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**“You Never Really Know Who’s Looking”:**

**Imagined Surveillance across Social Media Platforms**

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Social media users are routinely counseled to cultivate their online personae with acumen and diligence. But universal prescriptions for impression management may prove for vexing for college students, who confront oft-conflicting codes of normative self-presentation in digital contexts. Against this backdrop, our research sought to examine the online self-presentation activities of emerging adults (18-24) across an expansive social media ecology that included Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Twitter. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 28 college-aged youth, we highlight how the *imagined surveillance* of various social actors steered their self-presentation practices in patterned ways. After exploring three distinct responses to imagined surveillance—including the use of privacy settings, self-monitoring, and pseudonymous accounts (including “finstas,” or fake + Instagram)—we consider the wider implications of a cultural moment wherein users are socialized to anticipate the incessant monitoring of social institutions: family, education, and above all, (future) employers.

**Introduction**

In September 2017, *The New York Times* published a long-form feature that chronicled the latest whim in corporate culture’s persistent incursion into the education sector: *teacher influencers*. Reporter Natasha Singer detailed how U.S. schoolteachers—strapped for classroom resources amid a budget-starved state school system—are being “courted” by tech companies like Microsoft, Apple, and Amazon. In exchange for gratis technologies and app support, the instructor-*cum*-ambassadors are expected to hype branded products to their social media followers, and more alarmingly, their students, who represent potential “lifetime users of [companies’] products” (Singer, 2017). Predictably, Singer’s article emerged as a lightning rod for debates about public education and the ethics of technology provisions. But perhaps inadvertently, it also raised questions about the extent to which young people are being socialized to monitor their “digital footprints.” The article’s closing quote came from a third grader, who shared his social media takeaway: “You don’t want to post something bad…because if you want a job, those people are probably going to look at your social media page and they are going to decide if they’ll let you have the job” (ibid).

The youth’s comment, we contend, is indicative of a larger cultural anxiety about online surveillance and the potential implications of social media use—or maybe more aptly, *misuse*. Indeed, with the astonishing uptake of social media platforms, anecdotes about digital *faux pas*—a thoughtless Tweet, brash Facebook update, or indiscrete Instagram post—circulate widely in popular culture. According to a 2016 survey, more than twenty-five percent of companies admitted to reprimanding or terminating an employee for something they posted online, with sixty percent using social media to vet candidates (CareerBuilder, 2016; see also, Gandini & Pais, 2018; McEwan & Flood, 2018). Such pre-emptive screening takes place across a raft of social networks, with hiring managers more likely to examine an applicant’s Instagram profile than their LinkedIn account (Vozza, 2018, para 1). College admissions committees, meanwhile, carefully scrutinize applicants and have even revoked admittance offers (Singer, 2013). Against this backdrop, both parents (Fisk, 2014; Lincoln & Robards, 2017) and educators (Shade & Singh, 2016; Trottier, 2012) seemingly socialize young people to anticipate the imagined gaze of colleges and/or future employers.

Such advice, together with a steady stream of media coverage devoted to those who “learned that social media can get you fired” (Broderick & Grinberg, 2013), help constitute the so-called *hidden curriculum* of surveillance. The “hidden curriculum” concept, explains Turow (2017), refers to “patterns that quietly encourage students to absorb and act out their present and future social roles through the repetition of rules, stories, and performances that reflect, sometimes inconsistently, on a range of social status levels” (p. 15; see also Gerbner, 1972). While Turow draws attention to the role of marketers and retailers in establishing a hidden curriculum that facilitates data-driven consumer profiling, our research examines how other social institutions (e.g., family, education, and work/employment) normalize social media surveillance by teaching young people to anticipate—hence, *imagine*—institutional monitoring.

