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'Adults don't understand': exploring how teens use dialectical frameworks to navigate webs of tensions in online life

Shawna Malvini Redden^a and Amy K. Way^b

^aDepartment of Communication Studies, California State University, Sacramento, CA, USA; ^bDepartment of Communication, Villanova University, Villanova, PA, USA

ABSTRACT

As communication increasingly takes place online and via mobile technologies, young people are the fastest growing adopters of new online platforms. Consequently, communication scholars have begun to consider young people's experiences online, comparing online and offline interactions, establishing how developmental stages affect youth's engagement with online content, and documenting risks for youth's experience online. We argue that much can be gained from a 'tension-centered' approach that highlights the competing demands of young people's online engagement and problematizes current conceptions of risk. Through focus group interviews with teens, we examine current trends of online activity and re-conceptualize opportunities for conducting research with youth. Teens' 'local logics' for negotiation webs of communicative tensions online reveal articulation of formal rules, which are later eclipsed by lived experiences. We offer strategies for parents, caregivers, and educators to more productively engage with youth about their online experiences, as well as implications for communication researchers.

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Young people are the fastest growing adopters of new online platforms, with nearly a quarter of teens reporting being online 'almost constantly' (Lenhart, 2015). Across disciplines, scholars are investigating young people's experiences online, including topics and modes of Internet access (Blackwell, Lauricella, Conway, & Wartella, 2014), amount of and reasons for activity online (Lauricella, Cingel, Blackwell, Wartella, & Conway, 2014), and potential perils, such as cyberbullying, (Roberto & Eden, 2010). However, we argue that communication scholars have an opportunity to offer more nuanced perspectives about how social media and online technologies organize youth and shape their behaviors, desires, relationships, and identities.

Frequently, research on new media positions youth as 'a special object of study, as a homogenous category, rendering them marginalized within "general" discussions of the internet' (Livingstone, 2003, p. 148), an approach characteristic of broader communication research. While online spaces may pose risks for young people, they offer vital outlets for identity development. Through online interactions, youth willingly engage in

experiences ‘that cross over the protective boundaries in order to escape from the common and usual contexts in which they live’ (Răcățău, 2013, p. 16). Yet, while some studies recognize benefits of youth online activity – or at least acknowledge potential benefits (Livingstone, 2003) – they are far outnumbered by studies documenting risks.

We join scholars across disciplines to argue that youths’ online experience can be more fruitfully understood by putting risk and opportunity into conversation (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011; Selwyn, 2009). Thus, we take a tension-centered approach that highlights the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of youth’s online engagement. Critically, we move toward understanding the risks and rewards of online activity from youth points of view, which often differ from adults supervising online activity and researchers investigating it (boyd, 2012). This frame enables us to see how competing expectations influence youth’s choices in an increasingly connected world – in ways not always intuitive to adults. Privileging youth perspectives moves us away from reactive and fear-based portrayals of youth behaviors online – those that often alienate and infuriate youth – to positive implications of online engagement.

We present findings from a series of teen focus groups that demonstrate how youth navigate tensions related to their online lives. We discuss implications for theory and practice that foreground teen agency while offering researchers, parents/guardians, and educators suggestions to engage youth, cultivate conversations about sustainable online activity, and shift public discourse. We begin by arguing for a tension-centered approach before discussing how youth online activity is currently represented in scholarship.

Reflecting on the study of youth online

Youth online literacy is an ongoing, emergent process of understanding tradeoffs between opportunity and risk, with age and experience providing opportunities to gain skills managing risks associated with online activity (Livingstone, 2014). We advocate using a tension-centered approach to understand these experiences.

A tension-centered approach to communication online

Defined as the ‘discomfort, stress, or anxieties that result from competing directions, ambivalences in making choices, or struggles between opposing positions,’ tensions describe the experiences individuals have as they ‘encounter incompatibilities and dilemmas’ (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2015, p. 6). Scholars have examined tensions that characterize human interaction, from the construction of occupational identity (Meisenbach, 2008) to relational dialectics (Baxter, 2004) to tensions among organizational members (Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014). A tension-centered approach directs scholarly focus to the ongoing and contradictory process of constructing social reality, foregrounding the tensions, contradiction, and paradox that are ‘routine features of organizational life’ (Putnam et al., 2014, p. 415).

Though often used interchangeably, dualisms, contradictions, and dialectics refer to different experiences of tension. A dualism describes any oppositional binary relationship. Both contradictions and dialectics refer to a dualistic relationship, characterized by opposing poles, but are distinguished by the relationship between poles. A contradiction exists when opposing poles are mutually exclusive, whereas a dialectic refers to the ‘ongoing,

dynamic interplay' between poles 'as they implicate each other' (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016, p. 10). Where a contradiction positions opposing poles as 'mutually exclusive and logically incongruent,' dialectical poles are interdependent (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2015, p. 7).

A tension-centered approach encourages scholars to move beyond identifying tensions that characterize organizing to consider how tensions become resources that provoke creative or unconventional responses (Putnam et al., 2014). Likewise, we examine how youth experience tensions and how tensions function as communicative resources. Next, we discuss how tensions have been used as a framework to account for online experiences.

Tensions and youth experiences online

Research investigating online experiences is dynamic, as adoption of new technologies outpaces research about them. Early scholarship dichotomizes on- and offline experiences, considering quality of online interactions (Pike, Bateman, & Butler, 2013) and the influence of online behaviors on offline experiences (Cahir & Lloyd, 2015). Tensions are considered in terms of self-presentation online, vs. how people navigate prevailing social discourses to express identity. Research specific to youth has documented risks of Internet and mobile technologies, from negative effects on grammar (Cingel & Sundar, 2012) to cyberbullying (Roberto & Eden, 2010), and sexual harassment (Schrock & boyd, 2011).

Communication research that specifically examines tensions experienced by youth online highlights technology-driven educational practices. Researchers note stratification between students and teachers as classroom practices involve new technologies (Radovanović, Hogan, & Lalić, 2015) as well as tensions between supporting age-appropriate play online (Blackwell et al., 2014) and limiting inappropriate behavior (Meyers, Nathan, & Unsworth, 2010). Like much early research, these studies focus on tensions related to technology use as it compares to offline experiences.

