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## ***Social Media in Urban Suriname: An Ethnography on Christian Adolescents and their Cell Phones in Latour, Paramaribo<sup>1</sup>***

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This article is concerned with the use of social media in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, and more specifically in Latour, a city district on its outskirts, where I did ethnographic fieldwork in the community centre of StiBuLa (Stichting Buurtwerk Latour). In the style of Miller et al.'s project 'Why we Post' (2016), this article focuses on the social media use of different young Latourians, who are all involved with the neighbourhood, or the activities of StiBuLa, in different ways. It will consequently show and analyse how mobile phones and digital media productions are in constant dialogue with the established social and religious structures in the area. This ethnography provides an in-depth and culturally embedded analysis of not only how social media shape local reality, but also how local reality shapes our academic understanding of the social and cultural relevance of social media practices.

**Keywords:** Suriname, Paramaribo, Latour, social media, youth culture.

### **Introduction**

I cherish fond memories of my first week in Latour, Paramaribo, where I arrived amidst the joyous Keti Koti festivities (which literally means 'broken chains', in which the people of Suriname celebrate the day that slavery was officially abolished in 1863). Despite the festivities that day, I met Mr Koster, the coordinator of StiBuLa (Stichting Buurtwerk Latour), the organisation with which I worked. Mr Koster, with a bristly moustache and a charismatic smile, is a joyful man, and also the only salaried staff member of StiBuLa. He is responsible for the bulk of the organization's projects and its administration. As he showed me around the neighbourhood of Latour (one of the fastest growing areas of Paramaribo, however also one of the poorest), I vividly recall seeing the modest wooden houses with their fenced porches, and the bumpy semi-asphalted roads that crisscross through the area. I vividly remember the inhabitants of Latour, sitting outside or leaning against the walls of their house, their eyes curiously following our silhouettes as we passed in the colossus of a car belonging to Mr Koster.

As the weeks progressed, I learned more about StiBuLa's activities and soon became acquainted with the young people who visit the community centre. They are active in various neighbourhood-related activities, aimed in particular at tackling the urgent challenges surrounding sustainability in the area, such as recycling plastic bottles or raising awareness about the increase in the number of motorised vehicles. One day I met Darwin, a 20-year-old of Afro-Surinamese descent, a seemingly overconfident young man. I began chatting with him, hoping to make an acquaintance. He answered me half-heartedly and devoted most of his attention to his smartphone. After I asked him about his ambitions, he looked at me and told me that he wanted to become an actor in Hollywood. He had the talent and motivation, he emphasized, and now all he had to do was find the right contacts to take him to the top. Social

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media helped him to find auditions in the neighbourhood and to appear in locally produced films or commercials.

Darwin's account already provides some interesting insights into his relationship with Latour, his personal ambitions and, parallelly, his social media activity. This study aims to provide insight into how young Latourians, such as Darwin, build a sense of the future and how they use their smartphones to achieve their ambitions. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the historical, urban context of Latour and give an introductory understanding of the rapid emergence and spread of new digital communication platforms in the area. I will also outline the basic framework for interpreting these technological developments through the eyes of various young adolescent interlocutors (Darwin among others) whom I was fortunate enough to meet.



Image 1. Topographic map of Suriname.<sup>2</sup>

### The Urban Context of Latour

The *ressort*<sup>3</sup> of Latour gained increasing importance in the mid-twentieth century as a government-sponsored housing project for lower income groups in the face of increased population growth in Paramaribo (Hoefte 2014). Located on the outskirts of the city, the spatial socio-economic inequalities between the area and other parts became more and more visible as the business sector gained control over the purchase and sale of housing in the central areas from the 21st century onwards (Hoefte 2014). Paramaribo now has about 240,000 inhabitants

<sup>2</sup> Under Creative Commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Suriname\\_administrative\\_divisions\\_-\\_de\\_-\\_colored.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Suriname_administrative_divisions_-_de_-_colored.svg).

<sup>3</sup> This is the Surinamese equivalent of a municipal area within a specific district; in this case Paramaribo (Bouterse 2014).

and because there are almost no high-rise buildings, the urban area is spread over a large area (Verrest and Post 2007). As a result, the socioeconomic boundaries that separate the various *ressorten*, and the smaller neighbourhoods within the city, become even more solid as the city continues to expand.