Understanding how surveillance is implicated in existing power structures seems especially crucial at the present juncture, wherein social media users continuously negotiate identity, self-presentation, and social relationships across a sprawling social media landscape that includes Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, and more. As Lyon (2017) puts this, “A key aspect of today’s nascent surveillance culture is the imperative to share,” while “social media is in some ways synonymous with such sharing” (p. 830). Until recently, much scholarship on youth and digital media examined social networking sites discretely; yet Zhao et al. (2016) usefully show how a social media ecology framework is more apt to capture the complexities of everyday social media usage.[[1]](#endnote-1) On each platform, moreover, individuals may come into contact with once-distinct social groups—family, friends, educators, and employers—a phenomenon scholars describe as the “collapsed contexts” of social media sites (boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Emerging adults—including college students and recent graduates—experience these collapses, especially of personal and professional contexts, acutely. [[2]](#endnote-2) How, then, does anticipatory surveillance impact their self-presentation activities on different social media platforms? In what ways do young people imagine the self and social surveillance within a social media ecology? What role do institutions play as socialization agents? And, finally, what are the socio-cultural implications of these practices?

In response to these questions, our study examined how college students and recent graduates understand and articulate self-presentation across the cross-platform media landscape. Data come from in-depth interviews with 28 college-aged youth about their efforts to wield control over their online image at a moment when, as one of our informants put it, “you never really know who’s looking” at your social media feeds. We explain this phenomenon through the lens of what Lyon (2017) terms “surveillance imaginaries” within a culture where surveillance “forms part of everyday reflections on how things are and of the repertoire of everyday practices” (p. 825). Like other social imaginaries that guide our understanding of the social world (Taylor, 2004), surveillance imaginaries provide a perceptual basis for individuals’ exposure to and engagement with monitoring activities.

Building on this framework, we introduce the concept of “imagined surveillance” to describe how individuals conceive of the scrutiny that *could* take place across the social media ecology and, consequently, *may* engender future risks or opportunities. Responses to imagined surveillance—which include both disciplinary and resistance tactics—are based upon the interplay of imagined audiences (Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016) and the imagined affordances of individual platforms (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Three particular responses emerged from the interview data, including the use of privacy settings, self-surveillance, and pseudonymous accounts, most especially *finstas* (fake + Instagram). We conceptualize these practices as efforts to control *audiences*, control *content*, and control *identity* *connections*, respectively. The deployment of these practices reveals the hidden curriculum of a surveillance culture, that is, how social media users are socialized to accommodate acts of ubiquitous social media monitoring, particularly those that reaffirm unequal power relations.

**Social Media Surveillance**

The concept of surveillance traditionally refers to institutional mechanisms enacted by governments or corporations aiming to exert control over individual citizens (Ball, 2010; Gandy, 1989; Lyon, 2003). Yet with the proliferation of technologies that enable—and, significantly, *encourage*—the broadcast of personal information to networked audiences, scholars have reconsidered the forms of monitoring endemic to our digitally mediated society (e.g., Trottier and Lyon, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2013). Theorizations of “lateral surveillance” (Andrejevic, 2005; Humphreys, 2011), “interveillance” (Christensen & Jansson, 2015), “social surveillance” (Marwick, 2012), and “participatory surveillance” (Albrechtslund, 2013) highlight emergent forms of monitoring that may challenge or reaffirm entrenched power hierarchies. Considerations of power are central to teasing out the relationality of privacy and surveillance, too. Challenging the antithetical relationship between surveillance and privacy, Marx (2016) explains that “surveillance implies an *agent* who *accesses* personal data,” whereas privacy “involves a *subject* who can *restrict* access to personal data through related means” (p. 23; italics original). Both concepts consider one’s efforts to control personal data; what distinguishes them, Humphreys (2011) suggests, is that surveillance entails the “power or influence over others” (p. 576), where one remains largely unaware of the monitoring and use of such information (see also, Andrejevic, 2014).

Lyon (2017), more recently, argued social media’s prescriptions for *sharing, visibility,* and *exposure* impel us further into a “surveillance culture” wherein, “surveillance is becoming part of a whole way of life” (p. 825). Marking a departure from earlier notions of a “surveillance state” or “surveillance society,” Lyon (2017) argues that individuals play an active role in a surveillance culture through their efforts to regulate their own monitoring and that of others (p. 824). Notions of “surveillance imaginaries” and “surveillance practices” are constitutive of this culture; the former refers to ways of thinking about what surveillance is and how people should expect and engage in surveillance, whereas the latter include activities “that relate to being surveilled (responsive) and also modes of engagement with surveillance” (p. 830).

