

Social Life and Privacy in the Age of the Internet - A Sociological Perspective

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More and more people are depending on electronic communication rather than face-to-face interactions for socialization in the age of the internet. Young people have been leading this social trend knowing their privacy is at risk. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has heightened and strengthened this social phenomenon. This paper examines the phenomenon from an accidental classroom discussion and survey through a sociological lens, and provides some understanding and explanation with a sociological perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the industrial Global North and the developing Global South are interconnected like never before with modern technology. Whether they are black or white, rich or poor, Asian or American, young digital natives grew up in a world in which it is simply natural to interact with a cell phone or an electronic device (Sun, 2009; Giddens et al., 2019). It is not uncommon for the young digital natives to interact with people more online than face-to-face.

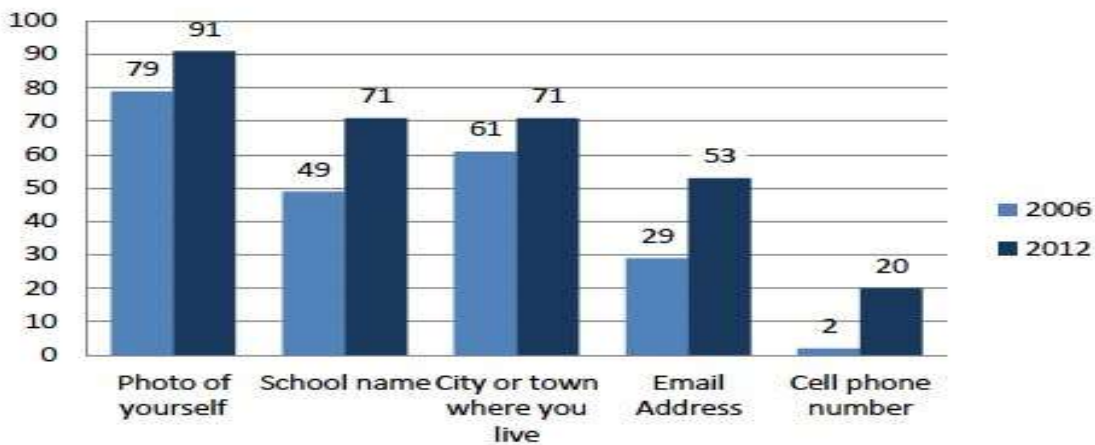
Sociology studies human behaviors as social beings, and is known in social and behavioral sciences to have many theories and perspectives that can be used to explain human social interactions and behaviors. The scope of sociology is very wide including the large-scale macrosociology and the small-scale microsociology. We are going to take a look at some sociological perspectives on why young people establish their social connections with each other in the age of the internet through an accidental teaching practice and survey which revealed some interesting aspects of the topic from a group of digital natives, and what they think of online socialization and privacy. If privacy is identified as the top disappearing or weakening cultural value per those digital natives, how do we take this to understand and explain this technological social inclusion? The following shares some findings of a classroom survey and some research results that may help us see the general from the particular, and explores some sociological underpinnings and theories to understand this phenomenon.

One day, I was teaching a class of young college students, and asked them the following random questions: “Which cultural value do you think is weakening or disappearing in our society in the age of the internet? Why, and what can you do about it?” It started as a regular classroom activity but I quickly noticed that something intriguing was happening with their responses. Out of all the 28 students in the class, 67.86% of them pointed out that privacy was the cultural value that is weakening and disappearing in our society; 10.71% of the students think marriage was the cultural value that is weakening and disappearing in our society; 7.14% of them stated religion was the cultural value that is weakening and disappearing in our society; 7.14% of them commented honesty was the cultural value that is weakening and disappearing in

our society, and 3.57% of them listed other cultural values. The unexpected statistical results got me thinking since the vast majority of the students determined privacy is weakening and disappearing. Out of those students who stated privacy is weakening and disappearing, 100% of them stated that it is because of social media. Variations of themes were drawn from their responses which showed that: 1) those young people are aware that they are sacrificing their privacy but they do not want to stop their online interactions and social life through technology. Some even say they cannot stop using social media because it is addictive; 2) they cannot stop using social media because it provides the ways and means to be connected with their friends nowadays; 3) social media provides major means to make new friends regardless of people's locations and backgrounds; 4) social media shows who is popular and they need to be in as much as possible; and 5) there is not much they can do about it but keep using social media.

I was curious if those outcomes of that classroom survey of my students are isolated opinions or if they are representative of other young digital natives of our time. In other words, are they reflecting the general from the specific as we say in sociology? So, I did some quick research of the literature on the subject, and very quickly I found studies done on teenagers using social media, and the question of privacy which demonstrated identical findings. Most notable of the studies is the one done by Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, Gasser, Duggan, and Beaton (2013). In their study, which was published by the Pew Research Center, they found, among other findings, that teens are sharing more about themselves on social media than before, and they are using social media more than before. They take steps to shape their reputation and do not express a high level of concern about third-party access to their personal data. They keep using social media because they want to stay connected with friends, and they also make new friends through social media. They don't like people sharing excessive and stressful drama but they keep using social media since they don't want to be left out in the teenage socializing. Madden and Lenhart, et al. (2013) also found out that older teens using social media more frequently share the following: 1. Photos of themselves on their profile (94% older teens vs. 82% of younger teens). 2. Their school name (76% vs. 56%). 3. Their relationship status (66% vs. 50%). 4. Their cell phone number (23% vs. 11%). See Figure 1 from their published study.

