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The study of youth online: a critical review and agenda

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ABSTRACT

The increasing and pervasive use of online technologies, especially social media, has inspired scholars to investigate how the Internet influences communication. As young people represent the fastest growing adopters of new online technology, much of this research targets youth activity online. But how is the communication discipline taking up this issue, broadly? Typically left to new media and computer-mediated communication scholars, we argue youth online activity raises new and exciting possibilities for researchers across the communication discipline. In this paper, we present a qualitative content analysis of communication research about youth and the Internet. Our analysis of over 700 journal articles provides a clear picture of past and present trends in communication research of youth online activity. Furthermore, we discuss the top four content themes, including: uses and gratifications, engagement, identity, and the uniqueness of youth experience. Critically, we articulate how such research organizes and positions youth in meaningful ways, paving the way for issues of inclusion. We call for a shift from a "difference" framework to one that more explicitly considers "complexity" before suggesting opportunities for future research that crosses and unites subdisciplinary boundaries.

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Scholars across disciplines have addressed the topic of Internet use with enthusiasm. Disciplinary areas of study, college majors, conferences, and journals have been created around "new media" and "social networking" with an understanding that online contexts, services, and activities are influential elements of contemporary communication. Subsequently, scholars are considering the presence and potential implications of youth online.

Early scholarship about youth online considered modes of access, technologies used, differences between age groups, technology in education, and risks of online activity. Since the proliferation of social media platforms, newer research is considering how social tools influence youth development, identity, sexuality, relationships, and civic engagement, among other things. For example, provocative scholarship outlines how youth navigate online privacy and risk differently than adults, viewing information as social currency to be managed across applications and audiences.[1] Similarly, research

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demonstrates that teens negotiate complex "webs of tensions" in their online activities, employing sophisticated dialectical frameworks to manage personal and interpersonal conflicts.[2] As well, communication scholars have developed a robust agenda regarding cyberbullying and social problems associated with online life.[3] Whereas communication research generally tends to ignore youth as the focus of empirical work, the Internet has created a space popularized, proliferated, and transformed by youth. Thus, in online contexts, youth have become a primary focus of scholarly research. Given this burgeoning attention to young people's communication, we must assess the current state of communication research to inform and enrich efforts moving forward.

In fact, many vibrant scholarly conversations regarding youth online are happening across disciplines and outside of communication studies. Studies in communication frequently build rationales based upon scholarship in education, gender studies, media literacy, and from consortiums such as the Digital Media and Learning Hub,[4] and communication scholars frequently publish outside of the discipline. While interdisciplinarity is crucial and advantageous, it leaves communication studies broadly without a clear scholarly agenda to reference and extend. Consequently, the opportunities for communication contributions are less clear. Likewise, while this line of inquiry seems most closely aligned for new media and computer-mediated communication scholars, we argue youth online activity raises new and important possibilities for researchers across the communication discipline.

In this project, we examine the current state of communication research regarding youth online. Our goal is to describe key areas of research within the boundaries of communication studies, and suggest avenues for expanding this research program to advance communication theory and practice. Likewise, this comprehensive, critical review of literature examines what existing perspectives offer in the way of theorizing young people's engagement online, and proposes new directions for communication scholars to make unique contributions not otherwise found in related disciplines.

This paper unfolds with a discussion of methods and procedures regarding our approach to the literature and analytic conventions. We present the findings of our qualitative content analysis in the form of broad trends that characterize existing research of youth online, including exemplars from each theme to provide a sense of how youth are represented and researched. Finally, we offer a framework for contextualizing existing research while suggesting new avenues for scholarly engagement that span traditional disciplinary subfields.

Methods and procedures

To understand how communication researchers study youth online, we began an extensive literature search and performed a qualitative content analysis of abstracts and keywords to learn the topics, methods, and theories being studied. Qualitative content analysis generally refers to methods used to interpret the meaning of a collection of texts systematically.[5]

Data gathering

We began by identifying search terms that would return the most relevant information about youth online engagement. We used two sets of terms, the first relating to online activity: social media, online, new media, Internet, technology, and digital media. The

second featured variations of "youth": youth, teen, and adolescent. In the database *Communication and Mass Media Complete*, a comprehensive communication database that includes full text coverage for more than 500 journals, we set "advanced search" parameters to English-only,[6] full text, peer-reviewed publications from 2000 to 2016.