Latour is a central neighbourhood in the *ressort* of Latour. It is unique for several reasons. Mainly because of its small population size,<sup>4</sup> Suriname harbours a highly diverse multi-lingual and poly-ethnic community, rooted in Europe, America, Asia and Africa (St-Hilaire 2001). In Latour, however, African-descent families, such as Creoles and urban Maroons, are predominant. The term Creole is generally reserved for the offspring of enslaved Africans who were forced to migrate to Suriname from the 16th century onwards, and who did not escape from their bondage by fleeing into the rainforest (Buschkens 1974, Hoefte 2014), as opposed to urban Maroons; that is, the offspring of Africans that fled slavery during the colonial period and that established semi-independent societies in the interior (Chin and Buddingh 1987), and who have in the last decade become a relevant ethnic group in Latour (Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek Suriname 2013). In general, most of the urban Maroons and Creoles speak Dutch, while Sranan Tongo and specific family idioms are spoken as well (St-Hilaire 2001).

Although the city has always been strongly divided into ethnic lines (Hoefte 2014), since the 1990s the practices of exogamy and inter-ethnic marriages have become more and more mainstream (Verrest 1998, Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek Suriname 2006 and 2013). During the Interior War that terrorized the country from 1986 to 1992 (van den Broek 1993), and in which the National Army fought domestic guerrillas in the jungle of Suriname, many Maroons fled to the suburbs of Paramaribo, most of which settled in Latour (van den Broek 1993, Hoefte 2014), becoming the ethnic group with the lowest education and socio-economic indicators. As such, they have for a long time been the subject of strong hostility and discrimination from the part of urban Creoles (St-Hilaire 2001).

According to Mr Koster, in the 1990s and early 2000s, several male youth gangs terrorised the streets and the number of teenage pregnancies was alarmingly high. It is thus no coincidence that StiBuLa concentrates its activities mainly on young men, who are found hanging out on the streets during school hours. This does not mean that girls have a lower drop-out rate than boys, but often the girls (especially if they are the oldest in the family) stay at home and do household chores, while their parents work outside the home (van den Broek 1993).

Fortunately, things have changed for the better in Latour. StiBuLa's activities, with occasional limited support from the Surinamese government, have played their part in this (Angel et al. 1999). Today, Latour's main street is reinventing itself with the emergence of several commercial companies, such as fastfood restaurants, bicycle repair shops and electronics shops. These socio-economic changes also resulted in a sharp increase of automobiles, and traffic jams have become for many a frustrating daily reality. These trends have mainly to do with a general recovery of the Surinamese economy after the end of the Interior War in 1992 (Hoefte 2014). New economic opportunities have led to accelerated

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<sup>4</sup> In 2012, it counted 541,638 inhabitants (Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek Suriname 2013).

mobility since the late 1990s, and this is clearly visible in the rapidly changing context of Latour.

However, Latour is currently nowhere near overcoming all its pressing, internal problems; the recent decade has not been one of fast-growing prosperity. On the contrary, for many, living conditions have become increasingly tense and precarious. While the beginning of the new century was applauded by several academics as a ‘reason for guarded optimism’ (Hoefte 2014: 218), in Latour families are currently facing rising livelihood prices as the value of the Surinamese dollar rapidly declines. For a younger generation there are double forces at work. At the micro level, they are part of a generation that will reap the benefits of an increasingly stable social context, while at the macro level, they are exposed to a precarious and unstable national situation, which threatens to destabilise local reality dramatically.



Image 2. Residential Street in Latour, close to Stibula (by the author).

### **The Rise of New Digital Possibilities**

Internet use in Suriname has rapidly gained in popularity, especially in the last decade (Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek Suriname 2013). During the week, young people come to StiBuLa to hang out, play football or basketball, or to take part in the organisation’s daily activities. Although these activities are popular, their smartphones often demand their full attention. In Latour, the quick rise of social media apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram or Snapchat, seems to produce a discursive sphere of interaction, often voiced as frustration or incomprehensibility, as for instance parents, grandparents and StiBuLa associates, at multiple occasions, expressed their concern about online connectivity. They point out that the younger generation does not know how to behave on social media platforms while the young adolescents in turn often express their frustration at the tight control their family members try to maintain over their online activities. This dilemma is mainly expressed by female interlocutors, who are generally more sensitive to parental control, as they are expected to carry

out chores and help in the household, while boys move more freely, away from their parents' gaze (van den Broek 1993).

This article will shed light upon social media activity among these young individuals, who were born in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Paramaribo, and which is now in a rapid process of change. I will show how the sharing of online content on social media, such as images and videos, are closely linked to the social, economic and cultural changes that the inhabitants are undergoing. As such, I will expose the different ways in which changes at the macro-level resonate with the social reality of several of these individuals, while cherishing a diverse palette of dreams, imaginations and subjectivities.

