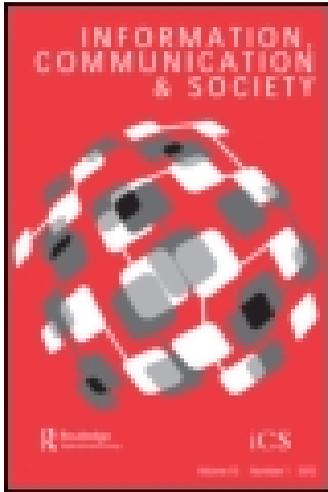


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Publisher: Routledge

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Information, Communication & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rics20>

Follow the rules and no one will get hurt: performing boundary work to avoid negative interactions when using social network sites

Brian Miller^a & Peter Munday^b

^a Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Wheaton College, 501 College Avenue, Wheaton, IL 60187, USA

^b Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA

Published online: 13 Aug 2014.

To cite this article: Brian Miller & Peter Munday (2014): Follow the rules and no one will get hurt: performing boundary work to avoid negative interactions when using social network sites, Information, Communication & Society, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2014.946433](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.946433)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.946433>

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Follow the rules and no one will get hurt: performing boundary work to avoid negative interactions when using social network sites

Brian Miller^{a*} and Peter Munday^b

^a*Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Wheaton College, 501 College Avenue, Wheaton, IL 60187, USA;* ^b*Department of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA*

(Received 10 September 2013; accepted 10 July 2014)

Social network sites (SNSs), like Facebook, have widespread appeal among emerging adults, yet they also present the potential for negative interactions. Interviews ($N = 227$) with emerging adults from Wave 3 of the National Study of Youth and Religion reveal the boundary work emerging adults undergo to limit negative SNS interactions and how they navigate the dynamic and permeable boundaries between positive and negative interactions. This work includes following three informal rules meant to limit negative interactions: do not share excessive personal information, do not spy on or stalk other users, and make online friendships with people one already knows. Several important implications result from this boundary work: crossing boundaries can have negative offline and online consequences, following the informal rules helps stabilize SNS communities by limiting the potential and severity of harmful interactions, and SNS may be popular among emerging adults but some disenchantment is not uncommon and some emerging adults may not use SNS as a result.

Keywords: social network sites; emerging adults; symbolic boundaries; boundary work; social interaction

Introduction

Research on social networking or ‘social network’ (boyd & Ellison, 2008) sites (SNS) has burgeoned in recent years with explorations of how these sites allow for impression management and identity formation (Goffman, 1959, 1967), along with forms of self-expression and presentation (Bobkowski, 2008; Bobkowski & Kalyanaraman, 2010; Bobkowski & Pearce, 2011; boyd, 2007, 2008a, 2008c; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Liu, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Utz, 2010; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Recent research on emerging adulthood (generally viewed as 18–29 years old) helpfully illuminates the broader cultural context of this transitional period between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Clydesdale, 2007; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Herzog, 2011; Smith & Snell, 2009; Twenge, 2006; Wuthnow, 2007). Less clear in the extant literature are how SNS users, that is emerging adults more specifically, negotiate the symbolic boundaries between positive and negative online interactions, the opportunities and risks associated with Internet use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010), and the informal norms guiding participation in online communities that are increasingly centres of socialization and identity development (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011).

*Corresponding author. Email: brian.miller@wheaton.edu

This study examines the means by which persons in the first half of emerging adulthood (18–23 years old) understand and navigate the fluid boundaries around positive and negative SNS interactions. Our research question is as follows: *What are the informal rules governing SNS use among emerging adults that encourage positive interactions and limit negative interactions?* By informal rules we mean *cultural norms and schemas* (Sewell, 1992) *not formally imposed by SNS procedures or the SNS user interface.*

Interviews with 227 emerging adults, a unique and large qualitative data set regarding SNS use, from Wave 3 of the mixed-methods National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) revealed three informal rules designed to limit negative interactions when using SNS: *do not share excessive personal information, do not spy on or stalk other users, and make online friendships with people one already knows.* Our analysis of these interviews shows the guiding principle behind these informal rules and the boundary work accompanying them is to avoid negative interactions. Our findings suggest that transgressing these fluid and permeable boundaries often has negative consequences for both online and offline relationships, resulting in some disenchantment with SNS, and even prompting a small subset of emerging adults to avoid using SNS at all.

