

“Nobody Sees It, Nobody Gets Mad”: Social Media, Privacy, and Personal Responsibility Among Low-SES Youth

Social Media + Society
April-June 2017: 1–14
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2056305117710455
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms

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Abstract

While few studies examine the online privacy practices or attitudes of young people of low socio-economic status (SES), they are often at the most risk of and most susceptible to privacy violations. This participatory, collaborative study of 28 low-SES young adults in the New York City area investigates how they view online information sharing. Like most Americans, our participants viewed online privacy as an individual responsibility. We make two primary contributions. First, participants revealed extensive awareness of the risks of sharing information online, and many avoided social media, self-censored, or obfuscated their contributions as a result. Second, many participants had extensive experience with policing and physical surveillance and were aware they could not avoid such encounters through their own efforts. This window into structural discrimination provides an alternate frame to that of “individual responsibility” that educators and researchers can use to conceptualize how privacy is violated online. Framing online privacy violations as inevitable and widespread may not only help foster activist anger and strategic resistance but also avoid the victim-blaming narratives of some media literacy efforts. By examining the experiences of these young people, who are often left out of mainstream discussions about privacy, we hope to show how approaches to managing the interplay of on- and offline information flows are related to marginalized social and economic positions.

Keywords

Low socio-economic status, class, risk, privacy, policing, youth, social media

Introduction

Yeah, people want to be seen. But then, at the same time, when they seen, who are they going to blame? No one but themselves.

(Mike, African American, 20)

For many young Americans, the visibility provided by social media offers a conundrum: it can deliver social support, attention, and even celebrity, but simultaneously leaves one open to criticism, drama, and conflicts. This is particularly true for young people living in economically precarious circumstances, such as those of lower socio-economic status (SES) working toward upward mobility. While these young people are often at the mercy of large institutional and structural forces, from gentrification to data mining of personal information, they frequently frame their online privacy practices and those of their peers in terms of individual responsibility. As Mike says above, if you did not want to be seen, doxed, bullied, or fired, you should not have posted on Facebook. This frame of personal responsibility is common;

across social classes and generations, it is the primary way that people understand privacy and agency both online and off (Hargittai & Marwick, 2016; Silva, 2013). However, this emphasis on “personal responsibility” over social obligation and as a remedy for institutional failures not only blames victimized individuals for privacy violations but also implies that privacy is only necessary if one has “nothing to hide” (Solove, 2007).

In the last few years, public attention has turned increasingly to police brutality against people of color.

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A proliferation of high-profile cases, captured on cellphone video, of black and brown people assaulted and killed by police officers has starkly illuminated the depth and breadth of state-sponsored racial violence. People of color have long been targets of surveillance (Browne, 2015; Muhammad, 2011). A vocal strand of public discourse maintains that people can avoid police involvement by behaving lawfully, but scholars of color, activist groups like Black Lives Matter, and members of various marginalized and subjugated communities have argued that police, as agents of the state, unfairly target people of color because their very existence represents a threat to public order as it exists in the white imagination (Davis, 1998; Murakawa, 2014; Taylor, 2016). The dissonance between the belief in one's ability to control the outcome of a situation and this reality challenges the frame of individual responsibility. Indeed, many of the youth we interviewed recounted interactions with and attitudes about law enforcement that reinforced these concerns, emphasizing their vulnerability even as they attempted to avoid trouble. Those with more experience articulated detailed strategies for managing surveillance and abuse of power by police and actively rejected narratives which blamed the victims in this context.

This article discusses the discourse of personal responsibility vis-a-vis privacy and SES. We argue that, as with other forms of surveillance, the rhetoric of individual responsibility in social media is both limited and problematic in the face of experiences of structural and institutional oppression. This frame, which is *prima facie* empowering and agential, often has the opposite effect, confining young people within rigid social structures despite the promise of technology to open doors and create opportunities. Our data are drawn from a qualitative, participatory research study that uses interviews and focus groups to illuminate the privacy frames employed by low-SES youth in the New York City (NYC) area when navigating their everyday data environments and encounters with surveillance technologies.

We make two primary contributions. First, our participants revealed an in-depth awareness of the risks of sharing information online, like inciting family drama or compromising employment, and some were extraordinarily careful about providing any personal details whatsoever. By examining the experiences of these young people, who are often left out of mainstream discussions about privacy, we hope to show how approaches to managing the interplay of on- and offline information flows are related to marginalized social and economic positions. Second, because these young people have a window into structural discrimination, they provide an alternate frame that can be used by educators and researchers to conceptualize how privacy is violated online. Framing online privacy violations as inevitable and widespread may not only help foster activist anger and strategic resistance but also avoid the victim-blaming narratives of some media literacy efforts.

Literature Review

SES and Privacy

Both legal scholars and sociologists have documented that people of low SES face privacy violations and surveillance by the criminal justice system and the welfare state (Brayne, 2014; Gilliom, 2001). Low-SES individuals are often unable to opt out of onerous and invasive monitoring practices like unwarranted drug testing (Goetzl, 2012) as these are linked to much-needed social services (Bach, 2014; Gustafson, 2013). They frequently work in sectors such as retail, manufacturing, and food services where persistent surveillance is a central feature of the job (Ball, 2010; Rosenblat, Kneese, & boyd, 2014). In urban environments, they are also more likely to live in neighborhoods under constant surveillance by law enforcement, particularly if they are people of color (Clear, 2009; Rios, 2011).

Examining how privacy laws shape the experiences of poor people, Michele Gilman (2012) argues that regular encounters with state and employer surveillance strip the poor of their senses of dignity, respect, and trust. With the advent of "big data," so-called predictive algorithms used to determine access to education, employment, and financial products may disproportionately impact the poor, bypassing existing legal protections (Barocas & Selbst, 2016). As a result, low-SES individuals develop various strategies for protecting their privacy and sense of self-worth in the face of institutional intrusion.

