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Working-class wisdom: how relationality and responsibility shape working-class youth's meaning-making on social media

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ABSTRACT

Young people spend prodigious time online cultivating identities, relationships, and values, however, most research about young people's experiences online fails to consider how socioeconomic status shapes young people's engagement online. Drawing on communication theory about meaning-making, impression management, and trends toward presumption, we examine how social class, informs young peoples' engagement online. Interviews and focus groups with culturally and geographically diverse teens from working-class families reveal that working-class youth articulate their engagement online in terms of (1) rule following, (2) impression management to become intelligible to peers, (3) cultivating relationships, and (4) occasionally by intentionally keeping meaningful things offline. We argue that their energies reflect efforts at (1) controlling the meaning of posts and (2) relational work, evidencing a 'responsibility-orientation' to online engagement. Implications extend previous research identifying the importance of personal responsibility for working-class users online and consider how education systems and online platforms might better serve working-class youth.

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Teens spend an average of seven hours per day consuming media via screens, not including school or educational purposes, with a significant proportion devoted to social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat (Rideout & Robb, 2019). Some teens check social media more than 100 times per day (Hadad, 2015), with many describing concerted efforts to develop online content and personae for multiple and varied audiences (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). Teens craft identities, relationships, and as we will argue, meaning, online.

Considering the experiences of youth online from a communicative perspective is important as this newest generation – Generation Z or the iGeneration – is the first to be socialized in an era of smartphones and mature social media platforms (Schlossberg, 2016). These young people – the oldest of whom are currently graduating college – think about life (Williams, 2015), work (Kramer & Myers, 2014), and politics (Lynch & Hogan, 2016) differently than their generational predecessors, and participate online differently

as well. Consequently, scholars across disciplines are investigating facets of youth online experience, including their use of specific platforms (Bayer et al., 2016), how they navigate image management differently than older generations (Litt & Hargittai, 2016), how they organize time online (Malvini Redden & Way, 2019), and how they are positioned in adult accounts of online activities (Stern & Burke Odland, 2017). Lacking from this vibrant research, and communication scholarship broadly (Dougherty, 2011; Gist-Mackey, 2018), however, is serious consideration of factors that influence online experiences, in particular, social class (Marwick et al., 2017).

Social media research has been critiqued for focusing attention on the experiences of white and/or privileged users (Sims, 2014) such that some scholars argue there is a new type of ‘digital divide’ occurring. Rather than some youth having access to technology and others not, people of fewer socioeconomic means are being left behind in terms of social and material benefits associated with advanced technology (Dolan, 2016). Working-class youth access and are encouraged to use technology differently than more affluent youth (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Likewise, we will argue, youth of lower socioeconomic means experience and make meaning of online activities differently than more economically advantaged peers.

In this paper, we explore how teens, largely from working-class families and neighborhoods, make meaning of their time online and negotiate meaning through online interactions and impression management. We define meaning as the ‘personal, emotional significance’ (Pugh, 2009, p. 23) and value people place on their experiences in their world, which are shaped by social and cultural interactions. Like Weick (1995), we argue that people actively create meaning and interpret experiences in light of their identities, relationships, and environments. Investigating meaning-making is important because meaning shapes how people view and construct their worlds, and imagine what is possible, good, or useful (Frost & Morgan, 1983; Weick, 1995). Considering the vast amount of time young people spend online, it is important to understand how they conceive of that time, how it prepares them to participate in the world, and how it shapes existing social structures.

We begin by discussing literature related to teen online activity, meaning-making, recent trends toward prosumption online, as well as how social class structures online activities. Then we present findings from a series of interviews and focus groups with teens that highlight the meaning(s) they give to participation online. These findings are particularly relevant because they come from culturally diverse and primarily working-class participants. Specifically, we argue that social class structures teens’ experiences online, encouraging them to adopt a responsibility-oriented approach to online communication, prioritizing personal relationships rather than productivity. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications for communication scholars, and directions for future research.

Framing teen online activity in terms of meaning

How teens spend time online

True to their reputations, teens avidly use social media, with 95% of teens having access to a smartphone, and 45% reporting being online ‘almost constantly’ (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Teens use social media to stay connected with important others, alleviate boredom, explore their sexuality, and cultivate identity, among other things (Way &

Malvini Redden, 2017). In fact, social media platforms are primary contexts where young people organize individual identities and construct social discourses that structure their lives (Malvini Redden & Way, 2019).

Much of young peoples' time online consists of 'learn[ing] how to make meaning out of a situation, others' reactions, and what we are projecting of ourselves,' skills that are enhanced in online environments that 'force individuals to reevaluate the signals they take for granted' (boyd, 2008, p. 128). People make meaning of experiences when they, 'read into things the meanings they wish to see; they vest objects, utterances, actions ... with subjective meaning which helps make their world intelligible to themselves' (Frost & Morgan, 1983, p. 207), all features of social media interactions. Youth spend extensive time crafting identities and managing relationships online (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). However, interaction online involves 'networked publics' that complicate the task of impression management as online communication is persistent, searchable, and replicable (boyd, 2008). These features make online communication more complicated, requiring young people to constantly navigate audiences that include school-mates, friends, family, as well as potentially infinite others who might access their posts.

One important shift in how youth spend time online involves the prevalence of user-generated content, which has fueled prosumption – a combination of production and consumption. Retail and entertainment innovations have contributed to the trend of putting consumers to work, via self-checkouts, reality TV, and do-it-yourself check-in technology (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Online spaces introduce youth to prosumption at early ages, inviting them to consume content while participating in its production (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Responsible prosumption, scholars argue, generates ethical citizens who are 'aware of the value of the information that they are able to generate, and the power this values gives them' (García-Ruiz et al., 2014, p. 17).

