information on mental wellbeing, at a difficult time. Information management was undertaken as a form of self-care, with information either sought or filtered out in order to allay 1) emotional distress, caused by either uncertainty due to lack of information, and 2) emotional harm, caused by exposure to explicit or distressing content. Amidst these and other threats, information management was a way of managing one's own emotional states, and overall wellbeing, and beyond this, of seeking existential stability by asserting control within their networked social world. For many of the same reasons, information management was also an act of care for others – seeking to help manage or reduce negative emotional states or potential harms. Yet in practice, this necessarily also involved acts of empathy and imagination (as also discussed above 4.1.1.1) in order to anticipate the needs of *particular* individuals or groups for information and the potential impact of certain forms of information on them. This at times included drawing on working understandings of the localised aspects of the internet (including digital access barriers, and information cultures, censorship), and of popular psychological concepts (such as trauma, triggers, and grief). Data shows that there was often failure, disagreement, or unintentional harm, involved in this process; but often evaluated against an orientation to, or goal of, care. This was about care within existing interpersonal relationships, and immediate social networks – such as children, friends, and family – but also went beyond this. Users' engagements with platform processes for reporting content, for example, while personally challenging and distressing, represented a sense of responsibility over the shared social terrain; an enactment of digital citizenship.

4.1.2.1 Sense-making after tragedy

Social media not only afforded a means for rapidly disseminating factual information about the event, but also a vehicle for the rapid exchange of social information, i.e. on the meaning, significance, and social implications of the attacks. Social media sites were a fitting vehicle for this because of the way information was shared (as discussed above) in a manner framed by users' comments, feelings, beliefs, and opinions; thus documenting the multi-layered public responses to the attack, in real time, and as part of information about the event, rather than separate to it. This was especially significant in the sociopolitical context of the event. As a racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic event, it forcefully highlighted troubling and ugly aspects of New Zealand's (historical and contemporary) social life, running counter to many dearly held narratives of the welcoming, egalitarian, or multicultural nature of the country. At

this crucial time, with many people using social media to get a ‘sense’ of collective sentiment or response (as already discussed in 4.1.1.1), social media sites provided the New Zealand public with information not only about the event, but *about itself*. This was significant to ongoing processes of the nation negotiating its own identity. However, much of this quickly became somewhat self-fulfilling, with social media platforms that were both circulating data on caring responses (such as photos of memorial tributes or performances) and acting as a vehicle for other caring responses (such as the viral crowdfunding campaign, or the selfie activist campaigns), feeding back into the mainstream media circuit as news to be reported on in itself.

The social information afforded by networked digital spaces was part of making sense of not only the event for both citizens of Aotearoa, but also for others looking on around the world, with real political and social implications. This too, was not something that emerged after the fact, but something social media users were aware of, and factoring into their online responses, from very early moments. A desire to defend the identity New Zealand – as their birth country, or home country, and as a nation suddenly highly visible to the international community through a very negative lens – was a motivation for some users’ actions. This was observed in patterns of sharing information as well as embedded in messages of support to the victims that emphasised re-stated positive qualities of New Zealand and its citizens (3.2.3.2, 3.2.3.3). A sense of the political stakes of this was also evident in the pride expressed, reflexively, in the weeks and months after the attack, around the public response, the Prime Minister’s response, and the media’s response – including around *not* having had the tragedy hotly politicised (3.4.1.2). The way that New Zealand was often contrasted to other countries and their typical (media or political) responses to mass violence (3.2.3.2) spoke to this processes of identity formation and moral positioning at a crucial time.

4.1.3 Negotiating ‘real’ responses

Social media is a site where people are repeatedly and regularly exposed to the suffering of others, amidst a variety of other types and tones of content vying for their attention. Even ambient or fleeting forms of exposure can interpellate users into positions of responsibility. However, their ability to attend or respond to others’ suffering is shaped by the aesthetic, dialogical, and material qualities of the social media assemblage, and at the same time by their own social position in relation to the tragedy.

While many offline and online practices for ‘witnessing’ the mosque attacks emerged, these existed in tension with a sense of helplessness, in knowing how to respond to an event of this gravity and scale. The data in this research spoke to the way that social media users navigated their own desire to help in this face of complexity. Online actions, as a way of responding to overwhelming tragedies that also belay much longer and deeper social issues, are certainly fraught. Changing profile banners, sharing memes, screenshotting news stories, giving to crowdfunding campaigns; these sorts of responses can simultaneously stand as an act of care and act as a marker of frustrated social agency in the face of something large, complex, and often (in the case of many ‘majority’ New Zealanders) removed from individuals’ immediate social contexts.

