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How social media discourses organize communication online: a multi-level discursive analysis of tensions and contradictions in teens' online experiences

Shawna Malvini Redden & Amy K. Way

Media reports frequently frame youth as foolish but also uniquely vulnerable when it comes to social media. However, adult framings of teen online activities and teens' reported experiences regularly differ due to the privileging of adult concerns. In this paper, we take a youth-centered approach to teen online activities exploring the constitutive processes of social media and the micro-, meso-, and macro-level discourses associated with youth social media use. Through in-depth interviews with 55 culturally and socio-economically diverse young people, we examine the contradictions and tensions that organize teens' experiences online, as well as the discursive resources they draw on to navigate online life. Our research showcases a multi-level discursive analysis that enables scholars to see how discourses intertwine to organize communication online,

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foregrounding theoretical implications about how young people resist and reify certain discourses about social media, as well as how identity and imagined audiences are maintained online.

Keywords: Discursive Analysis; Networked Identities; organizational communication; Social Media; Teens; Tensions/Contradictions/Paradox

Rarely does a month go by without media coverage of teenage antics related to social media. News reports showcase viral video “challenges” featuring teens eating Tide Pods or “planking” on dangerous structures for likes and follows, as well as the perils of online activity including cyberbullying, poor mental health, challenges to interpersonal relationships, detriments to school achievement, and preponderance of potential sexual predators (Stern & Burke Odland, 2017). Youth are frequently and variously framed as foolish, reckless, and frivolous, but also uniquely vulnerable and struggling as a result of social media. Likewise, scholars across disciplines have been investigating facets of youth online experience, including: privacy negotiation (boyd & Marwick, 2011), use of specific platforms (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016), influences on relationships and identity (Way & Malvini Redden, 2017), impression management (Litt & Hargittai, 2016), and hazards such as cyberbullying (Roberto & Eden, 2010).

Teen online behavior as a focus of adult attention seems reasonable given how much time and attention teens give social media and online activities. According to Pew Research Center’s 2018 survey of teens, social media, and technology, nearly 45 percent of teens report being online “almost constantly” (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), a figure that jumped 20 percent in three years since Pew’s last major study of the topic (Lenhart, 2015). In fact, some teens report checking social media more than 100 times per day (Hadad, 2015), spending hours online to the detriment of face-to-face interaction and other obligations like school work, family life, and personal health.

However, there seems to be a sizeable disconnect between adult framings of teen online activities, and teens’ reported experiences. For instance, adults are disproportionately concerned about sexual risks including exploitation and harassment that most teens do not report actually facing to the same degree (McGovern, Crofts, Lee, & Milivojevic, 2016). Likewise, adult conception of teen sexuality and sexual expression online—namely that it should not happen and poses significant risks—conflicts with how teens view and use online tools for sexual development. Related, adults consider privacy distinctly differently than teens, with adults likely to view much of the content and activities teens post as private information that should stay off-line and expressing fear for teens’ lack of control over their information. Teens, on the other hand, take a “networked” view of privacy (boyd, 2008), and manage information less by keeping certain things offline than by controlling which platform or audience gets what information (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). For example, controversial opinions or language that might offend important adults would stay off adult-

friendly platforms like Facebook and Instagram, and stay in the realm of Snapchat or Twitter. In other words, teens manage their audiences to control information.

Part of the reason for the disconnect is obviously that research and news media are largely driven by adult interests and concerns. Likewise, given their different social positions and life experience—with most adults growing up before the internet or at least before the advent of social media, and today's teens being the first to live in an era of smart phones and fully mature social media platforms—it is truly difficult for adults to understand the pressures associated with teen online life. For instance, in a study of how teens manage discursive tensions online, Malvini Redden and Way (2017) argue that it is only by being “digitally empathetic” and considering experiences from a teenage mindset that adults can possibly understand the experiences and consequences of online activity, and help guide teens.

The tensions between adult and teen framings of youth online experience are not merely academic, but can result in interpersonal conflict and exacerbate consequences experienced by teens. For instance, most teens report little adult oversight for their social media activities (Above the Fray, 2015), which is preferable according to teens but also leaves little in the way of support for difficult online situations. Even in extreme cases of online harassment, for example, few teens report their experiences to adults, and are skeptical about adult ability—from parents and educators to law enforcement alike—to meaningfully help them (Patchin & Hinduja, 2018). Teens also report *not* wanting to talk to adults about online problems anyway because “adults just don't understand” (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017, p. 37) and also because social media is a frequent source of conflict with parents. Some teens describe not wanting to bring up problems because a default adult response is to confiscate phones or limit online access.

In this paper, we combine a youth-centered approach to teen online activities with a discursive lens to understand teens' online experiences and communication. A discursive lens is useful because “online communicative interactions constitute discursive practices that serve as a mechanism for publics to shape and construct their own opinions by sharing and discussing social media content and even by giving meaning to experiences” (Valentini, Romenti, & Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 4060). We consider the constitutive processes of social media broadly by looking at how social media organizes communication, in desirable as well as difficult ways.

Our discursive approach to understanding social media and organizing attends to the micro-, meso-, and macro-level discourses that permeate young people's experiences with and talk about their social media activities. Specifically, we share the results of 55 interviews with young people who discussed the platforms they use, the problems they encounter, and the choices they make about communicating online. In analyzing these conversations, we home in on the many tensions and contradictions they describe, as well as the discursive resources (Kuhn, 2009) they draw on to make sense of how their lives are organized online. While we primarily focus on the discourses of young people, we also compare them to prevailing macro/“adult”

discourses about social media, as well as the discursive tensions young people described negotiating with the adults in their lives.

This study advances a number of implications about social media organizing including the utility of a multi-level discursive approach for understanding social media experiences, how young people resist and reify certain discourses about social media, and how identity and audience are maintained online. Specifically, we extend communication theory related to imagined audiences (Litt & Hargittai, 2014), the power of collective responses online in constructing and reinforcing macro-level discourse, fragmentation of identity as an addition to boyd's (2008) notion of networked publics, and the importance of information kept offline as a microdiscursive strategy for resistance. These contributions are particularly relevant because they come from a culturally and socio-economically diverse group of participants, acknowledging critiques that most social media research derives from the experiences of white and/or privileged users (Sims, 2014).

A discursive approach to understanding communication online

Discursive approaches have become common frameworks for scholars to account for the related processes of organizing and identity construction, "united by the view that language does not mirror reality, but constitutes it" (Fairhurst, 2009, p. 1608). A discursive approach "emphasizes the communicative character of human interaction ... [and] allows for a critical performative view on organizations" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 1123). Additionally, we argue that the main strength of a discursive approach is in its ability to account for the complexities of human organizing at the interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels. We begin by outlining a multi-level discursive approach—acknowledging that levels overlap and also serve as resources, or "concepts, expressions or other linguistic devices, drawn from practices and texts, that explain action while also providing a horizon for future practice" (Kuhn, 2009, p. 684).