### **Methodological and Theoretical Framework**

Social media platforms have aided Latourian youth to look across the frontier of their former social world, and to come into contact with other views, individuals and mentalities. Studying the relationship between urban neighbourhoods and social media has been popularised by Daniel Miller's global 'why we post' book series, in which anthropologists around the world have begun to document the use of social media in urban areas (see for instance Miller et al. 2016, Costa 2016, Haynes 2016, Miller 2016, Sinanan 2017). Additionally, Sarah Pink argued that 'in any project a researcher should attend not only to the internal "meanings" of an image but [also] to how the image was produced and how it is made meaningful by its viewers' (2006: 29). As such, in this article, I will look at the 'scalable nature' (Miller et al. 2016) of social media platforms, a term developed in the 'why we post' series, to see how social media platforms create agency for these young individuals to decide and control their social interactions. In other words, they are able to manage who is excluded and included on the different platforms. In this way, social media platforms enable them to radically rethink the neighbourhood of Latour and the mentalities that govern it.

I will focus on young Latourians who, although very different in dreams, ambitions and opinions, are all actively engaged in StiBuLa's activities in various ways, for example through administrative work, supervising school activities or organising meetings. Most of the dreams and ideals they have are inspired by Christian values, although, as we will see later, they all have different views of what it means to be a good Christian. In George Marcus' terms, I see them as 'cultural producers', to emphasise the responsibility they feel towards their peers, and who are engaged in 'intellectual work in various genres and who are difficult to pin down by any single specialty, craft, art, expertise, or professional role' (Marcus 1997: 8). These cultural producers are exploiting social media as 'an empty space of creativity where new ideologies and cultural strategies are shaped and deployed' (Jules-Rosette 2002: 604).

#### *Social Media in Latour*

As Appadurai (1996: 31) notes, increased globalization has rendered the imagination as a 'key component of the new global order'. In Latour, too, the rapid emergence of social media has led to an increasingly versatile and dynamic range of media productions (images, music or video fragments, even personal interactions) that have influenced the imagination of its young



inhabitants. As social imaginaries, a term coined by the political philosopher Charles Taylor in 2002, provide for the ‘totalizing backdrop required for human beings to make sense of the world’ (Sneath et al. 2009: 7), it is thus interesting to see how the introduction of social media, along with a changing urban context in greater Paramaribo, mixes with local reality in Latour, creating new opportunities and new ideologies. It is therefore as exciting as it is necessary to investigate the growing acquaintance of a group of young people, who are constantly expanding their social reference, with a diverse range of genres, ideas and people who have always been ‘elsewhere’, and who have now come closer, and have even become accessible, through social media.

In Latour, the smartphone quickly entered people’s social lives. In 2007, the telecommunications sector became privatized, as the Surinamese state company Telesur lost its monopoly to the multinational enterprise Digicel, dramatically lowering the costs for mobile telephony and spurring an increase in people’s mobile phone use. Nevertheless, there is a difference between having a telephone and being ‘connected’ in Latour: having a telephone and some credit is not enough, if only because texting and calling with a prepaid card is considered quite expensive. Young people feel the need to be online and to engage in meaningful social activities. As Miller et al. (2016) argue, the important digital platforms in Latour, which are above all Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube, should be seen as platforms of potential interaction, opening up new and exciting spaces of representation and communication that anteriorly were never a possibility

If we look at Mauss’ theory of the entanglement of persons, roles and masks (Hollis 1985), the use of social media in Latour could imply something important for the formation of an individual, striking a balance between concepts such as traditional and modern life, individual and family responsibilities, or between public and private life. The study of these analytical polarities are in line with contemporary ideas within urban anthropology that, when analysing urban contexts, it is important to integrate the challenges of macro processes such as globalisation and technological developments with local reality, for example in creating new forms of exclusion, segregation and even governance (Prato and Pardo 2013).

Thus, anyone with a smartphone and internet access can reconfigure public and private life and democratise the spheres of space and time for their own benefit (Fortunati 2002). Social media has thus lifted a significant proportion of the world’s population into a more extensive social reality than before (Miller 2011). Social media users are increasingly able to mediate and negotiate their presence online, or to ‘scale their sociality’ (Miller 2016: 13), vis-à-vis others. Although the equalizing potential of social media is often criticized by anthropologists as overly optimistic (Pype 2016, Archambault 2013), it has to be admitted that in Latour, the possibilities for and scope of communication, via social media, have greatly expanded.