Often, the discussion of tensions experienced by youth online stems from assumptions of fundamental differences in the way youth and adults approach Internet and mobile technologies. Prensky's (2001) concepts of youth as 'digital natives' for whom the Internet is a ubiquitous feature of life, and adults as 'digital immigrants' who adapt communication practices to the growing presence of online media, represent one example. Such essentialist discourses arise with new technological advancements and tend to position youth as either empowered or disempowered by activity online, frequently oversimplifying their experiences (Selwyn, 2009).

Critical scholars work to disrupt perspectives that position youth as either uniquely vulnerable or exceptionally skilled by considering ways online engagement represents 'complex interactions and negotiations with the social, economic, political and cultural contexts into which they emerge' (Selwyn, 2009, p. 371). For example, youth understand privacy and online danger not in terms of the public nature of information shared online, but in regard to strategies for managing information (boyd & Marwick, 2011). Resigning the ability to control who sees what they post, youth instead use 'in-jokes, cultural references and implicit links to unmediated events' to hide meaning from outsiders (boyd, 2012, p. 349).

As the Internet exposes youth to mature content, problematic interactions become readily accessible and normalized (Catalina García, López de Ayala López, & García

Jiménez, 2014). Young people downplay cyberbullying and problematic content, framing it as ‘drama’ in order to save face, avoid being positioned as victims, and distance themselves from the seriousness of such situations (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Adult assessment of dangers faced by youth online does not necessarily correlate with actual dangers experienced (boyd & Hargittai, 2013). Consequently, scholars argue that youth ‘should not be perceived as victims of the virtual space but rather, they should be considered resourceful persons who are able to protect themselves from the dangers that might occur online’ (Răcățău, 2013, p. 16). Instead of only seeing perils involved in online interaction, scholars should recognize the potential for helping youth develop a more complex sense of identity and skills for communication.

Navigating complex tensions

Though research often represents tensions as separate and distinct, in practice tensions are experienced as ‘multiple, interwoven, mutually implicating and prismatic’ (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2015, p. 22). ‘Tensional knots’ demonstrate the interdependent and complex relationships people navigate. When the experience of tensions demands a response, individuals often choose between solutions that are contradictory and bound up in one another. These tensional ‘choice points’ require active management (Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004) accounted for by ‘local logics’ or ‘the social accounts that actors give for their actions’ (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2015, p. 22).

Youth experience tensions regarding identity expression online, acknowledging issues of ‘multiplicity’ and ‘consistency’ of identity when engaged in overlapping interpersonal relationships and online communities (Davis, 2012). For example, youth who are actively engaged in civic causes offline experience tensions about how much to reveal and to what audiences online (Weinstein, 2014). Online interactions require decisions about what to share and with whom, sometimes creating tensions for youth on and offline, as well as across platforms (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012).

We build upon this work to understand how youth experience tensions as they navigate life online and how these tensions function productively as communication resources. Specifically, we ask:

RQ: How do youth describe the tensions that characterize online life?

RQ: How do youth navigate communicative tensions related to their online activities?

Methods and procedures

To investigate tensions in youth online activity, we partnered with the nonprofit Above the Fray (ATF). Developed in 2013 by Thomas Dodson and Aja Uranga-Foster, ATF’s mission is to empower safe and responsible social media use for youth. A social media strategist and wellness coach, respectively, the two developed an organization to help teens, parents, and educators navigate what Dodson calls the ‘digital wilderness’ of life online.

After learning about ATF online, Shawna met with the team, volunteering her qualitative methods expertise to help conduct focus groups with teens to understand their lives online. Two months later, the ATF team, including Shawna, met with two groups of

teens every week for four weeks, ‘having our minds blown’ according to Dodson. With permission, we later analyzed the focus groups to generate recommendations for parents/caregivers, and communication scholars regarding teen online life.

Participants and procedures

As a qualitative scholar, Shawna developed the focus group protocol, working with ATF leaders to craft questions and recruit participants. Teens were invited to participate in one of two series of focus groups: younger teens, ages 12–14 (middle school) and older teens, ages 15–18 (high school). ATF founders posted announcements in social media feeds and local newspapers. Twenty-four teens ages 12–17 participated; 13 younger and 11 older teens. Teens – 13 girls and 11 boys – were asked to meet weekly for four weeks. Parents gave written permission for children to participate and be audio recorded. Teens were given the same information letter and asked for assent. As thanks, teens received a certificate of participation, pizza before meetings, and if requested, school service credit.

Focus group methodology

Focus groups are useful for understanding complicated and sensitive phenomena in a group setting (Lederman, 2004). A collaborative environment facilitated conversations among teens not accustomed to speaking formally outside of school. The group setting helped ‘participants build off of each others’ ideas ... demonstrate[ing] a kind of “chaining” or “cascading” effect’ (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). This chaining helped focus group leaders and researchers see which issues resonated with teens, and understand culturally specific language (Tracy, 2013). A series of interview guides framed discussions including favorite social media platforms, time spent online, challenges and rewards of online activity, and advice for teens, among other topics. Focus groups lasted about 90 minutes, not including refreshment time.

Data analysis

Amy joined the project after data collection. Together, we used an iterative process to move between the data and existing literature to understand emergent themes and important issues (Tracy, 2013). We began by listening to meeting recordings several times individually, before transcribing. Focus groups were analyzed first with the goal of providing ATF a report of themes for use in reports, presentations, and to help develop an anonymous online survey about teen experiences online.

For research purposes each author coded data individually, then met to discuss codes and themes, using a consensus process to ensure reliable interpretations (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). Early on, we independently memoed about tensions that characterized participants’ accounts before coming together to create a typology of tensions. Then we employed dialectical theory as a lens to understand the overlapping and complex nature of the tensions that arose in youths’ decision-making online. Specifically, we identified ‘choice points’ in the data to understand how tensions guided teens’ online experiences. The following narrative incorporates data exemplars that serve as evidence for claims (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Smells like teen spirit: negotiating risks and rewards in teen online life

In a conference room redolent with pizza and teen apprehension, focus groups kicked off with quick introductions. Participants created nicknames, writing them on tent cards that would soon be covered with imaginative doodles. Aja led discussions with Thomas and Shawna chiming in with clarifying questions.