We performed three sets of searches with all of the terms identified above (e.g. youth + "social media," teen + "social media," and adolescent + "social media") until we gathered as many citations as possible. Then we exported each search into a format compatible with Zotero reference-management software. In Zotero, we sorted and removed duplicates, reducing our 2,000+ list of entries to 724. We then exported citations, abstracts, and keywords from Zotero to NVivo qualitative data-analysis software.

Data analysis

We began by coding a small subsection of data looking at keywords and abstract themes. Each of us coded 10 articles separately, then we came together to discuss level of detail for coding abstracts, as well as issues about what fit with our research goals.

We began by coding keywords, exactly as the author(s) supplied them. We agreed that for articles without author-supplied keywords, we would code according to the database terms. We created a "No Fit" category to sort articles that were clearly off topic; for instance, research with adults, research about youth but without an online component, or studies with only a tangential connection to youth online activity.

In analyzing abstracts, we coded for any referenced theories, methods, or topics, and generated our own broader codes to describe the work. For instance, for an article that discussed analyzing teen Facebook pages in order to understand political socialization and civic engagement, we would code for "Facebook," "social networking," "politics," "socialization," "civic engagement," and "content analysis" to start. If that article also referenced how teens managed a political persona online, we might also code it for "identity," even if identity was not specifically named in the abstract. We used a consensus process for coding to ensure reliable interpretations and application of coding schemes.[7] This involved discussing codes and how well they fit the data, as well as sharing examples of coding. After coming to consensus on coding style, we split up the articles, each taking 362, and coding separately. During this process, we also eliminated 304 "No Fit" articles.

When coding was complete, we met to discuss coding categories, combine categories where possible, and start preliminary interpretations of the 420 articles relevant to our analytic goals. This process also involved consensus by discussing codes and merging categories that seemed analytically similar (for instance "communication skills" and "communication competence"). To make sense of our large dataset, we first compared our individual codes, combined smaller like categories, and then identified constellations of codes that belonged together. For instance, the codes "activism," "participation/engagement," and "civic engagement" were rolled up into the larger code "Politics." From there, we identified the largest constellations of codes, focusing content analysis on the 10 most prominent categories. Then we split the 10 themes between us, analyzing the content of articles again to develop a clearer picture of communication research about youth online activity.

What communication scholars are saying about youth online activity

After analyzing hundreds of articles about youth online, we noticed contexts varied considerably, but concentrated around 10 topics: Educational tools/technology, developmental stages/generational differences, relationship development, access, culture, blending on/offline life, politics/civic engagement, risks/problems, identity, and uses/gratifications (see Table 1 for more detail). The research appeared in a broad range of journals, across topics including communication, public relations/marketing, international contexts, technology, sociology, psychology, language, disabilities studies, and more.

Next, we present a brief overview of the research to demonstrate key issues concerning scholars about youth online activity over the last 16 years, as well as opportunities for future research. The categories presented are not discrete, meaning some articles fit into more than one topic, such as the use of online platforms to cultivate identity, or the degree to which access to online platforms helps foster civic engagement. To talk about themes more succinctly, we grouped them into four broader categories: Uses (uses/gratifications, risks/problems, and relational development); Engagement (access, politics/civic engagement, and educational tools/technology); Identity (identity and culture); and Uniqueness of Youth Experience (blending on/offline and generational differences).

Table 1. Broad research categories and subthemes.