Levels of discourse

Micro-discourses

Micro-discursive practices are the everyday performances that result from local interactional accomplishments, where language becomes a tool for organizing. Fairhurst & Putnam (2004) demarcate discourse at the micro-level as discourse (with a lower case d) and define it as "the study of talk and text in social practice" (p. 7). Micro-discourses occur in daily talk and social practices, primarily accomplished through interpersonal and social interaction. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) explain that micro-discursive practices refer to the "unfolding processes of mundane interaction, *not* to the entrenched dispositions people bring to that process" (p. 9). The way individuals talk and negotiate meaning in their daily lives are performances and these performances form patterns of meaning which are constitutive of individual identity.

Micro-discourses of social media include sharing photos, commenting on others' posts, and using platforms to facilitate relationships and negotiate personal identity. An important feature of identity negotiation online involves impression management and audience interaction. As teens craft selves online, they demonstrate intense awareness of their personae (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017) and audience expectations (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Broadly, people engaging in social media do so with an "imagined audience" in mind (Litt & Hargittai, 2014)—people whom they imagine will be reading and responding to their content. However, imagined audiences fluctuate between abstract—general and vague—and targeted, usually personal, professional, or professional ties (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Teens describe spending significant effort crafting online images for personal connections like family and friends, while also managing communication for the various strangers who also followed them on various platforms (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). The process of negotiating imagined audiences can be conceived of as "masspersonal" or communication that is simultaneously personal and public, where communicators have expectations for audience response, and imagined audiences make sense of shared content in particular ways (French & Bazarova, 2017).

Meso-discourses

Meso-level discourses operate at the organizational level to structure day-to-day talk and exert a powerful influence on the discourses available to make sense of the world around us. Institutions and organizations like school, work, church, family, and increasingly corporations (Deetz, 1992) constitute our lived reality, and thus, "our senses of self are inevitably fashioned in the context of organizational memberships and the multiple, even competing collective identities they entail" (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 13). Holstein and Gubrium (2000) explain that peoples' lives are "continually mediated by the increasingly disciplined, institutionalized circumstances of contemporary life" (p. 153). Organizations enable talk about certain topics from a particular, organizationally defined, point of view.

Meso level discourses provide "a distinctive conversational environment – a set of methods and constraints – that circumstantially shape storytelling and self constructions" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 154). Meso-discursive practices illuminate the highly contextualized nature of discourse and point to a physical site where organizing and its attendant identity construction is carried out. Through repeated social practice, discourses become sedimented and instituted as organizational practice or (un)official organizational policy. In the case of social media, we can consider various platforms and their attendant features, affordances, constraints, and practice norms at the meso-level. For instance, we can see how the language of "status updates," "walls," "feeds," "followers," and "hashtags" have been common parlance—an example of meso-level organizational features moving into micro-level discourse—as well as how the physical sites of meso-level interaction (e.g., using smart phones during conversations or at work) can influence micro-level interactions. Teens describe interacting with meso-level platform features such as manipulating the timing of posts to garner the most

“likes,” “favorites,” and “retweets” (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017), and an awareness of how platform algorithms shape their postings (Tiidenberg et al., 2017).

Macro-discourses

Finally, macro-level discourse refers to larger, historically situated social narratives that constitute human subjectivity. This broader sense of discourse or Discourse with a capital “D,” references “general and enduring systems of thought” (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 7). Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) explain a macro-discursive approach exposes systems of representation, “which offer predictable, yet elastic, lucid yet contradictory images of possible subjectivities, relations among them, and attendant disciplinary practices” (p. 18). Though often the subject of critical examination, the influence of macro-discourses are easily overlooked by people during daily interaction as their influence is most often exerted through the naturalization of the social world. We also consider macro-level discourses in terms of conversations happening in the public sphere and in national media. Specific to social media, we might examine how social media is used as a form of surveillance—considering discourses of privacy, control, and surveillance, or how news media frame youth experiences of social media within discourses of vulnerability (McGovern et al., 2016). Teens routinely invoke macro-discourses, especially regarding surveillance and cyberbullying, assuming that their content is being watched by important and/or unknown others such as parents or future employers, and adjusting it accordingly to avoid offending people or attracting untoward bullying attention (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). Likewise, teens are apt to mention gender and sex stereotypes, namely that young women should prioritize beautiful or sexy personas online, but without seeming promiscuous (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013).

Managing irrationality, tension, and contradiction online

Irrationality is a routine feature of life (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004) and online contexts are no exception. Not often clearly distinguished, irrationalities take a number of different, yet related forms including contradictions, dialectical tensions, and paradoxes. Most irrationalities arise from the communicative construction of opposites simultaneously acting on a person. A contradiction “casts polar opposites as mutually exclusive and interdependent rather than discrete” meaning that “that the more actors move toward one pole, the more they feel pulled toward the other” (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016, p. 74). Dialectical tensions differ from contradictions by emphasizing the interdependence of poles, and how they define each other, rather than operate separately (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2015). People manage contradictions, dialectics, and paradoxes in many ways, using “Either-Or Approaches” such as defensiveness, selecting one pole over another, or separating poles; “Both-And Approaches” such as paradoxical thinking, vacillating between poles, and integrating/balancing poles; and “More-Than Approaches” including reframing/transcendence, connection and dialog, and reflective practice/serious playfulness (Putnam et al., 2016, pp. 122–130).

Social media is one medium of organizing that, unsurprisingly, is fraught with irrationalities. Recent scholarship has pointed to features of online participation such as “context collapse,” or the flattening of multiple audiences into one, as a prominent source of tension online (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Individuals must navigate the expectations of multiple audiences while shifting between various contexts of their identities, engaging in strategies such as using pseudonyms, managing multiple, “fake,” or “alternative” accounts (Van der Nagle, 2018), creating temporary or “throwaway” accounts (Leavitt, 2015), concealing or strategically targeting certain information, and imagining audience as most sensitive members (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Experiences of irrationality can lead to tensions, which refer to the “stress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices and moving forward in organizational situations ... as organizational actors encounter incompatibilities and dilemmas” (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 68). For instance Malvini Redden and Way (2017) identified tensions faced by young people as they navigate competing pressures and expectations online. In their study of teens ages 12–17, Malvini Redden and Way (2017) explored five sets of tensions, “highlighting local logics that organize teen’s talk and decision-making about the numerous competing expectations they face” (p. 26), including connecting v. disconnecting on social media, managing social media constraints alone v. appreciating guidance, wanting to be carefree and authentic online v. being seen in a positive light, managing on v. offline identities, and wanting to participate in online culture but also resist problematic rituals like bullying or compulsively seeking likes. Though teens talked about tensions as mutually exclusive polar opposites, their accounts of navigating tensions revealed a more dialectical relationship that allowed for a broader range of responses.

Scholarship regarding dialectical tensions reminds us that “tensions rarely travel alone; rather they come in multiples that are capable of forming knots or becoming interwoven in bundles” (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 119). Malvini Redden and Way (2017), however, illustrate the ways that these interwoven tensions that result from multiple simultaneous discourses—which they describe in terms of “webs”—are malleable, ephemeral, fragile, and lingering. “While knots suggests an individual focus, webs foreground connection” (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017, p. 35), and considering webs of tensions brings together teens’ layered and shifting experiences to inform their decision-making. However, while Malvini Redden and Way (2017) explored dialectical tensions in depth, they referenced the related discourses only casually.