The first meeting prompted teens to discuss favorite platforms, best/worst aspects of social media, problems relative to parents, school, and friends, and advice for others. Teens spoke candidly about favorite platforms – Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat for young teens; Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter for the older set, with each group listing dozens of regularly used sites. Thirteen-year-old E-Man answered in consternation when trying to choose his number one, ‘It’s hard. It’s like you guys trying to choose your favorite kid.’

Teens discussed bullying and harassment, time spent online, post content, sources of embarrassment, and management of relationships on- and offline. Common themes emerged across groups, including how teens use social media to be constantly connected, the absence of significant parental involvement, connections between online affirmation and identity, and differences between teens’ on- and offline identities. It became clear during data analysis that teens managed significant tensions or choice points related to the risks and rewards of participating online. We organize our findings around the five most significant tensions, highlighting local logics that organize teen’s talk and decision-making about the numerous competing expectations they face.

Staying connected online vs. disconnecting

Teens spoke passionately about how social media allows them to keep connected with friends near and far, and cultivate interests including developing a following online. It quickly became evident that teens structured their lives around keeping connected and experienced tension when forced to disconnect. After discovering the intensity with which teens stayed connected, Aja asked teens to consider life without social media. ‘Boredom!’ was the most common response, with K, a 13-year-old boy, summing up the younger teen group’s feelings by saying ‘It’d be really terrible or boring. I’d have to like, read a book.’ Older teens demonstrated less anxiety, envisioning time to read, hang out, and perhaps, do homework. Gabby cracked up the room, responding: ‘So. Much. Time.’

In addition to spending hours gaming and watching YouTube videos, several teens described ‘fandoms’ or online communities whose interactions revolve around a common cultural interest, most often books, TV, and music. Self-proclaimed ‘Whovians,’ three girls discussed their obsession with the TV show ‘Doctor Who’ and how they managed popular fan accounts. Thirteen-year-old Cami said her Twitter account for ‘Doctor Who’ was so popular, with more than 4000 followers, she had to shut it down because it was too much work. While most did not discuss such burdens of scale, many acknowledged the pressure of maintaining content for various publics.

We learned that, to a great degree, teens prioritize social media over most activities, including sleep. Younger teens admitted waking up hours before school to play games, and older teens to staying up all hours, succumbing to the temptation of checking

notifications in the middle of the night. 'It's super distracting. I start my day with social media, I end my day with social media. Homework in the middle ... Terrible sleep schedule,' said 16-year-old Allie.

Teens discussed the tension of being 'pulled' into offline activities such as sleeping, chores, homework, class, and family. Teens commiserated about parents' 'annoying' preference for phone-free dinner and family time, and the constant threat of having phones confiscated. In negotiating the tension of online and offline connections, teens described feeling pressure, guilt, obligation, and developing strategies to mitigate these consequences, like finding ways to get online without power holders knowing. Cami discussed getting around the no-phones-in-class policy by making a wall of books to hide behind or frequently using the restroom.

A number of local logics framed teens' decisions to connect, including self-described online addiction, 'FOMO' (fear of missing out), and weighing risks and rewards. Tongue-in-cheek, Lucy described social media as a 'time killer,' and echoing excuses from those with substance problems, drawled 'But I can stop any time I want.' Her comment received guilty laughter, highlighting a tension about agency. Namely, some teens feel at once responsible for staying connected, but also powerless. Kendra described how she is purposely 'slowed down' her social media activities because 'I felt like I constantly had to see what people were saying.' Kendra framed constant connection as a limitation when it came to risks such as rude comments on her YouTube posts. 'People called me fat and ugly. I decided to stop.' Faced with a difficult choice point, Kendra used personal experience to guide her to another platform with moderated connectivity.

Desire for freedom vs. oversight and constraint

The desire for constant connection and the tensions with disconnection highlighted a prominent struggle between teens' desire for freedom and autonomy, and the need for oversight and constraint. Teens puzzled over wanting to post certain content, for instance strong language and suggestive photos, but knowing they 'shouldn't' because of parental rules, audience (sensitive older relatives), or to avoid hurting friends. Teens described navigating these tensions, like 17-year-old Touchstone who discussed an inside joke posted to Facebook that was taken out of context. He lamented the post, recalling how he deleted it, apologized, and felt like: 'Oh man, I just offended somebody I care about.' Several teens described learning the 'hard way' about getting into offline disagreements with friends about online posts, and choosing to be more circumspect.

Teens learned to navigate tensions in part by using online platforms differently or tailoring posts by audience. Some, like Kendra, described the care they exercised before posting, 'I overthink before I post now, and make a bigger deal out of it in my head.' Many admitted jumping from parent-pervasive platforms like Facebook to more teen-friendly sites like Snapchat and Kik, and creating multiple accounts – parent-friendly and non – to avoid adult scrutiny.

While teens discussed how to get around parental rules, a significant theme was the apparent lack of parental involvement. Most said parental knowledge of online activities was minimal, and substantive discussion usually occurred at the arrival of devices such as smartphones, or if grades slipped. Teens relayed parental rules such as 'don't post inappropriate stuff,' 'no swearing,' and 'don't go over the data plan' in addition to not posting

contact information or physical locations. Younger teens, including 14-year-old Emily, grudgingly admitted parental supervision might be important: ‘You need it, like vegetables.’

Older teens chafed at oversight, indicating parents should not track posts or be privy to passwords. In fact, several teens discussed refusing to give passwords to parents. Some relished the absence of parental engagement, including 17-year-old Styx, who said, ‘No complaints. My mom’s not nosy. She stays away from my technology.’ Follow-up survey data collected from more than 250 teens suggest that lack of involvement is the norm, with 75% of respondents reporting no or unknown oversight (ATF, 2015). Allie expressed the trusting nature of some parents: ‘I guess my parents just expect me not to share inappropriate things.’ However, as teens discussed bullying, harassment, and suicide, probing the issue of parental involvement became an ATF priority.