### *‘Being young’ and the Role of the Household*

Since this is a study of young adolescents, there must be a reflection on youth culture. I consider youth and adolescence as socially fluctuating entities. In other words, identifying someone as ‘young’ means positioning this individual in terms of a variety of social characteristics (relevant

to a particular socio-cultural context). Age can be a factor, but juvenility can oppose adulthood in many ways. For example, there is a difference between pre-industrial and industrial societies in terms of the transition from childhood to adulthood, as, in the former, the transition from one generation to another has always been more balanced than in urbanised environments, where ‘children cannot expect to follow in the path of their parents, simply because the path has changed and it is continuing to change’ (Ling 2004: 95).

It is above all the flexibility of what categorizes youth culture that makes young adolescents able to ‘navigate and control new geographies and chronologies of globalization’ (De Boeck and Howana 2005: 6). A multi-sided perspective of young people as ‘being’, but also as ‘becoming’ — ‘the way youths are positioned in society, and the way they position themselves in society’ (Christiansen et al. 2006: 11) is thus pivotal. Due to their highly flexible and scalable nature, social media platforms offer a unique opportunity to explore this position further

Moreover, social media channels are used by the young people of Latour to manage the dual forces of their daily lives, between the public and private life, or the individual and the network. I will show how their use of telephone and social media exposes the shifting power imbalances in the relationship with their family members, who in most cases play the most important educational and formative role in their lives. As such, these young people make use of available technology to increasingly ‘manage interaction with their parents and with their peers’ (Ling 2004: 119), often outside of the purview of the former

Particularly when it comes to religion, the above trend is most evident. In Latour, religious belief systems cannot be seen as a top-down practice of socialisation that comes from parents and is received and accepted uncritically by their children. Taking into account the variety of ways in which young people perceive their religious upbringing is therefore important (Habashi 2017). I increasingly realised that my interlocutors were constantly monitoring their identity and their representation as Christian young adolescents on various social media platforms. Without dismissing the moral and psychological implications of these young adolescents’ relationship with their parents or with StiBuLa, I would like to emphasize in this article that they are increasingly choosing their own direction in a rapidly changing and often uncertain urban context.

As such, I make no clear distinction between the online and the offline. The things we do, the people we engage with and the activities we undertake on social media are as real as their counterparts in the physical world (Miller et al. 2016). In what follows, I will use photographic material published online by my interlocutors, but I will not limit my analytical gaze solely to these images. As an ethnographer studying visual culture, my primary goal is to show the interwovenness of online visual culture with the social world, and I support the prevailing view within social science literature that visual and virtual technological developments should be an integral part of the discourse of every contemporary anthropological ethnography (Zuev and Krase 2017, Krase 2018). Furthermore, I have been heavily indebted by the concept of ‘communicative ecology’ (Slater and Tacchi 2004, Slater 2005), arguing that one has to understand the broader context in which a new technological or media device has been

introduced. Social media platforms are not new spaces for creating reality; as they cannot be isolated from the hazy and very complex social reality in which their users already live

In this article, I contribute my own piece of the puzzle to what social media are and are represented in Latour, to show how technological developments are never neutral. In line with contemporary urban anthropological theory (Prato and Pardo 2013), I propose that the complexity of life can be found in the things around us that may seem most normal. The research data for this article was obtained firstly through ‘online’ and ‘offline’ participant observation in Latour, and secondly through roundtable discussions and semi-structured interviews with several young Latourians. These interlocutors have been carefully selected during my time as an intern and researcher at StiBuLa. I learned from them, listened to them and through their words I got a sense of what ‘being young’ means in Latour.

Cultural anthropology has a long history of studying distant societies, but it is in studying urban areas that the richness and complexity of social life can be found. Prato and Pardo (2013) have argued that, ‘bearing in mind that a great part of the world population lives in cities and that urbanization will inevitably grow further, it could be argued that contemporary urban anthropology is Anthropology’ (p.100). I suggest that the social media in Latour blend in with specific socio-cultural, historical and economic structures that are continuously shaping the area’s social organisation, as well as of its inhabitants’ complex and sometimes paradoxical decisions.