To understand more fully the discourses and tensions that shape participants’ communication online, we explored the following research questions: 1. What discourses inform young people’s participation online? 2. What discursive tensions and contradictions constitute young people’s online communication experiences?

Methods and procedures

The data for this project came from a larger program of research aimed at understanding how young people negotiate life online. Our participants were diverse in

terms of culture, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. We carefully designed the study to privilege participant voices and experiences, rather than simply researcher curiosity. Thus, we built upon past research, bringing key findings from a series of interviews and focus groups to bear in new conversations, and letting participants lead the research. Our initial objective with these in-depth interviews was to understand how participants wrestled with discursive tensions illuminated by past research (e.g., Malvini Redden & Way, 2017) and to *show* us examples of how those tensions were navigated by narrating and demonstrating their experiences online, as well as by responding to direct quotes from other interviewees of their same age range. These quotes were gleaned from past research, and helped us put current interviewees in conversation with ideas and concerns from peers, versus adult conceptions of teen online life.

Participants

Participants, 39 young women and 16 young men, represented a range of ethnic and family backgrounds, hailing from urban and rural communities in the northeast and western U.S., and were primarily from working class families (see Table 1 for demographics). Most individual interviewees were recruited from the authors' university communities. All participants reported having regular online access via personal smart phone and in some cases, tablet or family or public computer. All but two participants reported going online and checking social media daily for multiple hours.

Data collection

After receiving institutional review board approval, data collection involved 51 in-depth interviews ranging from 21 to 105 minutes, averaging 39 minutes, and four email interviews. With permission from participants, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews began by querying participant expectations about what the interview might be about as well as a grand tour question asking them to describe their online activity over the course of an average day. Participants were asked to share the impression they thought they made on various platforms, and then to show the researchers examples from their social media accounts. Current interviewees were asked to reflect on quotations from past participants about gender expectations, race and sexuality, the appropriate ages to use social media, and the tensions between authenticity and image.

Participants were also specifically asked to consider sets of discursive tensions described by past research to see if those discursive tensions resonated with their experiences online: connecting v. disconnecting, managing constraints v. appreciating guidance, wanting to be carefree and authentic online v. being seen in a positive light, managing on v. offline identities, and wanting to participate in online culture but also resist problematic rituals (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). Participants also reflected on the degree to which they consumed versus created material for online spaces, what scenarios they would

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Self-Described Ethnicity	Language(s) Spoken at Home	Romantic/Sexual Attraction	Parent/Guardian Employment
1 Armenian	1 Armenian	1 Asexual	Accounting (2), agricultural mgmt, appraiser,
1 Asian	1 Bosnian	2 Decline to state	auctioneer, cable repair dispatcher, caregiver (3),
1 Asian/Indian	2 Cantonese	49 Opposite sex	carpenter, caterer, cleaners (2), computer engineer,
1 Asian/Pacific Islander	30 English	1 Pansexual	construction (2), cosmetologist (3), decline to state
1 Black	1 English/Punjabi	2 Same sex	(2), doctor (4), engineer (4), Ford, flooring company,
1 Black/Mexican	1 Hmong/English	Parental Monitoring of Social	gas company, graphic designer, HVAC installer,
1 Bosnian	1 Mienh	Media before college	insurance agent, K-12 teacher (7), IT/computers, lab
14 Caucasian/White	1 Nepali/English	2 Decline to state	tech, law enforcement, lawyer (3), LVN, journalist,
1 Caucasian/Mexican	9 Spanish	44 No	maid, manager for Safeway, military, nurse, pianist,
1 Caucasian/Chinese	3 Spanish/English	1 Not sure	plumbing, private security, project manager, real
2 Chinese	1 Tagalog	8 Yes	estate, refrigeration tech, restaurant owners,
2 Filipino/a	1 Ukrainian	Favorite Platforms	restaurant worker, retired (4), sales/service (7),
12 Hispanic/Latino/a	1 Urdu	Snapchat	security, social worker (2), stay at home mom (2), tire
1 Hmong	2 Vietnamese/Chinese	Twitter	shop owner, truck driver (4), unemployed (3), x-ray
2 Jewish	Religion	Instagram	tech, youth center manager
5 Mexican	1 Atheist	Facebook	
1 Mexican/Japanese	1 Buddhist	Pinterest	
1 Mexican/Filipino	17 Catholic	We Chat	
1 Mienh	11 Christian	Tumblr	
1 Nepali	1 Church of Christ	QQ	
1 Pakistani	2 Hindu	Vent	
1 Turkish	2 Islam		
2 Vietnamese	2 Jewish		
Type of high school	1 Mormon		
5 Charter	1 Muslim		
7 Private	14 N/A		
42 Public	1 Shamen		
1 Public and Private	1 Taoism		

Note: We include parent/guardian employment as an indication of possible socio-economic status

recommend young people practice as they learn how to be online citizens, and what questions they would ask their peers if they were conducting interviews.

Data analysis

Analysis was a multi-step process that began as we started collecting interviews. We each listened to the audio files separately, writing analytic memos (Charmaz, 2014) to get a sense of similarities and differences, and key issues. We agreed upon some adjustments to the interview protocol, omitting questions that were not resonating with participants, and emphasizing elements of the interview that were exceedingly fruitful, including interactions with past participant quotes. As interviews were gathered, we analyzed audio files and transcripts, again writing individual analytic memos. After a period of individual data immersion (Tracy, 2013), we came together to discuss our initial impressions. In this phase, we noticed that the tensions/ideas of past participants resonated with interviewees, and that participants seemed to wrestle with webs of tensions and contradictions in interesting ways, especially in regard to discourses at micro, meso, and macro levels.

The second phase of analysis involved us both individually reviewing data, this time specifically looking for examples of tensions and contradictions. We identified contradictions when polar opposites emerged in the data, such as when participants described social media as “no big deal” in one part of the interview, but also detailed an extensive process for developing posts in other parts of the interview. We identified tensions in the data when dualities emerged in speech, such as when participants described content management as effortful but also fun, and talked through how they managed the associated tensions. Likewise, we assessed each example of tension and contradiction for the various discourses that participants seemed to draw from, noting approximately what level of discourse was being referenced (micro, meso, macro). Then we analyzed patterns in the data, organizing the tensions and contradictions into themes that show both distinct concepts but also how discourses sometimes overlap and constrain each other. This process enabled us to move from simply describing tensions and contradictions synthesizing themes into theoretical concepts (Tracy, 2013). (See Table 2 for contradiction and tension data exemplars at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels). To ensure a trustworthy analysis, we used consensus coding (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005) that involved each of us reviewing data separately, then coming together to discuss categories and codes, and make changes to analytic categories or coding practices where necessary.

