Virtually managing (in)visibility: Girls, social media, and rural U.S. family relationships

Abstract

Drawing upon data from a year-long ethnographic study involving 15 rural female U.S. teens, this paper uses critical theory and queer theory to explore how Facebook and Twitter use influences and is influenced by young women's experiences within family. Findings suggest interlocutors use social media to "get around" ideological and physical constraints to involvement they face as minors and females in families. Living in social media, interlocutors reported they strategically perform social identities to enhance the visibility of traits encouraging parental trust and connection. At the same time, they used these platforms together to perform invisibility, allowing them to quietly subvert certain parental controls that police and restrict their involvements offline.

Keywords: social media; youth; gender; family

The past decade has seen in a steady growth in social media use throughout the United States. The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project reports that the percentage of all adults in the U.S. using social media climbed from 16 to 69% between August 2006 and August of 2012. Additionally, Pew reports that, in 2011, 95% of all U.S. teens under the age of 18 accessed the internet, up from 93% in 2006, and from 73% in 2000. While 55% of teen internet users took part in social media in 2006, in 2011, 80% reported being social media users. In fact, in 2011, social media use represented the activity teens stated they were most likely to participate in while online.

Because of this increase in use, social media has gained an increased presence in family life. Mobile access has allowed social media to further challenge some boundaries separating family members' on and offline involvements, as well as to change the nature of some of the involvements they have within family. With a wider world of peers, work, and involvements reached through a simple touch of a button on the phone in one's pocket, social media easily "crashes" family events, connecting family members to other aspects of their life during traditional family-only time. Horst, Herr-Stephenson and Robinson (2010) note that while people as a whole are spending greater time online, young people in the U.S. grow up understanding digital media as central to their life. For these youth, Horst et al. (2010) explain that "(t)he social desire to share space and experiences with friends is supported now

by a network and digital media ecology that enables . . . fluid shifts in attention and copresence between online and offline contexts" (50). As such, social media use presents opportunities and challenges to parent-child connectedness, as well as to family relations and child development, as a whole.

While allowing for greater monitoring and new types of interaction between family members, young people's social media use (like youth usage of many new technologies throughout history) is a common source of stress, tension, and misunderstanding for many families. Parents and their children – especially daughters – commonly disagree on the importance and safety of social media. These disagreements have implications for family relationships, and for youth welfare. Longitudinal psychological research finds that trusting, caring relationships with adults are critical to young people's successful development, even through extremely difficult circumstances, as concluded by scholars such as Werner (2010). Additionally, attachment research makes clear that youth family relationships are informed by children's perceptions of parental support (see Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973, 1988). The connection and trust young people hold with parents have developmental implications for their other relationship, as well. Extending attachment research into the later years, Catalano et al. (2002) argue that parent-child relationships impact youths' social competence, trust, and interactions with their peers. "How a child establishes early bonds to caregivers," they write, "will directly affect the manner in which the child later bonds to peers, school, the community, and culture" (102). As such, parent-child tensions and synergies ignited by social media have broad implications for adolescent well-being.

Using a critical theory (Lesko, 2001) and queer theory (Butler, 1990; Gray, 2009) approach, this paper will discuss findings of a twelve-month ethnographic study examining rural U.S. young women's use of social media as it relates to the identities they hold within family. Drawing upon data from formal and informal interviews, offline and online observations, and homepage review of 15 rural teenaged females between the ages of 14 and 18, this research suggests that young females strategically use employ tactics aimed at visibility and invisibility in social media to meet local needs. They use social media to perform specific acts of trustworthiness, responsibility, and "goodness" to audiences they

know consist of parents and other adults in an effort to meet some of the expectations they have as a child in their family. At the same time, they also use social media to render invisible other less parent-friendly involvements. Drawing parallels to teens' offline living, this research argues that young people live strategically online in ways that to "get around" some of the cultural, physical, and ideological constraints they experience as a daughter in modern-day US society.

Furthermore, data from this study finds that these youth recognize social media as a source of extreme parental concern regarding their safety and well-being in the present and in the future, and as an area of deep parental mistrust. Youth reported agreeing with their parents about many of the concerns they raised, and were observed taking specific steps in to attempt to protect their images and information online. However, they attributed a number of these worries to parents "freaking out," or projecting their need to shelter and protect daughters onto their new spaces of involvement. The validity of parental concerns for the safety of these youth in social media will be discussed in light of historical panic over females occupying social spaces (Fine, 1988; Odem, 1995), as well as in reference to the areas of online identity and data mining. Overall, this paper will discuss how young women's rules for engagement online both align with and diverge from those held for them offline as members of families, and examine how young rural teenage women use online spaces to negotiate and mediate offline experiences they have as daughters in their families.

While young people live in families, they increasingly also live in social media. This paper explores how social media use both influences and is influenced by young rural U.S. females' social position within their family, and within society. It will examine the implications of daughters being able to employ social media to attempt to affirm, test, and challenge boundaries set by parents on their actions and involvements, as well as the need they feel to "go around" parental blocks to involvement in on- and offline lives. In doing so, it will ask how social media use influences the interactions, support, connectedness, and trust young women are able to experience within family, and, as a result, in wider society.

Acknowledgments

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