Local logics differed markedly by age group. Younger teens’ choice points related to freedom vs. oversight often focused on when to break specific and clear rules, usually supplied by parents or schools, whereas older teens navigated choice points that privileged personal experience. Teens, especially younger, danced around what we call a ‘parental panopticon’ – operating with the assumption or possibility that parents are watching. Lexi, whose parents have her social media passwords, said ‘Parents see all,’ and Gabby echoed ‘Every time you’re online, parents are watching everything you do.’ Younger teens echoed specific rules such as ‘don’t swear,’ ‘no talking to random people,’ and ‘watch your [data] usage.’ These adult-driven rules appeared to form choice points for teens that resulted in resolving tensions by complying with rules or more often *appearing* to comply. For instance, Emily advised teens not to appear secretive about social media use, to be friends with parents online in order to ‘Keep parents around’ because ‘You don’t want to raise suspicion.’ Camille advocated concealing rule breaking by having multiple accounts, because ‘They [parents] don’t know, and what they don’t know doesn’t hurt them.’ These local logics show how teens manage rules, parental expectations, and facets of social identity.

Whereas younger teens’ choices focused specifically on when to break rules, older teens’ logics around freedom and oversight involved negotiating interpersonal consequences and norms. Lucy and others talked about choice points relative to maneuvering parents’ potential anger and responding to household norms in absence of clear rules. Lucy advised teens to delete unapproved apps before leaving phones unattended, and showing parents ‘enough’ to avoid suspicion. Both Styx and Touchstone spoke about personal discipline, and controlling self-behavior in order to control parental reactions. Styx suggested proactively speaking to parents about online activities, and when being called out to ‘Be rational, lose the argument ...’ acknowledging ‘It’s not really your call.’ Touchstone, Gabby, and Lucy described choice points about interpersonal consequences related to online activities, suggesting local logics that value not hurting others’ feelings and avoiding guilt by association.

Carefully curating an online persona vs. carefree authenticity

Throughout the conversations, ATF leaders queried teens about motivations for posting online. Teens reported frequently posting selfies, photos, video game messages, and reblogs/retweets. Permeating the discussion was the importance of interactions with others, specifically the thrill of getting ‘likes’ and positive affirmation. A clear tension emerged regarding wanting carefree authenticity – being one’s self – and carefully curating an online persona.

In younger teen groups, boys whose online interactions revolved around gaming did not care as much for likes, while girls made significant links between online affirmation and self-esteem/self-concept. E-man shared that likes are ‘Kind of a big deal. Otherwise, what’s the point?’ while Jade, 13, said ‘[Likes] let me know that people actually care.’ Likewise, older teens equated likes with social approval. Allie said, ‘[Getting likes] feels pretty good. ... The whole point of social media is getting people to pay attention ... It’s dumb but it works. When you get a like, they’re confirming you as significant.’

Positive affirmation inspired many teens to exert great effort to manage content. Olivia, who ran several popular Doctor Who fan sites, took a calculated approach, deleting posts that ‘aren’t popular, so new followers don’t think they’re bad.’ Allie described monitoring post popularity, ‘If no one likes, I’ll delete. If it doesn’t seem popular with the people, [I’ll give it] an hour, wait and see.’ Gabby went so far as to consider rate of reactions. ‘When I refresh Instagram, I’ll look at the likes-per-minute.’ If the rate is low, Gabby said she would post at a ‘better’ time of day. Teens demonstrated an acute awareness of image management and post optimization, which became more evident when discussing regretted posts.

Young teens described regretting ‘childish’ posts, which usually occurred when they first joined social media at age 10 or 11. They seemed especially embarrassed by unattractive pictures whether recently posted by friends or baby pictures from parents. In comments that resonated with many, Olivia said, ‘I look back at old personal stuff and delete. My personality changed ... The posts were awful ... I outgrew it, didn’t want people to think that was me.’ Teens spend significant energy managing identity, past and present. While older teens discussed regret, their concerns were more interpersonally driven, regretting mean comments, text-based fighting with significant others, inadvertently hurting others, and sexting or sending explicit photos. Lucy explained her process of deciding what content to remove, ‘If I feel stupid about it, it goes away.’ Likewise, Kendra admitted, ‘I delete tags. For really bad pictures, I report as inappropriate,’ referencing platform features designed to prevent explicit or violent images.

A clear tension emerged between wanting to appear carefree and authentic online – having fun, doing interesting things, sharing important thoughts, and attractive pictures – and the reality of spending time carefully crafting an online persona. Teens seemed keen to impress others online, and to reflect a life lived well. In managing these tensions, teens articulated local logics of seeking attention, receiving affirmation, and actively avoiding embarrassment or rejection.

Teens’ choice points also position social media activity as ‘fun’ but effortful, with shifting and varied logics. For instance, Kendra discussed how she manages posts for different audiences, saying she now ‘doesn’t care’ about Instagram. ‘I don’t post with the intent to get likes on Instagram. On Twitter, I post with the reason of getting likes to get people to follow.’ She explained that her Instagram audience is people she actually knows while ‘Twitter equals randoms’ (‘randoms’ being random people), and that she is concerned about building Twitter followers. Meanwhile, Gabby said ‘It [likes] just makes me feel good’ but that while her posts used to garner 500 likes on Instagram from strangers (who she was not supposed to be interacting with, according to her parents), she went through her follower list and culled outsiders. ‘I’d rather have people I know and be proud of that number instead of a bunch of randoms I don’t like anyway,’ she said. These changing logics suggest complex image management, showing when the process of negotiating tensions, publics, and affirmations becomes cumbersome, teens reframe,

shift focus, and concentrate on one platform or audience more than others when need be. Local logics regarding image management also foregrounded important identity work.