The contradicting discourses that organize communication online

As we spoke with young people about their online lives, we were excited to hear about, as well as see, examples of their online personas and experiences. All but one interviewee consented to showing us examples of their social media exploits, narrating how they chose images for Instagram or Twitter, and what types of conversations happened

Table 2 Data Exemplars

Level of Discourse	Examples of Tensions (When participants described experiences in terms of dualities; both/and tensions)	Examples of Contradictions (When participants described experiences in terms of mutually exclusive polar opposites)
Micro-level , e.g., “local” practices like sharing photos, commenting on others’ posts, direct messaging	When young people discussed feeling constrained by the expectations of their various audiences—for instance, not sharing “sad” or “angry” posts on certain platforms like Instagram—and instead using various platforms to meet their identity and communication needs without alienating their various audiences. (Showing the use of meso-level platform features to manage micro-level interactions)	When young people framed social media as fleeting or ephemeral—and therefore not that serious—but also acknowledged the permanence and macro discourses like “the internet is forever.” (Showing the influence of macro-level discourses in micro-level communication)
Meso-level , e.g., organizational level discourses, platforms and their features, norms for engagement	When young people described the normative pressure to participate in aspects of social media—such as compulsion to keep Snapchat streaks alive—even though they might feel like it is silly or meaningless. (Shows the relationship between meso-level normative practices and micro-level relational communication)	When young people described exerting control over social media by using it on their own terms, taking breaks, quitting altogether, or strategizing content based upon algorithm influences, while also discussing the constraints of social media and it being an inescapable controlling influence.

(Continued)

Table2 (Continued)

<p>Macro-level, e.g., larger, historically-situated social narratives; conversations happening in the public sphere</p>	<p>When young people describe the difficulties with resisting or participating in popular online conventions in response to large social discourses such as propriety, permanence, or gendered expectations, such as the expectation for girls to cover their bodies/show “appropriate” images, or perform happiness/positivity. (Showing awareness of how young people’s social media habits are viewed broadly at a macro-level, enacted at the normative meso-level, and shape interactions at the micro-level.)</p>	<p>When young people described how social media is a casual affair and something to be frivolous and carefree about—showcasing macro discourses like individuality and authenticity—while also discussing social media as an important image management tool requiring careful attention in order to preserve reputations with on and offline parties, and to retain followers. (Shows concern for macro-level discourses of authenticity as well as societal level conversations about what is “appropriate” content, as well as how meso-level normative constraints like being seen as available and attractive)</p>
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on Snapchat versus Facebook. Comparing visual data across platforms enabled us to see readily that teens navigate tensions and contradictions in their online experiences related to identity, audience, and communication. The findings below are organized according to the most prominent categories of tensions and contradictions that surfaced in our analysis of participants' experiences on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Tumblr, and Vent, including: 1. Social Media as Ephemeral v. Permanent; 2. Being Careful v. Casual on Social Media; and 3. Exerting Control Over v. Being Controlled By Social Media. We describe each set of contradictions and tensions, and within each section, trace the various micro-, meso-, and macro-level discourses that constitute young people's experiences online.

Social media as ephemeral v. permanent

Throughout our conversations, participants discussed their lives online while straddling an important contradiction: That on the one hand, social media is somewhat frivolous and fleeting, while on the other hand, it can have permanent consequences for the future. For example, participants described how they share everyday life on platforms like Snapchat—videos of dancing, images of hobbies and travel, school and work—that frequently disappear or are erased, that “don't really mean anything” and take on an ephemeral quality in terms of meaningfulness. Yashve, for instance, admitted keeping her Snapchat streak alive by trading “ugly face” pictures with her sister or random pictures with the caption “streak” just to keep the conversation going. “Streaks” connote the number of unbroken days that a Snapchat conversation has been kept active. Likewise, RJ admitted calling Snapchat's customer service when an app down-time caused him and his girlfriend to lose their streak and almost have to start over after more than a year.

Streaks as a meso-level feature of the platform incentivize, albeit trivially, participation on Snapchat, and clearly shape micro-level communication. In fact, a number of participants described intense anger at friends or significant others who broke streaks. At the same time as they acknowledged the ephemerality and frivolity of online platforms, confirming existing research about Snapchat in particular (Bayer et al., 2016), participants also discussed the great efforts they go to generate the right impressions for their various publics, because “the internet is forever” as Adela and a significant proportion of our interviewees admitted, echoing a prominent macro-discourse about online life. Participants demonstrated how these contradictory ideas shape their communication generally and usage of various platforms specifically as we discuss below.

Throughout participants' talk is an awareness of various discourses, some grand and familiar like “If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all” according to Vanessa, or “Don't post what you don't want your grandma to see” as Bea and many people mentioned—echoing familiar ideas about not posting content that isn't fit for public consumption. Others discussed more local discourses, like “do it for the 'gram,” meaning to respond to pressure for posting on Instagram, to avoid

“being extra” or extravagant, or “sliding into the DMs,” a term Liam used to describe when strangers send unsolicited and often sexually explicit messages into the direct messaging function of platforms like Instagram or Twitter.

Many people articulated a keen awareness of future consequences of social media, whether through personal experience, cautionary tales from friends, or stories propagated in the public sphere. Lenore admitted she doesn’t put her real name on her social media accounts in case a future employer or college searches her online. Carlos also worried about the effect of social media posts on future background checks for his hopeful career, and Thuanh discussed how future employers will “search you up” online. Sally spoke critically of those who post party pictures, saying: “There are people who see that. They could just Google their name and that picture could come up. That could really change their future. And I definitely think a post is never worth more than a future.” These comments show an important awareness of macro-discourses about social media’s potential impact on future employment as research shows that employers’ definitely surveil and make sense of job candidates via “cybervetting” and evaluation of online activities (Berkelaar, 2014).

Indeed, the material consequences of online activities came early for some participants. Robert described losing his job due to an offhand post on Snapchat about his employer’s fiscal irresponsibility. Expressing consternation about the post that was only visible for an hour, Robert said “I don’t know how they found it ... My theory is someone close to them or something screenshotted ... They actually had screenshots, so ... that’s a little scary.” While Robert described how in school “they’ve always given us that talk” about colleges and future employers watching social media accounts, it wasn’t until he experienced the repercussions of posting that he described being more circumspect in his posts. In his reflections, Robert juxtaposes conflicting discursive resources—the meso-level discourse of ephemerality that frames snapchat activity as something that is “supposed” to be frivolous and fleeting, the micro-level assumption of masspersonal privacy management (French & Bazarova, 2017) in his surprise at an unintended audience viewing the post, and the macro-level discourses of surveillance that are at once familiar but constraining.

Others discussed the imaginary employers and potential audiences that shape how they post. Jay described how she avoids publicly commenting or sharing opinions on controversial topics “Because um, it’s going to be there forever and then someone could always trace it back. And I don’t want that, in a way, to backfire.” As a college freshman, Jay gave an example of wanting to become a pharmacist, and how she wouldn’t today comment on the price of medicines or how hospitals could save money by creating their own, in case her future employers might see and be critical. Jay described such concern about a career at least eight years on the horizon, while at the same time offered examples of sharing highly personal and embarrassing content about her family and sexuality in other online spaces, saying that sharing “over online won’t really affect me much in the long run because it’s just for in the moment.” This type of contradiction surfaced frequently in participants’ talk as they drew upon different discourses to describe their online lives. However, unlike

Robert's wrestling with competing discourses, Jay seemed unaware of the way she nimbly held onto to contradictory discourses of ephemerality and permanence, exemplifying an inadvertently "More-Than" approach to tension management (Putnam et al., 2016), likely because she was not aware of the contradictions. It is interesting though that Jay held such firm rules about posting relative to professional goals, but was perfectly willing to disclose highly sensitive personal information without recognizing that the personal could still hurt her professionally, even though the content was not about her future employment directly.