There were serious critiques, at many points, about both the appropriateness, and the efficiency, of various charitable, activist, or memorial responses, online and offline, too. Certainly data from this study showed that social media users navigated an awareness of many of these criticisms, through continual reflection on their own, and others, responses. This included an individual users’ agency in relation to platforms (3.2.4.4), appropriate ways of attending, recording, and witnessing tragedy (3.3.2.2), the genuineness or motivation behind different actions and different forms of action (3.3.4.4, 3.6.2, 3.6.3.1), the likelihood of ‘convincing’ those with different views through online debate (3.5.1.2), and the usefulness of donations (3.6.1.2). This was also present in comments from key public figures, at this time and later, who were eager that action not only be tokens of care, but “real” social change. From a social science perspective, there is a need to explore this further, and to work towards theorising how different forms of memorial, caring, or charitable action, offline and online, can relate to wider social shifts.

4.1.3.1 Giving and the giver

Giving is as much (or more) about the giver, as the receiver. Thus the impulse to do something (3.6.1) related not only to the victims’ needs, but to the donors need for a sense of agency, of a positive and coherent sense of self-identity, and or moral ‘rightness’ – each under threat for the white majority in the context of a white supremacist attack against a minority community. The viral success of this crowdfunding campaign helped with PR for

the country, to others, at a crucial time (see also 4.1.2.1), but also helped in affirming a positive moral alignment for those participating: as individuals and as part of a social body.

The findings from this study highlight the way that choices about what forms of charitable action to undertake not only reflected, but actively helped to constitute, social relations in New Zealand. Even fleeting online actions, such as donating to a crowdfunding campaign, factored into a sense of belonging and participating in a social body. Although crowdfunding websites are rarely spoken about by scholars looking at online sociality, intimacy, or care, the dialogical features of sites like Givealittle and GoFundMe were key in this context. It was on these sites that public care was made visible in particular forms. This included care quantified through rising tallies of both the number of donors, and the total number of donations, in the pay statistics displayed to all viewers. It also included donor comment sections, which gave donors an opportunity to position themselves demographically, geographically, socially, and morally (3.3.1.1), and enabled them to address non-present others (the recipients, the Muslim community). At the same time casual observers, and other donors, were able to read the comments left by previous donors, and thus get a sense of digital co-presence and shared participation, in the activity of giving (as discussed in 4.1.1).

The vast literature on charity are clear that it is embedded within, and constitutive of, distinct relations of power. The data in this study shows that care *was* enacted in a multi-directional, and multilayered way, during this period. However, as I have discussed above (4.1.1.1), the particular rhetoric of care risked creating a division between those being ‘cared for’ and those doing the caring in the New Zealand public. The ‘they are us’ formulation reinforced an ‘us’ - of mainstream, white and/or non-Muslim New Zealand – who had the power to accept, welcome, comfort, and care for the Muslim community at a time of intense shock and grief. At the same time it reinforced a ‘they’ who had varying experiences of being on the receiving end of these different forms of care, and whose safety was staked on their careful monitoring of these tides of charitable sentiment.

4.1.3.2 The public and the personal, as vehicles for social change

Very few actions on social media are truly individual. Rather, they are directly or indirectly relational – things that are done for, to, or with non-present others (as discussed above 4.1.1), including audiences. In particular the qualities of visibility, or of being observed, was often

key in defining the moral quality of particular actions in online spaces. The public nature of the medium gives many of the expressions of charity, care, and personal transformation documented in this study a performative quality - not necessarily in the sense of being insincere, but in that their social significance is embedded not in the action itself, but in its social context. ‘Micro’ moral actions such as liking/hearting (3.3.5.1), were acts of visible moral positioning; contributing to a visible and quantified public response, but also making the users’ orientation to the source statement/content visible to their own contacts and beyond. Personal comments, statements, reflections, or confessions (3.3.4.3), also drew both significance and impact from their public qualities.

Many social media users did reflect critically on the power or impact of words, being perceived as inauthentic, limited, or actively contrasted to ‘real’ action at times. From a scholarly perspective words have a performative social quality that can establish their speakers own intentions and obligations, while also interpellating others/readers into similar orientations towards the event. Thus public reflection can be taken as at once part of the process, and result, of subject formation within a newly fragile social body. This is partly because it reflects the internalisation of particular emergent values or discourses through ‘technologies of the self’ – which, as Foucaultian scholarship charts, rely upon the idea of a self that is not only revealed but actively worked upon through public confession.