Sarah Brayne (2014) suggests that low-income individuals who are concerned with surveillant institutions may respond with "system avoidance" (p. 372). The resources available for the poor often come with costs—suspicion, personal privacy invasions, and punitive consequences for those judged undeserving (Bach, 2014; Budd, 2010). In his study of the effects of incarceration, Todd Clear found that people in neighborhoods with heavy police surveillance socialized less in public, had weaker relationship networks, and participated less in civil society (Clear, 2009). This is the result of the massive American apparatus of criminal justice and incarceration, which criminalizes poor people of color and immigrants in order to justify its existence (Cacho, 2012). Victor Rios (2011) also noted the impact of criminalization, the process by which the styles and behaviors of young Black and Latino men are rendered deviant, on young people who come to feel "stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless" (p. xiv) through their negative experiences with the representatives of institutions that engage in social control.

Strategic information concealment is a common practice in low-income communities. For low-income families, access to income support, health care, subsidized food, housing, jobs, and childcare requires furnishing detailed information to state authorities (Edin & Lein, 1997). Female heads of household often strategically conceal information to avoid

negative repercussions (Scarborough, 2001) using adaptive techniques, or “habits of hiding” like selected telling, agreeable talk, and staying quiet (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). These practices can be understood in terms of *secrecy*, the choice to conceal information as a tactic of resistance, which, as Sissela Bok (1989) argues, are “often rooted in encounters with the powerful, the sacred, and the forbidden” (p. 5).

SES and Online Privacy

Turning to the online practices of low-SES youth, much of the early work on the internet and SES focused on the “digital divide”—the division between those with internet access and those without, which was fragmented along racial, economic, and rural/urban lines (Blank & Groselj, 2015). More recent work on digital inequalities has focused on differences in internet skills (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008) and the participation gap in networked media (Watkins, 2012). Epstein, Nisbet, and Gillespie (2011) argue that when policymakers frame digital inequality as a difference of skills and participation, this ignores systemic explanations for divisions in access and use, instead shifting responsibility to individuals and communities.

Most research on the social media practices of young people focuses on white, middle- and upper-middle class individuals (Stevens, Gilliard-Matthews, Dunaev, Woods, & Brawner, 2016). There is little scholarship, to date, on the online practices of young people from low-SES backgrounds, and what exists is primarily descriptive. S. Craig Watkins (2012) found African American and Latino youth to be highly engaged, often early adopters of social technologies, who frequently used digital media to critique media narratives and participate in “civic-oriented genres” (p. 5). Other studies identified lower-SES teens as at least as likely as their middle-class peers to use social media (boyd, 2012; Micheli, 2016). Marina Micheli’s study of Italian students found that middle-class students contrasted their Facebook activity (worthwhile and educational) with the activity of their lower income peers, which they saw as frivolous and excessive. The latter used Facebook enthusiastically, primarily valuing it for its ability to connect them with new friends, romantic relationships, and emotional support (Micheli, 2016).

Although low-SES youth may be just as—if not more—active than more privileged youth, how they use social media, and which services they use, seems to differ. Teenagers from lower income families use Facebook more than those from affluent families, who are more likely to use Snapchat and Twitter (Lenhart et al., 2015). Even when a service is broadly used, like Twitter, race and class can significantly influence norms and practices (Brock, 2012). Moreover, devices shape rates of internet access and patterns of use. According to a recent Pew study, African-American teens are most likely to own smartphones, an important propeller of internet use, and African-American and Latino teens report more frequent internet use than white teens (Lenhart et al., 2015).

When considering youth privacy attitudes and practices more broadly, empirical research belies the popular claim that “young people don’t care about privacy” (Hargittai & Marwick, 2016). Instead, scholars have found that young people have a range of attitudes toward online information flow and maintain standards and boundaries of what information is suitable for various contexts (Blank, Bolsover, & Dubois, 2014; Hoofnagle, King, Li, & Turow, 2010; Madden et al., 2013). While there is limited research on the online privacy practices of low-income youth specifically, some of our previous work (boyd, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2014) accounts for interactions with low-income contexts and social services in analyzing teenagers’ networked privacy strategies but does not explicitly examine class differences. Jacqueline Vickery’s study of “non-dominant” youth in Texas found that many shared devices with friends and family and enacted both technological (password-protected or deleted content) and social solutions (creating bonds and networks of trust) to maintain privacy. Others chose not to participate online as a way to resist “parental and peer expectations that allowed for surveillance” (Vickery, 2015, p. 7).

This study attempts to connect the literature between privacy and SES by attending specifically to the online privacy practices of low-SES youth.

Methodology

This study has 28 participants, low-SES young adults with age ranging from 17 to 27 in the NYC area. We required participants to have a smartphone or similar device (e.g., iPod Touch) and to use at least one social media platform regularly (e.g., Twitter and Instagram). Our first group of 11 participants was recruited through emails to instructors at NYC-area high schools and colleges. Recruitment flyers specified that we were seeking a diverse sample of young people, including first-generation college students, people from single-parent households, immigrants or children of immigrants, residents of the NYC Housing Authority, and recipients of Section 8 housing vouchers. The third author screened prospective participants over the phone. All participants gave written informed consent.

The primary goal of this project was to identify new privacy frames. Principal investigators individually interviewed the 11 selected participants for 60–90 min. The interviews were semi-structured and based on a protocol that included general questions (what are you passionate about?), and questions about social media use, information-sharing practices (what kinds of things might you share with some people but not with others?), surveillance, policing, and privacy. We avoided using the term “privacy” until the end of each interview in an attempt to pinpoint alternative discourses around information flow. Participants were paid US\$25 for the initial interview. After each interview, the principal investigators (PIs) wrote field notes and memos to preserve data that

Table 1. Racial/ethnic self-identification of participants.