A future-orientation to social media also helped many participants shape their strategies for posting and cleaning up accounts. Casually, Yashve described combing through her Instagram to delete various images of herself. When asked what she deleted, she said "Selfies and stuff" usually "when I start to outgrow the pictures." Rather than consider employment implications, Yashve discussed wanting her content to be current with how she views herself. Similarly, Sally said "I think it's just making sure that the things that are important to me are the things I focus on. Because I could post one negative thing that maybe isn't that important to me and that could mar the entirety of everything else I've posted." Thuanh also admitted to cleaning up posts, typically inane "I'm hungry" comments on Twitter or pictures that she knows friends have already seen. All three women's comments, echoed in the words of many of our participants, point toward a great concern for persona, and that while malleable, posts have considerable implications. These comments show an awareness of masspersonal audience expectations and the desire to curate personas developmentally. Meaning, participants drew upon micro-level discourses of identity that emerge in the desire to showcase a "current" self, while also wanting to maintain consistency for their various audiences and protect their online personae. Participants described leveraging meso-level features of each platform to accomplish this identity work.

Being casual v. careful on social media

One of the striking aspects of our data was how participants discussed social media as "not that serious" while also evidencing great care and effort toward posts and participation. Steph, for instance, repeated several times how she is "low key" on social media and how her posts do not say much about her as person. However, these denials conflicted with the energy she described exerting to maintain a "proper" image, avoid bad reputations, and be "respectable." Likewise, Maria sounded dismissive of social media, advising others, "Don't try to please people, it's tiring" while also describing her methodical process of writing posts and captions, saving them as drafts, and waiting a period of time before posting, in order to maintain her "good girl" image. This resonated with Additas, Paige, and Natali, who all described sharing captions with friends to solicit their advice. These participants seemed unaware of broader social discourses about gender expectations that emerged in their speech—that being a "good girl" means taking care not to offend others as well as being methodical about images and captions. For instance, when

Steph discussed being “proper” and having a “good” reputation, these were terms used to convey conforming to gendered norms for girls—not showing flesh or risqué images so people will not question their morality. These macro discourses emerged from micro-level sources like parents and grandparents, and regularly related to meso- or macro-level religious discourses that promote modesty as an important virtue for young women.

The tension between careful- and carelessness emerged in many participants’ talk to show contradictory approaches to audience. Participants seemed to desire the ability to be carefree but also communicate a preferred image, echoing past research (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). Yashve, for instance, advised “Don’t try too hard, just be who you want to be” but also admitted she avoids posting “stupid stuff” so as to keep her preferred persona and not lose followers’ respect. Likewise, Bea mentioned wanting to be as “authentic as possible online, but sometimes that’s ... really hard to do. I feel like if you try to do anything different than what other people are doing, then you’re immediately going to get like judged. Or like shut down.” She continued, lamenting how if she tried to do something funny or different like posting a bunch of memes on her Instagram account, “I would lose so many followers. I would lose so many people.” In responding to the contradictions with authenticity and image, Bea and Yashve show a desire for carefreeness, but the pressure to be more intentional. In these examples, Bea and Yashve show how macro-discourses of authenticity and individuality run up against meso-level normative constraints of acceptable platform activity.

Concern for image and audience showed up in several capacities—to preserve reputation among family and friends known offline, to keep follower interest and engagement, and to follow personal ethics. For example, while Natali advised “Don’t worry too much about it,” she also described going back and revising years of image captions when her mom joined Instagram, changing “[My friend] and I beat the shit out of prom” to something more tame that would not offend her mom. Lily, along with others like Yaz, also admitted keeping accounts that family could see as “PG,” harkening to movie rating guidelines where PG is “Parental Guidance Suggested” but content is generally appropriate and avoids swearing, nudity, and violence. R.H. shared how he posts “whatever I’m feeling” but with the caveat that he avoids material that would offend or hurt people, and Alex emphasized the importance to “avoid obscene or emotion driven posts.” Leslie and others discussed the pressure to show “friends back home” a positive image of life since high school, particularly via Instagram. Leslie said “I’m advertising the time of my life, having the ‘college experience,’” despite also advocating for others to “be yourself and tweet what you want,” especially in regard to personal politics. Leslie’s comments show how people use meso-level platform features to navigate contradictory micro-level discourses—showcasing a positive winning image to certain familiars on Instagram and saving more authentic, personally satisfying opinions for the masses on Twitter.

Contradictions about discourses of authenticity emerged as a major concern for participants, particularly on Instagram, a platform Stephanie described as a “cover photo for your life,” Additas as a “highlights reel,” Tabi as “pretty and polished,” and Jake as “very grown up.” Lily confided that “Everything is like super calculated, but it’s supposed to look like super ‘this is me every second of every day.’ Versus like I took 17,000 pictures at different angles and put 7,000 filters on this and this is what I got.” Lily’s comment highlights the competing discourses people respond to—the meso-level pressure to conform to norms that emphasize Instagram as a polished and picture-perfect platform, but the macro-level pressure to make sure that perfection looks effortless. Similarly Additas described sharing beautiful travel photos online, but without the “backstory.” She said, “Like I’ll share a picture of the Eiffel tower in Paris, but not what it took to get there.” She described how she would not “trouble” her followers with pictures of or complaints about the many busses and connections she had to take in order to find her way to the beautiful location. Rather, she said she would save that conversation for platforms with more immediacy, like Snapchat. In this way, Additas manages imagined audience expectations by platform.

Some participants demonstrated a segmented approach to performances of authenticity. When asked about the impression she creates on social media, Kait was quick to sing lyrics to Natasha Bedingfield’s upbeat pop song “Pocketful of Sunshine.” She showed pictures of her Instagram account—with bright, happy, smiling, beautiful people and travels—a vibrant, optimistic life. This imagery contrasted starkly with her “finsta” or a fake Instagram, an alternative private account with limited audience where she puts her “real” experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Describing it as a home for her “sad girl” feelings and goofy videos, like one of her best guy friends brushing her teeth, she said “It’s just ... it’s where I can be honest.” Kait shared many contradictory claims like how she is sweet but doesn’t like to “sugar coat” anything, how “I won’t take shit from anyone ... I have a backbone,” but also that she keeps a “dinner party ready” image for Instagram “grab-a-dates.” These comments, echoed by others, show how she negotiates competing logics in a “More-Than” approach to tensions where she describes polar opposites as equally important on the one hand, but also completely separate in an “Either-Or” fashion on the other (Putnam et al., 2016). Kait did not seem aware of the contradictions of conforming to macro-level gender expectations for women to be “sweet” but also sexually available, while challenging both meso-level norms of not sharing negative feelings on social media (something we discuss further in our third category of findings) and macro-level discourses about appropriate social emotions for women.