Particularly relevant to the current study are surveillance imaginaries that appeal to an imagined audience—the conception of those with whom we’re communicating—on social media (Litt, 2012, p. 330). However, as noted earlier, social media is routinely a site of collapsed contexts, where various social groups are privy to the same digital persona. With “individual, institutional, market and investigative scrutiny all rely[ing] on the same interface,” Trottier (2012) explains, “personal information that has been uploaded for any particular purpose will potentially be used for several kinds of surveillance” (p. 157). And, indeed, reports of employers screening employees’ or job candidates’ *personal* social media accounts are rife (McEwan & Flood, 2018; Gandini & Pais, 2018). As such, an evaluation of what Hedenus and Backman (2017) term “online employability” becomes part of the recruitment process: employers expect job seekers “to sanitize, keep track of, and explain their data double” (p. 651). Increasingly, employability directives are hitched to discourses of reputation-management and the more buzzy concept of personal branding.

**The Promises and Perils of Self-Branding for Emerging Adults**

Management consultants and business pundits have long offered counsel on the strategic presentation of the self. Yet personal branding discourses have seen an astonishing uptick in the social media age as workers of all stripes are prodded to stage an ever-employable front. Researchers and cultural theorists attribute the current personal branding mania to a constellation of social and economic forces, including the cult of personality that seems endemic to Silicon Valley social networks (Marwick, 2013); the steady incursion of market logics into various realms of social life (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2010); constructions of online reputation management circulated by the commercial privacy industry (Draper, 2014); and the precarity of the work economy that incites individuals to internalize the demands of self-enterprise (Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016; Vallas & Christin, 2018).

The system of higher education in the U.S. and U.K. has ostensibly embraced the self-marketing mandate, with many universities offering courses or curricula on personal branding and entrepreneurship (Gershon, 2017). As such, teenagers and young adults are socialized to leverage social media to craft themselves into marketable self-commodities and to “ensure their digital footprint is positive and consistent” (Cohen, 2015, para. 4). During career talks, for instance, college students are counseled to “clean up” their Facebook profiles before applying for jobs—a trend which Lincoln and Robards (2017) suggest is part of a larger, iterative process of *editing the social media self* (p. 524).

While discourses of employability highlight the profound stakes of one’s social media activity, the realities of maintaining an ideal self-brand can be quite confounding, particularly given the resonant social media ideal of “consistency” (Gershon, 2017; Marwick, 2013). Pinpointing the larger contradiction underpinning personal branding directives and contemporary understandings of identity performance, Gershon (2017) probes, “How can someone always be willing and able to transform and yet remain a cohesive self?’ (p. 35). On one hand, she explains, individuals are expected to project a “context-free” brand that is flexible enough to withstand the vagaries of the contingent employment market. On the other, people always perform differently dependent upon the specific context.

Social media scholars have thus, in recent years, examined how people maintain various socially mediated “selves” to enact discrete elements of their identity on different platforms. Challenging Mark Zuckerberg’s (in)famous contention that people have one identity online, van Dijck (2014) argues that “keeping up multiple personas across platforms may be a powerful strategy for users to ‘perform’ their identity” (p. 211; see also, boyd, 2015). Duffy et al. (2017), meanwhile, reveal how digital creative workers vary their self-presentation across social networking sites in patterned ways as part of “platform-specific self-branding” practices. Similarly, young people report framing their LinkedIn and Facebook interactions in widely distinct ways based upon considerations of employability (Gershon, 2017).

The shrewd control of one’s self-presentation is by no means a novel concept, especially among teenagers, and many offline practices of impression-management translate well into digital contexts (Livington, 2008; Lincoln & Robards, 2016). Countering the common refrain that “teenagers don’t care about privacy,” Marwick and boyd (2014) show how teenagers conceptualize privacy in a way that foregrounds their own control within a “constellation of audience dynamics, social norms, and technical functionality” (p. 1063). Later, as teens enter the stage of adulthood, they confront a new set of realities related to privacy and surveillance of (future) employers. Our particular focus on *surveillance* indicates an overarching concern with institutional power asymmetries within what is allegedly a “critical” moment of identity transition (Lincoln & Robards, 2017). Not only is this group uniquely positioned between various social institutions—including family, education, and employment—but their sustained participation across an ever-changing social media ecology is telling of how individuals reflect on changes in self-awareness (Lincoln & Robards, 2017) and social relationships (Robards & Lincoln, 2016) over a period of time.[[3]](#endnote-3) Therefore, an exploration of young people’s surveillance imaginaries can help us to understand how individuals are socialized by a hidden curriculum of surveillance.