### **Christianity, Networks and Reciprocity**

Sitting outside on the terrace of StiBuLa, Fabian, 24 years old, and I discuss social media. Growing up as a self-confident young man and developing his moral compass as well as leadership skills at the boy scouts of Latour, he decided to pursue a career in the political realm of Suriname. As he progressed to become the chairman of the national youth parliament, he had to be increasingly aware of his online presence. Having reached the maximum friends limit of Facebook (5000), he needs to be extremely vigilant of what he posts online. ‘In Suriname you need followers to achieve your goals’, he said, ‘but it gets me thinking about Facebook. If I go to a bar with friends, or if I enjoy myself, I cannot show a picture of it afterwards’. Fabian thus seems to be aware of his representative status as a political figure and of his reputation as a well-educated Christian young man, who is not supposed to be drunk, surpassing himself with wild parties and outrageous behaviour.

This principle of ‘being a good Christian’ is of great concern to most of my interlocutors; it is ubiquitous, albeit often unconscious. It is the principle on which the Roman Catholic neighbourhood project StiBuLa was founded in the 1960s, and the words are also central to the world view of the Boy and Girl Scouts, of whom many of my interlocutors are active members. The importance of this movement and its formative function in their lives cannot be ignored. The role of the scouting movement in Latour dates back to the Dutch colonial period (van Niel 2017). For many of my interlocutors, the movement is a primary place of orientation, a place where they, as Christians, learn to ‘be’ in the world, to learn the values that underlie the social organisation of Latour.



The relationship between Christianity and the scouting movement is even spatially visible, as the scouts meet weekly on the grounds of the Catholic Church. However, the role Christianity plays in my interlocutors' daily lives is very complex, not in the least because the religious landscape in Latour is very heterogeneous, including, for instance, Roman Catholic, Jehovah, Lutheranism, Pentecostalism. As 23-year-old Julia explains: 'Although Christianity has played an important role in my upbringing, I am not one to take the Bible literally. For me it's more about the way I was brought up, I do believe there is more between heaven and earth, but I won't take it as proof'. For Julia, being a Christian is subordinate to being a morally good person, and passing on the example to others

The keyword the young adolescents use above all to describe their ambitions is 'responsibility' (Dutch: *verantwoordelijkheid*). For Julia, as a chemical engineering student, it is about the responsibility for Latour's environment. For Fabian, as an aspiring politician, it's about responsibility for the future of next generations. According to Mr Koster, during the Internal War, it was generally thought that young migrant families were not able to educate their children properly. Therefore, many of their offspring now feel strongly that they have a shared responsibility to paint a responsible picture of themselves.



Image 3. Julia's Facebook picture in 2018, wearing the traditional uniform of the girl scouts and raising awareness for Earth Hour.

Nonetheless, the publication of moralising and educational messages online is the subject of many negotiations. As Frida, 18, explains, posting too many moral and religious references can have a devastating effect on a person's popularity. In a society where visibility and connectivity are very important, Frida, as a committed Roman Catholic, makes an effort not to be found 'too boring', and therefore limiting Bible-related content online. In real life, she prefers the evangelical Christian masses to the Catholic masses, the church she belongs to, because she finds the latter masses somewhat 'grey and depressing'. The evangelical meetings are livelier in her eyes and give her more incentive to regularly go to church. She thus struggles

to negotiate her religious preferences, fearing that she will lose her peers' attention if her posts are too dull.

Next to this, my interlocutors are constantly rearranging their contacts online. Issues of reciprocity, especially on Facebook, are important. 'Normally, if someone sends me a friendship request, I accept it, given that the person has a decent profile', says the 22-year-old girl scout Eunice, 'and if they start talking to me, I will respond. You never know what someone else might do for you', which indicates the blurred line between a friend and a stranger on social media, both of which are called 'friends' (Dutch: *Vrienden*) in her vocabulary. However, the difference between a 'Facebook friend' and a 'real friend' (in Dutch: *goede vrienden vis-à-vis Facebook vrienden*) is also relevant, as Eunice explains: 'a good friend is there for you and we see each other outside, but someone new is interesting, and you can make nice *tori*'<sup>5</sup> (van Stipriaan 2015: 157). For Eunice, meeting new people to talk to is an important incentive to approach strangers on Facebook. Social media is therefore a way to understand the changing scale of her social life, to meet people from outside her traditional social circle and possibly form connections with them.

Marcel Mauss argued in the 1920s that reciprocity is important for the expression of social ties between (groups of) people, not solely measured in economic terms (Heins and Unrau 2018). The most important issue, as Mauss argued, seems to be sociality. Being connected to someone's social media platform brings with it a certain expectation of engaging in meaningful communication. Individuals who may not know each other physically, but who may be useful to each other at some point in life, thus create multiple networks a day. In Granoveterian terminology these would be 'weak links' (Granovetter 1973), local bridges aimed at the immediate or future distribution of goods, sociality, ideas or subjectivity.