Social media profiles: What teens post — 2006 vs. 2012



Source: Pew Internet Parent/Teen Privacy Survey, July 26-September 30, 2012. n=802 teens ages 12-17. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones. Margin of error for results based on teen social media users is +/- 5.1 percentage points. Comparison data for 2006 comes from the Pew Internet Parents & Teens Survey, October 23-November 19, 2006. n=487 teens with a profile online. Margin of error is +/- 5.2 percentage points.

Figure 1. Social media profiles: What teens post--2006 vs. 2012. Reprinted from *Teens, social media, and privacy*, by Madden and Lenhart, et al. May 21, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2013/05/21/teens-social-media-and-privacy/> Copyright 2013 by Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.

So, what do sociological theories have to say about young digital natives using social media? Why do young people continue to use social media knowing they are sacrificing their privacy? Since it appears that technology enabled social media is the new form of modern “face-to-face” interaction to the digital natives, we can use the interactionist theory or the symbolic interactionist approach to explain and understand it at the micro level.

First of all, humans are social creatures and social interaction is just part of our everyday life. Indeed, we humans have a true need for social interactions. For example, people may feel a sense of emptiness or even despair if not having been heard by someone or having listened to somebody else.

Secondly, we learn about ourselves, what other people think of ourselves, which confirms who we are and what we are, through regular, sometimes very trivial routine encounters and social interactions (Goffman, 1973). For example, our daily greetings and chat-chats are important encounters to affirm and influence ourselves and each other in this process.

Thirdly, socialization and social interaction shape and influence people’s values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. They therefore lead to patterns of expected thinking and behaviors. For example, we gain perspectives and adjust our behaviors and mentality based on our socialization and interactions with others.

Fourthly, social media allows people to remain in the back stage instead of risking the possibility of ruining their expected personal image in the front stage, therefore makes personal impression management a lot easier. Sometimes, it even allows people to create unreal identities or personal images people desire to show or to be seen. For example, People have time to think and compose first, and then response in a later time of their choice in social media; people sometimes post images of themselves that are modified or “photo-shopped” or shot in a certain fashion or place; people can choose to only show what they want other people to see; some people post misinformation or fake images that are not their own.

Fifthly, social media allows people to redefine time and space, to bridge both physical and social distance. For example, some students reported that they are able to connect with friends from afar, and make new friends around the world and from different social classes and walks of life that they would otherwise never meet. Social media enables them to create relationships and share feelings and information they would otherwise not have or feel comfortable doing in face-to-face settings or situations.

According to the symbolic interactionist approach, social life is constructed through the interactions and socialization of individuals, and those interactions and socialization gain meaning, and reflect back to shape the behaviors of the individuals in our everyday life. Accordingly, it will only change if we consciously change the way we interact with others and ourselves. We can go back and take a look at the three basic tenets of the symbolic interaction theory. First, we act toward the objects we encounter in life based on our understanding of their meaning. Second, those objects have no inherent meaning, but are based on what we think of them. Third, the meaning of those objects can change through our interaction with them (Garfinkel, 1963); Blumer, 1969; Glass, 2009; Ferris & Stein, 2020). Using the symbolic interactionist theory, we can see young people getting into a new form of interaction, getting influenced by their friends and peers and other groups, attach meanings and values to the substance and behaviors and reshape their own behaviors and images in the process. By participating in the social interactions of social media, young people create and make meaning in their interactions, and get a sense of belonging, affiliation, and personal identification in the process.

We all live in a society where shared beliefs, values, and norms give rise to similar expected behaviors, creating more shared perceptions and experiences that are almost universal. We learn the meaning of our own perceptions and behaviors through social interactions with others. In turn, we use these understandings and expectations to guide our own social interactions and influence others. Human beings are culturally bound by space, time, norms and symbols according to the symbolic interactionist theory. People develop a sense of self based on the interactions with other people and how other people viewed them. The feedback and interpretations they receive come around to reinforce, shape, and enhance people’s self-image and self-action.

To sum it up through a symbolic interactionist lens, young people grew up with technology and feel natural to use technological tools to interact. That is how they see and understand the world and how social interactions should be for them in the age of the internet. Therefore, they socialize by delving into their

social interactions through social media, and acted through their understanding, interpretation and intention while using social media, and develop or reinforce their understanding of themselves and their social world fully knowing the risk of privacy in the process. And while learning and reaffirming their own selves by interpreting the meaning created in social media through the eyes of the others, developing their awareness of social norms and values for their own self-consciousness and identity, and reflecting on their social interactions and experiences, young people are also shaping and influencing others in their social interaction experiences and enhancing the utility of social media in the age of the internet.

Indeed, internet technology and electronic communication have changed the way people interact and many personal controls are lost in the process. Technology is impacting our social lives like never before. With the new COVID-19 pandemic currently going on right now, teenagers as well as adults are turning to social media for socialization and interaction at an unprecedented rate. In fact, social media is becoming the main way or form of human socialization and interaction people rely upon now in the wake of social distancing and stay at home mandates and orders. Zoom is the new face that joined the social media interaction form amidst all things in this new era, and is booming and surpassing the other forms of electronic communication. The current phenomenon demonstrates the essence of our sociological theory and the essence of the changing meaning and the changing world. There are many ways to examine people's interactions and behaviors through symbolic interactionist, and other sociological approaches. Sociology can help us understand our human behaviors and aspects of our lives better and help us shape them in this changing world.

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