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ALL QUIET ON THE FACEBOOK FRONT: TEENS' NEGOTIATION OF SOCIAL AND MOBILE MEDIA PRIVACY

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Introduction & Research Question

At a time when teens increasingly communicate via mobile and social media, it is not a surprise they are willing to share incredibly personal information with their peers, yet this should not be misinterpreted as a disregard for social privacy (boyd; 2014; boyd and Marwick, 2011). Research evidences that teens care deeply about their privacy (boyd, 2014; Harris, 2010, Marwick, Diaz, and Palfrey, 2011; Youn, 2009). This paper focuses on the unique challenges low-income teens face in mitigating social and mobile privacy. Due to financial constraints, low-income teens often have precarious access to technology, which leads to an economy of sharing. Additionally, compared to adults, teens (and in particular low- income teens) are subjected to greater surveillance (Kelly, 2000, 2003), thus further complicating privacy management. As such, this paper asks: how do low-income teens mitigate reduced privacy levels in and through mobile technologies and social media?

Method

This ethnographic study focuses on the lives of 18 high school students at a low-performing, economically challenged, and ethnically diverse high school in the United States. As part of a research team, the reviewer spent one year observing an after-school digital media club and getting to know students at the high school. While the larger project employed a multi-methodological approach, this particular paper draws analysis from one-on-one interviews conducted with teens over the course of an academic year. Interviews were conducted on a weekly basis with a member from the research team and vacillated between semi-structured topical interviews (e.g. technology, peers, education, home life, etc.) and informal unstructured conversations about their day-to-day lives. In most cases, interviews were recorded on mini digital recorders and then transcribed and uploaded to a cloud-based qualitative analysis program called Dedoose. Analysis involved reading, coding, and analyzing initial interviews and field notes in order to identify emergent themes and trends. In total, the project collected 215 recorded interviews with participants.

Research & Findings

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As literature demonstrates, teens employ various methods of achieving privacy. This study demonstrates some of the unique challenges low-income teens face managing mobile and social privacy and considers the various tactics they employ in order to manage their digital and social lives. I specifically use the word tactic to invoke de Certeau's (1984) language of resistance. I demonstrate how participants tactically negotiated blurred boundaries and resisted norms of surveillance to manage privacy.

Blurred Boundaries between Communal & Personal Mobile Devices

Research suggests mobile devices are typically constructed as highly personal and individualized; they are worn on the body and enable person-to-person contact, rather than place-to-place communication (Campbell & Park, 2008; Ling, 2010). However, financial constraints prohibited many participants from attaining a phone or mobile device (e.g. iPod or tablet), thus mobile devices were constructed as communal and shareable commodities within peer networks. In other words for many of the participants, mobile ownership was not as simple as 'yes I have a phone' or 'no I do not', but rather access was temporal and contextual, 'yes I have a phone *right now*'. As such, teens developed localized practices of sharing within peer groups that led to constant negotiations and contestations of public and private boundaries.

Resisting the Reconfiguration of Social & Physical Boundaries

Low-income teens are often discursively constructed as "at-risk" and thus subjected to greater surveillance (Kelly, 2000, 2003). Furthermore, mobile phones have been simultaneously constructed as tools of freedom and liberation as well as technologies of surveillance and control (Ling, 2010). While some participants found that mobile devices granted them freedom to connect with peers outside the purview of parents and authority, other teens in the study resisted the ways in which mobile phones reconfigured parental and peer expectations. Some teens in the study deliberately and tactically resisted mobile phones as technologies of further surveillance. For example, Mexican senior Javier could afford a phone (and his parents offered to help him get one), but he chose not to have one because he did not want to make himself readily available to adults or his peers. In this way some participants actively resisted the ways mobile devices disrupt social and physical boundaries.

Resisting Converged Identities & Collapsed Contexts

Lastly, teens in the study utilized a variety of different social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, YouTube - in order to reach different audiences, explore different identities, and form different communities. I argue the use of different platforms is a deliberate privacy strategy intended to resist converged identities and audiences. Social media interfaces and corporate influences facilitate the convergence of identities and communities. This is evident through the increasing public nature of Facebook, the archival narrative created through sharing, and the collapse of audiences on the site (van Dijck, 2013). However, these norms are relatively new within the broader scope of internet history. For example, prior to the rise of social networking sites, teens used blogs as a way to anonymously explore identity and find community beyond their day-to-day interactions. These explorations were often fluid, experimental, and diverged from their offline embodied identities (Author, 2010).

Yet, sites such as Facebook encourage the cohesiveness of “one” identity (Van Dijck, 2013). It is no surprise then that teens are abandoning Facebook in favor of social media platforms that allow for greater fluidity and exploration of divergent identities and communities. Likewise, teens in this study had a preference for platforms that alleviated them from further surveillance (by adults and authority). These transitions are tactical exercises of resistance that afford greater privacy. That is, rather than negotiate liminal boundaries between what is and is not socially acceptable to share with converged audiences on sites such as Facebook, some participants utilized alternative spaces that afforded anonymous disclosure and more private interactions. The norms and technical affordances of different mediated spaces afford teens the freedom to openly disclose information without breaching localized social norms.

Significance & Contribution to Conference Themes

This research is significant because it furthers our understanding of the unique challenges low-income teens face while managing digital and social privacy; it addresses a gap in literature by paying particular attention to the role of economics in shaping teens’ privacy strategies and tactics. The research coincides with several themes of the conference. It focuses on teens who are living marginalized (virtual) lives and focuses on an economically-challenged demographic of digital “have-nots”. The study explores the constant negotiation between social media platforms that encourage context convergence and teens’ desires for divergence, exploration, and privacy. As will be demonstrated in the full paper, this study ultimately argues that the boundaries of sharing and privacy are constantly renegotiated at the intersection of localized social norms, economic and social capital, and the technical affordances of particular platforms and devices.

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