In Suriname, talking to each other is an important part of everyday life. This could explain why many of my interlocutors on Facebook are quite flexible when it comes to talking to strangers. Nevertheless, they pay constant attention to who is 'useful' and who is not. 'Sometimes I meet someone on my friends list who I don't know and who never talks to me', says Eunice, adding, 'what's the point of keeping this person as a friend?' Thus, having a lot of friends on Facebook is not just about popularity, it's very social — people are expected to invest in their contacts.

Moreover, the affinities with different media platforms — Gershon (2010) calls these 'media ideologies' — are constantly changing. I felt a growing aversion to Facebook among my interlocutors, because many felt that it had become too big to manage properly. Other social media platforms were mainly discussed with more enthusiasm. Especially Snapchat was for many an ideal combination of the virtues of Facebook and WhatsApp, being not too openly public, yet easily manageable and scalable, while retaining the playful and representative qualities of Facebook. On Snapchat, young adolescents play with self-representation, manage social networks and have fun all at once. Eunice explains, 'You know, you can also copy Snapchat photos to Facebook and share them but then everyone would see it. On Snapchat, I

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<sup>5</sup> This is the Sranan Tongo word for 'storytelling' or 'gossiping'.

can send personal, filtered photos to different types of people. I get to choose'. This way, Snapchat offers her more agency to manage online interactions with her peers.

For WhatsApp, the dynamics are different. As the platform is not suitable for the type of public display that Facebook offers, my interlocutors were not so much concerned with showing themselves explicitly on it. WhatsApp seemed more suitable for direct messaging. Being WhatsApp contacts overall has an air of gravity, and therefore, Eunice alludes to the fact that on the platform one can easily separate strong from weak ties (Granovetter 1973). 'If I give you my number, it means something', she says, and gives a clear example of a scaled sociality on her part:

'If I give you my number, we are friends, or we are about to become friends. Sometimes I add someone on WhatsApp, or someone adds me, whom I don't know too well. Then I can reset my profile to zero so that this person can't see my profile picture or status. We can only chat.'<sup>6</sup>

Although most of my informants agree that Instagram is no less public than Facebook, those who use Instagram generally emphasise feeling a higher degree of freedom. They dislike the fact that their Facebook profile is exposed to a variety of unwelcome actors, such as family members, strangers and fake accounts, which prevents them from moving freely. Facebook has become too big to scale. On Instagram, they are able to manage their accounts between private and public, or between exhibition and concealment, sharing photos while following others, such as international celebrities and interesting foreigners.

As this discussion shows, there are important differences between scaling strategies for the most popular social media platforms; namely, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat. Facebook is seen as increasingly stressful and demanding. As a result, WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat are rapidly gaining in popularity. Many of the social media activities of the young people in Latour seem to stimulate their sense of autonomy and responsibility, as they are navigating different platforms and using different strategies to create and maintain social networks.

### **Economic Activity, Connectivity and the Household**

One could randomly choose an afternoon to visit the Latourweg and see groups of young men gather around the restaurants, bars or Chinese supermarkets. Often dressed in leisure or sports clothing, their smartphones are at the centre of the collective interaction. They listen to music and occasionally show each other videos or photos. Darwin explained to me that these young men are attracted to these places because of the availability of free Wi-Fi. Since StibuLa is unable to offer an open Wi-Fi hotspot, these young men prefer to hang out here during the day, and even in the night.

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<sup>6</sup> The original in Dutch reads: "Als ik je mijn nummer geef, dan zijn we vrienden of dan worden we vrienden. Het gebeurt soms dat ik iemand toevoeg op WhatsApp, of iemand voegt mij toe, die ik niet zo goed ken. Dan kan ik mijn profiel op nul zetten, zodat hij mijn profielfoto of status niet kan zien. We kunnen dan alleen maar praten".

According to Darwin, many of these young people do not have access to the Internet at home, because the costs of installing safe and fast wireless or cable connections in Suriname are relatively high, especially in comparison with other countries in the region (Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek Suriname 2013). The multinational Digicel responded to the demand for affordable internet by offering free Facebook access with a prepaid SIM card. Although this free access to Facebook is very slow in the eyes of many, it has convinced many people to switch from Telesur (the semi-state telecommunications provider) to Digicel.