**Method**

This article draws upon in-depth interviews with twenty-eight college students and recent graduates. Participants were initially recruited through campus fliers and email listserves soliciting participants for a study of social media self-presentation; a snowball sample was used to recruit potential participants from other universities according to theoretical sampling. Our interview participants represented four universities on the U.S. east coast; their completion levels (freshman through post-graduate) and courses of study varied and included biology, communication, education, engineering, and management, among others.[[4]](#endnote-4) Women were greatly overrepresented in our sample (n=25), a trend that may reflect larger social media usage disparities (Pew, 2018) as well as gender differences in self-presentation (Herring et al., 2015). It is indeed noteworthy that early research on social networking sites revealed that young women are more concerned about employer screening Facebook data (Peluchette & Karl, 2008)—a trend that indexes larger social inequalities in recruitment and hiring. Also importantly, the fact that many of our interviewees were enrolled in universities is telling of their class standing and relative privilege.

The majority of the interviews wered in person, and at the completion of a 30-35 minute (average) interview, participants were compensated through a university-credit or cash incentive. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, and discussion questions/topics included: initial use and changing experiences with various platforms; the size and scope of various networks (i.e., “audiences”), the types of content shared/avoided; the use of privacy settings; reflections on personal branding; socialization into social media culture; among other topics. Interviews were transcribed by a professional service, and the researchers used an inductive approach to establish coding categories. We followed a grounded theory approach, which involves the subjectification of “inductive data to rigorous comparative analysis that successively moves from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding from these data” (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347). Moreover, data collection and analysis are iterative; for instance, when we learned about “finstas,” we began to solicit additional interview participants who had accounts.

**Imagined Surveillance on Social Media**

During their expositions, interviewees made it clear that surveillance imaginaries and practices structured their social media activities in profound and complex ways. Mandy, for instance, noted, “I know it’s on social media, so once it’s online, it’s there forever.” Discussing how this mentality impacts her image-sharing behaviors, she offered, “I definitely want to make sure it’s appropriate cause I know a lot of people could potentially see it even if my network isn't that big.” Like many of our interview participants, Mandy seemed to express concern with how her social media activities could potentially impact the future. Other young people were especially reflective about the difficulties imposed by collapsed contexts of social media (boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010). When asked about how he interacts with people on different platforms, Daniel shared:

I have never interacted with [my Instagram followers] on LinkedIn and really hope I never do. I think there’s something very inherent in something being a professional medium and then something that's so intensely personal where, of course, I’ll divulge more of myself in a personal setting than I would in a professional one because I have a demeanor that I put on in that professional sphere.

Sadie, meanwhile, explained her concern that colleagues and bosses might screen her Facebook activities; as she put it, “you never really know who’s looking at your Facebook.” She added:

You hear all these horror stories of—whether it’s a student applying to college or a student applying to a job—and their employer or admissions office going through their Facebook and seeing all these pictures and deciding not to give them the position, or not to give them a space at the school. I never really want to jeopardize my future, by making myself vulnerable to that.

In this vein, self-surveillance—including the avoidance of certain types of content--becomes a practice aimed at maintaining employability.

To anticipate and potentially deflect the negative consequences of imagined surveillance, our interviewees instituted a variety of social and technical practices, including:

1.Privacy settings, or an attempt to manage the *audience;*

2. Self-surveillance and platform-specific presentations, or an attempt to manage *content*;

3.The use of pseudonyms and multiple aliases, or an attempt to control the *connection* to one’s identity.

Before discussing these practices within the framework of imagined surveillance, it seems important to address *how* young people were socialized into a culture of ubiquitous monitoring. Several interviewees explained the role of family in teaching them norms of appropriate digital media usage. Nicole recalled:

When I came to college, I got the talk from my parents, ‘Don’t post any pictures of you when you’re visibly intoxicated or…holding alcohol…[Now] I’m [Facebook] friends with my dad, and occasionally I'll get a text being like, “You should take that picture down,” He’s always like “Oh, jobs this, jobs that.”