A few participants discussed resisting online conventions but with a clear awareness of the discourses that shape social media activity. Grace discussed taking “breaks” from social media and being thoughtful about posts in order to convey authenticity and protect her reputation. Wrestling with ideas about sexuality and modesty, Grace described how she put a lot of thought into the images she shared, in part to avoid commentary from her parents or suggestions of impropriety. In sharing examples of her Instagram posts, she showed one full body picture of herself in a small bikini. “I had a lot of hesitation when I first wanted to post this ... But then

I just kind of decided ... that picture isn't like me posing all sexy," Grace said. "It's just like me, like literally caught in the moment ... I wasn't posing, you know, it was just like me actually laughing and then them snapping a picture." Grace seemed to wrestle with what the bikini shot communicated, comparing and contrasting it to other bathing suit images that featured more modest swimsuits during her life guarding duties, or while on the beach but focused more on the scenery than her body. However, in emphasizing the photo's spontaneity and effortlessness, she seemed to rationalize it to herself, that it is okay *because* it's carefree. In crafting and talking about her posts, Grace seemed to struggle with micro-level discourses like conflict with her parents and balancing her participation in meso-level norms online (e.g., the common practice of posting skin shots, appearing effortless, etc.). In describing her activities, Grace's experiences point to control as an important feature in how communication is organized online, a topic we turn to next.

Exerting control over v. being controlled by social media

Our analysis surfaced a third category of discursive contradictions: tension between how social media platforms exert control over young peoples' communication online and the efforts they exert in manipulating platforms to navigate tensions and achieve their communicative goals. Even as they expressed awareness of how social media controls their lives, especially in terms of time and identity expression, resisting the influences of participation required vigilance and concerted effort.

Participants poignantly described the pressure to always be online, echoing past research findings. Though they claimed this pressure was much less influential than when they were younger teenagers, they admitted not being totally free of it. Some seemed to struggle more than others, like Lily who admitted, "I've just recently come to terms that I am like addicted to it." Meanwhile, Grace mused, "Honestly, I don't think it's anything bad. I don't think it's something that's overpowering me and I like to see what's going on in everyone else's life, especially like my close friends." Robert, signaling social media's control, said, "You should be taught or I guess encouraged to um, have practice, self-control, you know, so you're not like always, you know, 'ooh, what is that? I need to check that out right now.'" In some ways, these comments support macro-level discourses about teen behavior and apparent addiction to social media, but they also evidence important nuance. Teens are not uniform in their experiences or relationships to social media, like frequent macro-level framings, nor are they unconcerned about how social media shapes their time.

Aware of the often addictive nature of social media, participants talked about the various ways they limited their use. Anna stood out in our sample as the only person who avoided social media altogether, saying: "I'm always really conscious of how I use my time. And I felt like watching people use social media it seemed like they were wasting their time." Likewise, Jasmine, who spoke eloquently about the negative impact of social media on her self-esteem, had recently cancelled—not just deactivated—her social media accounts to start a "journey of self-exploration" and to "find peace." Lenore

expressed similar feelings in terms of rejecting conventions, “I just don’t really want to participate in that whole culture of like trying for the most likes.” Unlike Anna, however, Lenore maintained several social media accounts but kept the audiences small and the content well curated. For many, taking a hiatus was the best way to demonstrate discipline about social media. Additas recalled how a teacher helped her realize she needed a break: “He’s like ‘Your phone’s a metaphor for drugs’ ... that literally clicked.” So, she took a six month break from social media. Additas went on, “It made me think like, okay, the phone doesn’t control me. I control the phone.” Numerous participants described long breaks from social media ranging from a few weeks to six months or more. When asked how friends responded to breaks, participants described micro-level pressures to participate in some cases, usually in the form of feeling left out, but also accommodation from close friends who would clue them into important information via other routes such as traditional texting.

If not an extended break from social media, many teens strategically deleted apps off their phones for shorter periods of time. Grace recounted a familiar cycle for the young people we spoke to, “I deactivated my account a few times. Um, but I’ve never like fully deleted it ... I deactivated my Instagram a couple times, but usually I just, I’ll delete the app and I’ll go, you know, two, three days” before reinstalling. Mel echoed this approach, saying, “There’s times where I am very distracted so I had to delete the app from my phone just to draw my eyes away from using the phone a lot.” Ariana concurred, saying she once deleted her apps for two months and sometimes uses the “do not disturb” function on her phone to avoid distraction at the beginning of a new semester. Kait described a fellow sorority sister who, though very involved in her organization (and its social media platform), “didn’t like the way it was making [her] feel, so she just deleted it.” Lily admitted she thought social media was taking a personal toll and deleted apps for a few hours at a time and turns off notifications, “Just ‘cause it’s like gotten to an unhealthy level in my life where I know too many things about what people are doing. I don’t want to know anymore.” She added “Stuff like that is just not productive for anyone.” The process of deactivating or deleting accounts shows how young people attempt to control or resist platforms by manipulating meso-level norms and pressures. However, most readily admitted coming back to social media eventually, with some breaks lasting only a couple hours before the draw of timelines and updates sucked them back in, thus supporting macro-level discourses about youth obsession with online activity they were trying to escape in the first place and demonstrating the anxiety associated with being pulled between two polar opposites (Putnam et al., 2016).

Participants also spoke about the tricks they used to “outsmart” platforms, and sometimes simultaneously, how they resist or subvert being controlled by social media. Lily, along with many participants, mentioned knowing about “algorithms” used by particular platforms to organize the showing of posts, and sheepishly admitted, “I changed my age on Snapchat to a couple of years younger because I wasn’t sure if it would save less of what I sent.” Participants also spoke of paying for likes, adding particular hashtags in order to attract more likes, and using software to optimize the

timing of posts. With considerable reluctance, Bea confessed, “I actually downloaded this app not too long ago and it tells you when you’re best posting times are ... It’s just this weird thing that I wanted to use to post when I know that most people will see it. I’m not too proud of it.” Sometimes, however, their tricks were not aimed at greater engagement, but rather were crafted as a way of participating online with less engagement. Lily, for example described getting too caught up in features that alert users to who has seen their posts. She explained, “On Instagram ... you can like see who’s liked a picture, but on your laptop you can’t. So I can look at Instagram on my laptop and that’s safe for me.” Other described “muting” people on Twitter or “hiding” people on Facebook to maintain relationships but avoid seeing certain content. These actions show people wrestling with meso-level platform features and their relationships to micro-level intrapersonal discourses of self-control, but also strategically leveraging features to gain more followers.

Participants were certainly aware of the meso-level features of most platforms that encouraged their immersion, shaped their posts, or made it difficult to disengage. Reflecting on how individual choices about what to like/follow determine what information is presented to users, Bea suggested, “If you think you’re shaping your timeline, Twitter is shaping it for you first.” And while many described frustration at the control of apps, most described switching platforms rather than giving up altogether, especially due to social relationships. Resisting the traps of social media individually is one thing, but resisting expectations of peers, seemed like more of a challenge. Lily explained, “People get real upset if you break [Snapchat] streaks. So it’s like really hard to disconnect from that one in particular.” Likewise, Jasmin, who shared about deactivating her accounts only to reactive them shortly thereafter described how new friends’ disbelief at her lack of social media caused her to renew her accounts, while old friends commented on her break with “Oh, she did it again” type remarks. Jasmin also indicated that while people can quit certain platforms fairly easily, Snapchat requires that people deactivate their accounts and stay inactive for at least 30 days before the account goes away entirely. In these instances, feeling bound by micro-level relational expectations while trying to break free from meso-level normative pressure, and meso-level platform features that reinforced micro- and meso-level discourses to stay engaged, participants wrestle with micro and meso-level discourses about social media.