Literature review

In this study, we build on literature about the positive and negative aspects of SNS participation based on the options or affordances SNS presents users (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Norman, 2009), as well as the concept of boundary work (Gieryn, 1983; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Emerging adults and other SNS users are drawn to SNS platforms like Facebook because they are an enchanting technology offering personalized, user-generated content (Jurgenson, 2010). SNS communities allow participants relatively free reign to create, customize, and maintain their own persona. Online profiles can be sanitized to avoid displaying incriminating or socially unacceptable content and present only an idealized version of the user. Thus, SNS represents a liberating means of customizing online self-presentation, impression management, and doing identity work (Bobkowski, 2008; Bobkowski & Kalyanaraman, 2010; Bobkowski & Pearce, 2011; boyd, 2007, 2008a, 2008c; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Liu, 2008; Utz, 2010; Walther et al., 2008).

As they maintain an online presence, SNS users are able to both observe and consume information and social interactions, as well as participate in and help shape these interactions (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Song, 2010). Pempek et al. (2009, p. 237) argue that SNS enables ‘users to become the producers and stars of their productions as they create their own profiles and observe those of others’. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) similarly note that Web 2.0 technologies, like Facebook, facilitate both production and consumption online, giving ‘prosumers’ agency to create while also consuming the products of others.

SNS is also attractive for staying in touch with a broad network of current and past acquaintances by fostering bonding, maintained, and bridging social capital (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, & Vittek, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, and Espinoza (2008) uncover significant crossover between emerging adults’ online and offline interactions as SNS positively facilitates offline socialization, relational connectedness, and social activities. Studies also show that SNS use among most emerging adults and members of the general population is primarily a way of maintaining existing relationships than a means of finding new friends (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007; Pempek et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008).

While SNS has many enchanting affordances, studies also reveal that the very features and opportunities that make SNS appealing can also lead to risks (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010).

The mass media highlights stories of the dangers facing young and naive SNS users (Holmes, 2009), and there is evidence that young Internet users are more at risk for cybercrimes than older users (Oksanen & Keipi, 2013). Jurgenson (2010, pp. 168–169) argues the rules built into the Facebook user-interface limit customization and encourage homogeneity by applying the principles of McDonaldization, like routinization, to socializing. Additionally, SNS can be considered inefficient in that users spend more time with weak relationships that in the past would have simply been lost, and users are inefficient in their constant and habitual use of such sites. In short, SNS has the potential to lead to a rationalized version of relationships.

Concerns about online privacy are common among users (boyd, 2008b; boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Brake, 2008; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Fogel & Nehmad, 2008; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Livingstone, 2008). boyd, for example, identifies teenage conscientious objectors to SNS (boyd, 2007, p. 121), describes user's perceived invasion of privacy with the emergence of Facebook's News Feed (boyd, 2008b), documents the user-articulated drawbacks of the less hierarchical social networks created by Friendster, and shows how Friendster users with excessive numbers of online friends are often viewed in a pejorative light (boyd, 2008c). Livingstone (2008) similarly finds some critical sentiment among teenage users regarding the limitations of SNS in classifying different types and/or levels of friends, confusion over privacy settings, and general concerns about privacy, especially regarding parents. Given these concerns, it is unsurprising that scholars have identified the emergence of rules, norms, and boundaries for appropriate SNS practices (boyd, 2008c; Brake, 2008), which parallels research on best practices and cultural rules for eDating (Hardey, 2008).

While the growth of SNS has led numerous researchers to examine the advantages and pitfalls of SNS use, it is less clear in the literature how users negotiate these trade-offs. The enchanting and disenchanting aspects of SNS, specifically how they are related to positive and negative interactions, represent a set of symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) that users learn about to negotiate, enforce, and alter. This process of developing and negotiating patterns of SNS behavior is summed up by the term boundary work (Gieryn, 1983). Although sites like Facebook offer *formal* restrictions on what users can and cannot do, there is much room for individual users to follow *informal* rules that they can transgress, follow, and attempt to enforce.

Performing boundary work involving social interactions (as opposed to more mental work involved in boundary maintenance – see Zerubavel, 1991) can lead to positive and negative consequences. Goffman (1959, 1967) argued everyday life consisted of a series of shifts by individuals as they moved between roles and played different parts depending on the boundaries specified by changing social contexts. Boundary work is often associated with an increase or decrease in emotional energy (Collins, 2004) that can either energize or drain an individual or a group. Hochschild (2003) emphasized the emotional toll exacted on persons by adhering to a social role established by symbolic boundaries in consistent interactions. For example, flight attendants are asked to maintain certain physical appearances and to smile constantly to provide better customer service.