For many Latourians, the chance of finding a job outside the neighbourhood has increased due to improved access to the Internet. Eunice is one of them. For her it is important to post work photos online, because she wants to present a good and responsible image of herself. However, having fun is just as important. Several of her photos have been adapted with so-called ‘filters’, photographic objects that can be added digitally to a photo to increase its attractiveness (for example rabbit ears or a crown). In this way she reinvents social life via the smartphone medium. Snapchat is an important platform where many of the edited photos are shared among her closest contacts, and sometimes she remediates them in the form of WhatsApp or Facebook status updates (photos or videos that remain on the platform for 24 hours and are then automatically deleted). These kinds of photos are rarely published for a longer period of time, exemplifying the ongoing negotiations of distance and proximity, or private and public life, online.

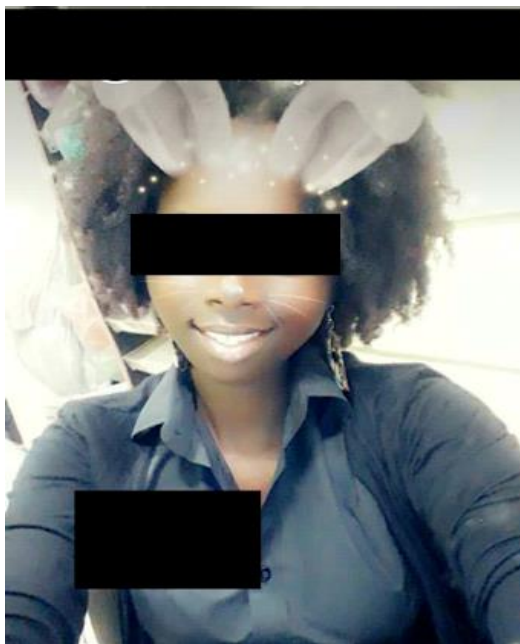


Image 4. Eunice’s Status Update on Whatsapp in 2018, a filtered selfie taken at work.

In fact, managing the private and the public is an important concern in the neighbourhood. In a community like Latour, where social life is often lived outdoors and where it is often difficult to isolate personal issues from neighbours (van Niel 2017), social media platforms directly play into the desire in Latour to find new spheres of possible social connection in which, among others, one’s status can be enhanced.

The importance of social networks in Latour therefore cannot be overestimated. For example, for both Fabian and Darwin, who both share political ambitions, it is very important to reach and speak to as many people as possible. Fabian says, ‘To be a good politician in Suriname, you have to hear a lot of young people, and see what you can do for them. On social media, Facebook and Instagram, for example, I can show what my goals are and what I can do for others and my environment’. But bringing social networks into the realm of social media can create some new problems, as Darwin tried to get into the youth parliament during the 2016 elections and at that time his social media contacts increased. Two years later, they all want something from him. Visibly irritated, he told me one afternoon: ‘They just don’t leave me alone, they even bother me on WhatsApp. I befriended them and told them that I would do what I could for them and now I get messages from unknown people every day’. It should be noted that the verb ‘befriending’ often does not mean that one actually makes friends, in the traditional sense, online. It has more to do with making preliminary contacts in building new forms of complex social relationships related to the self, agency and, in the case of Darwin, political mobility. However, these ‘friends’ are now coming too close to his personal life. Above all, though, he is frustrated with their messages on WhatsApp, a platform which he considers with intimate contacts, and he regrets having given them access. Darwin, in his eagerness to be elected as a youth politician, made a mistake rushing to add and welcome people to his WhatsApp account. He thus failed in his efforts to manage private and public affairs, leading to a form of ‘context collapse’ (Marwick and Boyd 2010) where self-presentation can go wrong when mediating between different groups and people online. Darwin is particularly interested in befriending people who are relevant to get his political (or acting) career moving, and he calls them ‘important people’ (Dutch: *belangrijke mensen*). However, chit-chatters, or people who ask him for a favour, are undesirable.



Image 5. Picture of Darwin from his Facebook page in 2018, showing him on a film set, dressed in the robes of an African prince.



Most of the messages circulating on social media have to do with individuality and self-realisation, in one way or another. This contrasts sharply with the history of the Latour household or, even the history of the Maroon societies in the interior, where one derives one's identity mainly from belonging to one's village or matrilineal ancestry (St-Hilaire 2000). Now, by opening up the household as the most important sphere of socialisation and communication, young people think more and more of themselves as individuals. As such, the social media practices in Latour have influenced the relationship between my interlocutors and their family members. As social media platforms represent growing opportunities and openness to the outside world, it is crucial to remember that online and offline are inextricably linked. The reach of family members in the lives of these young adolescents is illustrative of this, as parental authority is rapidly extending to online platforms as 'a social activity' (Pype 2018: 4) that affects the relationship between parents and children. This evolution is seen by several of my interlocutors as an undesirable or unforeseen consequence of increased connectivity, confronting them with their expected role within established family relationships.