Racial/ethnic self-identification	Number of participants
Hispanic/Latino	5
African American	4
Puerto Rican	3
White	3
Indian	2
Biracial	2
Asian-American	2
Chinese	1
Filipino	1
Dominican	1
Belizean	1
Ghanian	1
African	1

otherwise might have been lost during transcription (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Seven interview subjects were selected as participant researchers (PRs). We were inspired in this decision by collaborative, participatory methodologies like participatory action research (PAR) (Krueger, 2010; Torre, Cahill, & Fox, 2015; Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012), an approach that engages the knowledge and expertise of those most affected by the research to produce scholarship that propels social change. As three White women researching the experiences of primarily low-income young people of color, we strategically involved participants in the process of data collection to generate rich data and enhance the validity of our findings. However, it should be noted that unlike PAR research, ours is not activist in orientation and was designed without substantive input from participants. Each PR interviewed between two and six friends and family members, although two did not submit any interviews. We provided some guidance to PRs, highlighting themes we felt each was well positioned to investigate and encouraging them to respond to issues that emerged in the interviews and phrase questions organically. The third author trained each PR on basic interviewing techniques and the use of a recording device. Participants were paid US\$25 for the training. Once the interviews were complete, participants emailed or uploaded the audio files to a shared file system. Interviews were transcribed by an outside transcription service. Participants received US\$50 for the first set of two or three interviews and an additional US\$50 for a second optional set of three interviews.

Each author read and coded the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings. We coded the transcripts at three different levels: content, or what the interviewees were saying explicitly; assumptions and cultural discourses underlying the content; and dynamics of the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Gilligan & Brown, 1992). We determined an initial set of themes and wrote memos on each topic. After developing our own theories, we brought five of the PRs together for a focus group, which served both as a

form of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and a moment for collaborative meaning making.

Demographics and Identity

Our sample of 28 participants is racially and ethnically diverse (Table 1). Many participants are recent immigrants, so do not easily map to typical US racial categories.¹ Two identify as middle class and one as upper-middle class, although it is unclear how they defined these terms. The other participants identified themselves as of low SES in various ways: as “really low income” (Angelique, 27, biracial), “really poor, like super poor” (Diego, 21, Dominican), and as “not getting the government cheese or anything” but with a household income “probably between 22 and 26,000 a year” (Ian, 22, Latino). We note here the pitfall of conflating race and class; it is important not to equate “low-SES” with “urban minorities of color” (Scarborough, 2001). While poverty rates are higher among African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans, the majority of low-income individuals in the United States are white (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). However, given the context of our study—NYC and its environs—and the intersectionality of race and class (Collins, 1993), most individuals in our study are low-income young adults of color. Our participants also dealt with the intersection of nationality, immigration status, sexuality, and gender, which at times they explicitly discussed during interviews.

Six participants identify as sexual minorities. There are 18 male-identifying individuals, 9 female-identifying individuals, and 1 biological female with a non-binary gender identification. A range of religious identifications are represented. Participants’ living situations reflect the high cost and relative scarcity of housing in NYC. Sixteen live with family members (immediate or extended family), two with a roommate, and two with a partner. Eight did not provide information about their domestic arrangements.

Many of our informants, and almost all the PRs, were upwardly mobile and striving to succeed. Some had tested into magnet high schools for gifted students, while others were working to improve their lives after experiencing hardship. Many of the immigrants had come to the “land of opportunity” to achieve successes that seemed impossible in their home country. While they were all struggling financially and burdened with debt and responsibilities, this group of young adults were relatively mature and determined. We recruited for this precisely because we needed PRs who could follow through with commitment. Because not all young people are as responsible and driven, we focused on seeing the norms, practices, and values of other youth through the attitudes of our informants to their peers.

Findings

The participants in our study used many privacy-protecting strategies, from making careful use of Facebook privacy

filters, to asking friends to remove pictures or tags on social media, to using multiple apps and sites targeted to different audiences. These practices are widespread among young people and have been well documented in previous studies (Hargittai & Marwick, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014). A few in our sample were unconcerned with privacy, while others were very savvy. For example, Diego (21, Dominican) uses Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and proxy servers, keeps several SIM cards on him, and even owns a shirt with a metal-lined pocket that protects his phone from revealing location information to cellphone towers.

On the whole, however, we were struck by how mindful our participants were of what they put online. They are aware of the rhetoric espoused by teachers and authority figures that social media content can come back to haunt you. They are surrounded by people made vulnerable by online postings, from family members opening themselves up to drama, to friends embarrassed by naked photographs, to rumors about young people who lost opportunities due to their social media presence. As a result, they adhere strictly to the cultural script that it is an individual's responsibility to choose what to post online. Many participants discussed the necessity of being very careful online. They critiqued others whose online behavior they viewed as careless or even reckless and adopted a number of strategies in an attempt to gain control over their personal information. While many of the privacy violations mentioned depend on institutional structures, from the surveillance of social media accounts by high schools and universities to the casual misogyny that rewards young men for passing around naked photographs of women, our participants saw it as their responsibility to protect themselves from such dragnets. This allowed them to maintain a sense of agency and power in an ecosystem where control felt tenuous. While some found this dependence on self-reliance reassuring, others worried that if they experienced negative consequences from posting on social media they were, to a certain extent, at fault.

Being Careful

Aviva (23) is White, Jewish, and middle class and recognizes the privilege that comes with that. She is also a geek girl, a gamer, and active on 4chan. Her biggest fear is getting doxed,² which feels ever present. She keeps a low profile on social media as a result and is very careful about sharing particular types of information—particularly her address or phone number. She says,

You see people getting doxed and that makes you realize how easy it is for people to get to your information. So you really do have to be very careful about who you talk to, and what you present online.

She continues,

There's a message board community called 4chan that I use pretty often. People have gotten doxed a lot on that website. I

make sure to never give out any information, never ruffle any feathers even if there is something that I don't agree with. That's the one good thing about—the thing that I like about the Internet is that you have kind of this power to avoid situations that make you uncomfortable. Not all of the time, but you do have that option to kind of put a barrier between you and that situation.

Aviva avoids getting into confrontations online, or even participating in debates, in fear of angering the wrong person and having the watchful eye of 4chan turn her way. Aviva sees it as a form of agency to avoid the negative consequence of doxing by staying away from certain situations, places, and conversations.