Category 1: Uses
Uses/Gratifications 34.76%
- Benefits/Rewards
- Design Implications
- Info Seeking/Sharing
- Time Online/Use Patterns
- Uses & Gratifications Theory

Risks/Problems 24.29%
- Cyberbullying/Cyberpathologies
- Hacking
- Internet Addiction/Dependence
- Privacy/Risks/Problems
- Stranger Danger
- Surveillance/Stalking/Violence

Relational Development. 10.95%
- Disclosure/Friendship
- Interpersonal Communication
- Relational Dynamics
- Romantic Relationships

Category 2: Engagement
Access 11.43%
- Access to Resources/Technology
- Digital Divide
- Digital Literacy

Politics/Civic Engagement 21.19%
- Activism
- Participation/Engagement
- Politics/Civic Engagement

Edu Tools/Tech 10.24%
- Education Tools
- Learning Context
- Youth Development Programs

Category 3: Identity
Identity 31.9%
- Gender
- Identity
- Self-presentation
- Sexuality
- Social Capital/Socialization

Culture 11.67%
- Community
- Nationalism
- Transnational Context
- Subculture
- Youth culture

Category 4: Unique Youth Experience
Blending On-Offline 16.19%
- Blending On-Offline Life
- Carryover to Offline Life

Development/Generations 10.71%
- Developmental Issues
- Generational Differences

Note. Above are the most prominent topics in our content analysis of 420 research articles about youth online activity, including subcategories. Percentages reflect the proportion of articles in each category. As some articles fall into multiple categories, the percentages do not total 100%.

Uses

One of the most popular areas of research involves young people's uses of the Internet—much focused on the formal "uses and gratifications" theory—and categorizations of how youth spend time online. Research in this area also examines young people's use of the Internet for relational development, and associated risks and dangers.

Researchers have spent a great deal of time cataloging patterns of use (e.g. time online, time of day, sites used) and differences related to gender, culture, age, etc. In some cases this research is narrowed to a particular group, such as homeless youth, deaf youth, or those with ADHD, and sometimes it is limited to a particular platform, such as Facebook or Fotolog.[8] Findings reveal the roles and expectations for the Internet in young people's lives. For example, participation in social networking is understood by young people as a necessary resource for communicating and developing closer relationships.[9] But recreational uses of the Internet may help young people build initiative and skills that lead to more utilitarian uses in the future.[10]

Research has led to a better understanding of patterns in youth behavior online, such as the replacement of more traditional media with Internet communication,[11] preference for instant messaging over social networking,[12] and increases in blogging and "prosumer" behaviors.[13] In many ways, this scholarship focuses on how young people shape the Internet through their preferences. Alternately, however, researchers are interested in how the structure and design of online technologies shape young people's uses and outcomes. For example, Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock[14] demonstrate that young people are more likely to engage in online communication where they perceive it to require lower effort and result in more immediate gratification than face-to-face interactions. This line of inquiry extends to gaming, where flexibility of use seems to trump enjoyment.[15]

Along with broad trends and patterns, communication research has examined how the Internet functions as a means for youth to develop and maintain relational ties. This area of inquiry overlaps with research examining youth's development of social networks, and investigates how the Internet shapes dyadic experiences. For example, research considers how youth maintain and extend relationships, of special importance for immigrants who may be separated from friends and family.[16] Researchers also consider the degree to which information is made available to social ties[17] and how frequently and what type of information is shared.[18]

While much of the research explored friendships or peer relationships, a subset concerns the maintenance of other types of relationships. For instance, scholarship outlines not only how mobile technologies increase quality of communication, but also conflict in romantic relationships, and how online activity changes family interaction patterns.[19] Currently, scholarship focuses on how the Internet helps to initiate, maintain, or extend interpersonal relationships. Our hope is that as scholarship evolves and is taken up by interpersonal and family scholars, communication research will consider particular relational dynamics, such as abuse, commitment, and leave taking, and include a more critical approach like Melinda R. Weathers and Mark C. Hopson in their study of cocultural communication practices related to intimate partner violence against women.[20]

Amid discussions of young peoples' uses of the Internet is a strong focus on the dark side of online engagement. Scholars have been preoccupied with risks related to privacy, safety, communication competence, and health. A prominent focus includes

research on cyberbullying, or online harassment, generally focused on defining and categorizing problematic use.[21] Much attention is paid to who is at risk or most likely to perpetrate or be victims of negative online behaviors and what motivates such behaviors.[22] Scholars who examine cyberbullying have argued about its negative health implications, gendered nature, and how it differs from face-to-face bullying.[23] Some have considered the legal implications of cyberbullying and the shortfalls of current legislation, as well as predictors that can be used to create interventions to prevent or lessen abusive behaviors.[24]