Research about boundaries involving online interactions suggests that the boundary between home and work (Nippert-Eng, 1996) is blurred by SNS and other technologies that are present in both spaces (Berkowsky, 2013; Salaff, 2002). Shaw (2012) shows how online communities rely on gatekeeping undertaken by certain community members in order to establish boundaries for interaction – determining who's in and out – which can lead to status inequality.

While studies have examined online impression management intended to put a good image forward (Goffman, 1959, 1967), little research has examined how SNS users respond to unsettled online spaces (Swidler, 1986) – the grey areas between what sometimes appear to be clear symbolic boundaries. Swidler (1986, 2001) suggests actors will first use existing cultural approaches to the problems they face in unsettled situations. For example, as online platforms change, users

have to alter their approaches to online privacy. Regardless, users are likely to have some idea how to respond as privacy is a modern concern both offline and online. And yet, the need for innovation invariably arises because interacting with other users online is not necessarily controllable, meaning users are confronting new situations. As relationships change both online and offline, often together with the overlap of both realms (Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008), users may have to alter their approaches on the fly.

Building on these bodies of research, we specify how emerging adults perform boundary work on SNS, a generally underdeveloped area of research (Lewis et al., 2008). We argue this boundary work limits the negative interactions that are a primary factor in dissatisfaction with SNS. We next discuss the NSYR data and how we measured the different expressions of dissatisfaction that emerging adults expressed regarding SNS use.

Data and methods

Our study is based on 227 interviews from Wave 3 of the NSYR (Smith & Snell, 2009, pp. 309–314 for more information on Wave 3 methodology). This NSYR wave included in-depth interviews with 230 of the third wave telephone survey respondents, of whom 227 were asked about SNS use.

The in-person interviews occurred between 1 and 12 months after Wave 3 telephone survey ended (2532 telephone surveys were completed in Wave 3 with a 77.1% response rate) and were completed between May and September 2008. Twelve interviewers conducted interviews in 35 states throughout the West, South, Northeast, and Midwest. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, averaging 135 minutes with the shortest lasting 40 minutes and the longest 272 minutes. Most were conducted in public locations (e.g. library study rooms, coffee shops, and restaurants). Interviewees ranged between 18 and 23 years in age with an average age of 20.5. One hundred and fifty-one of the interviewees were holdovers from the original Wave 1 stratified quota sample of 267 (see Smith & Denton, 2005, pp. 302–307 for Wave 1 methodology) and 79 were telephone survey respondents who had never been interviewed in Waves 1 or 2. While the interview sample itself is not nationally representative of American emerging adults, the stratified quota sample reflects significant regional, religious, racial, age, sex, and socioeconomic status variation (Smith & Snell, 2009, p. 319).

While the interviews asked about a range of topics including family life, religious beliefs and practices, and future goals, of particular interest for this study are the multiple expressions of informal rules and boundary work involved with SNS use that emerged from questions about SNS use found at the end of the interview section on 'Friends'. If respondents said they used SNS websites like Facebook or Myspace, they were then asked: How frequently do you log on to those types of sites and how much time do you typically spend on putting together and managing your online profile(s)? How do you use your social networking sites? Why did you create (an) online profile(s)? Do you keep your profile public or private? What type of information do you share about yourself on your profile(s)? Have you ever had any concerns about what you have posted online, privacy-wise? Do you know personally most of the people who are your online 'friends' or are there people that you have never met in-person? How similar or different is your online 'self' from who you are in real life, offline, and in-person? Emerging adults who do not use SNS are also included in our analysis as they were often asked follow-up questions regarding their lack of participation.

The analysis of the interviews began as the second author, who conducted several of the interviews in-person, read through transcripts of the interview section on SNS and noticed some statements of dissatisfaction with SNS use from emerging adults. The coding process began by both authors inductively coding significant portions of the interviews in Atlas.Ti. We then compared

codes and resolved differences in coding across the same interviews. Finally, the first author coded all of the interviews and the results are presented in the next section. No a priori codes were employed; the informal rules and interviewee disenchantment were deducted from the data. Throughout the coding process, we utilized grounded theory, which emphasizes looking for emergent themes in the data and then narrowing the findings to common or key themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results

The 227 interviews confirmed that SNS membership and use are common among emerging adults: 85.5% of Wave 3 interviewees used SNS (compared to 76.3% of the 2528 respondents in the NSYR Wave 3 nationally representative telephone survey – see Table 1). In terms of SNS usage, 36% of interviewees say they use SNS once a day or more (compared to 42.5% in the NSYR Wave 3 telephone survey – see Table 2).