Nicole thus attributed her father’s directives to expectations that employers are likely to screen young people’s activity; in response, she had changed the privacy settings and created a pseudonym—two practices we discuss below.

Haley, meanwhile, explained the guidance she received from her mother, including directives to avoid being “tagged in pictures when there's beer in the background.” Haley also indicated surprise that her peers failed to follow similar directives. She reasoned, “I have a lot of friends that will post pictures of them drinking on their public Facebook… I would have thought that more people would have been like me, where their parents have always told them…” Haley’s reflection suggests that being monitored is understood as a contemporary social norm; that is, she expects her peers to have been counseled to self-regulate. Tyler, too, noted that his parents taught him about appropriate social media use; yet he seemed to internalize this culture of careful impression management as he grew older: “Back in the day, my parents had my Facebook account password and everything and monitor[ed] it.” “Now,” he contrasted, “it’s kind of just my judgment.” He offered a hypothetical example of untagging a photo which revealed him holding a beer can, and added, “My mom doesn’t need to tell me that for me to feel that way.” Of course, other interviewees feared that *their parents* would be the ones enacting surveillance—a salient factor in the use of privacy settings.

Young people also learn about social media “best practices” from their educators—high school teachers and, later, college professors. Echoing Lincoln and Robards’s (2017) observations about advice on social media self-edited presented at career talks, our interviewees were taught to make conscious efforts to manage their online personae. Mandy, for instance, attributed her own careful self-policing behaviors to her university curricula: “I’ve taken a lot of classes that talk about how…you can really find everything on the internet nowadays. So these things kind of have made me more attuned to privacy issues.” While Mandy’s classes were part of her communication major, Larissa and Kierstyn learned about the importance of impression-management through their education degrees. Kierstyn told us, “[I]n high school, they always scare you like, ‘Oh, they’re going to find your social media and judge you for stuff.” Larissa, similarly, noted “We’re constantly reminded in education: Make sure your social media is private, make sure you change [your] names.” She offered a telling anecdote that occurred while she was in high school:

We had a…permanent substitute teacher, and she was a lot younger, and somebody found her Vine or something, and it had some videos that students shouldn’t be seeing, and she ended up getting fired.

Such an extreme example becomes part of the surveillance imaginary in highlighting the potentially devastating consequences of social media misuse.

Despite this recognition, it is important to note that young people don’t necessarily follow the norms taught by their parents and educators. Sabrina, for instance, noted, “My parents always said that you should keep your personal life personal and your business friends and co-workers separate, but I have co-workers on Facebook, as well as previous bosses...It’s just because I never had anything that I felt like I needed to hide.” This example suggests that parents and educators had a more unified imagination of “appropriate” social media use. The young adults in our sample, by contrast, indicated that their online practices continued to take shape amid wider transformations in the social media ecology. Some migrated to and from different platforms, much like those in Lincoln and Robards’s (2016) study, who “renovate[d]” conventions of the digital space, or even moved away from them, when it no longer squared with their identities (pp. 939-941). A common tendency was swapping Twitter and Facebook for the more voguish Instagram and Snapchat. Others, meanwhile, highlighted their own maturity; as Larissa put it, “I feel like I have evolved in my social media presence as I’ve grown up.” The “renovation” also means an on-going redefinition of boundaries (Lincoln & Robards, 2016). The creation of finsta—fake Instagram account—exemplifies the boundary work. While our interviewees were socialized to present a highly curated self on Instagram and other social media platforms, finsta emerged as a social space where they could attempt to evade the concerns about surveillance and possible disciplinary outcomes.