Practically speaking, prosumer behaviors, including blogging and digital media production, are associated with social and professional success (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2015), and overcoming social inequities (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). By developing prosumer prowess, young people can access social and professional opportunities not otherwise available to them, and potentially level the social playing field through relatively affordable online activities. Additionally, though most teens fail to recognize the benefits of content creation until they have done it, prosumption allows youth to develop expertise, pride and self-worth, and outlets for reflection, emotional release, and growth (Stern, 2008). Moreover, user-generated content beyond typical social media accounts allows young people 'to present the kind of identity or self-image they feel they cannot present in other spaces' (Stern, 2008, p. 107). On social media, where parents and peers are frequent viewers, teens may avoid controversial or overly personal revelations. But blogs or websites, which must be sought out rather than stumbled upon, provide space to seek feedback and develop identity among relative strangers who may be more supportive (Stern, 2008).

Social class and the structure of online activity

It is inadequate, however, to paint a monolithic picture of what young people do online. Prior research has revealed developmental differences between children's and teens' activities online (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). While the proliferation of technology seems to be mediating the 'digital divide' that scholars argued distinguished those with greater access

to technology from those with less, recent work has mapped a detailed topography of digital skills and inequalities that vary among young people (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Marwick et al., 2017). Research examining such divides aims to understand the broader social and structural factors that shape online practices (Epstein et al., 2011).

Social class, for example, influences – more strongly than race or ethnicity sometimes – how young peoples’ lives are structured (Lareau, 2000). Individuals with low socioeconomic status (SES) engage in ‘materially bounded decision-making’ where uncertainty, urgency, complexity, and risk govern decisions (Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019). Additionally, poor and working-class youth are intimately familiar with external scrutiny governing their lives as a result of the highly supervised jobs they and their families overwhelmingly hold in service and manufacturing industries; their neighborhoods, which are more often under police surveillance; and their overwhelming representation in the criminal justice and welfare systems (Marwick et al., 2017). Perhaps because of this scrutiny, or because of longer work hours (Ames et al., 2011) and lack of resources for individualized childcare, working-class parents provide more unstructured time and less direct oversight of children’s activities, emphasizing safety in parenting decisions (Lareau, 2000). In contrast, middle-class children’s lives are more ‘cultivated’ with organized activities, less unstructured time, and a focus on performance that can lead to a frenetic individualistic approach to parenting (Lareau, 2000). These differences are mirrored in how young people’s time online is structured.

A stark contrast exists in the online activities of working-class youth and their more privileged peers (Dolan, 2016). Middle- and upper-class parents provide ample opportunities for children to access and own digital devices, but fear the dangers of unlimited time online, especially regarding impediments to future career success (Ames et al., 2011; Dolan, 2016). Consequently, affluent parents create more rules to limit screen time, instead providing structured online experiences such as classes and camps (Ames et al., 2011). As a result, ‘middle-class children take up more online opportunities than do working-class children’ (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007, p. 686).

At school, low SES students actually spend more time on computers, but ‘focused on drill and practice ... rather than on higher order thinking strategies or production of materials’ (Dolan, 2016, p. 26). Outside of school, working-class youth’s internet use depends upon their ability to negotiate access, either at home, or in public spaces where devices are frequently shared, and time and privacy may be limited (Yardi & Bruckman, 2012). Aware of the dangers of depriving children of opportunities for technological proficiency, ‘working-class parenting values more often focus on access to technology and the role it plays in family togetherness’ (Ames et al., 2011, p. 63). Though they may not be able to afford personal devices for all family members, working-class parents understand the status afforded by technology, and sometimes engage in ‘symbolic indulgence’ (Pugh, 2009) to provide opportunities like having a smart device available to avoid the stigma of cheaper pay-as-you-go options (Yardi & Bruckman, 2012). As working-class youth enter the workforce and can afford to purchase their own devices, parents then feel limited in how much they can control their children’s use of technology (Yardi & Bruckman, 2012).

However, while allowing children to access technology, working-class parents fear the risks of sharing personal information online, warning their children (Ames et al., 2011; Marwick et al., 2017), closely monitoring posts, and frequently requiring children to

share passwords or provide access to accounts (Yardi & Bruckman, 2012). While more affluent parents also warn of these risks, supervision is minimal and/or sporadic (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). Guided by their experiences living under surveillance, working-class individuals articulate discourses of being careful, having nothing to hide, and avoiding revealing sensitive or private information consistent with a need for ‘protecting their privacy and sense of self-worth in the face of institutional intrusion’ (Marwick et al., 2017, p. 2). As a result, ‘while popular rhetoric [frames] young users [as] savvy with digital media ... students of lower socioeconomic status ... exhibit lower levels of Web know-how than others’ (Hargittai, 2010, p. 108). Still, more research is needed to understand the implications of social class in young people’s participation online.