Managing on- and offline identities

Teens consistently talked about how they perform identity on- and offline, and how communication changes when face-to-face vs. online. Teens described using social media to stay close to current offline friends and relations, including Ambi who said ‘[Social media] helps and strengthens [relationships]. My best friend moved and I can still stay connected.’ Teens also shared how technology facilitates communication. Audball said she shares more online, ‘Because I’m shy in the real world,’ and Camille admitted that while face-to-face conversation is more ‘genuine,’ it is ‘easier to apologize to parents on text [messages].’

Although some younger teens fostered active online relationships with people they did not know offline, most seemed cautious about interacting with strangers and held fast to parental and school guidelines, such as not posting real names, locations, or photos at identifiable places. Still, some like E-man were more cavalier, ‘I don’t really decide [what to share online]. I’m an open book.’

Unlike older teens and adults, younger teens often made accounts with avatars or nicknames that protect identities and reinforce anonymity. However, teens made several surprising comments about how they interact with strangers. Camille, who has a best friend online she has never met face-to-face, said, ‘If they seem far away, it’s okay to share more and get to know people.’ The idea that distance would provide safety online seemed out of character for teens who described knowing of online bullying in their own backyards. Several described ‘testing’ online friends, usually over time, before disclosing information, which corroborates existing research (Livingstone, 2014). For instance, Ambi commented, ‘I use a fake name, different ID, no real information until I know I can trust them.’

Older teens seemed more focused on how online interactions help or hinder offline relationships or offer opportunities to test boundaries. Lucy said ‘It facilitates face-to-face conversations,’ playfully adding, ‘Online I can come up with a new personality.’ Lucy’s comment reflects an understanding that by crafting an online identity, people can express themselves in ways that are constrained offline. Others discussed differences between online and offline communication. Styx said, ‘Conversation is more genuine face-to-face. It’s easy to misconstrue through comments without nonverbal nuance.’ He suggested it is also easier to be mean online. He said, ‘You don’t have to look at them. ... [Social Media] gives you confidence to say mean things.’ Allie suggested it is also easier to lie: ‘Online, a point may be easily misconstrued. It’s easier to lie on text or social media, easier to hide behind your profile picture of the puppy, hide behind anonymity.’

As teens discussed communication on- and offline, they seemed to dance around the tension of performing identities differently for different audiences. Although aware of online anonymity and asynchronicity as a resource – to hide, lie, try new personae, or manipulate – teens did not clearly differentiate between on and offline communication. Instead, they articulated how on- and offline identities related and were implicated by each other. Cami shared how she lost a friendship after posting an ugly ‘Throwback Thursday’ picture, even though Cami apologized and offered to delete the photo. Likewise,

Camille talked about how her dad was looking at Instagram on the family iPad and noticed a picture of her with a boy. He teased in a sing-song voice, 'You want to marry him.' Not only did Camille have to deal with offline embarrassment for her online posts, the exchange was witnessed by a friend, compounding her chagrin. Other teens shared how online interactions influence the school arena and vice versa, including E-man discussing online posts that resulted in schoolyard violence, Kam noting how school friendships evolve over breaks due to social media, and Allie who said online activities are fodder for relational maintenance.

Reflecting on tensions emerging from managing on- and offline experiences, teens articulated local logics that show critical identity work, including being a good friend, demonstrating masculinity, being cool, and staying in the know. Teens also demonstrated a sophisticated knowledge of affordances and constraints of on- and offline communication, suggesting local logics of identity play with anonymity, overcoming shyness, supporting face-to-face interaction, being nice, managing conflict, and deceiving others. Teens' local logics about on- and offline identity work and communication also highlighted their roles in online culture.

Participating in vs. resisting online culture and ritual

Teens spoke candidly about how they participate in and resist online culture and ritual. This tension emerged specifically in regard to interaction conventions such as liking, sexting, bullying vs. bystandering, and integrating feedback from others.

Some teens demonstrated ambivalence and an ironic awareness of how caring about 'getting likes' might come across. Several teens offered conflicting statements, such as Dakota who said, 'I like it [getting likes] but it doesn't mean anything. It feels good to know my friends are like paying attention.' It was interesting to hear teens admit chagrin at participating in something they deemed 'silly' but still finding it valuable for self-affirmation or social support. Gabby described hating feeding into peoples' need for likes, but feeling compelled to be supportive. Similarly, Allie admitted it was foolish, but that is how the online platforms worked.

Teens were more critical of rituals involving sexually explicit content. Discussing when, if ever, it is okay to send nude pictures, younger teens were unanimous and adamant in their opposition. However, most had received naked pictures, or known someone close to them who had. Ambi seemed to represent the majority, saying: 'They can always get out. Not ever, even if married.' Even as middle schoolers, students seemed aware of the double standards related to sexuality. Camille talked about when girls share inappropriate pictures: 'For boys [who receive pictures], it's "congrats dude." Anyone who sent those pictures has no self-respect.' Intriguingly, the negative comments did not so much condemn sexual activity as it being digitized and taken out of the one-on-one context.

Older teens, several who admitted to not only receiving but sending nudes, also spoke negatively. 'It's a common practice. You're slut shamed if you send them but guys are praised for getting them. Double standard,' said Allie. Teens largely suggested nude pictures were widespread and dangerous, but focused more on potential long-term repercussions to reputation than emotional or legal harm. Regarding nude photos, Lucy said, 'It will come back and screw you over, it always does. Do it in person.' Similarly, Gabby warned about sharing with strangers: 'Be careful. You could be talking to a 40-year old

man. Be aware that it's out there and it could happen to you.' Lucy's comment suggesting nudity should be accomplished in person without digital evidence, and Gabby's comment about sharing intimate information with strangers online compare on- and offline behavior in ways that suggest a keen, though frequently unheeded, awareness of the long-term repercussions of online life.

Possible repercussions were acknowledged specifically in regard to harassment and bullying. Talk foregrounded the tension of whether or not to integrate or ignore feedback from others, and whether to stand up to untoward behavior online. Teens casually threw around the term 'cyberbullying' and relayed near identical definitions of it as the use of technology to threaten or intimidate others. Most teens had cyberbullying training in school and described experiencing or knowing someone who had experienced bullying.