The interviews also illustrate how young Americans are at times disenchanted with SNS and often mention pitfalls associated with these online communities and the need for a set of informal rules to govern them (Table 3). By disenchantment, we mean *the feelings of discontent or discomfort many emerging adults express about their own SNS use and that of their peers*. The three most frequently cited forms of disenchantment were: (1) posting personal or incriminating material (34.4% of respondents); (2) spying on or stalking people through SNS (20.3%); and (3) unwanted friends or contacts (17.2%). These pitfalls were mentioned by a broad range of interviewees: while 57 interviewees (25.11%) had no mention of disenchantment, 64 (28.19%) mentioned 1 issue, 43 (18.94%) mentioned 2, 31 (13.66%) mentioned 3, and 31 (15.4%) mentioned 4 or more. Overall, the mean was 1.87 and the median was 1.00. We argue that emerging adults employ a variety of strategies to deal with SNS disenchantment and the boundaries between positive and negative interactions.

Three informal rules of SNS use

In response to the troubling aspects of SNS, emerging adults often mentioned a set of informal norms and rules that guide their SNS behavior and limit negative interactions with other users: (1) Not sharing too much information, particularly if too personal or possibly incriminating; (2) Not using SNS in order to spy on or stalk someone; and (3) primarily ‘friending’ people you already know. Sites like Facebook or Myspace have *formal* procedures which must be followed (e.g. ‘friending’ involves a friendship request from one user and an affirmation by another), but there is a lot of leeway in terms of presenting information, who one can friend,

Table 1. Type of SNS used by NSYR Wave 3 interview respondents.

Type of SNS used	% Respondents (<i>N</i>)
Do not use SNS	15.0 (34)
Use both Facebook and Myspace	22.9 (52)
Facebook use only	35.7 (81)
Myspace use only	22.5 (51)
Myspace plus another SNS	1.8 (4)
Unclear which SNS they use	2.6 (6)
Total	227

Note: *N* = 227 as three interviews did not contain questions about SNS use.

Table 2. Frequency of SNS use by NSYR Wave 3 interview respondents who use SNS.

Frequency of use	% Respondents (N)
Daily or more	42.0 (81)
A few times a week/every few days	17.1 (33)
Rarely (once a week or less)	27.5 (53)
Unclear	13.5 (26)
Total	193

Note: N = 193 not all interview respondents are members of a SNS.

and what happens in interactions. Thus, users tend to follow *informal* rules that help them avoid negative interactions.

By far, the informal rule mentioned by the most participants is *not sharing certain information because it is too personal or possibly incriminating*. While several respondents suggest they do share all their information, many others suggest limits to information sharing. Several respondents indicate hearing about what can happen to people online and mention stalkers, sexual predators, ‘abductions and stuff’, and ‘crazy dateline stories’. Respondents also note how excessive self-disclosure can create social ‘drama’ in addition to getting in trouble with employers and school administrators. Knowing negative outcomes are possible, and many emerging adults make decisions about curtailing their own online information sharing. This often includes not putting their address or cell phone number on their profile.

Related to the idea of not sharing certain kinds of information, the second informal rule governing SNS use is *not using SNS in order to spy on or stalk someone*, which is frowned upon and often deemed ‘creepy’ behavior by emerging adults. While information sharing is a key feature of participating in SNS, particularly in order to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007), emerging adults often suggest a line demarcating excessive sharing can be crossed (though this line is not necessarily the same as cybercrime – see Oksanen & Keipi, 2013).

The issue of sharing information, as well as using this posted information against people, is dependent on who can see such information – which leads to the third rule: *primarily ‘friend’ people you already know*. Most respondents claim they personally know most, if not all, of their online friends in the offline world. As found by others, most SNS users do not participate

Table 3. Disenchantment with SNS use expressed by NSYR Wave 3 interview respondents.

SNS rules and disenchantment codes	% Respondents (N)
Concerned about SNS addiction	15.0 (34)
Concerned about privacy (overt)	15.0 (34)
Conflict with people within SNS or due to SNS	15.9 (36)
Dislike SNS/think it is silly/are reluctant user	9.3 (21)
Once used it more/are now more bored with it	14.1 (32)
Others share/use too much	10.6 (24)
Posting personal or incriminating material	34.4 (78)
Problems/concerned with posted pictures	14.5 (33)
Rather interact with people in other ways	9.7 (22)
Spying/stalking	20.3 (46)
Unwanted friends/contacts	17.2 (39)

Note: Respondents could indicate more than one concern so the N is greater than 227, the number of interviews that included questions about SNS use.