Varying financial resources obviously result in different consumption activities. However, communication scholars argue that social class is more complicated than material conditions, income, occupation, or education. Rather, social class is ‘the silent force between the cracks ... that constitutes the mortar of the class system’ (Conley, 2008, p. 371). In looking beyond consumption patterns of wealthy and poor parents, Pugh (2009) uncovered the symbolic interpretations that guided parents’ buying decisions. While affluent parents practice ‘symbolic deprivation’ by refusing to buy select items for their children to communicate their own restraint and disagreement with certain types of consumption, low-income parents sometimes engaged in strategic purchasing of higher ticket items (that require long-term budgeting) as a way of demonstrating ‘symbolic indulgence’ (Pugh, 2009). The strategic decision to purchase items that provide the most ‘bang for the buck,’ enables poor children to participate and belong among their peers. Differences in how we communicate the meaning of material practices, such as the symbolic indulgence/deprivation identified by Pugh, constitute social class and the struggle ‘to be respected, to be revered, to have access to resources, to live well’ (Dougherty, 2011, p. 73).

Research questions

Building on this conceptualization of social class as constituted through communication, we consider how primarily working-class youth describe their online activities and meaningful uses of the internet. In the context of contemporary capitalism where productivity and self-discipline function as primary sources of identity and meaning (Way, 2019), and discourses of prosumption frame privileged uses of the internet (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), some young people seem conflicted about how they spend their time online. For instance, teens demonstrate chagrin and self-derision about frivolous online practices of ‘liking’ (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017) and acting foolish to gain followers (Humphreys et al., 2013). Yet, it is unclear how working-class youth make meaning of online activities or what social media practices they consider important. We explore these curiosities by asking the following research question: How do working-class youth describe and make meaning of their online engagement?

Methods

To explore how teens make meaning online, we employed an iterative qualitative approach (Tracy, 2019), engaging in a two-phased process of data collection including

in-depth interviews and subsequent focus groups. As discussed below, the interviews were wide-ranging topically to help us understand how teens prioritize their time online. During initial analyses, when meaning and ‘good’ uses of social media emerged as important, we convened focus groups to explore the topic of meaning-making more carefully.

Interview and focus group participants

Fifteen teens participated in initial one-on-one interviews and ten teens participated in focus groups, each choosing a pseudonym. Participants, 15 girls and 10 boys ages 12 to 19, represented a range of ethnic and family backgrounds, hailing from urban and rural communities in the northeast and western United States, and were primarily from working-class families (see Table 1 for demographics). Most individual interviewees were recruited from an independent after school program. All participants reported having regular online access via personal smart devices, and in some cases, family or public computers. Online access ranged from uninterrupted to intermittent because of limited data plans and sometimes, parental discipline resulting in lost phone privileges. All but one participant reported checking social media daily for multiple hours.

Data collection

Our first phase of data collection involved 15 one-on-one interviews with eight boys and seven girls, ages 12–17, ranging from 18 to 71 minutes, averaging 40 minutes. With permission from participants and their parents, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews began with a grand tour question asking teens to describe their typical online activities and led into more specific topics, including gender, normative expectations, and how to be successful online. Participants reflected on what they hope to communicate about themselves online and answered questions like: ‘Who is your audience online?’ ‘How do you decide what to share online?’ and ‘How do you react to things you disagree with online?’

After analyzing the interviews, we convened three focus groups to dive deeper into more specific topics that had traction in the interviews. Focus group participants were recruited from Shawna’s personal social network and university community. Participants

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Self-described ethnicity	Language(s) spoken at home	Type of school	Parent/guardian employment
9 African American or Black	20 English	18 Public	Teaching, carpentry, sales
1 Asian/White	1 English/Arabic	5 Charter	Nursing, manufacturing
1 Black/Dominican/Puerto Rican	1 English/Hmong	2 Private	Bus driving, pizza shop, cook
3 Hispanic	2 English/Spanish		After-school programing
1 Hmong	1 Spanish		Landscaping, golf course
1 Latino			Electric company, marketing
1 Mexican			Housekeeping, restoration
1 Multiracial			Sports industry, trucking
5 White			Accounting, IT consulting

Note: We include parent/guardian employment as an indication of possible socioeconomic status.

included two boys and eight girls, ages 16–19. Focus groups each lasted approximately an hour, not including introductions and refreshments.

Focus groups are useful to see what resonates among participants (Lederman, 2004). Our focus groups explored the topic of meaning in depth, and corroborated findings from the interviews. We asked teens to define what they found meaningful or good about online activities, and how they value their time online, describing the term meaningful in common parlance, as something ‘full of meaning, significance, purpose, or value’ (Dictionary.com, n.d.). While we asked many of the same questions as in the interviews, we also explored how teens defined meaningful participation and pursued meaning online. For instance, we asked about good reasons for using social media, to which a common answer was ‘to relieve stress’ or ‘because I’m bored.’ We then probed if teens thought those activities were meaningful or useful. This questioning enabled teens to reflect and sometimes reframe activities, as we demonstrate in the findings and discussion. This iterative process helped us increase the trustworthiness of our findings (Tracy, 2019) and identify areas of interest to teens, not just adults, in keeping with recommendations for research with teens to be more youth-inclusive (Way & Malvini Redden, 2017).

Analysis

Data analysis involved a multi-step process that began after our initial 15 interviews were complete. We each listened to audio files separately, writing analytic memos to get a sense of the data. After data immersion (Tracy, 2019), we discussed initial impressions. In this phase, we identified concepts such as sensemaking, impression management, gender, and typical behavior as topics for follow up, using a process of consensus coding to ensure reliable interpretations (Harry et al., 2005). Consensus coding involved coding a subsection of data separately, meeting to discuss interpretations and refine codes if necessary, before splitting up the data to code separately. We met regularly to discuss interpretations throughout the coding process and used these findings to inform our focus group questions.