Teens discussed varying degrees of negative experiences online. Audball, at 12 the youngest participant, shared how someone said she looked like a 'retarded clown' in her profile for the kids' game 'Animal Jam.' Thirteen-year-old E-man discussed how he experienced harassment over poor X-box performance, when the not-known-offline adults he was playing with said 'Kid you did bad, go kill yourself.' An apparently common command in the hyper-masculine gaming world seemed to hit E-man hard, and Shawna asked how he felt after. Cheeks red, E-man quietly replied, 'I felt like I wanted to kill myself.' It might seem ridiculous to adults – teens actually considering suicide after gaming feedback. Yet, E-man's example corroborates research that shows how at certain developmental ages, children operate at a more concrete level of reasoning where they draw simplistic and clear distinctions between good/bad and right/wrong, rather than discerning the nuance of complex circumstances (Livingstone, 2014). Meaning, due to E-man's young age, he interpreted the consequences for poor gaming as very high stakes, without the maturity to immediately realize that the command was actually just harsh criticism.

Older participants discussed how online harassment often took a sexual tone. Gabby shared that an offline acquaintance harassed her on Kik and Snapchat, 'He sexually harassed me, knew my whole life ... Inappropriate messages, gross pictures, couldn't figure out how to block him.' Although she would later speak nonchalantly about receiving 'dick pics' from strangers, Gabby's frustration at being unable to block offenders seemed palpable and recognized by others.

Although one or two admitted finding it 'fun' to mess with others (usually with inconsiderate gaming tactics or purposefully posting unattractive photos), most spoke negatively about bullying. Students seemed especially aware of the potentially dire consequences, including Camille, who shared how a 14-year-old friend committed suicide after being consistently taunted by strangers online. She said to a stunned room, 'A friend of mine died and that made me really mad.' The juxtaposition of 'fun' bullying and a young person committing suicide demonstrates the wide range of ways teens integrate and ignore online feedback, and participate in online culture.

Resisting online culture seemed to be most difficult in regard to being a bullying bystander. Teens said it was easier to ignore bad behavior than report or confront it. Because, as Styx pointed out, 'You don't want bullies to turn on you.' Most troubling was the degree to which students said they would 'definitely' speak to an adult if a friend was being bullied, but would not seek help for themselves. Of speaking to an adult, Styx said, 'Absolutely not. More difficult to admit I would need the help.' Allie agreed she would be 'Not so comfortable telling people. I would help a friend out though.' In a subsequent online survey, ATF

found that teens would be most likely to seek a trusted adult's help only if someone was threatening to reveal inappropriate photos or information about them online (ATF, 2015).

In managing tensions related to participating in online culture and ritual, teens articulated local logics of self-protection, relational maintenance, and identity management. Teens like Gabby confessed to 'talking crap' online because it is fun and creates an edgy persona, while Kendall described 'throwing shade' at someone who called her friend 'a fat bitch.' Others discussed participating in online rituals such as venting in order to bond with friends, and how online play allows for sexual expression not always possible in 'real' life.

There were also logics related to resistance. Teens described resisting rituals to protect friendships, avoid becoming cautionary tales, and for self-protection. Cami shared about a friend who was convinced to lift her shirt during a live-stream conversation, which was then shared widely, 'The bullying was so bad, she drank bleach. She went to a new school, and took pills. Showed her, you know. Just don't do it.' Others spoke with similar warnings of 'It happens,' and Sierra's colorful 'It comes back to bite you in the ass' in regard to sharing explicit materials. Teens advised others to avoid creating permanent evidence to avoid embarrassment, and to shun common online activities to protect their identities. Teens like Lucy discussed 'Keeping it light,' avoiding posts that might make others jealous or fishing for compliments. Taken together, these local logics point to active, constant tension negotiation that bears on all facets of life. With these findings in mind, we now turn to a discussion of tensions as well as implications for communication theory and practice.

Discussion: framing tensions dialectically

Our findings illustrate the tensions felt by youth as they navigate life on- and offline. As they shared experiences of managing competing demands and expectations, participants more often demonstrated a dialectical rather than contradictory orientation to tensions. Though quick to recognize what sometimes *feels* like the dualistic nature of navigating life online and the ways opposing demands frequently lead to stress, frustration, and anxiety, youths' talk about tensions demonstrates a complexity not reflected in scholarly and popular discourses about youth online experiences.

Consider the tensions discussed by youth. In some cases, young women described frustration at disagreeing with the compulsion to seek affirmation via 'likes' and comments, while getting caught up in the expectation for them. Allie's observation, 'It's dumb but it works. When you get a like, they're confirming you as significant' and Dakota's admission, 'I like it [getting likes] but it doesn't mean anything' demonstrate ongoing and opposing influences where acceptance of and resistance to social norms derive meaning from each other. Another example comes from participants' characterization of adult oversight. Though not everyone agreed, Emily's comment, 'you need it, like vegetables' is representative of many of our participants who were not in favor of parental oversight, but admitted its importance. Youth do not characterize these tensions as either/or relationships where choices are mutually exclusive, but rather as push/pull relationships where poles are interdependent and need each other in order to exist (Putnam et al., 2016).

Teens frequently discussed tensions in terms of an ongoing and dynamic interplay, rather than 'polar opposites that ... can potentially negate one another' (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 9). One exception was the discussion of sexting where younger participants

took a hardline, no-exceptions approach. Younger participants saw sexting as a behavior that contradicts a 'good' use of social media. In contrast, older teens' dialectical view of sexting suggested that while the behavior did not seem good to them personally due to long-term risks or past negative experience, they could still acknowledge some benefits. A dialectical view enabled older teens to recognize a range of possibilities for participating in online culture, and room for them to change their minds in the future or contextualize past actions. Still, this dialectic could be pushed further. Though the conversation among older participants had more nuance in regard to gendered implications, none went so far as to articulate potential empowerment for girls previously identified by feminist scholars (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011). Nevertheless, looking at how teens actively negotiate tensions sheds light on experiences that are not well represented in scholarship or popular media authored by adults.