Perhaps the most common strategy articulated by these participants for exerting control over social media was to selectively post different content to different platforms. There was virtually unanimous agreement among participants that all social media accounts were not to be used for the same purpose. Jay explained, “So like with Facebook, um, I really want to be showing that yes, I am like I am pro-choice and like I support marijuana, right. But I choose not to, not on Facebook.” When asked why, she explained, in a way that echoed many of our participants, “Facebook is for family.” Jay discussed sharing controversial opinions friend oriented platforms like Snapchat. What was once a “problem” of having to portray a complex identity to multiple audiences on one app was solved by splitting up identity performances

across platforms. “When I started finding these other apps where I can be open, then the problem was kind of solved,” Jay added, without necessarily realizing these actions of using meso-level affordances to craft complex online identities challenges macro-discourses of authenticity and singular identity.

While most described posting different content to different platforms, not everyone agreed with having two versions of the same account or maintaining wildly different personas online. Treedog and Liana bristled when asked if they had a finsta account, as if it were silly or offensive. Liana explained, “I just find it useless. Like if you’re going to have a finsta, then I don’t know, what are you trying to hide?” Tabi, who did not have a finsta, described wanting to be more consistent with her on and off-line personas, so she kept content similar across platforms, supporting macro-discourses of authenticity and singular identity in almost the opposite way that Jay challenged them.

For most young people though, managing identity online involved grooming more public or outwardly focused accounts like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to only focus on positivity or a particular professional persona, while other more private platforms, like Snapchat or those with a more selective following like a finsta, as outlets for sad, angry or controversial posts, or less idealized images. Kait characterized the difference as Instagram being “PG,” where “Anyone can look me up and I wouldn’t be embarrassed about things.” Her finsta, however, involves “sad girl” commentary and serious posts, saying, “That’s real life. You know?” Thuanh described a similar process between her three favorite apps: Instagram was for the “good pictures” and “made up” faces, while Twitter was for “rants, retweets and food pictures,” and Snapchat was for personal conversations.

Our interviews also revealed a strong meso-level pressure for performances of positivity. Lenore explained, “The biggest constraint is that [with Instagram] unlike Snapchat and Twitter you can’t really post anything bad going on in your life I guess.” Jay felt similarly, explaining, “I’m a really, really happy person, but ... well not everyone can be just happy. Like I put my anger in Vent so that I can’t put it on other people.” Kait perfectly captured what was implicit in many participants’ responses: “I’m tired of always seeming happy online. ‘Cause like I’m a person, like I do feel sadness ... You can’t post a picture of you being sad on your Instagram ... People would ask you what’s wrong and stuff.” Tabi described it as peer-pressure, “No one admits it, but you can just kind of tell ... People doing the same thing ... You can just tell.” Tabi’s comment illustrates how micro-level actions—posting certain types of comments and pictures—become meso-level norms, where soon everyone is posting similar content in ways that constrain people. Responding to someone who said to “just be yourself online,” Lenore commented: “If you can [be yourself], that’s great. But it’s not the culture of social media. You’re supposed to put your best foot forward.” Taken together, these comments show how participants navigate discourses that work to control their experiences online.

Discussion and implications

In this essay, we explore how young people experience social media and navigate related discursive contradictions and tensions. We discussed three prominent categories of contradictions that organized young people's experiences online, including: Social Media as Ephemeral v. Permanent; Being careful v. Casual on Social Media; and Exerting Control over or Being Controlled by Social Media. Likewise, we identified and analyzed the numerous micro-, meso-, and macro-level discourses that permeated young people's talk about social media experiences and created tensions for youth to manage.

Participants seemed variously aware of these discourses and related tensions. All of the young people we spoke with discussed keen awareness of certain discourses, including macro-level discourses about the internet's permanence and stereotypical advice for posting family-appropriate content, as well as meso-level discourses including normative pressures for using social media broadly, for how to engage (constantly and with an eye toward audience expectations), and how to manipulate platform-level features to accomplish communicative goals. However, young people seemed less aware of how multiple levels of discourse intersect and act upon them, such as how attending to micro-level discursive pressure to maintain a "proper" image online serves to reinforce macro-level gender expectations, but using meso-level features, such as alternative and multiple accounts, can help accomplish micro-level inter- and intra-personal goals that challenge macro-discourses.

While young people demonstrated strategic thinking about certain discourses, they did not seem to realize how they evidenced contradictory thinking or activity online broadly, even as they discussed challenges they face online. While we (adult researchers) might expect youth to frame contradictions as especially difficult to manage—and indeed, youth did describe serious negative emotions about their experiences online—they did not typically frame contradictions as such. We suspect this finding relates to differences in adult versus youth-focused discursive experiences, as we discuss below in the theoretical implications. One exception to awareness of contradictions related to the third category of contradictions regarding control. Participants seemed somewhat aware of their struggles to control their social media use in ways that satisfied their complex personal and relational goals, in light of various compelling discourses at micro, meso, and macro levels. We argue that a reason for this awareness relates to the "heaviness" of three levels of discourses acting upon youth at the same time, in ways that made the contradiction more evident and its consequences more difficult to navigate.

Below, we discuss the theoretical implications of these findings, including the utility of a multi-level discursive approach for understanding social media experiences especially in regard to imagined audiences, the power of collective responses online in constructing and reinforcing macro-level discourse, fragmentation of identity as an addition to boyd's (2008) notion of networked publics, and the importance of information that is not shared online as a microdiscursive strategy for resistance.

Theoretical implications

By looking at how levels of discourse intersect, we can see how certain phenomena, including identities and communication, are organized online. A discursive approach shows how young people draw on certain discursive resources (Kuhn, 2009) to make decisions and navigate tensions. This approach also helps explain some of the contrast between adult-driven discourses of youth social media experience, and youths' narrated experiences.

Consider online trends and challenges participants described such as the cinnamon or Tide pod challenge, where people are dared to eat sometimes noxious substances or complete dangerous tasks and post videos online. If we consider the overlapping discourses that people are drawing from to make decisions about participation, it becomes easier to understand how these phenomena occur. When considering whether to participate in challenges, young people navigate sometimes contradictory discourses—for instance micro-level interpersonal support from friends and discouragement from parents, while at the same time responding to norms that exist at the meso organizational level—meaning social norms communicated via social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat. Young people draw from macro level discourses such as being “cool” or “independent” or “daring” but their actions also result in bolstering macro level conversations about young people being foolish and social media perpetuating danger (Stern & Burke Odland, 2017).