The second phase of analysis began after focus groups were completed. Individually, we reread interview transcripts and listened to audio recordings, this time with a specific focus on meaning and how young people frame their time online. We then coded the focus group transcripts and re-coded the interviews, looking for instances where participants discussed meaningful and meaningless experiences online, and in the focus groups in particular, how teens challenged and sometimes also described resonating with other participants’ experiences. Finally, from our coding, we identified important patterns in the data and crafted second-level, analytic codes that enabled us to move from simply describing meaningful activities to synthesizing themes into theoretical concepts (Tracy, 2019), which were informed by our immersion in the literature about how social class shapes communication.

We engaged in several strategies known to increase quality in qualitative research, including prolonged engagement (Creswell, 2007), crystallization, and member checking (Tracy, 2010). Specifically, both researchers have spent years in this research context and have prioritized the perspectives and experiences of participants, rather than solely researcher priorities. Likewise, we employed multiple methods, theories, and sources

of evidence to create arguments, including in this study, interviews that corroborate themes from previous studies, and focus groups that build upon interviews. Throughout, we engaged in member-checking, asking participants to reflect how our topics, initial interpretations, and directions of research resonated with them, and if they had any suggestions.

How working-class youth engage in communication online

In the findings below, we articulate four major aspects of how working-class youth communicate online: with an emphasis on rule following, through strategic impression management to become intelligible to peers, in cultivating relationships, and sometimes by intentionally keeping meaningful things offline.

Rule following/right answers

In our conversations about online activities, teens frequently articulated the ‘right’ answers – seemingly rehearsed, typically adult-friendly lines about what not to do online, such as not sending ‘inappropriate’ material, e.g. nude pictures, profanity, or home addresses. Early in our data collection, Osh, 13, explained, ‘School really isn’t the place to get on your phone unless you got permission ... if you wouldn’t do that in front of your parents you shouldn’t do that while you’re in school.’ Participants repeated warnings of not posting anything online that would not be appropriate for the entire world. Several said if they were not comfortable with a family member seeing a post, it was not appropriate to be online. Nae, 17, said, ‘I think like a grown-up, so when I think about stuff, I ask myself, ‘what would my grandma do?’ ‘Cause if my grandma not gonna post it, I’m not gonna post it.’ Teens described being acutely aware of how perceptions of their online activity are informed by others’ reactions. At times, these refrains came so frequently and easily, they seemed rehearsed – as if youth were repeating provisos from school trainings without reflection or critical thought.

These young people knew there were right and wrong behaviors online, and acting inappropriately could result in undesirable consequences. Twelve-year-old Bob illustrated this focus on consequences when he half-stated, half-asked, ‘It’s a crime for putting inappropriate things on the internet. It’s called sexting, right?’ Likewise, Jackie, 17, described sometimes being afraid to go online in case she was associated with *other* people’s inappropriate behavior. For instance, she discussed wanting to go online with her friend and check out a school acquaintance’s Facebook posts:

I was like ‘nah, let’s not do it’ cause you know, a lot of stuff might pop up ... it’s hard because you might be friends with that person and it could pop up on your newsfeed, and the cops might be looking on your page ... and then you could get in trouble yourself.

Peppered throughout interviewees’ talk were references to consequences – some plausible like upsetting relatives, and some largely fear-based like being arrested for someone else’s online posts.

The focus on compliance and consequences as guiding features of participation online is reflective of the educational systems that working-class students often experience. Rather than emphasizing development and critical thinking, for instance, lessons

position teachers as peacekeepers and teach students to follow rules. Haberman (1991) explains that this 'pedagogy of poverty' is one where teachers 'direct students to work on particular tasks, allot time, dispense materials, and choose the means of evaluation,' (p. 84) and students' compliance or resistance is the measure of who is a good student or not. Thus, children in low-income communities learn first and foremost the importance of following rules, a value reflected in their talk about their time online. As noted, this is also reflected in how low-income students are trained in rudimentary computer skills rather than content-creation or critical thinking (Dolan, 2016).

Participants in our early interviews touted their knowledge of and adherence to rules. Even when asked direct questions about good uses of time online or what good online citizenship looks like, youth tended to define activities in the negative, such as avoiding bad behaviors. Bob quickly reasoned, 'If you do things online, that's permanent. 'Cause then when you get a job they'll check your Facebook and stuff like that. Then they'll see what you did and [won't] want you to work there.' Many rules included not jeopardizing future prospects for employment or college. Even when asked if they might create websites or blogs to support their passions, interviewees did not seem interested or equipped to do so.

Among the negative behaviors participants cautioned against were fights and arguments, promoting gossip and negativity, and cyberbullying. Jackie shared numerous examples of social media engendering conflicts: interpersonally when she shared an unflattering picture of a friend, via anonymous bullying when an unknown schoolmate captioned a picture of her singing in the school chorus with 'listen to that ape sing,' to organizationally, when she discussed how a school riot was planned over Facebook. Osh, 13, said she unfollows people when they post 'nasty stuff' like risqué photos, and Melia, 14, said she limits her online time thanks to boys 'disrespecting' and 'trying to expose females.' Several teens discussed how negativity shapes their actions on social media. For instance, Jackie said she selectively adds people to Facebook who don't 'mess with my emotions so much' after experiencing 'drama' on the platform, while Bob stated he avoids Instagram because 'I don't like when people ... talk like about people, like rate them from 1 to 10 and stuff.' John, 17, said he used an online video to help prove the innocence of a friend who was accused of punching a girl during a fight at school. He was, in fact, helping break up the fight.