Thus, a primary contribution of this paper is our argument that altering our orientation to the tensions that characterize youth online experiences in ways that mirror young people's understanding of them can allow for more insightful scholarship. Furthermore, we demonstrate that framing tensions dialectically offers clear advantages (see Table 1). Shifting how youth, adults who educate and care for them, and scholars frame tensions provides better alternatives for young people to manage them in healthier and more productive ways. For instance, consider how viewing the tension of carefully curating an online persona vs. carefree authenticity in contradictory terms creates pressure for youth to spend time honing online profiles, or else completely reject social media as a resource for identity work. Cami discussed this struggle when the burden of managing her online accounts became too much to bear and she chose an all-or-nothing approach. On the other hand, viewing the identity management tension from a dialectical perspective suggests there can be a range of ways to construct identity that are not either/or, but rather take into account the ongoing and complex experiences of life online. Understanding tensions as dialectical rather than contradictory reveals new avenues for moving forward as tensions often 'represent choice points' that 'require active management' (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2015, p. 22). Reorienting to the ways competing poles actually develop interdependently and can be held in play at the same time, 'becomes a source of energy, creativity, and dialogue' (Putnam et al., 2016, p. 10).

An applied approach to tension management shows that, in practice, tensions are rarely as simple and dichotomous as research often portrays. Rather, tensions are frequently overlapping, layered, and bound up in one another. Our participants articulated various decision-making processes, many guided by mandates from people in positions of authority (e.g. parents, teachers, educational programs) and others discovered via personal experience (e.g. friends, peers, or personal desire). Our data show that formal rules served as initial choice points, which younger participants easily articulated, until they found themselves in more complex situations.

Existing literature describes overlapping and interwoven tensions as 'tensional knots' (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2015), but we propose a theoretical extension to better account for young people's experiences online. Our findings demonstrate that teens navigate the complex intersections of local logics in terms of webs. While knots (e.g. rope, hair, and necklaces) are tough, difficult to straighten, painful, and binding, webs can be characterized in terms of ephemerality, complexity, and thickness. Webs can be easily broken, but still cling insidiously. Though fragile, webs anchor to other objects, making connections,

Table 1. Affordances and constraints of contradictory and dialectical thinking.

	Constraints of a contradictory/binary/either-or view	Affordances of a dialectic/both-and/ongoing push-pull view
Staying connected vs. disconnecting	Generates stress for kids who want to be connected but are pushed to disconnect; positions online activity as either on or off. Obscures asynchronicity of the online presence – that posts and profiles have a life of their own.	Acknowledges better the benefits of using social media asynchronously rather than trying to stay constantly connected to remain engaged. Allows for other engagement offline.
Desire for freedom vs. oversight and constraint	Generates a false dichotomy suggesting it is possible to be completely free from constraint; Positions freedom and oversight as good/bad opposites.	Demonstrates how desires for freedom vs. constraint work in tension with each other, acting as ongoing elements to be managed rather than end points.
Carefully curating an online persona vs. carefree authenticity	Creates pressure for kids to spend time honing online profiles or completely reject Internet/social media as a resource for identity work.	Suggests there can be a range of ways to perform identity online. Encourages young people to find alternate communities, experiment with identities and live crystallized selves.
Managing on- and offline identities	Positions identity management simplistically, disregarding the overlapping nature of relationships; Suggests communication is different on- vs. offline; elides the implications of online communication.	Encourages a more complex view of identity management, demonstrating how on- and offline identities and relationships have recursive implications, e.g. identity play online can influence offline relationships, and vice versa.
Participating in vs. resisting online culture and ritual	Positions social media activity in an either/or fashion. Enables/reinforces existing discourses of race, class, ability, etc. Assumes clear identification with or rejection of particular discourses.	Acknowledges the range of ways people can participate in online culture; Enables teens to participate but at the same time critique and distance themselves from online culture and ritual.

and can be easily rebuilt. Thus, while knots suggests an individual focus, webs foreground connections. So describes our participants’ experiences with tensions from competing expectations that connect their various social roles and linger even as teens move on.

Implications from a tension-centered approach to youth online activity

Our analysis shows social media has become a vital outlet for young people to develop and express identity through the process of navigating overlapping tensions. Despite tremendous opportunities, teens could benefit from guidance to develop skills that allow them to navigate online tensions in sustainable and healthy ways. Furthermore, given their descriptions of bullying and harassment, teens also need assistance identifying and coping with troubling communication. With this in mind, we share implications for communication theory and practice.

Implications for communication research

We call for communication scholars to take seriously and lead the way in changing talk about the distinction between online and offline experiences, to offer strategies and techniques for thriving online, and to consider identity construction.

Appropriately communicating the ‘realness’ of online experiences

Communication scholars and practitioners must recognize how communication not only reflects, but constitutes experience. Talk about online experiences frames and legitimizes

understanding of them. Thus, communication scholars have an opportunity, if not a responsibility, to take an active role in shaping how others talk about online experiences.

Our analysis revealed a struggle, for young people and adults, to talk about electronically mediated relationships vs. those that happen purely offline. Interviewers and participants commonly compared online relationships with those in the ‘real world.’ Even with this shorthand, young people hesitated and stumbled over their words, indicating an inadequacy of these terms to capture the complexity of those experiences. Especially for youth, relationships are not cleanly distinguished between online and physical communities as ‘young people integrate on- and offline communication in order to sustain their social networks, moving freely between different communication forms’ (Livingstone, 2003, p. 151). Researchers have recently observed the reciprocal influence of on- and offline behaviors, but still draw a distinction between the virtual and real world (Ahmad, Shen, Srivastava, & Contractor, 2014).

Communicating about mediated experiences as somehow different or less ‘real’ than other experiences delegitimizes them (Clair, 1996). If we trivialize the very meaningful online experiences young people have (even inadvertently), we risk creating barriers to open communication that make youth clam up or engage flippantly. Scholars, practitioners, adults, and young people must be more precise in framing experiences. If a distinction is even appropriate, we suggest ‘online’ and ‘offline,’ or ‘online’ and ‘face-to-face,’ and urge scholars to consider how these tensions occur dialectically, each deriving meaning from the other.