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in SNS to find new groups of friends (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Typical responses include: ‘I don’t ask people that I don’t know because that totally freaks me out’ and ‘But, yeah, I mean, I know everybody that I’m friends with. It’s not like I meet random people on Facebook. You know what I mean?’ A 19-year-old female links unsolicited friend requests from strangers to news stories about how such contacts ended badly:

I know before Facebook when I had MySpace, I just didn’t trust it because the people, the strangers who friended you, were usually creepy people, and you see on the news, people who get lured through MySpace and stuff, that just freaks me out so I just don’t wanna get myself into a situation like that.

When contacted by unknown users, respondents suggest two primary courses of action: not reciprocating the friendship and setting their profile to private. At the same time, many also admit they have at least a few online friends (sometimes expressed as a small number of friends or a small percentage) they have never met in person. Overall, emerging adults say that adding ‘random’ or ‘unknown’ friends is to be avoided altogether or done on a limited basis.

On the whole, these rules guide users’ activities and appear to be primarily tied to maintaining relationships and avoiding negative interactions. Because information, particularly personal or possibly incriminating information, can easily be restricted to being viewed only by friends, guidelines regarding establishing online friendships are critical. If a user happens to become friend with a wrong person, or someone who could use such information against them, then the user could be harmed.

The boundary work involved with the informal rules of SNS use

While these three informal rules help guide user’s actions, there is considerable space around these boundaries, which are fluid and permeable, dependent on the context and who the user is interacting with, as well as being relatively easy to cross without formal sanctions.

Returning to the first rule regarding not posting too much personal information, many emerging adults comment about the potential problems with photographs posted on SNS. Photos function as a critical tool for keeping in touch as others can see changes in one’s life, such as having children and getting married. However, the posted photos also have a downside: respondents articulate the need to consistently monitor and censor what photos are online and in which ones they are ‘tagged’ (in Facebook, users can link profiles to images) to avoid drawing attention to less-than-desirable activities. One 21-year-old male discusses photographs and impression management as he prepares to enrol in law school:

I don’t want any law students that I am going to be with getting the first impression of me through a web page. You know, they’re gonna see me with, like, girls and guys and think he’s probably just your typical frat boy. I don’t want them thinking that.

He therefore removes pictures ‘where I look really drunk’. A number of respondents note how photographs can lead to inaccurate impressions based on a few photos. Users worry other users will make assumptions about them from a relatively small amount of visual information. In the words of a 21-year-old male,

My pictures are taken Friday and Saturday, it’s not showing what I do Sunday through Thursday, so it only captures the social aspect of your – the bars, the parties, so you know, it’s not an accurate depiction of who I am ...

While posted photos may give the wrong impression, what exactly constitutes spying or stalking is ambiguous. One 21-year-old female suggests information gathering can be helpful:

[laughing] Some people really do use it like they meet a person and they immediately go and they research everything about them and they use that to know how to approach them the next time, which is, I mean, possible and it's just, it's strange. But I mean, it's smart. Like you know, you'll probably be better at like making them like you if you like, are like, 'Oh I love jazz. You like jazz? Oh you do, yeah.'

Users expect others are checking them out online and plan accordingly. One 20-year-old female says that she thinks employers should look at profiles because you can read them and 'you can tell what the person's values are'. Some low-level spying is thus acceptable to many users who see SNS as a useful tool for finding out information they currently do not know about people.

In contrast, others give examples of excessive spying. Excessive gathering of information online might lead directly to dangerous in-person interaction, as a 19-year-old female suggests:

I don't want just anybody just be looking at me. They can know all types of things about me, and I don't even know who they are. Next thing you know, they could be sitting there, staring at me from across the street of my house, stalking me.

A few respondents who are or were in dating relationships say they or their significant other checked up on the other's profile. But more common are responses like that of a 19-year-old male who specifically distances himself from stalking: 'You know I'm not like a Facebook stalker, while I sit there and it's not usually where I'll go and like, hunt down every aspect in someone's life that I haven't been in touch with for a while ...' Where exactly the line is drawn between friendly catching-up and stalking is unclear, but many emerging adults are aware there is a line that can be crossed.

In addition to avoiding posting incriminating photos and not stalking other users, emerging adults generally friend people they know offline, but there is one way this informal norm can be broken: if there is a possibility that the two SNS users might cross paths. One such situation is while attending college, a social space where filtering mechanisms limit who is on campus. A number of respondents say, similar to this 18-year-old male, they started friending people before arriving on campus:

[I]n the past I had a rule where I kinda have to know the person to accept them as a friend. Lately I've been making exceptions for that because a lot of people have been adding me as a friend who are going to be going to [name of school] next year and everything, so people [I] haven't met yet, but it'll be people I'll get to know hopefully.