4.2 FINAL COMMENT: FROM CARE TO MORAL PRACTICE, VIA AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE GOOD

I began this study with an interest in care. Care is an important, flexible, and multifaceted, interdisciplinary heuristic. A key appeal in applying it to this topic, was that it would enable me to focus on the existing capacities, knowledges, and moral systems of social media users, at a time when much of the wider (popular and scholarly) discussion focused on a particularly negative and ‘top-down’ perspective, i.e. on hate speech and extremism, often in terms of censorship, legislation, and political alignment. The lens of care, I felt, restored attention to the agency of everyday social media users, in responding to this horror, while still maintaining critical attention to the sociopolitical contexts in (and through) which they enacted these responses. However, I soon found that in order to encompass all the rich facets of the data that were emerging, I needed to shift to a broader lens than care – that of ‘moral practice’. Scholarly use of the terms are varied, but for myself I defined the moral as the

flexible everyday pursuit of the good; which is shaped by shared cultural frameworks, but distinct from the more formally prescribed frameworks of ethics. As such I further developed my approach through reference to Joel Robbins' (2013) work on the 'anthropology of the good'. This work suggests that there is already a growing shift in the field of anthropology, towards an interest in value, imagination, morality, wellbeing, empathy, the gift, hope, time, change, and care – within and amongst, rather than as an alternative to, the harsh dimensions of human life we often study. I observed all of these woven into the experiences and practices of social media users as they navigated interpersonal interactions, information exchange, civil, activist, and charitable activity, in this study.

As the previous sections have discussed, moral practice online was inherently tied to social and relational concerns, and thus care maintained a central role. This covered quandaries about how to act and interact, on social media platforms, often based not on a *lack* of care, but on competing care objects: including digitally co-present individuals, imagined social wholes such as the nation of 'New Zealand' or 'the Muslim community', and an imagined future society, and oneself. The perspectives of the three Muslim participants shows some the additional complexities and ambiguities of being at the receiving end of care. As such the findings speak to 'good' not only as a quality of individual action or intent but also as something defined relationally, in conversation, in shifting and fluid ways. People were often working towards multiple goods, and at the same time, observing and evaluating other people's goods. As such, difficulties emerged not only about what counted as good and for whom, but also the realistic constraints on good actions (individual, political, or legal) to take, in the face of complex issues of racism, colonialism, white supremacy, migration, multiculturalism, cultural assimilation and more. Data on social media users' experiences in this study, spanning period of the introduction of new gun legislation, and international partnership of the Christchurch Call, a great many community and grassroots responses, and a number of social media based activist campaigns. For each there were multiple layers of reflexive consideration and public debate, online and off. Particularly given the role of social media platforms in hosting the radicalised communities such as that which the terrorist belonged to, and in presenting the spectacularised violence of the attack via livestream, data also responded to conversations specific to the ideal characteristics of a digital public sphere. At the same time, data spoke to conversations about the scope and limitations of individual user actions versus the responsibility of platforms and their owners and developers.

Across all of these observations, I found it important to remember that the ‘good’ is not abstracted, but rather is part of the messy, vital, negotiated, everyday quality of the social world. As such it is embedded in the material and embodied facets of human life, not only the abstract or intellectual. This is perhaps particularly important in looking at responses to an event centred on intentional violence against real, living, and vulnerable human bodies. As I have tried to emphasise in this section, it is essential for discussion of the moral and social life of the internet, by researchers, to also pay continued and close attention to the subjective ground through which we participate in this life; through phenomenological attention to the senses, the body, memory, cognition, and affect. This is what forms the actual lived experience of *being* as well as *doing* online at times of social tension or change. Looking, clicking, scrolling; pity, anxiety, shame; listening, co-presence, hugs; these are the actual building blocks of the good, as lived out in social media spaces, with the social body continually reshaped by the circulation of attention and affect in and through real bodies, even at “the interface between medium, hand, and eye” (Frosh 2011: 365).

Social media continues to be perceived, in both popular media and some scholarly circles, as primarily a site of antisocial behaviour, and ‘shallow’ social engagement; too new to have established proper governing etiquette. This study affirms the opposite: that social media users act based on incredibly complex and nuanced sociomoral rules, values and frameworks, that draw from wider moral frameworks. Additionally, users are also uniquely cognisant of the structural, aesthetic, dialogical, and phenomenological features of the online platforms through which they act, and often reflect on these, individually and together, as part of navigating the possibilities for moral response to extreme events.

The mosque attacks have left deep imprints on the nation, and social media does more than record this – it is an active part of determining what these imprints will be. It is my hope that we continue to take very seriously not only the moral and civil possibilities of the internet – as a site for top-town interventions, education, or legislation – but the internet as it already is, as a messy human place, in which people navigate, together, the most mundane and the most extreme facets of social existence. Academics trained to study the nuances of social life should be watching closely here, and policy-makers should similarly be working to recognise the capacities, agencies, and tacit social knowledge, that many users already possess.