Development of strategies for thriving online

Likewise, we see an opportunity for communication scholars to develop research around building online communities where young people can thrive. Online communities will never be free of negative experiences, but communication scholars have much to offer in the way of coping strategies for negativity online and avoiding the social isolation associated with bullying and harassment. For example, communication researchers have demonstrated the power of writing for reducing stress, promoting wellness and forgiveness (Boren & Alberts, 2011), and coping with negative physiological effects for victims of hate speech (Crowley, 2014). This type of research could be extended to online environments where hurt feelings are rampant. In a recent study, the simple act of publicly tweeting experiences of sexism improved women’s feelings of well-being and reduced negative affect (Foster, 2015). Beyond strategies for avoiding or ameliorating the effects of negative situations, communication scholars might also draw on existing research regarding communication practices that foster feelings of support and community (Pauley & Hesse, 2009) to offer strategies for young people as they socialize into online communities.

Considering online identities

Finally, communication scholars are uniquely positioned to consider the process of identity construction/maintenance/transformation online. This analysis shows how youth use ephemeral types of media as identity play in a relatively low stakes manner. For instance, the platform Snapchat, wherein messages disappear after a few seconds, offers the illusion of temporariness. Teens can ‘try out’ different types of identities – goofy, sexy, or otherwise – and then ostensibly start over. This trial-and-error process is seen as students get older and reflect on their ‘past selves’ and things they did that make them cringe. Unlike offline

life, online identity work allows people to ‘clean-up’ profiles and online footprints to a certain degree. It is interesting to think of this flexibility as a method of identity play/development, rather than how it might be framed as ‘cleaning up’ in order to hide.

For youth at formative stages, experimenting with online performances provides resources for identification and even resistance/revision of social norms. Young women in our focus groups described wanting to resist norms that social media encourages while feeling compelled in order to adequately perform friendship. We urge communication scholars to consider how identities ‘have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed’ (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 186) and apply such a perspective to online identity work.

Practical and methodological implications

Our findings also offer important practical implications for family relationships, interpersonal communication, and how researchers communicate about youth.

Cultivating digital empathy and empathic advice

Adults who interact with teens – whether in a familial relationship, in school, or while conducting research – would do well to engage in perspective taking. Throughout our focus groups, teens echoed the refrain ‘adults just don’t understand’ and it is likely that adults do not, in fact, comprehend the realities and tensions of negotiating life online as a teen. We recommend adults engage in what Dodson calls ‘digital empathy,’ which requires careful consideration of what growing up in a digital age entails, where every good and bad day has the potential to be broadcast to thousands, and bullying is no longer confined to the schoolyard. Issues that seem trivial – getting ‘likes,’ playing games for ten extra minutes, Snapchatting – are amplified for teens in ways that are difficult for adults to understand without conscious effort. Many adults went through their formative years pre-internet, let alone in an age of smart technology that enables continuous Internet access. Most teens in this study were born between 1998 and 2003, and grew up with constant access. In an age where toddlers get ‘screen time’ (Hu, 2013) and iPads are part of educational environments (Murphy, 2014), it is important that adults consider teen experiences empathetically.

Digital empathy is especially important for those wanting to conduct research related to youth online. Projects are often formulated to satisfy adult curiosity and impose adult priorities on teens. However, a digitally empathic research frame would invite questions and procedures that better get at the heart of teen online experiences and the complexity of teen life. This might entail practices that more actively engage teens in data gathering and analysis.

As we begin to understand the webs of tensions experienced by youth as they navigate life on- and offline, current advice aimed at young people fails to account for the complexity of local logics that guide their decision-making. The formal rules young people learn from authority figures are taken up by younger Internet users who have minimal experience with difficult situations online. But our research shows that once young people find themselves negotiating choice points in practice, their own local logics (comprised of webs of tensions) overtake whatever formal rules they have learned. Thus, it is our strong recommendation that programs designed to educate and prepare youth for situations they

will face online should articulate strategies that acknowledge webs of tensions online. Programs might prompt youth with scenarios or choice points, allowing them to design their own responses. Working through webs of tension to craft their own responses will ensure that solutions represent teen experiences while providing a practice script that is more readily available when they do find themselves in similar situations (Way, 2013).

Reframing fear-based responses to technology

As an offshoot of digital empathy, these findings encourage a less fear-focused understanding of online activity. Rarely does a day pass without mainstream news reporting about teens and social media, relating cautionary tales of sexting scandals (Rosin, 2014), bullying-related suicides (Coughlan, 2016), and online predators (Amos, 2014). Likewise, anti-bullying campaigns highlight dangers related to online activity, and research overwhelmingly points to negative outcomes. The Internet is framed as a dark and deviant place.

While important to consider negative outcomes, fear-based responses may critically inhibit conversations with teens and blind adults from being able to understand teen experience. Our participants were especially candid in acknowledging they would reach out for help on behalf of a friend, but rarely for themselves. Teens harbor a constant fear about their digital devices being confiscated or being barred from social media if they report difficulties. Adults should understand that in order for teens to feel comfortable talking about online challenges, whether bullying, harassment, sleep, or grades, they will not risk losing online access. Having a basic understanding that adults are available to help navigate online life rather than take it away can help facilitate dialogue. Likewise, those in a position to research and write about teens and technology should take care when framing teen experiences as wholly harmful. This frame perpetuates discourses that position teens negatively and contributes to stereotypes that do not correlate with teen experiences.

Concluding remarks

Communication scholars have significant opportunities to explore teen online identity and how the mediated world can influence communication. As a starting point, we recommend considering more diverse participants, specifically how teens of color and those who identify as LGBTQ experience life online. Most teens in the ATF focus groups identified as white and heterosexual, and all had parents willing to bring them to focus group meetings consistently. Understanding challenges related to socioeconomic, culture, and parenting styles would also help further understandings of teen online life.

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