This attitude carries over into campus life. One 22-year-old male says in response to a question about how many of his online friends are 'actual friends' that he may see on campus:

I mean, at [name of school] it's small enough, there's maybe 900 students, so it's small enough that you pass the same guy to class enough times and you say 'what's up?' And then he has you on Facebook and then it's like okay, well we're friends now. That's by far the majority of my Facebook friends.

Here we see how the line between who can become an online friend is often drawn at people who might be considered 'random', someone to whom the user has no prior connection. But, what is 'random' may differ depending on the context, such as sharing a college campus.

Beyond these three main rules, users navigate other issues on SNS related to negative interactions. This can involve perceived negative actions on the part of other SNS users: either sharing too much information or spending too much time on SNS. For example, a 22-year-old male says that ‘some people describe themselves too much’. A 20-year-old female explains her SNS use compared with others who she suggests are ‘self-absorbed’, adding: ‘It’s like, look, I’ve got like a class, and homework, and life – I really can’t comment on your pictures.’ A 22-year-old female decides not to emulate her friends:

Like, because my friends would be hooked on them, and that’s – they’d be checking on people’s information. I’m like, “That’s kind of an invasion of privacy.” Even though people put it out there, people, like, really overanalyze stupid stuff. So I was like, “I’m gonna stay away from that”.

These emerging adults make judgments about other users, but what exactly is excessive or too much use is left to individual users to decide.

While some emerging adults criticize the SNS use of others, a group of users admit their more frequent SNS use and describe themselves as ‘addicted’. According to a 19-year-old female, ‘I guess that is my downfall. Facebook is my downfall. It is addictive.’ Less frequent SNS users sometimes clearly distance themselves from excessive users, or describe how they used to be addicted but have intentionally cut back. One 20-year-old male user says, ‘But I’m not like on there where some people spend hours and hours and hours on end on that thing. It’s just not worth it to me.’

Some emerging adults recognize that spending too much time on SNS limits offline activities. A 22-year-old male user describes how the excessive SNS use of his significant other detracts from their relationship:

[She] uses it every day, probably more than twice a day, and it’s kind of annoying to me. I’m always looking over and she’s always on the computer going on Facebook. I’m like, “What the heck are you doing? I’m right here. Hello.”

A 19-year-old non-user says he recently deleted his Facebook account because of the amount of time it took up: ‘So, I think that had a lot [to do] with me letting it go, because when you get on the Internet, that’s the first thing you go to, you’ll stay there for, and waste all your time.’ Identifying when a user has crossed the line between regular use to addiction is generally ambiguous and there is little appeal to outside or expert opinions on the subject.

The consequences of negative SNS interactions extend beyond the online realm. For example, several emerging adults explain how romantic partners could be unhappy with their partner’s online interactions. A 19-year-old male says he now uses SNS less because of the reaction of his current girlfriend:

I just never checked it because she’s kind of like the one that gets kind of pissy like, “Why are you writing her and stuff?” Like my ex-girlfriend would text me and stuff, she got mad. So, I just kind of dropped out of that.

Others note how changing offline circumstances – perhaps a new job, busyness with college homework and organizations, or getting married – alters online behavior and interactions. One 19-year-old female describes the divergent paths of her friends after high school graduation: ‘But then we all, they graduated and I got married, it was like they went off to college and so it was like, it wasn’t a big deal.’ Here we see the multiple social spaces affected by SNS interaction and how life stage changes may alter SNS cultural norms.

While a clear majority of emerging adults use SNS, having to negotiate all of these rules and ambiguities leads some users to participate reluctantly or to not participate at all. A small percentage of emerging adults say they dislike participating in SNS or find it silly, but still find reasons to use it. One 22-year-old male illustrates this tension when he answers ‘reluctantly’ when asked if he uses SNS:

R: I have Facebook. And I occasionally send people a message on it or check it. But I prefer email, and even with email, and even with phone calls, I find it kind of scattering to try to keep up a lot of different relationships all over the country. It prevents you from really being able to sink down into one relationship ...

I: So why do you even have Facebook then?

R: Because I do have a number of friendships that are valuable to me that I don’t want to lose track of. And also because it’s really not a lot of trouble.

A 20-year-old female expresses how she dislikes Facebook but still uses it to keep up with friends while ‘gritting my teeth’. Another 22-year-old male makes a similar argument:

I use Facebook, and I really, really want to get rid of it I swear. Like, I just want to like just delete my account and everything. But, you know, it’s amazing that you feel so connected to something that is completely fake. Everything lives through the Internet. And it really lives, though, I feel because that’s what becomes your lifeline to everyone else.