The numerous references from participants to fights or aggression contrasted starkly from our previous research with middle-class youth where online 'fights' were merely mean words. Teens we spoke with during this project spoke of aggression online that could easily transfer offline into physical altercations, and their desire to avoid violence. For instance, when asked if she had ever been bullied or attacked online, Osh replied 'No.' Laughing, she said, 'Cause they know not to mess with me.' When asked how people knew, she continued, 'Cause, like, I WILL FIGHT ... We gonna fight ... You gonna have a problem.' Similarly, Melia discussed how she was arguing online with a girl about the girl's boyfriend. 'It was somethin' stupid and she wanted to fight me. So we met up.' Melia matter-of-factly described how both families showed up: 'My mom was tryin' to talk to her, and that's when I turned around ... and she hit me!' Melia described the fight as a matter of course, without awareness that physical violence on account of 12-year-old girls' jealousy is not typical, at least not in middle- or upper-class social norms. While violence wasn't a primary theme in our data, this exemplar shows the high stakes

of social media participation for some working-class youth. More commonly illustrated was the underlying desire to actively and directly protect reputation.

Social class is 'physically unmarked' and can be difficult to pinpoint, 'we often fail to recognize the communicative marking of social class' (Dougherty, 2011, p. 83). But when examined closely, there are distinct differences in working-class and middle-class communication. Working-class people communicate in more direct ways, without concern for sparing feelings or acquiescing to norms of politeness, 'You speak your mind, directly challenging authority' (Lubrano, 2004, p. 130). In our data, challenging authority sometimes transcended virtual spaces to enter into the physical world, and involved the authority figures (e.g. parents/adults) who, according to middle-class norms, would rein in teenage aggression. In a world shaped by middle-class and white-collar values where 'everything is outwardly calm and quiet ... reserved, unemotional and ... never show [ing] anger,' working-class kids 'have to think of themselves as angular shapes trying to fit into spherical holes' (Lubrano, 2004, p. 130). As a result, working-class teens often negotiate complex identity work online.

Becoming intelligible to others

When pressed for examples of the content they post online (rather than behaviors they avoid), teens painted a vivid, varied picture, largely focused on efforts to communicate identity. Our conversations burst with examples of teens using social media to keep in touch with friends and family, show a 'good life,' demonstrate humor, share hobbies, display maturity, enhance school work, and stay entertained – essentially curating a story about themselves and their intimate others. Osh described using social apps to practice her Muslim faith. David, 13, was one of the few content creators who discussed using his Youtube channel for sharing activities from school and hobbies: 'Like, if we're creating like our own um, rap. So I would put that on there.' Papasote, 17, described using social media to share his interest in fashion; Dee, 16, her passion for anime; and JC, 17, his photography. These uses resonate with past research that shows how teens harness social media to display identity and cultivate interests among social groups (Ahn, 2012).

Much of the way participants described online activities as having meaning seemed to be rooted in the idea of social media as a space of competition or validation. Participants talked about followership and attention from others as a limited or finite resource they wanted to capture. For example, Nae portrayed social media as a contest:

They'll ask me 'How many followers do you have?' And I'll say, 'Like right now, I am low.' I had to make a new [account] because I forgot my password to it. So, I have 100 followers now. And it was like 'Haha you [have no] followers.' It's like, if you don't have 1,000 followers, you not poppin'.

Likewise, Osh said she would regret if she ever had to delete her account, explaining, 'Cause I work hard for those followers!' Having thousands of followers does not ensure meaningful online interaction, but meaning is certainly made of the size of one's following.

At its most basic level, the procurement of followers is an important part of participation in the social life of young people, allowing them to be socially intelligible to their peers.

Pugh (2009) refers to an ‘economy of dignity’ where ‘children collect or confer dignity among themselves, according to their (shifting) consensus about what sort of objects or experiences are supposed to count for it’ (p. 7). More than a vain attempt at garnering attention, having a certain number of followers or ‘likes’ on a post renders young people ‘visible to their peers, and granted the aural space, the very right to speak in their own community’s conversation’ (p. 7). For working-class children who may not be able to rely on consumption as a way of making themselves intelligible online, followers or responses become that much more important in granting them belonging.

Beyond worry over ‘likes’ and followers, participants also voiced concern for managing the impressions others have of them online. Participants seemed especially attuned to how particular posts might shape perceptions of them. Despite their own recognition that they have little control over others’ thoughts, teens frequently discussed actively working to craft thoughtful representations of themselves online. Maddie, 17, admitted she avoids posting content that might lead to stereotypes, saying ‘I don’t like people having opinions of me like that.’ Sam, 13, said she worries about being stereotyped related to gender. She expressed frustration at girls who she thought posted frivolous or attention-seeking content, lamenting, ‘It reflects on all of us! ‘Cause, [boys] be like, ‘Well if these girls over here do that, then why don’t you?’ ‘Cause I’m not like the rest of the girls!’ Likewise, JC described consternation with how much meaning is read into young people’s posts, saying: ‘I’m just a teenage boy. I’m not nice, I’m not mean, I’m just myself.’ He continued, ‘I just want people to know me for me ... I’m not always nice, like I have my moments of like being petty ... I just want to be myself.’

Pugh (2009) explains that ‘children’s lives can traverse several different economies of dignity – at school, at their after-school program, and in the neighborhood, for example – where different tokens can become salient in the peer culture resident there’ (p. 7). Thus, there are many measures of how children might experience belonging. For our participants, dispelling common stereotypes about what young people do online and rejecting some of the more harmful trends about gender stereotypes and conformity, acted as especially salient economies of dignity.