Choosing to abstain entirely from social media because it is a "poison," "a major pitfall that has eaten so many people's lives," Ravi (25, unspecified race, interviewed by Diego, 21) believes that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own privacy. He emphasizes the importance of control: "The greater you control your information, the better off you will be." An artist, Ravi tries to limit people from seeing his designs to prevent them from being stolen. Furthermore, he believes in restricting access to any type of potentially damaging information. "If you're going to protect yourself, that really is the way to do it. You don't let people get anything on you that you don't want them to get." In his mind, there are many ways things can go wrong, but the solution is simple: "You abstain, or you control . . . the only thing you actually have control over is yourself and you've got to control what you let out into the world." Like Aviva, he tries to maintain control by limiting the information that he provides to others online or avoiding social media entirely.

Batuk (18, Indian, interviewed by his brother, 24-year-old Vikrama) similarly believes that it is his responsibility to limit information. As an immigrant focused on his future, Batuk argues that people "[are] not entitled or obliged to state their views on every relevant matter in society." He states that privacy is important to him, but he also says "I feel it's not in my place to share that much information about myself. And I don't think people should be obliged to know that much about me." From his perspective, the onus is on him. He does not worry about strangers being offended by what he puts online "because I don't really take political stances in my posts and I do my best to make sure my posts, even if they may be of a funny intent, don't offend any particular demographic of people." Although aware of government and marketing surveillance, he feels responsible for how his information spreads.

Other participants see refraining from active participation on social media as a survival strategy. A motivated computer science major, Vikrama (24, Indian) is deeply concerned about privacy. He worries that information leakage might compromise his ability to get a professional job and is concerned about data brokers and governments using his personal data. As a result, he heavily edits his social media presence. His LinkedIn profile lists only facts about his professional life; he has a Twitter account but has never

posted, fearful of being judged. He not only worries about government agencies and employers using Facebook to screen applicants but also worries that if an employer did find his Facebook page, they would find it strangely empty. He resolves this conundrum by using a fake name and has never uploaded a photograph or made a status update. When asked for examples of information he would not want people to know, he mentioned his enjoyment of professional wrestling and television shows about hunting, which he thinks would seem unprofessional. Vikrama said he tries to be the same person at work, at home, and on the street—respectful, hardworking, and “putting his best foot forward.” His anxiety around achieving permanent and gainful employment leads him to censor and edit all but the most mundane details of his life.

Malik (17, African-American) was asked in a college interview for his Facebook profile. Knowing that employers or admissions officers might look at his social media, he was careful not to post anything that others might see as problematic. Unlike members of his peer group, he did not need to “put a mask over everything” online in an attempt to seem like a good person. This highlights the kind of face-work participants felt was necessary on social media to present as education- and employment worthy for powerful audiences (Goffman, 1955). Malik is cautious about sharing information overall, as he thinks that people who put too much information online—who he refers to as “Facebook famous”—are creepy:

You know exactly where they go to school, where they’re around, the area they’re around most of the time, what they share, almost everything about them, what school they’re going to, in the stuff people share, ‘cause some people share, you know, how some people take pictures of what they got in the mail, some people don’t cross out their address or something like that. They don’t do that. Some people share what they have in their house, what their house looks like and that’s too much to be sharing.

This sense of caution and care juxtaposed with judgments of others’ choices was common among our participants. Anthony (26, African American) characterized himself as “More of a watcher than, like, a—I’m more of a spy than a contributor.” This language—a watcher, a spy, a ghost—wove its way through our interviews, in sharp contrast to the stereotype of young people recklessly sharing their thoughts and experiences on social media.

Nothing to Hide

The most common argument against strong privacy protections is that if you have nothing to hide, you do not need to worry about the police, the government, or Facebook looking at your personal information (Solove, 2007). Several participants articulated variations of this argument when asked about privacy and surveillance online:

Arvin (21, Filipino): You should be worried if you were doing something bad, but I don’t feel like I’m doing anything illegal or unlawful. So for the government, I’m a pretty open book.

Jake (24, Asian American): Is what you’re putting out really that, you know, is it so insidious for them to be watching what you’re doing? Are you doing something that’s insidious? What are you afraid of if you’re nervous about that?

Javier (24, Belizean): I don’t feel like I post stuff that I need to worry about. So it hasn’t been a concern for me, like what’s the issue. Most of the stuff that I post, I would want the public to know about.

Both Jake and Arvin assert that to object to mass data collection suggests individual fault or culpability. Jake is judgmental of those who worry about negative repercussions: “I don’t live my life on social media, so I wouldn’t say that anything I put out there could come back and hurt me in ways that I wouldn’t want.” Javier uses social media for work, strategically sharing information for publicity. He does not post anything that he would “need to worry about” and so is not troubled about privacy.

Others disagreed. Ebo (23) is a Ghanaian immigrant concerned with immigration law. While he is careful not to engage in controversy online, he is a frequent Facebook user and enjoys posting pictures and sharing light updates about his life. Ebo participates in social media with the assumption that whatever he posts can and will be used against him. He says, “I don’t think I’ve done anything that’ll get me in jail or get me kicked out of the country. I very much hope not. So, in that case, then I don’t think I have anything to fear.” However, he assumes that Facebook, and the internet in general, is a public space. His understanding of privacy stems from his childhood in Ghana, where there is often little expectation of privacy inside small homes, and conduct on the street shapes the reputation of the family. He is therefore used to having to modulate what he says and how he behaves, referring to a Ghanaian expression that roughly translates to “Don’t say stuff that you don’t want other people to hear.” He also argues that online self-censorship is similar to personal interactions, where “you don’t always say whatever comes into your mind.” He has very limited understanding of how technology operates, and a lack of privacy is normalized in his life, so he expects that he has to be careful and responsible. However, he believes that the entitlement to privacy in the home extends to everyone, even if they are doing illegal things; he does not subscribe to the “nothing to hide” argument.