These reluctant users still see some upside to participating in SNS, but they are very aware of the multiple tensions and boundaries to be negotiated.

Going even further, 15% of interviewees (this is 7% lower than 22% who do not use SNS according to the NSYR Wave 3 telephone survey) say they do not use SNS at all. This lack of participation is prompted by a lack of access (Hargittai, 2010) for several interviewees (and differences in resources and social class could be related differences in online skills – see Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). But most non-users say they do not feel the need to take their friendships to the online realm. A 20-year-old male non-SNS user says he thinks SNS is ‘superficial’ and that he has ‘better things to do with my time’. One 21-year-old female describes Myspace, and her reasons for deleting her profile, this way: ‘It’s kind of like a weapon. When you get mad at someone and you delete them from your page or somebody posts a nasty comment and then it just gets out of hand.’ A 21-year-old male non-user says: ‘I find online communication is a pretty poor substitute for talking to people, and it seems like a waste of time in general.’ Many of the non-users articulate some of the same troubles as users, but this has pushed them to not participate in an activity that many of their peers see as normal.

Discussion and conclusion

For most American emerging adults, SNS use is common and often integrated into their daily lives (Ellison et al., 2007; Pempek et al., 2009; Pew Internet, 2012). However, the NSYR Wave 3 interviews show that many emerging adults have concerns about SNS. One specific set of opportunities and risks (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010) in SNS use involves interactions with other users. To reduce the risk of negative interactions and their consequences, emerging adults follow three informal rules: limiting what information they share with other users, not going over the line by using online information to find out too much about others, and generally limiting their online relationships to people they know or are aware of offline. Following and enforcing the informal rules involves much boundary work as the rules are dynamic and

somewhat malleable due in large part to the fluidity of human interaction. Not all SNS users follow one or all of these rules together. There remains significant ambiguity regarding where exactly the boundaries for the rules lie, how they are enforced, and what to do if they are violated.

While the discovery of these rules provides a better understanding of how emerging adults negotiate interaction risks on SNS (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010), the boundary work around these informal rules reveals four other important implications regarding SNS use. First, not all emerging adults respond in the same way to negative interactions and the boundary work users undertake. While there are common techniques in the SNS user repertoire (Swidler, 1986, 2001) for avoiding negative interactions – especially following the three rules outlined above – specific responses to negative interactions are often left to the individual user to handle (outside of overt cases that SNS platforms address). For most users, following one or more of the informal rules and performing the necessary boundary work makes SNS use palatable, but a sizable minority are reluctant users and some do not use SNS at all because of the challenges of online interaction. Ultimately, the fate of SNS may rest on the willingness of users to continue to participate in consistent boundary work delineating between positive and negative interactions, which can be taxing and sometimes uncomfortable.

As emerging adults react to this boundary work differently, the consequences for crossing these boundaries are enacted both online and offline. Overlap between the online and offline worlds is common for emerging adults (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008) who frequently recognize how online actions can positively and negatively influence their friendships, romantic relationships, interactions with family, career ambitions, and social standing in their offline contexts such as school and work (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Lehdonvirta & Räsänen, 2011; Oksanen & Keipi, 2013). As seen above, emerging adult users are generally aware of this tight connection between offline and online relationships and adjust their online behavior accordingly.

A third aspect finding regarding the boundary work surrounding negative SNS interactions is that it illustrates Swidler's (1986) concept of unsettled space. Swidler argues that when existing cultural repertoires of action are insufficient for new situations, actors develop new repertoires, of which the three informal rules we describe are representative, as are the more individual-level approaches unique users adopt. Moving from individuals to organizations, we can see these new repertoires in the development of new SNS platforms to compete with Facebook, Myspace, and earlier SNS. Twitter dispenses with needing to accept or reject friends and instead allows for subscribers. Snapchat circumvents the problem of incriminating information by sending self-destructing photos. Chatroulette skirts the issue of 'friending' others and randomly connects users for very short periods of time (which, unsurprisingly, can lead to negative interactions). Performing and responding to boundary work can lead to innovation as different platforms offer unique built-in boundaries compared to their competitors.