Cultivating relationships

While for many teens, time online provides an opportunity to build a personal brand or develop skills that bolster their image and fitness for future professional opportunities (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017, 2019), participants in this project did not speak of such self-focused pursuits. Instead, using social media to cultivate relationships featured highly in teens’ discussion. JC shared how social media helped him get to know romantic candidates in advance of dates, and also shape friends’ opinions for the better: ‘My friends ... are also really like closed-minded sometimes, with like homosexual, like people ... And I’m like ‘just let them be, they’re people ...’ [By posting online] I actually change a lot of their minds.’

Many examples involved providing social support for others. For instance, Jona, 19, explained how checking a friend’s social media enabled her to see if her friend was okay and offer support. Maddie discussed how social media acted as a ‘lifeline’ for friends who could be ‘out’ about their sexuality online, while not to their parents and important others offline. Likewise, Jackie described being ‘family oriented’ with social

media, keeping in touch with her mom, sisters, and aunties on Facebook, even though they live together or very nearby.

The cultivation of relationships offers important resources for poor and working-class people, as ‘social support networks provide a type of protection for individuals experiencing stressful economic uncertainty’ (Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019, p. 2). In addition to bolstering individual wellbeing, social support is a source of social capital that can build on itself, actually changing the trajectory of materially bounded decision-making. Thus, for low SES individuals who understand the importance of social support systems, online spaces function as critical sites for developing relationships and networks.

Participant responses revealed that young people understand the importance of relational work online and recognize the value of interacting with others’ posts. Osh described a time when she realized a follower liked nearly all of her pictures on Instagram. That day she decided, ‘I’m gonna like her pictures. ‘Cause I felt bad, ‘cause she always like all my pictures and I never like her pictures.’ Understood as a common courtesy online, reciprocity is more often a demonstration of relational status, than affinity toward a post. Similarly, Jona described reacting to friends’ posts, saying ‘I either like it or retweet it or send it to somebody. I try to like make it meaningful in some way.’ Though young people willingly admit there is nothing particularly meaningful about a ‘like’ or comment, symbolically it represents the validation of a relationship or choices about self-representation. This sense of community, care, and norms of reciprocity are valued in working-class communities where meaningfulness often comes from being involved in helping others realize their own goals and dreams (Way, 2019). Validating someone’s post with attention makes them socially intelligible to others, creating space for their participation in the economy of dignity online (Pugh, 2009).

Tradeoffs of being online and disconnecting

Though teens quickly admitted to spending endless hours on social media, many characterized most of that time as wasted. ‘It pulls you in’ were Nae’s first words during her interview. Later, in a focus group, Roberta echoed this sentiment, saying, ‘It sucks in people a lot.’ Many teens, like JC, described the same experience: ‘Social media took over our lives ... it’s like crazy now. It’s like we need it, we don’t need it but we think we need it. So we like get into the habit of going on it and making a repeated cycle.’

Youth noted how a quick glance at social media could turn into wasted hours online. Clyde, 17, described how easy it is to look in on an old friend and before she knows it, ‘like an hour later, I’m still doing this.’ Anne, 16, mentioned getting lost in celebrity profiles before realizing ‘What am I doing? I’m like two years back in their history.’ Melia described killing time online: ‘Sometimes I might be bored doing my homework. So it’s like I will go check on Facebook, and I will say I will only be on for two minutes and I end up being on there for ten minutes.’ Similarly, Dee, 16, worries about, ‘people being on their phone like forever and stuff. Like especially, little kids. I just feel like they’re just missing out on everything.’ Teens demonstrated an awareness that while some of their online time was ‘good’ and ‘useful,’ much was a ‘waste.’ For instance, Nae said ‘I zoom in and I forget ... how long I be on there.’

Most described how this easy slide into mindless scrolling comes at the expense of more important activities like school or sleep. Jona explained, ‘I’m like dang, I just

wasted all of that time' (laughs) ... that's why I have to stay up so late [to finish homework] ... because I'm on social media and I wish I wouldn't have done that.' When asked how often she feels that type of regret, Jona remarked, 'Umm. Almost every day.' David echoed this sentiment, 'I'm in 8th grade and I need um go to high school, like I need to get good grades. So I shouldn't be worrying about anything but my school work.' JC concurred, admitting, 'I could be doing something else more productive ... You just keep going on it ... and it is like "Why am I on here?"'

Existing research demonstrates how poor people think about their limited resources. For instance, 'Money that is spent on one good is the loss of another good that could have been purchased instead' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 298). To heighten the stakes of their decision-making, 'Unsuccessful [financial] decisions can lead to more pronounced negative outcomes' (Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019, p. 2). For young people for whom 'costs are losses' (Kahneman, 2011, p. 298), time is another resource that represents a choice between losses. Time spent on one activity is experienced as a loss of time on another. If time is not well spent, the implications of 'wasted time' can be compounded in other areas of life. Amid the responsibilities of school, work, or caring for families, being online is not a productive use of time, but a threat to more valuable activities. Likewise, the ability to cede control of time to social media by getting 'sucked in' is facilitated by other aspects of social class, like absence of parental oversight or limited screen time (Ames et al., 2011).

Teens discussed that one way to make time online more meaningful is counterintuitively, to limit time online. Felicia, 16, said she doesn't believe social media was designed to be useful and if she really wanted to spend time meaningfully, she would spend less time online: 'Sometimes when I lose track of time on social media, I wish I would have stopped and done something else.' Roberta, 16, followed up, 'Yeah, more toward less, just using it less.' When asked how they might change social media, Hannah suggested 'limit myself for how much I go on' while Clyde said, 'I don't need a magic wand ... [limiting myself] is just me being me,' suggesting the power to change was completely within her control.