Blaming the Victim

Participants were intimately familiar with what is colloquially known as “revenge porn”—when the recipient of nude pictures shares them with a larger audience without consent. Overwhelmingly, they blamed the victims for

sharing the pictures in the first place, as opposed to criticizing their (typically ex-) partners for distributing them. This was true even for young women who identified as feminists. Fatima (21, Hispanic) said, “I’m definitely not stupid enough to send anyone lewd pictures, because those don’t end up where you want them to. Don’t trust anyone.” Knowing that nude pictures can and do spread rapidly, Fatima places the onus on the woman to avoid taking or sharing them, rather than on the recipient to keep them private. From her perspective, there is nothing to do once content is out there because “the interwebs can be a very savage place.” Fatima feels as though control exists only at the point of sharing.

Malik (17, African American) expressed a different point of view, putting responsibility squarely on the distributor rather than the person taking the nudes. As a peer sexual health educator, Malik has spent more time grappling with the ethics of revenge porn than many other young adults. From his perspective,

The person felt comfortable enough with you to share that with you, and then after you stop dating them you share that. I think that shouldn’t be the case. I think you should have enough respect for them and if you really loved the person you wouldn’t have done that.

Malik does not condone people “sharing their sex life or stuff like that” or “the nudes that some kids sext,” as he believes that “those images can affect human life” and “do harm to you,” but ultimately he maintains that if sexual images are shared in the context of a consensual loving relationship, the logic of respect should continue to prevail even if the relationship dissolves.

Jun (22, Chinese) interviewed her friend Shaka (23, African immigrant). Shaka is a graphic designer who works in a museum gift shop. He is “straight African. Came from Africa. I was born there, and I came here when I was 13 years old.”³ Shaka articulates a strong sense of individual responsibility for social media use. He believes that many of his peers are caught up in the trivialities of consumer culture, whereas “people in Africa, they would spend a day worth of bless[ings] to you if you would give them a fucking little soup, a little pants, and fucking shirt, ‘cause they do not have it.” While others are “too addicted” to social media, he sees himself as above it, saying “I don’t allow shit to get to me over the internet social media.” Jun points out that many people cannot shrug things off so easily, especially young women. Shaka responds to Jun’s point about the difficulties of being a young woman online:

Shaka: Yeah, and then just fucking random creepy-ass guys trying to talk to you and all that. So that’s why I feel a little bad about females on social media, because any type of fucking rapist can talk to them. It’s very scary in a way. You can’t stop nobody to use social media, at the end of the day, but just be careful what you do on social media.

Jun: It’s like what my aunt says: if you can’t change someone, you gotta change yourself.

Shaka: Exactly. Be careful what you put on social media, and respect yourself, ‘cause if people seeing that you don’t respect yourself, they not gonna respect you. And they will talk shit about you, and they will fucking be creepy on you.

While Jun and Shaka are clearly bothered by “rapists” and “random creepy-ass guys” online, they both believe that women have a certain responsibility to avoid negative attention. If you post content online that shows “you don’t respect yourself”—nude, revealing, or inappropriate pictures—it is not surprising that other people will criticize you. By this logic, negative attention indicates a young woman’s lack of respect for herself. Similarly, Stacy (22, Hispanic) says,

It boggles my mind how people can just put pictures of—I don’t—I guess, provocative pictures of themselves on the Internet, or—and how that might suddenly lead to online harassment, or some creep hacking into your device, or finding your IP address, your address, your personal information. It’s just—I don’t know how people do it.

While people who hack or harass others are “creeps,” it is the individual woman’s responsibility to make sure that she is not inviting such attention by posting “provocative” pictures.

Overall, our participants took a dim view of sexy content. They criticized their peers who posted risqué images for exhibiting what they perceived as a lack of individual responsibility. This “blaming the victim” frame for sexting is common, and rooted in anxiety around acceptable female sexuality (Hasinoff, 2015). This is compounded for girls and women of color, who are often hypersexualized and painted as deviant, rather than enjoying the presumption of innocence given to white women (Collins, 2002).

Rejecting the Dominant Frame

In two areas of our informants’ lives, they broke with the dominant frame of personal responsibility: policing and workplace/public surveillance. In both domains, informants prioritized personal experience. They were unable to avoid negative consequences of policing or surveillance simply by refusing to participate or by staying out of trouble. Instead, their own experiences, and stories from friends and family, made them feel vulnerable regardless of what they did.

Police Harassment

We observed a schism between participants who believed that it is possible to avoid police harassment through appropriate behavior, and those who knew from experience that the police can and will harass people of color without a reason. Jorge is a 25-year-old Hispanic man and public-housing

resident in a heavily policed neighborhood. He is very aware that the police will bother and even arrest people who are not doing anything illegal. He, his family, close friends, and neighbors have all been subject to police harassment, so he is suspicious of the cops and avoids them whenever possible:

There's a lot of times where it's just like [police] just seem like they're just preying on the fears of people who aren't doing anything. Like, "Hey, you better be in line" black dude that's just walking down the street—who I know from my building is, like, sweetest dude ever and doesn't do anything. But they're, like, giving him a hard time just because he likes to wear big coats and baggy pants.

While Jorge has lived in public housing his whole life and knows his neighbors, the cops in his neighborhood do not. He maintains that their reliance on racial profiling and stereotypes leads them to harass innocent people. As a result, he is deeply critical of the rhetoric that one can avoid police harassment through personal action:

You know, the whole, "Oh, I'm not doing anything wrong, so I have nothing to fear," thing. I believe that, but in another way, every time I'm on a train car and there's cops just on the train car, I'll feel intensely uncomfortable. Because it's like, "Oh. They're going to find something wrong. They're going to make something up." . . . So I just don't trust the honesty of a lot of cops, because I've seen them lie.

The idea that one can avoid police harassment by following the law is proven false by Jorge's experiences with structural racism. He describes how people in his neighborhood usually hang out outside, listening to music, talking, and gossiping. When the police show up, they all disappear—not because they are doing anything illegal but because they know that the police can and will harass and even arrest brown people without cause. He says, "It's like, 'we're not doing anything wrong, but we're going to get busted for nothing'." He repeats one of his brother's favorite sayings: "Nobody sees it, nobody gets mad." Like many of our participants, Jorge often tries to be invisible as a strategy to avoid negative attention, even when he knows it does not always work.