4.3 LIMITATIONS

This research is heavily based on interview data from a small number of participants, who are not themselves a representative sample of the New Zealand population. Although the Muslim interviewees in this participant pool provide extremely important insights, it is particularly important not to over-extrapolate or over-generalise findings about Muslim experiences after the attack, to all New Zealand Muslims. Muslims must be recognised as diverse social actors, within a culturally and socially heterogeneous religious community.

While the findings from this study can contribute to the theorisation of digital sociality, they cannot be generalised to all social media users in New Zealand, nor to social media use in different places or settings. This is because digital spaces are shifting, fluid, and highly personalised by algorithms, individual user settings, platform policies, moderation practices, and more. It is also because the emphasis of this study is on the situated nature of digital practice; it considers social, cultural, historical, political, and economic settings and key factors that shape understandings and practices of moral behaviour, both on and offline.

Finally, data from interviews presents an image of social media practice that is based on reported actions rather than direct observations – the two forms of data should be carefully differentiated. To increase the validity of findings derived from reported data, the study triangulates this with data from direct observation of online behaviour through digital ethnography and digital textual analysis (i.e. of crowdfunding pages and donor comments).

4.4 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- 1) **Power and agency, in the negotiations between platforms and users:** While this research has aimed to provide ethnographic perspectives on the everyday behaviours of social media users, other literature has focused more on policy, platform responsibility, legal intervention, censorship algorithms, and other top-down or infrastructural aspects of digital worlds. While both are significant in gaining a more full and complete picture of online social life in a highly mediatised world, and amidst the spectacularisation of violence, there is scope for further work that addresses the tensions between platform ethics, responsibility and agency, and between user ethics, responsibility and agency. Places where these tensions are seen via silences and absences, traces and hauntings, emerged in this research. However, more could be

done to consider how and where the power of invisible others becomes evident in the digital worlds that users inhabit, as well as the ways they engage with or push back against this. Considerably more analysis is also needed of an additional, intermediary layer: the community leaders and ‘admins’ who do moderating work but are distinct from the formal, paid moderators employed by platforms or media outlets. Research into their role, labour, and strategy is an important next step.

- 2) **Crowdfunding platforms as sites of digital sociality:** Literature on crowdfunding – and particularly on medical crowdfunding – has tended to focus on crowdfunding platforms and campaign pages as windows into health access inequalities, but to date only minimal work has been done to explore the social, moral, and affective aspects of this phenomena. Elsewhere, rich bodies of work address intimacy, community, care, and relationality, across many different online platforms and spaces. However, crowdfunding platforms have received almost no attention in this area of scholarship to date, despite having similar networked and dialogical qualities. In addition, most studies have analysed campaign demographics or statistics, campaign texts, or occasionally interviews with campaigners about their experiences, but few have approached them more holistically, and there is little data on audience/donor experience or practice.
- 3) **Digital phenomenology, and online being:** Sprinkled throughout this data were a variety of metaphors for presence and power in digital worlds, which require further unpacking. Examples include references to ‘voice’ as a bundled metaphor for positioned online identity, audience, reach, and impact – which was doubly striking given the highly visual nature of social media worlds, leading to consideration of how ‘voice’ is perceived or enacted through image and text. A phenomenological lens could be used to consider how digital selves are differently embodied (rather than disembodied) and what the language and metaphors used to described online practice reveal about their relationship to the body. These metaphors could also be critically analysed to see how they correspond to other social structures, to platform structures and agencies.

4.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

For those working on either formal policy-making or community research and development to do with the digital, some suggestions based on this research are as follows:

1. **Training and/or accessible information for social media users** on what modes of action or responses to troubling information are available on each platform. Users are not always aware of how to filter information through their own accounts via different settings, how to report objectionable content, or other processes. This could be distributed in simplified, accessible forms, and would need to factor in regular updates, as platforms updated policy or site infrastructure. Additional to providing information about these options, it would also be beneficial to facilitate the sharing of individual's stories that contribute to the normalisation of various social applications of the platforms different settings and tools, in order to manage one's own wellbeing and relationships (samples of which appear frequently in the data from this study). Overall this could contribute to a sense of empowerment and control in response to trauma – with the study clearly documenting that a lack of control over the social media environment contributed to distress and anxiety among users at this time.
2. **Acknowledgement, support, and capacity-building for existing community leaders**, including group or page administrators. These people currently fulfil an important role on the social infrastructure of many networked digital spaces – in between formal platform moderators, and regular users - including in dealing with hate speech, dangerous speech, or objectionable content within their own groups, pages, or communities. Yet they do without any access to training, professional development, and professional support services, and most do not engage with this work as part of any formal paid roles. There are similarly no dedicated conferences or journals through which their own knowledge or skills can be recorded and shared, at a peer-level, or in relation to other professional fields (such as social and community work; law; psychology; management, or others).

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