While many spoke about limiting time online, we were surprised at moments where participants articulated that if something is truly meaningful, the best course of action is to keep the information offline. Osh explained, 'When you are in a relationship ... you probably wanna keep it low. Not because you are embarrassed ... because people will try to interfere.' Similarly, Jona regretted talking about a past relationship online and would probably not be so forthcoming in the future:

I would post ... stuff about my boyfriend ... and someone would like try to tell me lies and stuff, and it would just like ruin the relationship ... So I was like ok, I'm not going to be posting all about that person. It's just going to be, like, between us.

Several participants concurred that truly important or meaningful things are better kept offline. JC warned, 'don't show yourself off too much' because even friends will try and 'destroy' the good things you have.

Teens also suggested that some information should be kept offline to protect reputations and privacy. David, 13, said, 'If my family is broke or something and they gettin' help from somebody else. I wouldn't want my friends to see that. 'Cause you never know they might say something about it on other um websites.' For Nae, the same logic can be used for resolving a conflict, 'If you try to do it online, people gonna try

to impress their friends ... If you call them offline, they are gonna wanna talk.' From our discussions, it seems that offline spaces and experiences can be seen as more meaningful than online, and keeping information offline is a way of protecting something meaningful.

Implications of a working-class lens for understanding engagement online

Our study is set in the context of contemporary capitalism, with many meaningful uses of the internet and social media framed by scholars and social discourses in terms of productivity – whether presumptive content creation, image-building self-promotion and networking, and identity development through interactions with a broad online community. However, many conversations about online activities for youth, in particular, do not account for the experiences of those from lower socioeconomic positions. Consequently, one significant contribution of this study is to demonstrate how social class shapes young peoples' communication online, and helping grow the small body of research that addresses social class in relation to online activities (e.g. Marwick et al., 2017).

Youth in our study described vibrant online lives where they showcased features of their identities – hobbies, preferences, personal qualities – in much the same ways as more affluent youth (e.g. boyd, 2008; Malvini Redden & Way, 2019). They likewise emphasized the importance of engaging with followers online and participating in social conventions like 'liking' others' posts. However, our findings also reveal distinct and important differences including how working-class youth's online activities are characterized by an emphasis on rule following and avoiding trouble, becoming intelligible to others, cultivating relationships, and protecting meaningful information by keeping it offline.

In the following theoretical implications, we argue that these priorities for meaningful time online showcase that working-class youth emphasize a responsibility-oriented approach to online communication that extends beyond personal responsibility. Finally, we offer practical implications with a focus on social structures that might be shifted to accommodate the communication needs and preferences of working-class youth.

Broadening the scope of a responsibility orientation

Our conversations with working-class youth about their communication online revealed an overarching concern for control over messages rather than more creative communicative pursuits. When teens described making posts meaningful, their energies reflected efforts at (1) controlling the meaning of posts via impression management and (2) relational work. In some ways, these findings mirror Marwick et al.'s (2017) claims about the discourses of personal responsibility that frame emerging adults' engagement online. However, in addition to revealing that working-class youth articulate discourses of responsibility starting in their early tween/teen years, our findings extend the scope of a 'responsibility-orientation' to more than just personal responsibility. In addition to explicit concerns over safety and reputation, participants articulated the importance of social media as a way to care for important others, and build stronger connections. They

cautioned against posting content that might bring negative attention to families or communities, and articulated the importance of making friends' and family's posts meaningful through liking, commenting, or sharing. This approach demonstrates a norm of responsibility extending beyond the self to a relational responsibility that recognizes the interconnectedness of one's individual story and achievement as the result of community efforts (Way, 2019).

This responsibility-orientation, which our analysis illustrates is constitutive of social class, generates complex theoretical implications. On one hand, a responsibility-oriented approach can strengthen social ties and build local networks of social support that act as resources during times of stress (Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019). Likewise, seeing online communication in terms of responsibility can offer physical protections as well, as many teens mentioned 'avoiding negativity' as a priority for online activity, not only for relational and personal harmony, but for literal safety and to avoid violence. At the same time though, by not conforming to middle-class values and behaviors online, working-class children actually participate in a process of online engagement that reinforces class differences. By not taking an opportunity-oriented approach to their online communication – outwardly focusing their promotional efforts – poor and working-class youth do not participate in online activities in ways that allow them to 'be seen' by middle-class systems of hiring or networking that lead to opportunities that middle-class youth rely on.

To add more complexity, consider participants' insistence that their most personal or valued revelations be kept offline. This desire to protect important or particularly personal information makes sense in the context of increased scrutiny faced by poor and working-class communities, and is representative of a responsibility-oriented approach to communication online. Keeping the most important matters offline is a way of protecting and keeping them meaningful. For youth who understand choices about how to spend time as a tradeoff between losses (Kahneman, 2011), it makes sense not to risk ceding control that comes with exposing something to increased scrutiny online. The choice to avoid participating online, especially with their most meaningful content, however, complicates Pugh's (2009) findings regarding the efforts of working-class families to risk (financial) safety to ensure belonging for their children. Our findings suggest that for some children who are bestowed 'symbolic indulgences,' the opportunity for belonging may not be worth risking personal or familial values for symbolic economies of dignity.