Other young people in our sample had similar experiences. Mike (20, African American) recognizes that the police could stop him at any time

because sometimes I feel like some cops just do it for the fun of it. I don't really think they just do it because they are—they care, because I've seen—I've seen the bad things where cops will just stop others just for no reason. I've seen it before.

Diego (21, Dominican) explains,

Like I myself and like others that I'm with, like I see . . . you know, we can be loud and joking but as soon as we see like a

uniform on the corner, it's just, "Alright, like get it together, get it together." Like, anything could happen.

Like Jorge, Diego knows that the police can spin innocent behavior into something suspicious, making him feel that he lacks any control over how others interpret his actions. Our participants grew up under New York's Stop and Frisk policy, which disproportionately targeted young African-American and Latino men, the vast majority of whom were innocent (Kelley, 2016). They are aware that avoiding police harassment cannot be achieved through individual action, given the intense policing of inner-city communities and the racialized nature of the criminal justice system (Murakawa, 2014; Taylor, 2016).

Notably, several of our White or White-passing participants, who had never been stopped by police, recognized the reality of structural racism and how it impacted their friends of color. Aviva (23, white, Jewish) said,

I'm Caucasian. I'm female . . . So personally I don't feel worried when I'm like out on the street and I see a police officer. If anything I feel like they're more willing to protect me. That being said, I do have a lot of friends who aren't white, who aren't female and they have been stopped by police or harassed. And it's mindboggling to me.

Aviva not only acknowledges racism but also believes that the police are particularly willing to protect her as a White woman. She thus echoes Simone Browne's insight that contemporary regimes of ubiquitous surveillance are part of a system for the protection of whiteness, specifically the ideal of white female purity (Browne, 2015; Davis, 1981).

Participants distinguished, however, between the structural role of police officers and the politics of particular, individual police officers. A racially diverse group of participants complicated the notion of law enforcement as a machine of systemic racism with the observation that agents of police brutality may be individual "bad apples" rather than representative of the police force as a whole. According to Gregory (22, Asian American),

Behind every uniform, behind every occupation is an actual person. You can't just determine a police, right. You can't determine that the whole police department that everyone is the same. I've got quite a few officers as close friends and some of these things that they say about officers is not true but then you know, it is true to some extent to certain people who take advantage of their . . . you know, blue suits, you know, what I mean.

Gregory resists racial analyses of police brutality, instead believing that most officers are good people and those responsible for abuses hide behind the uniform of power. His connections to police officers make him more sympathetic to their point of view.

Anthony (26, African American/mixed race) is also ambivalent about police. He recognizes that there are

officers who “do care about keeping the community safer and protecting everybody,” but there are others who are “hostile,” “bitter and angry,” and inflame situations. He summarizes,

[T]here are some cops that I will get this sense of feeling of being safe around. And then, there are other cops that you look at them and you think, “I wouldn’t want that guy near me with a gun.”

Camila (17, Puerto Rican) makes a similar distinction between police like those responsible for killing Eric Garner or Trayvon Martin and “cops that are dancing with kids in the train station or the cops at Broadway Junction that just had a pizza party and they were hanging out with the kids in the neighborhood.” Notably, these participants did not deny the existence of police brutality or racial profiling; however, they saw these as acts perpetrated by individuals, who might be angry or racist, rather than outgrowths of a police system rooted in contemporary formations of racial capitalism (Camp, 2016; Robinson, 1983).

Everyday Surveillance

Many participants lived and worked in environments with heavy physical surveillance. Although most of them knew there was also surveillance online, they believed that its impacts were avoidable. This, generally, was not the case with in-person surveillance, which many informants feared. Angelique (27, biracial), for instance, told us that many of her friends “don’t give a shit” about privacy online because they do not have much to lose:

People that are broke, people that are poor or low income, they’re not going to give a shit or at least, not so much that they’re not going to give a shit, it won’t be a top concern sort of thing for them. People that are higher income it might be because they might have more to worry about, they might have invested on stuff online.

She talks about her boyfriend who lives in public housing, whose family does not think about risks online because “they wouldn’t think about it, there’s other things to do.” Instead, they fear the ubiquitous and normalized presence of law enforcement, from beat cops on the corner to floodlights on the block. “When you’re low income, there’s always kind of a certain, you’re used to surveillance in a way depending upon who you’re with, where you go, where you live.” In other words, caring about online surveillance is a class privilege; for Angelique, her boyfriend, and many of her friends, the realities of physical surveillance were more important and the consequences unavoidable. She says, “It doesn’t occur to you that it’s such a big issue or that it could be potentially so damaging because it’s like, ‘Yeah, well people are always fucking watching you, what am I going to do?’”

In our focus group, Beth (21, African American) talked about the differences between on- and offline surveillance:

I think that in the physical world it’s more intrusive and violent to be surveilled. Like you can see and feel the camera bearing down with its red dot of death. And you can feel the stare of the police officer watching you intently across the street while you’re not doing anything, just because you’re black. Whereas online that type of surveillance can be happening, maybe even more magnified, but you don’t detect it at all because it’s happening behind a screen.

To Beth, online surveillance was less visible, and thus had less emotional weight.

Surveillance is a tried and true management practice in the retail sector, which frustrated many participants. Angelique complained that she had to do a bag check at work. One day, she was accused of stealing because something she had bought from her employer was in her bag; this made her resentful. Jun (22, Chinese) worked at a toy store with intermittently functional surveillance cameras. Her friend was fired after he was filmed taking something and entering an area without a working camera immediately afterwards. “If that camera worked, it would’ve seen that he didn’t steal it. But they accused him of that. So I think those cameras really are just for show sometimes.” Jun expected that the camera would prove her friend’s innocence and was frustrated that management did not see it the same way. Although such workplace monitoring is decades old, our informants are well aware of the increased levels of surveillance in retail, public housing, and on the street. Their attitudes toward cameras pivot on whether and how surveillers use them to leverage their power and authority. Still, none expressed a sense of agency over these systems and, as a result, simply accepted such surveillance as normative.