***Privacy Settings: Managing* Who *Sees***

Those in our sample tended to frame privacy settings and, more broadly the technological affordances of individual platforms, as resources to control *social media audiences*. That is, informants utilized privacy features based upon their considerations of—and concerns with—various social actors’ who they feared would monitor their social media activity. Several of our interviewees admitted to using customized privacy settings to conceal their status updates from parents and other family members. Daniel, for instance, blocked his mom from seeing his Snapchat stories. Lyndsey, meanwhile, explained that all of her accounts were set to private, a decision she attributed “definitely [to] jobs, because I’m an education major.” Kylee, similarly, relayed, “I used to have it [Instagram] on public, but just especially when you’re applying to jobs, it’s just not worth it.” Kylee’s reference to a publicly visible account as “not worth it” calls attention to the (imagined) implications of social media activity and, in particular, the concern that content will be discovered by the wrong audience (“employers”).

Other interviewees expressed a level of uncertainty about the visibility of their profiles, despite their reliance on these settings for audience management. Olivia was forthcoming about her decision to use privacy settings in anticipation of employer surveillance. She reasoned, “I'm really careful with privacy controls and stuff, just because I know how much employers are on the internet…My Instagram is private. Facebook, I think you can only see my profile picture and my cover photo.” Hanna, similarly, described her use of “limited...privacy settings so that you can’t search me.” She then clarified, “If we have mutual friends, I think you can actually search me.” Note, here, the common refrain of “I think,” which indicates a level of vagueness with technical controls. Larissa’s exposition of privacy settings also revealed some inconsistencies, particularly regarding her understanding of the privacy features of Facebook: “I always feel like I don’t have the privacy settings [on Facebook] on high enough, but it’s not public. I don't know, [it’s] whatever the default is.” For these young people, then, it was somewhat unclear what information remained visible and invisible to their imagined audience across the social media landscape. Echoing Andrejevic’s (2014) observation of a “big data divide,” there is a dissonance between the desire to manage the social media audience and the lack of knowledge about the publicness of personal information.

Other interviewees, by contrast, were quite intentional in their use of social networking sites’ privacy settings for audience management. Sadie recalled how during high school, she chose to put “family, distant family and my parents on limited profile [on Facebook], so they couldn't see the racy pictures that I was posting”; she maintained these settings despite being much more “mature” and selective with her posts. By contrast, she understood the Instagram privacy settings as a way to engage in social surveillance of her account followers (Marwick, 2012). She explained, “I do go off private sometimes, but I usually always switch back [to public], and so I can see really everyone that’s following me.” The affordances of Instagram’s privacy settings thus enabled her to keep track of those inside her social media network, tallying up users who sought access to her feed. In a similar vein, Tyler attributed his vacillation between public and private settings on Instagram to his own impulses for social monitoring: “As superficial as it sounds, [making my profile public] also gives me more followers. I think if you’re public…people see your pictures and stuff.” Although Sadie and Tyler articulated Instagram privacy differently, both seemed carefully attuned to the social costs and rewards of social media surveillance of various kinds.

To be sure, a small subset of our interviewees seemed less concerned with particular audiences—parents, employers, peers—and more anxious about the circulation of their personal information in public spaces. As Kierstyn told us, “It would creep me out a little bit if someone knew intimate details of my life.” Naomi seemed to echo this, stating, “If someone searched me and they didn't know who I was, I don't want them to see my life. You know?” It was more common, however, for social media users’ self-presentation activities to be guided by a concern for the surveillance of an (imagined) audience.

***Self-Surveillance and Platform Specificity: Managing* What *They See***

At the same time that young people rely upon platform settings to negotiate their presence among various audiences, many also engaged in self-surveillance, which entails a heightened “attention to their actions and thoughts when constituting themselves as subjects of their conduct” (Vaz & Bruno, 2003, p. 273; see also, Humphreys, 2011; Marx, 2016). Accordingly, our informants monitored their social media activities with vigilance as they sought to conceal and reveal different types of *content* across a vast online ecology. Considerations of the audience figured prominently here, too, but interviewees foregrounded *what* they did and did not want these networked groups to see. Daniel reflected of his Instagram: “I have to make [an account] that’s acceptable enough for my family to see and then also for my friends to find interesting. There are things that could fall into one of those groups but not both. Those are things that I’ll probably try to avoid.”