The interference of family members on social media platforms is considered highly undesirable or frustrating. A good example is given by Julia, who has had several disputes with her family members concerning her online engagement with others. Although she does not explicitly prevent her family members from befriending her, she has already blocked some uncles and aunts on Facebook. Although she is Christian, she was tired of the biblical quotes shared by several of them and found them 'boring' and somewhat 'annoying'. Above all, she wants to stay informed about what her good friends are doing, or be informed by good articles, and not be bombarded by biblical references and religious quotes.

Julia thus increased her connectivity (Miller et al 2016) and sought a balance between existing social tasks and the new social space offered by social media platforms (Gershon and Bell 2013). WhatsApp, in contrast to Facebook, appears to be the most suitable platform for managing these different relationships, due to its easily scalable functionalities. Miller, in England, also noted that Facebook's popularity was declining as young people increasingly classified it as 'a place for communication with relatives rather than the cool peer-to-peer platform for peers' (2017: 389).

Being online friends in Latour does thus not necessarily mean that you are physical friends. They are often 'fictitious friends' who are part of an ideal that 'modern relationships should reflect the authenticity and informality that are the supposed results of choice rather than the obligations associated with the past and tradition' (Miller 2017: 390). In most cases, my informants did not care whether or not they knew their social media contacts. The common thread seems to be reciprocity. One has to constantly give likes, make *tori* or comment on updates. If an online friend fails to do this, my young interlocutors agree, it is permissible to remove him or her from your account. In this way, proximity and distance are in an ongoing process of renegotiation.

In short, for the young Latourians, the world lies at their feet, and historically this is a new idea — novel and exciting opportunities are slowly replacing family responsibilities. In addition to receiving and using new information, genres and media content, my interlocutors

are able to actively dialogue with this content and choose which ones work for them and which do not. They then enter into dialogue with other people from all over the world, while continuing to use the agency to choose who to include and who to exclude. They see themselves more and more as autonomous individuals, responsible for both themselves and for the world they live in.

## Conclusion

In this article, I introduced several young adolescents from Latour, Paramaribo, who are all active in the field of social media and who are increasingly embracing a contemporary lifestyle. At the same time, they are all indebted to the social, cultural, historical and economic context relevant to their neighbourhood. In a sense, a gradual neo-liberalisation of the district is taking place. By this I mean above all that the semi-hierarchical family system of the urban Creoles and Maroons is losing its function as a primary source of reference, in the light of increasing urbanisation and increased mobility throughout Paramaribo. My interlocutors are in a complex process of self-examination: they are learning to see themselves as individual agents and as the creators of their own future.

It is worth noting that these young individuals represent only a small percentage of Latour's rapidly growing young population. Moreover, most of them are already involved in social movements, such as StiBuLa, to tackle relevant issues in the neighbourhood. As promising as the imaginative possibilities of mobile and online technologies may be, it is necessary to point out that more academic research is needed to understand complex processes or urban mobility, youth identity and social media in the neighbourhood. More anthropological research on these issues is therefore needed to ground the claims made in this article.

Next to this, this article shows that social media platforms increasingly elicit different sites of struggle over influence and authority. For instance, the young adolescents often expressed their frustration about the social control of family members, especially on Facebook. Furthermore, social media has enabled my interlocutors to connect to new realms, make new friends, or new contacts. For them, being Facebook friends has no geographical boundaries — one uses his or her profile to show oneself, to open up to others, often strangers. They all represent themselves online and construct a specific image of themselves, through sharing images, or making *tori*, or small conversation to build new relationships and maintain networks. In this sense, proximity and distance are constantly in flux, between showing and not showing, or adding or removing, on different platforms

To conclude, the specific context of Latour affects the lives of these young people, and hence their social media activities. The changing geography of the district, which is increasingly linked to greater Paramaribo, presents a wide range of possibilities and dilemmas. Nonetheless, these individuals all have their own diverse and individual strategies to manage their (online) lives. In this sense, social media did not alter daily life in Latour; the neighbourhood was already changing and social media arrived just in time to become an irreplaceable pillar of localized social reality.

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