Privacy has been a prominent concern regarding youth's use of the Internet; researchers have investigated how children's personal information is misused online, as well as risks associated with online self-disclosure.[25] However, a provocative line of work considers how youth negotiate privacy differently than adults by moving away from traditional models of individual privacy to networked privacy, as well as employing creative risk-reducing strategies.[26] Increasingly, researchers are working to situate questions of risk *with* youth, getting a sense of how children cope with or manage risks and allowing them to define what is troubling or not.[27] With such efforts come shifts in how scholars understand risk, danger, privacy, and control based on young people's experiences.

Scholarship focused on sexual risks is especially prominent. Scholars consider the degree to which online activity can lead to sexual exploitation, the negative impacts of sharing sexually explicit content online, and how online activities can migrate offline with strangers who may take advantage of youth.[28] However, as with scholarship that takes a more nuanced approach to youth privacy, some researchers consider how online activity affords an opportunity for healthy sexual self-expression and identity development, and resistance to sexual objectification.[29]

Primarily, research examining young people's uses of online technologies can be characterized by a desire to predict and control young people's behavior.[30] We recommend that scholars increase complexity in the ways youth behavior online is studied. While researchers have been quick to characterize online communication in a negative light, increasingly, research designs that are free from such assumptions reveal that online communication is no less complex than face-to-face communication, it simply offers different affordances and constraints.[31]

Future research should prioritize observational studies of young people online. Despite the challenges of conducting research with minors, studies must be designed that observe the actual behaviors young people engage in online. Existing knowledge of how young people make choices online is largely based on self-reporting of decision-making processes, but researchers have yet to see if youth act in the ways they describe. Additionally, we call for nuance in the way scholars assess the experience of risk for direct participants and bystanders. Researchers should move beyond categorizing the scope of risk for young people online and instead investigate what perpetrators and victims glean from such behaviors.

Engagement

A strong line of research examines how youth access the Internet and social media, and use those tools for personal, educational, and civic engagement. Some such research considers the location/place of access, devices of access, and mediation via parental controls and governments.[32] This body of work considers the ramifications of teen access. For instance,

research considers how smartphones function as a "tool of citizenship" and foster "democratic inclusion" in Brazil, while simultaneously reifying social inequalities in Sri Lanka.[33] Other scholarship shows how communities attempt to ameliorate the digital divide among youth by providing "e-gateways" in public spaces or engaging disadvantaged youth in media creation.[34] Further scholarship links access to parenting style and physical place, with rural youth seeming to find online access more important than urban youth.[35]

Research in this area also examines how access is influenced by socioeconomic status, race or ethnic group, and physical ability. For example, existing research shows a strong connection between class and online activity, with cultural capital contributing to a "socially entrenched digital inequality rather than an economically entrenched digital divide."[36] Other scholarship demonstrates the ingenuity of those with fewer means who "are able to deal with these challenges in creative and effective ways."[37] Likewise, research has considered how youth with physical disabilities leverage digital skills that give them more social opportunities and increased educational experiences online.[38] A contribution of this area of work is the focus on social justice with scholars calling for more research that advances equity of access and experiences for teens.

A related, important strand of access and engagement theorizing considers how the Internet is leveraged in education. Research shows that students' access to educational technologies ranges from fully online courses to the integration of online experiences into lessons and projects.[39] Much of the research examines case studies or specific programs that engage young people in media creation, as well as more traditional educational settings that use the Internet to bring experiences to children who would not otherwise have access.[40]

A key line of work focuses on youth engagement and agency. For example, studies show how youth actively engage with Internet content, using privacy features to control access to their online content on YouTube to be "publicly private and privately public."[41] Likewise, research shows how youth "negotiated economic and cultural barriers to digital media and mobilized opportunities to use media in pursuit of their own interests,"[42] contrasting much of the scholarship that positions youth in less agentic roles. A critical research area demonstrates how the Internet facilitates civic and political engagement for young people typically criticized as politically apathetic,[43] as we discuss further below.