To make sense of social media self-surveillance, it is vital to consider people’s designations of what Daniel described as “acceptable,” or what others delineated as “appropriate” and “inappropriate” content. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of our interviewees considered photos of drinking, partying, or vulgar language “inappropriate” on social media. Lyndsey, who described herself as “very conscious of what I post,” asserted she did not post anything “bad” such as “making fun of people” or “embarrassing pictures.” Meredith, correspondingly, noted, “I don’t post anything super risqué…Drugs and alcohol, I try to keep off of it. I don’t try and put any really questionable comments.” Kierstyn, by contrast, believed appropriateness with regards to the (future) workforce was context-specific, largely dependent on the industry and workplace composition. She reasoned, “I’m looking mostly in tech and that kind of stuff for potential fields of employment, so…going into a field like that, being yourself on social media is kind of celebrated more…versus going into something like finance.” She added, “If I’m working with other people who are in college, millennials, they’re kind of used to having their lives on social media.” Eliana, similarly, drew attention to “people who are just not used to being authentic on social media or active.” She explained, “If those are your co-workers than you might have to tone it down or not friend them.” Meanwhile, our interviewees actively monitored others’ social networks since unknown disclosures may jeopardize young peoples’ capacity to curate a cohesive and desirable digital persona. Haley, for instance, shared, “I’ve been tagged in a few pictures and I'll either remove the tag or …I’ll text the person who posted it and be like “Can you please untag me? I haven’t asked people to delete the pictures, but I don’t want to be tagged in it.” Her comment indicates users’ awareness that private information about them circulates in public spaces (Humphreys, 2017). Such self-monitoring practices, more broadly, have significant implications for young people’s presentation of self. Highlighting the vexing nature of identity performance, Larissa noted, “I try to stay, I feel, somewhat true to myself. [But] I feel like there’s no way to actually be true to yourself because you’re filtering so much of it.”

Not only did young people carefully attend to the information they *didn’t* want made public, they also acknowledged the presentation of self they *did* aim to project; this binary maps loosely onto the distinction between impressions *given off* and *given* (Goffman, 1959). Events, “pictures of friends,” “scenery,” “baking stuff,” and “stuff about clubs and organizations on campus” were among the types of content our interviewees shared with intent, although variations existed across platforms (Facebook versus Instagram, for instance). Accordingly, our interviewees’ practices of self-surveillance varied across different social networking sites, based upon platform-specific modes of self-presentation (boyd, 2014; Duffy et al., 2017). As Hanna reflected poignantly, “I think my identity on each social media site is varied. Together you would get a pretty good image of me, but if you were to see one, there’s not a lot of cohesion between what I’m presenting on Instagram versus what I’m presenting on Facebook.” Christina’s observation that “there’s definitely a unique personality or characteristic of each platform” also exemplifies platform-specific orientations to the social media ecology. Specifically, she tended to post “serious” content on Facebook and share “crazy snaps” on Snapchat, in part because the imagined audiences on Snapchat are usually close friends, whereas the audience on Facebook is more motley.

Additionally, while Kylee noted that her social media accounts are “to an extent…all me,” she explained how she presented different types of content based upon perceived intimacy with her audiences:

Snapchat is very much like myself, more like personal, because it's my really close friends, whereas Instagram, I have a lot of more people I don't know closely, and Facebook, I just don't post as much,…I try to update my family members and parents…[On Instagram], I kind of try and keep it very light, and I also try not to post a lot of political stuff…

Her decision to evade “political stuff” in favor of “very light” content reveals how platform-specific self-presentation represents a form of self-surveillance. Zhu, similarly, described how Facebook has a “wider audience” and is “definitely more professional.” She continued, “I would only post big news in my life [such as], ‘Oh, I got a job,’ or ‘I'm moving here.’” She strayed from content that was “more for her generation” out of a concern that “an adult might think it’s rude or something.” Sadie was particularly self-reflective of how the potential audience of each site shapes self-presentation—and consequently self-surveillance—activities. The types of content she shares, she offered, “really just depends on who my audiences are on each platform.” She offered an example:

If there’s a picture of me drinking or partying or something like that, that I wouldn’t want my extended family [or an] employer to see, I'm probably not going to post that on Facebook, but I might post it on Instagram, ‘cause I know it’s just more people my age and I really look at every single person who requests to follow me. And [I decide], ‘Am I going to want them to see the types of photos?’