That said, a responsibility orientation is also a resistant orientation – one that pushes against capitalistic incarnations of social media that nearly require self-branding and entrepreneurialism. In some ways, youth are using social media as it was originally conceived, as a means for social relationships rather than connective capacity for networking (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). This finding is especially conspicuous when considering that adults – researchers, educators, and parents alike – have lauded the benefits of online content creation and digital skills like creating videos and websites. But the reality is that *most* youth, regardless of social class, report that they prefer to consume rather than create online content. In a recent large-scale, nationally representative survey of youth media use, a mere fraction of the 1677 teens surveyed described enjoying creating content like art (9% of teens), music (5% of teens), or coding (3% of teens) (Rideout & Robb, 2019).

When specifically asked about producing content – crafting blogs, websites, and videos, rather than the typical comments, photos, stories – with few exceptions, participants in our study seemed disinterested. Whereas Papasote described potentially creating a website if he got into a fashion career, and Osh said she thought about making a Youtube channel to share her singing, the majority of participants described no interest in producing content. While teens considered using social media to showcase talents and experiences relevant to career aspirations, most discussed doing so for relational or affirmation purposes, shunning self-commodification. When asked if he would ever create his own content online, Bob rejected the idea saying, ‘I think if you make a blog, it’s a lot of responsibility.’ This finding directly ties to our practical implications about how adults frame online activities for young people.

Practical implications

We continuously marveled at how our participants seemed to have the ‘right’ answers, easily reciting common risks online and how to avoid them. But we can’t help wonder how their strict adherence to rules makes them less inclined to ‘break’ them or think about the internet in revolutionary ways. Just as Haberman (1991) argues for education in poor and working-class communities to change from discipline to problem-solving and critical thinking, there are infinite opportunities for working-class youth to make time online meaningful, including: aiding schoolwork, learning from others, and designing spaces and communities they would like to see. Self-generated content might serve as an opportunity for learning through trial and error.

Still, perhaps the more radical move is for scholars and practitioners to recognize the value in working-class youth’s responsibility-orientation. A responsibility-orientation emphasizes self-preservation and arguably fosters a healthy moderation of online activity. Likewise, it encourages discretion among youth and discernment in knowing when to shift meaningful things to offline contexts. In fact, this skillset illustrates youthful wisdom and should be more readily appreciated by adults.

Another practical implication relates to how adults shape meaning about online activity for teens – or attempt to, anyway. Teens suggested, with few exceptions, that advice from others is not particularly meaningful. Hannah said, ‘I think you have to learn it for yourself. Even if we do give advice, they’re [younger teens] just going to ignore us.’ This resonates with past research that shows how teens make sophisticated decisions about managing dialectical tensions within their online experiences better via experience than example (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017). However, it puts communication scholars and adults hoping to influence teen online decision-making in a quandary, especially when teens vigorously concurred with Maddy who said ‘No one really listens to parents’ advice for social media. If you mess up and start drama, you’re going to learn from it and not do it again.’ Additionally, the ability to learn from others is a privilege that working-class children may not have. There may not be adults (or older children) in their lives who are any more experienced online or better positioned to give advice. But, as our participants wisely stated, there are benefits to learning lessons independently such as building a work ethic, fostering growth, and not relying on others to be successful. In the same way that working-class youth engage in unsupervised play with neighborhood children, developing a type of survival

skill set (Lareau, 2000), working-class youth may be more adept at solving problems, finding resources, and learning experientially online.

Rather than warning youth about the inherent risks in communicating online, parents, educators, and mentors should provide experiences that shepherd young people through online activities as a way of understanding their local and global world. For schools and community programs, policies and practices should not just prioritize surveillance and using social media as a way to scrutinize young people, but rather policy/programming should be designed as a resource for solving problems. Online spaces might become an opportunity for young people to move beyond concerns of the self to concerns of the world, and create a positive legacy, rather than fearing a negative one.

It is perhaps easy to think of suggestions for how working-class youth should have better opportunities online to build their technological capital or to engage in prosumption, but only if these opportunities preserve and celebrate the contributions of working-class youth. Working-class ways of life are too often marginalized. Instead of assuming middle-class norms of engagement as the ideal way to participate online and ‘pointing to the inadequacy of working-class talk’ (Dougherty, 2011, p. 84), encouraging working-class youth’s prosumption might instead privilege their experiences, values, skills, and creativity in online communities.

Poor and working-class youth spend time developing interpersonal relationships in ways that provide support in accomplishing their goals (Way, 2019) and act as a resource in times of trouble (Gist-Mackey & Guy, 2019). Social media platforms might then be better structured to mirror this way of valuing relationship-building by focusing on the strength rather than number of connections online. Additionally, instead of marketplaces on social media—like Facebooks’ Marketplace where people advertise and locate items to buy and sell – platforms could be developed to encourage local support and resource sharing. Perhaps people could turn to social media to find family members or friends nearby who can help with childcare or a place to stay or borrowing a car, etc. This might also work for educational forms of engagement online, where platforms could be developed to encourage students to help one another with assignments or homework.

Continuing communication research with working-class youth online

Our research shows how a social class lens provides an important perspective to better theorize the ways young people engage online. Meaningfulness for working-class youth online is characterized by values of responsibility and reciprocity. We must examine how online contexts shape discourses of meaningfulness and who has access to such experiences, as well as how material conditions of engagement inform and influence how practices become meaningful. We strongly encourage future research to incorporate observational methods where researchers shadow young people as they spend time online, rather than relying on reflections about online life. It would be interesting to note how youth talk about meaning online in the context of their actual practices. Future research might also consider how technology programs provide opportunities for youth in traditionally minoritized communities such as gaining important skills in STEM fields.

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