Research regarding politics split along two broad lines, examining: potential and actual political activities of young people (read: college students), and the civic engagement and political socialization of youth. Research investigating the political practices of "young people" most often referred to young adults, and examined the voting and political attitudes of U.S. college students, and the political activism of young adults in countries with political struggles, including censorship in China, student protests in Chile, and civic dialogue in Arab-Muslim regions.[44] This research examines how young people use social media to protest and organize dissent.[45] James Sloam argues that the ability to organize digitally "has enabled a 'quickening' of youth participation—an intensification of political participation among young, highly educated citizens in search of a mouthpiece for their indignation."[46]

In Western countries and places with stable democratic governments, research considers youth's voting behavior, political socialization, and the influence of social media on civic engagement. For instance, in comparing the voting behaviors of young people in the European Union and the United States, researchers found positive connections between the use of online news media and online social activity with voter turnout.[47]

Other research examines how political campaigns or youth-oriented political websites socialize youth politically, or try to influence voting behavior. W. Lance Bennett, Chris Wells, and Deen Freelon argue that many established organizations are out of step with changing styles of civic engagement online.[48] This is evident in studies of political campaigns that show how online tools were not leveraged well in past elections.[49]

Research focused specifically on youth seemed most concerned with political socialization and attitude formation. Studies focused on how online activities increased political participation among marginalized youth, how blogging fosters personal politics, and how political activity offline produces civic opportunities online.[50] This research shows connections between race and political participation, suggesting, for instance, that African American teens were far more likely than their white counterparts to participate in political conversations and action, both on- and offline.[51]

Some studies focus specifically on youth online civic engagement and adolescent development. For instance, research considers civic identities that develop online over time,[52] while other studies suggest youth struggle with how to present themselves politically. For example, Emily C. Weinstein, Margaret Rundle, and Carrie James show how civically engaged youth change patterns of politically expression over time, with 40% of youth surveyed showing they quiet or silence expression as they mature.[53] Likewise, Tanja Storsul demonstrated that despite using online media for organizing political activities, politically engaged youth are hesitant about using digital media for political deliberation and reluctant to portray themselves as highly political.[54] This research demonstrates that youth are leveraging social media to be engaged civically, although it may look different from previous generations.[55]

Scholarship related to access and engagement shows how youth use online technologies for personal, educational, and political goals. Given this analysis, we encourage scholars to look at how youth access the Internet for political goals—both personal and civically related—and examine more carefully the consequences of online participation for individuals, groups, communities, and environments such as the classroom and workplace. Likewise, we advocate for more scholarship that examines social justice and engagement to illuminate inequities more clearly, as well as ways to ameliorate them. Furthermore, we suggest more research look at how youth are not just accessing online tools, but also using them for content creation rather than mere consumption.

Identity

In our analysis, identity appeared as a popular area of scholarly interest, with nearly a third of reviewed materials incorporating some aspect of identity. Within the identity category, scholarship ranged from pursuits of how teens shape or craft identity by using various online tools,[56] to how certain social media platforms influence identity markers such as self-esteem or social capital, and how social media and online activities shape identity performances.

Related to identity crafting, communication research has considered how youth are using online technologies to develop identities, both individual and social. For example, research shows how teens experiment with identity online, and how online communication influences social competence but does not appear to shape self-concept.[57] Some work considers when youth choose to use the Internet for identity work. Louis Leung correlates online identity experimentation with loneliness and social support, showing that

younger youth (ages 9 to 14) who are lonely, and older youth (ages 15 to 19) who lack social support, are more likely than their peers to perform identity experimentation online.[58] Socially, teens use online tools to cultivate friendships and participate in social groups and subcultures.[59] Intriguing scholarship shows how identity work online is not often private or neutral, but rather involves the active coconstruction of identity with others in processes that sometimes involve negotiation and conflict.[60]