Discussion

Some respondents drew on a language of personal responsibility to reclaim power and control in the face of often-invisible mechanisms of data collection. By staking a claim to agentic action online—even if that involved heavy self-censorship, a refusal to provide personal information, or avoiding the use of certain social media—young people were able to assert a measure of efficacy in an ever-changing milieu fraught with risk and danger. In the face of visible institutional actors, such as employers, the police, and the NYC Housing Authority, participants resisted and yet felt simultaneously powerless, vulnerable, and keenly aware of the limits of personal responsibility. Online, by contrast, our participants believed that they could prevent social actors, such as parents, friends, and others from spreading personal information without permission. This held regardless of the depth of their understanding of the data-gathering practices of invisible online actors, such as marketers, data brokers,

and governments. However, many participants described their privacy-protecting strategies, withdrawal from social media, obscuring information, or use of pseudonyms as a form of power, rather than framing a refusal to participate as an inability to control personal information. Beth explains,

And one of the other people I interviewed, he was just like, “I read all the fine print, I know that all my information’s out there anyway. This is what I agreed to, so I put it out there and I know what I’m doing. I’m cognizant of it, I’m not just doing it mindlessly.” So it’s kind of like a . . . not really resignation, but kind of putting his own agency back into it, sort of thing.

Because choosing what to share appears to be more of a choice than deciding how to physically move about public space, these participants feel as though they have more power on social media than on the street or surveilled workplace.

In emphasizing the choice to be invisible in digital environments, our informants underscored the social and economic costs of opting out of social media. Many knew that having a digital presence was important to job prospects and social opportunities. Some were aware that police and immigration officials often pay attention to the online content of low-SES youth. But they did not focus on the implications—namely that they were at a disadvantage in their ability to navigate and control how they were perceived.

In online contexts, people must “type themselves into being” (Sundén, 2003). Choosing to self-censor and limit one’s participation is a choice to be rendered invisible. While some of our participants, like Jorge, relish the ability to be invisible (in part because he is so visible to authorities face to face), this also means that he cannot easily enjoy the benefits of online participation. Drawing attention to oneself online can be a pathway to opportunity, but it has risks and costs. As a result, many young adults in precarious economic circumstances eschew real names and seek cloaks to hide their digital footprints.

Personal Responsibility Is the Only Way

The emphasis on personal responsibility in the face of structural problems is hardly new; in fact, it is a core tenet of neoliberal discourse (Marwick, 2013). For instance, in 1996 President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) into law, which he said would “end welfare as we know it” (Watts & Astone, 1997). A cornerstone of the Republican “Contract With America,” the PRWORA took aim at a purported culture of dependency, where welfare recipients supposedly enjoyed government largess and gave birth to children without a sense of responsibility for them, who then grew up seeing unmarried parenthood as normal (Watts & Astone, 1997). Crucial to this reform effort was a discourse of welfare recipients as “welfare queens” and media depictions of social

service recipients as black women which, as Cassiman (2008) argues, played on racist, sexist imaginaries. The portrayal of welfare recipients as irresponsible slatterns, rather than victims of structural forces, provided a justification for denying social services and triggered widespread rejection of collective responsibility for taking care of the less fortunate (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). Welfare reform is one example of a broader shift away from an understanding of social welfare as a public responsibility. The youth that we interviewed grew up in the shadow of these reforms; as Nancy Worth (2016) points out in her paper on millennial women and precarity, “young people have only ever known neoliberalism.”

This personal responsibility discourse that dominated welfare reform efforts is equally prevalent in discussions of privacy. In previous work, we argue that while privacy is conceptualized as *individual* in both legal discourse and social software, it is impossible for individual actors to escape the consequences of information as it moves across contexts, because privacy is *networked* (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Conceptualizing privacy as networked suggests that individual control over personal privacy is impossible, as people’s inherent connections to each other, and the contextual nature of information, are explicitly made visible through both data-driven technologies and social media. The networked properties of these technologies require people to collaborate to maintain appropriate boundaries online (Lampinen, Lehtinen, Lehmuskallio, & Tamminen, 2011) and engage in a variety of strategies and tactics to maintain their desired level of information sharing (Vitak, Blasiola, Patil, & Litt, 2015). The emergence of networked privacy is partially due to the widespread mining of personal information by marketing and government apparatuses; partly to the affordances of social technologies which facilitate context collapse and allow for slippage along the social graph; and partly because humans are social animals, and we talk about each other.

We see this disconnect as a fundamental flaw with current models of privacy education, which put the onus of responsibility on the individual. Essentially, we tell young people that many governmental and institutional actors are mining personal information, and it is up to individuals to prevent this through their own actions, regardless of their structural position. We never mention that this is impossible. Our mental model of young people as selfie-taking narcissists desperate for attention from anonymous audiences makes it possible to blame them for privacy violations, rather than passing legal protections which would protect young people from the prying eyes of governments, educational institutions, and employers.

As we have seen, several of the young people in our sample take the individual responsibility rhetoric to its logical conclusion: to blame victims for negative consequences and decry the importance of privacy protections overall. In its weakest form, the “nothing to hide” argument is easy to refute: even those who do not engage in illegal activity

probably have curtains in their house, keep their credit card number private, and cover up their naked bodies in public. Daniel Solove (2007), who has written extensively about this argument, points out that it compares the relative value of security versus privacy, as many people are willing to give up a certain amount of privacy for possibly increased security protection. However, this conflates *privacy* with *hiding bad things*. Privacy is not simply about hiding a wrong; it is key to free speech, free assembly, and a functioning democracy (Solove, 2011).