It is through micro-level discourses that young people exert their own resistance to and subversion of these larger discourses, such as when youth face gendered critiques from adults and choose to ignore comments or delete content to avoid the hassle of arguing. Of importance, however, is that frequently, the acts of resistance that are working to challenge broad social discourses occur in spaces separate from other acts of compliance. For instance, women in our study described maintaining social media accounts that in many ways adhere to idealized norms of female beauty and comportment—especially the more polished accounts like Instagram—echoing research about the persistence of sex role stereotyping in online environments (Holz Ivory, Fox, Waddell, & Ivory, 2014), and the pressures for young women to appear beautiful and sexually available, but not promiscuous (Bailey et al., 2013). When young women turn to private Snapchat messages, finsta accounts, or apps like Vent to express anger, sadness or the unvarnished examples of their everyday lives and selves, such acts of resistance do not do much to challenge the broader social discourses that call for women to be beautiful, pleasant, and accommodating of others. When youth, for instance, delete photos to maintain micro-level interpersonal harmony with important adults rather than resisting publically, they resist at a personal micro-level, but not at a relational one. This personal resistance unintentionally reinforces some macro-discourses about “appropriate” types of dress for teenage girls, while inadvertently challenging meso-discourses that promote sharing risqué photos online in order to garner attention.

The ways that teens negotiate discourses also helps illuminate how they conceive of their imagined audiences (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) and expectations for audience

responses (French & Bazarova, 2017). Namely, within the contradictions of social media being fleeting but associated with future consequences, and “not that serious” but requiring serious effort, teens vacillate between abstract and target audiences. Like Litt and Hargittai (2016), we saw teens give their audiences both extreme concern but also disregard. This was evidenced in the juxtaposition of extreme effort toward image management but also discussions of authenticity and “just being myself.” It was striking how teens, even as they mentioned important adults as members of their target audience—relatives and future bosses whom they imagined responding to posts—acted surprised in the face of adult responses or treated them more as abstract audience members. For instance, youth’s responses to familial critiques and surprise at negative employer responses to critical online activities show how important adults who were articulated as part of a target audience seemed to be relegated to a more generalized position. This also may connect to how teens perpetuate and resist levels of discourse and the contrast between adult and teen framings of social media. If important adults are not really part of teens’ target audiences, it is not surprising then that they draw upon different discourses than adults to make decisions about and frame social media activity.

Related research has shown that youth understand privacy and boundaries differently than people who grew up before the prevalence of mature social media platforms (e.g. Marwick & boyd, 2014). Networked publics complicate the task of impression management as communication is now more persistent, searchable, replicable, and inclusive of an invisible audience (boyd, 2008). Our findings extend boyd’s concept, adding fragmentation/segmentation as another feature of networked publics, or as we say, networked identities. For instance, participants in our study offered many and varied examples of strategically segmenting their identities across platforms in order to exert control of others’ perceptions of them. Perhaps initially it would be easy to argue that this same process of fragmentation happened offline in the lives and identities of individuals well before the proliferation of social media platforms. Of course, individuals perform different aspects of their identities in different contexts. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) refer to this process as crystallization, where identity is understood as dynamic, multifaceted, and context dependent.

Our findings reveal a complicating feature of this segmentation on social media platforms, however, where a profile is often thought to be representative of a whole person (recall Stephanie’s description of Instagram as “the cover photo for your life” or Kait’s explanation of her finsta as her “authentic self”). For users who share across several platforms—as nearly everyone in our study described—the aggregate may very well be representative of a robust persona. But rarely do users have the same followers across every platform. More frequently, followers may be similar across one or two platforms, but rarely does the average follower have access to the totality of what is posted across the four or five platforms being used. While a person’s profile may feel like the representation of a whole person, more often it is only representative of one sliver of their larger crystalized self. And, as we argue, these

slivers of experience (based on a narrow focus of one particular platform) then make up larger macro level discourses about “what young people do online,” for instance.

This issue brings us back to the importance of examining phenomena across multiple levels of discourse to understand the power of these discourses to organize lived experiences. One feature of the presentation of identities online (specifically through social media) is the opportunity for response and interaction with these performances. It is not just common practice for followers to respond to posts, but an expected way to perform relational maintenance. As research shows, people post with audiences in mind, whether general/abstract or specific (Litt & Hargittai, 2014), and people have certain expectations for responses such as getting likes on Facebook or Instagram from many people, and comments from a few (French & Bazarova, 2017).

When identity is fragmented across platforms, followers are responding to a person’s presentation of themselves online, but only to the one facet that they have presented on a particular platform, rather than the nuanced and complex picture that makes up the body of their online profiles. For example, when parents respond with chagrin to a Snapchat photo their daughter posted wearing a low cut top, their perception of that image is only in the context of other images she has presented on that platform, and not likely with the broad range of other images in the suite of platforms she maintains. Perhaps all of her photos show a more consistent image of her as comfortable showing a certain amount of skin, or, just as likely, they may show a much more balanced picture of a girl who varies her look based on the context in which it is happening. As our research method allowed for the actual viewing of various social media accounts during the interview, the authors were able to see that in fact, the latter was the case. In many instances, by looking across all platforms, the fuller picture of a person’s online identities emerged. However, as the ability to segment identities across platforms solves one set of tensions—the ability to present a polished persona on Instagram and express more varied emotions on a finsta—segmentation introduces different difficulties for teens to manage. Namely, audience responses and expectations.

Another feature of these “networked identities” is that as well as missing the full, nuanced, complicated, and crystallized presentation of identities across platforms, various publics are not seeing what others are *not* doing online—for instance, *not* engaging in cyberbullying, *not* posting the “authentic” picture to Instagram, *not* choosing to post political opinions. Neither are publics seeing what content and ideas people are intentionally keeping offline. Users make meaning of all the information others post to social media and are crafting specific impressions of people, but they are not (by nature of the platforms) engaging in microdiscursive meaning making of what people keep offline. Of course this is the case, because how could publics be privy to the private offline moments that make up most of people’s daily lives or the many decisions that go into what people consider doing online but don’t? And yet, users make choices about what not to post, and in other cases (as revealed by our findings) they take breaks and go offline for days, weeks, even months at a time. While these actions are somewhat accounted for in the macro discourses of “unplugging” and

taking time to “digitally detox,” they are not represented in micro and meso discourse. This is problematic, because as we know from previous research (Way & Malvini Redden, 2017) young people intentionally keep particularly meaningful things, like new romantic relationships, family matters or their own accomplishments, offline to avoid the sensemaking that may come with others’ comments. As scholars who consider online organizing and especially identities, we must also keep in mind the interplay between on and offline decision-making.

Conclusions, limitations and directions for future research

In this paper, we ask how communication fundamentally organizes relationships, identities, and time online. Our findings reveal the layered nature of micro, meso, and macro level discourses that result in contradictions for people to navigate across multiple social media platforms. We extend the contribution of organizational theory to online spaces, and our findings speak to how people organize themselves, manage respective audiences, and negotiate identities.

Although we spoke with a very diverse sample of participants in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, and socioeconomic levels, our sample reflects a mostly heterosexual and disproportionately female experience of social media. Future research should consider how the use of discursive resources differs among those with more varied sexual identities for whom imagined audiences might be very different depending on awareness and performance of sexual identity. Likewise, future research should consider more specifically the experiences of boys and men whose experiences are not well accounted for yet. Future research might also consider more specifically the experiences of those who take extended breaks from social media, or those who opt out altogether. Our participant pool of 55 revealed only one person who opted out of social media totally, but numerous people who enjoyed extended breaks or more limited experiences. It would be interesting to know what experiences inform opting out, and how those people manage related tensions. A longitudinal study might trace the ways that networked identities change over time relative to social media updates.

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