Specific and significant attention has also formed around how youth use online activities to develop a sexual identity and communicate aspects of gender and sexuality.[61] For instance, Deirdre M. Kelly, Shauna Pomerantz, and Dawn H. Currie show how girls "rehearse" femininity and gender online before offline experiences.[62] A strong line of inquiry examines the influence of sexually explicit online material on youth, suggesting that it contributes to sexual attitude formation, and negative views of women.[63] Other scholarship examines how gender norms are reproduced through online self-presentation and how youth communicate sexuality and gender online, including through queer discourses by online videogame players.[64] Much research in this vein focuses on problematics related to sexual identity and associated risks for teens; however, some newer work investigates broader views of teen sexuality. For instance, Sander de Ridder and Sofie van Bauwel demonstrate how teens make meaning of sexuality, gender, relationships, and desire through the use of social networking sites and argue "social media are spaces for an intense intimate politics."[65]

Identity-related scholarship also investigates how teens' identity development differs from past generations and relates to offline life, a theme we discuss further later. For example, Gustavo S. Mesch and Guy Beker examine how self-disclosure on- and offline relate, and show how online self-disclosure increases the disclosure of personal and intimate information in offline contexts.[66] Similarly, Maim Sveningsson Elm demonstrates that the pressure for sexual self-presentation is as similar online as offline for boys and girls—namely, boys are expected to portray stereotypical masculinity and girls femininity.[67] Likewise, Ionela-Maria Răcătău illustrates how teens use online activities to seek out and negotiate risks. In doing so, teens are able to develop more complex and resourceful identities.[68] Scholars are concerned, however, about how identity development is different than generations past, specifically with regard to the absence of known adults.[69]

A subsection of identity research focuses on aspects of culture. For instance, studies examine elements of culture such as refugee status, how youth's cultural values and traditions (largely based on nationality, but also socioeconomic status) influence consumption of information online, and how cultural norms shape perceptions of Internet use.[70] Research related to culture and identity examines how Internet technology has changed the broader cultural landscape, focusing on youth as the largest segment of new technology users.[71] Where particular cultures were not mentioned, researchers discussed online "communities" based around preferences or other ways of identifying, such as fan groups, and how those communities serve youth identity work.[72]

Taken together, studies of youth identity online portray a wide range of scholarly interest. However, while current research includes many paradigmatic lenses, we observed a dearth of critical or poststructural approaches to identity, which would offer a more complex understanding of identity than is currently available. For example, rather than describing identity in terms of "real" offline selves and "fake" online selves, researchers could examine how youth are taking a crystallized approach to identity that is neither

real nor fake, but faceted, shifting, and malleable.[73] Likewise, we observed a strong focus on female identity work at the expense of understanding how boys do identity online, as well as those who do not identify on a gender binary.

Uniqueness of youth experiences

Common among researchers is the tendency to want to categorize how young people, who have more or less grown up with the Internet as a constant feature of their lives, differ from adults as a result of their developmental stage or generation. There is a common perception that young people relate to and interact with the Internet differently from adults and that these differences could lead to important outcomes. We explore these lines of research as well as the shift from understanding on- and offline as distinct contexts to a more current blurring of those domains.

Researchers are keen to consider how young people, at developmental stages where they are seeking out novel experiences and becoming independent, navigate the Internet. Livingstone considers how youth differ in their motivations online as a result of developmental stages, concluding that as teens mature, online engagement shifts from recipients, to participants, to actors.[74] Much research in this area considers the experience of risk, including what risks youth take online as a result of their developmental stage as well as how they define risk, as discussed previously.

Frequently, researchers' approaches to studying youth online are attributed to generational differences. Youth is often defined as its own culture, with some studies demonstrating how the Internet shapes youth culture in regard to ethics and safety.[75] For example, while legal systems view sexting (sexually explicit texting) as illegal for minors unable to give consent, teens have developed a culture around sexting. Likewise, Iolanda Tortajada and colleagues show how youth culture view online risk and safety differently than adults, sacrificing adult-privileged privacy for self-expression.