Accompanying the boundary work surrounding unsettled spaces are the many transitions facing emerging adults (Smith & Snell, 2009). The malleable rules that govern SNS may be uniquely well suited for the values and behaviors of emerging adults – a demographic that desires communities with fluid boundaries. Smith and Snell (2009, p. 74) suggest that 'emerging adults [may] be progressing yet further toward the nearly total submersion of self into fluidly constructed, private networks of technologically managed intimates and associates'. SNS communities allow emerging adults to share whatever parts of reality they choose with whomever they choose and to maintain relationships with little input or sustained interaction. When users do choose to participate, they can develop relationships without needing to be physically present or provide the focus required of face-to-face interaction (Collins, 2004; Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 11).

SNS thus offers a style of community very different than face-to-face interaction –allowing for an efficient, customizable, and minimally invasive means of connection with a broad network of current and past acquaintances, which may have deleterious consequences for emerging adults and society (Jurgenson, 2010, pp. 168–169). The freedom of interaction afforded by SNS might not provide the skills needed to participate effectively in democratic society (Song, 2009) or to participate in social movements (Earl & Kimport, 2011). SNS may therefore lead to emerging adults being ‘alone together’ (Turkle, 2011).

Finally, SNS boundary work regarding interactions requires time, effort, and emotional energy (Collins, 2004). If a user is negotiating the boundaries well and experiencing few negative interactions, they enjoy catching up with friends, finding out information about others, and interacting when they want. At these times, emotional energy likely increases and SNS use facilitates the development of relationships, which numerous emerging adults confirmed in the NSYR Wave 3 interviews in discussing how SNS helped maintain and build relationships. But, if users break the informal rules, or if other users do the same, there is the potential for emotionally draining experiences. Users then have to decide how to respond: confront the other user? Change their behavior or profile or privacy settings? Emerging adults are well aware that SNS is not only about the posting and exchange of information, or building existing relationships; participating in online interactions involves work, and possible frustration and conflict within relationships.

We acknowledge it is difficult to know from this data whether our findings are due to a particular life course stage or are emblematic of SNS community life at the time the data were collected. Yet, even though these interviews do not reveal how emerging adults learn to do this boundary work, who gets to set and alter the informal norms, and how sanctioning is handled, few respondents say they cross these SNS boundaries or regularly engage in what others might see as negative interactions. These interviews thus provide rich insights into the boundary work that both constrains and empowers SNS users (Sewell, 1992).

Much has changed with SNS since 2008, rendering future research important to assess whether the rules and new boundary work we identify have evolved, been replaced, or been supplemented by new approaches. The three rules that emerged out of Wave 3 NSYR interviews are not formally instituted by SNS platforms or users acting as gatekeepers and could change in the future as online communities, like offline communities, evolve over time as users move in and out and the community responds to and shapes social forces (Song, 2009). Also, to further understand SNS boundaries around negative interactions, researchers need to examine exactly how SNS socialization takes place as new and continuing SNS users learn and adapt, particularly with changing users, norms, and platforms. Our interviewees also hint at the negative sanctions that arise when the informal rules of SNS interaction are violated, but this could be explored more fully in future studies to see who enforces such rules, in what situations the informal rules are enforced most strongly (this could depend strongly on the type of relationship and the online context – see Blais et al., 2008), and how users change their behavior in response. Finally, future studies linking the online and offline relationships and contexts of SNS users would help researchers better understand both realms and their interplay. Relying on data from just SNS behavior limits our broader understanding of users, how both positive and negative interactions online spill over to offline relationships, and the full range of their social settings and actions.

In this study, we have shown that while emerging adults may be immersed in SNS, they are at times disenchanted with SNS and articulate informal rules intended to limit negative interactions. Even as emerging adults follow informal rules that help them control what information they share, not spy on or stalk other users, and decide who they should be online friends with – they must consistently negotiate the malleable boundaries surrounding these rules, which are not set in stone. The responses that users have to this ongoing boundary work, and the innovations made by SNS platforms to address user disenchantment regarding perceived violations of boundaries

between positive and negative interactions, will help determine the popularity and relevance of SNS in future years.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for their generous funding of the NSYR and to the anonymous reviewers whose feedback improved this paper.

Notes on contributors

Brian J. Miller is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Wheaton College. His recent published research articles look at the role of character in suburban growth and development, the meaning of the term McMansion, and the relationship between religiosity and SNS use among emerging adults. [email: brian.miller@wheaton.edu]

Peter Munday is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame. His dissertation explores the relationship between religion and consumerism. Other research interests include megachurches, religious giving, prosperity theology, emerging adults, and social networking sites. Munday has also been a research assistant for projects affiliated with Notre Dame's Center for the Study of Religion and Society, including the Northern Indiana Congregations Study, National Study of Youth and Religion, and Science of Generosity. [email: pmunday@nd.edu]

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