Nowhere is this more clear than when youth talk about why “nothing to hide” rhetoric breaks down vis-à-vis individual responsibility and policing. In this context, youth of color know that they are not targeted because of something that they have done but because of who they are. They feel and witness the consequences of black and brown bodies gathering in public and, even when they believe problems only emerge because of individually racist police officers, they are acutely aware that personal responsibility is rarely enough. Their tendency to emphasize personal responsibility in social media while downplaying it when talking about policing and everyday surveillance reveals a crack in the normative logic of power and agency.

It is worth considering whether *surveillance* might help to capture this collective, rather than individual, understanding. In his essay on privacy and surveillance on social media, Daniel Trottier advocates for such an approach. Given the institutional nature of online privacy violations, the language of surveillance may be more apt than that of privacy, which tends to focus on the individual (Trottier, 2012). Social media has become part of a larger surveillant apparatus, as data are mined by governments, law enforcement, marketers, data brokers, and other institutional actors, and often combined with other data sources to create comprehensive databases of personal information, what is called “Big Data” (Fuchs, Boersma, Albrechtslund, & Sandoval, 2013). Moreover, Trottier (2012) points out that the internalization of the surveillant gaze is key to surveillance theory. Among participants, not only do we observe practices of what they refer to as “ghosting” or “masking” in terms of obfuscating their internet activity, we see an active subset of young people who avoid social media entirely. Just as Brayne (2014) and others saw low-SES people avoiding interactions with public institutions, we find a subset of low-income individuals who self-censor, limit, or avoid interacting with social media for fear of negative consequences. Perhaps, the language of privacy is no longer adequate to describe the practices of young people online, particularly as low-income youth and youth of color come to face the limits of personal responsibility in allowing them to achieve power and agency in a networked ecosystem.

This study has limitations. Our population is very much grounded in NYC, and the social class of the participants cannot be de-coupled from their race, ethnicity, and immigration status. Moreover, while our findings are congruent

with others’ findings that young people actively engage in privacy-protecting practices, our participants’ actions may not be widely generalizable, given their motivated and upwardly mobile status. Future work that investigates, for instance, rural white communities that face similar economic conditions, but grapple with different challenges and expectations, would be extremely valuable.

Conclusion

Discourses of personal responsibility are grounded in a neoliberal framework that holds individuals accountable for their own structural victimization. The individualization of risk and responsibility has been a basic premise in many spheres since the dissolution of the social welfare state. The general wellbeing of citizens, even those subject to systemic discrimination, is cast as a personal matter to be resolved through reliance on informal care networks, or else through sheer grit and fortitude. The language of personal responsibility is so deeply entrenched in dominant scripts, and so shapes general conceptions of the social contract, that it can be difficult to work outside of it.

Participants in this study take up discourses of personal responsibility in various ways. Some, like Aviva and Batuk, felt that it was their personal responsibility to carefully edit and censor what they said on social media to avoid offending others. Others, like Mike, worried less about offending others and more about exposing themselves to others’ unsolicited opinions. Since they believe that by posting content they are inviting others to engage with them, they must be willing to deal with the consequences. Fatima, Shaka, and Stacy all placed the obligation on young women to resist sharing and revealing images of themselves with others. Vikrama felt that he could best promote his own professional upward mobility by carefully limiting what he shared. Diego was an autodidact who cultivated technical expertise in the name of outwitting authorities, rather than joining their ranks.

If participants seemed to accept the dominant frame that individualized risk and responsibility online, they were keenly aware of the limitations of this framework in their dealings with law enforcement. Many had personally experienced negative interactions with police or knew others who had. The discriminatory practices of cops and courts felt inescapable. Many participants, especially those living in public housing, experienced surveillance by the state on a daily basis. Most could recount stories of being unfairly targeted and felt that they could face sanction for any misstep.

The tension between these two positions is perhaps a productive one for privacy educators. The same resistance and push back that low-income youth of color growing up in NYC articulate about their experience of police harassment, a critique that is grounded in a lived experience of how the system attempts to surveil, control, and potentially punish their black and brown bodies, could be explored as it relates to participation in online spaces. Naming and calling out discriminatory

law enforcement practices is a way of claiming a sense of dignity and respect, and is the first step in building a collective counter-narrative. It is easier to name structural victimization by state agents precisely because they have a human face, unlike the larger online surveillant apparatus of which social media is a part. Privacy educators can work this tension by teasing out the parallels between the two, emphasizing the structural nature of online privacy violations.

It may seem that in drawing on a discourse of personal responsibility to describe their approaches to managing information flow in online spaces, low-income young people are acquiescing to the false notion that it is possible to fully protect one's privacy. However, we believe that when these youth deploy the language of personal responsibility, they do so with an interest to producing counter-narratives that contest dominant narratives of their victimization and irresponsibility and, instead, claim their own dignity on the basis of merit and ethical practice in fundamentally untrustworthy and unpredictable spaces. We hear this in their voices, in the fervor with which they speak, their anger, and their passion. They are speaking back to the ways that they have been positioned within privacy research, but doing so by drawing on a neoliberal framing that gives the appearance of personal power while negating the possibility of collective action.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this work was presented at the 2016 Privacy Law Scholars conference. We thank all the Privacy Law Scholars Conference (PLSC) participants, Yang Wang, Josh Scannell, Mikaela Pitcan, Alana Saulnier, and Jeffrey Lane, for their helpful advice and commentary. Special thanks to our participants for their insights and willingness to share with us.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by a grant from the Digital Trust Foundation.

Notes

- One member of our sample declined to share information on his race or ethnicity.
- Doxing is the practice of revealing someone's personal information online, which may include, the "real name" behind a pseudonym; address and phone number; and/or social security number and financial information. Doxing is often an attempt to intimidate or socially shame someone, as when journalist Adrian Chen revealed the "real name" of the controversial Reddit moderator Violentacrez or when Gamergaters worked together to reveal personal information on feminist activists (Massanari, 2015; Phillips, 2015).
- Shaka did not specify which African country he is from. He may be accustomed to American audiences not appreciating such distinctions, or perhaps his identity is more closely linked to the idea of Africa—in general—as a homeland, rather than any particular nation.

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