Researchers are also curious about differences in online experiences for youth as a result of being born in a time when the Internet has always existed as a context for interaction. For example, Panote Siriaraya et al. examine differences in the expression of support online.[76] While adults tend to communicate more formally online, young people demonstrate higher levels of empathy for others online, but lower levels of concern. Researchers have also begun to consider how identity formation changes when such processes take place online, concluding that youth both reproduce and reinvent normative expressions of gender identity and sexuality.[77]

While highlighting youth as a particularly noteworthy time, this research is also characterized by a fervor to investigate how young people's behavior and activities online will shape their lives offline. Researchers have examined young people's choices for online contexts over offline,[78] and have concluded that sometimes the choice to communicate online is attributed to laziness rather than any unique affordances offered by a medium.[79] More recently, however, researchers have begun to abandon the notion of on- and offline as distinct spheres and recognize that increasingly, "generational experience of the Internet has naturalized it as a form of communication in a manner that makes distinctions between online and offline action obsolete."[80]

Savvy public health practitioners are integrating a blended approach into their communication with youth. Researchers consider how offline relationships and networks might

mediate and/or aggravate problematic situations such as cyberbullying.[81] Other researchers want to understand how public health campaigns, such as Ven-hwei Lo and Ran Wei's research on antidrug campaigns, might encourage young people to seek out additional information online, where youth have access to a greater range of messages that may or may not fall in line with the goals of the campaign.[82] Counselors have adapted their efforts to reach youth by offering blended models of communication, encouraging clients to move from initial text or email based consultation to phone conversations.[83]

A key takeaway from this literature is the idea that youth are navigating an online context that changes faster than research can keep up. Because of their age and the ubiquity of the Internet, youth do not adapt or translate their lives to online spaces; rather, navigating online spaces is their life. For this reason, new technology changes how youth learn, removing adults as agents of socialization and emphasizing self-socialization, wherein young people must navigate particular issues for themselves.[84] Scholars must understand that young people are agents of change to the mechanisms of their socialization at the same time as they are being socialized.

Young people understand the Internet as a "rite of passage" where increasing access to online privileges mark a long process of transition from childhood to young adulthood, marked by both positive and negative experiences.[85] In fact, young people tend to experience the Internet in terms of dualities that shape their relationships with others. Our own research shows that when faced with decisions about online life, young people experience webs of tensions in terms of who they feel accountable to and how they decide to move forward.[86]

Just as organizational scholars have moved from popular stage models of socialization to discursive approaches that better capture the ongoing and overlapping spaces where people construct reality, so too should scholars examining youth online. Although it is a generational tendency to understand experiences of young people as vastly different and more dangerous from our own, research shows that young people face the same challenges as they always have, just in different contexts. Thus, moving forward, scholars must consider youth in more complex ways—as simultaneously inexperienced youth *and* experts in online communication and engagement. The more we can stop characterizing them in one way or another, the more rich and relevant our findings can become.

Researching youth online: moving from difference to complexity and innovation

In this critical review of communication literature regarding youth online, we trace the contours of existing research, point to compelling current conversations, and discuss possibilities for future inquiry. We argue that online communication has created spaces for including youth in communication research in ways not seen before. This inclusion reveals new possibilities for research, but only as we shift from a framework of difference to one of complexity. We implore communication researchers to place youth at the center of research and to tackle issues that cross disciplinary divides.

Difference and inclusion in youth-centered research

As our analysis demonstrates, focusing on online activity invites specific consideration of youth. Youth are not often considered the purview of much communication research,

except within the context of families or how they are socialized into becoming adult communicators.[87] However, research examining online activity often places youth at the center of research because of their status as the most avid Internet users.[88]

In addition to simply including youth as a focus of communication research, much scholarship that considers youth online also deals with other issues of inclusion. A popular area of inquiry in this regard highlights the "digital divide," which describes the gap between those who have access to and proficiency with the Internet, and those with limited access and knowledge, usually as a result of a lack of other resources such as disposable income, education, etc. Researchers are committed to understanding the reasons for and consequences of such a divide, and make important contributions in terms of program and policy development.

Much research examining youth online illustrates an attempt to understand the differences that make a difference in Internet use among youth. Researchers tend to focus on both inter- and intragroup differences that characterize use of the Internet among youth. Intergroup differences are largely descriptive of age and generational characteristics that distinguish adult versus youth engagement online. Intragroup differences include gender, developmental, and cultural differences in the ways youth go online.

The focus on difference in many ways mirrors how youth are positioned in regard to difference offline. But when the primary focus of research sets out to investigate the differences among/between young people, it can obscure other, perhaps more interesting, questions. Instead, we suggest communication scholars consider questions such as the following: How does communication online foster inclusion, especially among young people who are so engrossed in it as a medium? What distinguishes youth who primarily consume online content from those who create content? How might an intersectional lens change our understanding of young people's online experiences? How does including youth in research, theory, and practice of online spaces shape resulting outcomes?

The next phase of research with youth online should be one characterized by richness and complexity. Now that so many basic questions have been answered, we call for research that engages the complicated online lives of youth.

Opportunities for innovative research

Beyond providing an overview of past research, our analysis points to opportunities for changing how scholars typically position youth in communication scholarship. Important possibilities exist for communication scholars across subfields to contribute to this dynamic area of research where young people's seemingly insatiable appetite for and total engagement with the Internet is shaping communication in myriad ways. Online technologies are not simply the domain of new or mass media scholars, but rather beg for consideration from organizational, interpersonal, family, heath, strategic communication, and rhetorical scholars (to name a few). By increasing the diversity of research, communication scholars can make important practical contributions to processes that shape lives, relationships, organizations, and communities.

Our call for change is not to say that innovative research does not already exist. Essays that shed light on young people's activism and civic engagement online are a good example of possibilities for research. Whereas among Western and more stable political systems, research on civic engagement tends to focus on how youth are socialized into

(in some cases away from) creating a political identity online, much research in non-Western countries focuses on how youth actively disrupt existing political structures through the Internet. Similarly, some of the research that considers youth subcultures online or youth identity experimentation does similar work to disrupt stereotypes and norms regarding gender, sexuality, privacy, and other categories of identification and use.[89] In many ways, however, the existing body of literature points to opportunities for more innovative future research. For example, scholars can move away from understanding the Internet as it has been designed by adults and spend more time focused on the ways the Internet is coopted and adapted by youth. Certainly there are pockets of such research; work that urges scholars to think differently about the risks young people face online and instead consider the opportunities.[90]

Research focused on the Internet provides an opportunity to shift the ways scholars typically position youth as anticipatory to or in the process of becoming adults and instead understand them as fully human actors who are actively engaged in a spectrum of communicative processes. A constitutive communicative perspective would argue we are all always in the process of becoming, as organizations, families, and communities are all ongoing communicative accomplishments.[91] And yet, it is tempting to imagine youth as somehow not quite fully persons yet. Communicatively speaking, researchers should move beyond asking if there are differences between youth and adult communicators, and instead treat young people with the agency and wholeness afforded adult communicators.

Online contexts provide an important opportunity to begin this work as youth are engaging with technologies created by adults, using and changing their nature in ways that demonstrate maturity and ingenuity. We encourage communication scholars to take up the following questions: How are young people coopting and reshaping online resources? How would young people design their own online resources? How are paradox and tension routine features of organizing online, and how do they spark creative responses? How do online spaces simultaneously resist and reinforce discourses of youth and technology?

Beyond researching youth as complete human beings, research with the fastest growing adopters of online technologies holds exciting possibilities. For example, future scholarship might consider the ways the online spaces break down global and geographic barriers that characterize youth's offline communication. Additionally, scholars might consider how young people organize around particular problems or issues online, instead of focusing on particular platforms. Likewise, important opportunities exist for considering the experiences of underrepresented youth. One innovative way to understand youth experience is to partner with young people as coresearchers who can help shift the theorizing about online spaces.

We hope this review helps set the stage for innovative research endeavors that highlight possibilities for the Internet that have an immediate and lasting impact on the lives of young people.

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