Sadie’s comment reveals how “inappropriate” content on a particular site might become “appropriate” on another platform, affirming that each site has its unique persona and social norms (Zhao et al., 2016).

***Pseudonyms and Multiple Aliases: Managing the Connection to One’s Identity***

The concealment of one’s “real” identity—such as through a fictitious moniker or multiple aliases on a single platform—emerged as another tactic of surveillance evasion. That is, users attempted to keep their digital personae “unlinkable” to other identity expressions through principles of fakery reminiscent of early web culture (boyd, 2015; Cirucci, 2015; Raynes-Goldie, 2010). One of the most frequently mentioned identity concealment tactics was the use of a pseudonym representing some variation of one’s name (Lincoln & Robards, 2017). Nicole, for instance, recalled the decision to change her social media accounts to her first and middle name: “When [college juniors] start looking for jobs or internships that would turn into jobs and stuff, people [opted to] do it as a precaution.” She added that her dad frequently lectured her about “how employers can find you, and I was just like, I’m just going to change it [from my first and last name].” She later noted, “It's harder for them to find you if it’s your middle name. At least we all assume that.”

Other interviewees similarly articulated such modes of identity camouflage as a way to resist the surveillance of employers and college admissions committees. Notably, several students discussed how their initiation to name-changing strategies emerged in high school, where anecdotes of internet-screening college admissions committees were rife. Hanna recalled how her peers created a second, public-facing Facebook account to stage a college-ready front: “They had their fake Facebook profiles and their regular Facebook profiles, and one of them was the one that they thought colleges were going to look at, so [their posts were] like, “Heading off to my SAT tutors now [in order to project a sense of studiousness].”

Even more common among those in our sample was the creation of a second Instagram account, known as a “finsta”—a portmanteau of “fake” and “Insta” where users share more personal content with a select group of friends. Crucially, the “fake” designation refers to the pseudonymous nature of the doppelgänger account handle, rather than to users’ calculated attempts at duplicity. Some young people, as we discuss below, found finstas as a way to provide a more “realistic” version of their daily lives—one that subverted the cultural conventions of social media performativity with mocking irreverence. According to our interviewees, young people began creating alternative accounts on Instagram years ago, but the finsta trend had seen a marked spike in the year preceding our interviews. In fact, almost half (13 of 28) of our interviewees maintained both Rinsta (real + Instagram) and finsta accounts, and all but one followed their friends’ finstas. Finstas are, according to our interviewees, marked by their smaller followings, ironic tone, and decidedly less polished aesthetic.

The contrast with Instagram—with its culture of airbrushed perfection and aspirational lifestyle presentation—was central to understanding how young people presented themselves on their finstas. As Daniel offered:

I think there are such intense constraints levied on people on Instagram and ostensibly also on Facebook…Then you have the idea of this much edgier, perhaps less palatable account that you can create to maybe put parts of your real, stranger self also into the abyss of the internet without that same pressure to get judged and be well-received.

Or, as Madeline explained, Instagram is a place to post “a pretty nice, edited, high-quality picture with some witty caption I put way too much time into thinking of.” She juxtaposed this with finsta, where she will share “a really ugly selfie I snapped of myself half-way through walking [and] an entire paragraph of every single thing that happened to me that day.” Haley, similarly, contrasted the images of cityscapes and formal events she shared on her Instagram with her finsta. On, the latter, she will share “if something funny happens to me I’ll post a post about it and tell a story or complain about my life or stuff.”

Accordingly, interviewees mentioned that they could share “funny” or even “sarcastic” contents on finsta, though these posts were often considered “inappropriate” To this end, users drew upon the framework of “appropriateness” to delineate the types of content that was best suited for these accounts. Thus, while Tyler was careful to point out that he doesn’t “post anything bad,” he noted that his finsta will occasionally include vulgar language. He added, “I would not want someone to [let that] get that back to my mom.” As such, his finsta was limited to “a select group of people.” Lyndsay, similarly described her finsta audience as “very selective,” while Alyssa explained that she had “about like 20 finsta followers…[compared to] over 1,000 regular Instagram followers.” Decisions about with whom to share one’s finsta account were based upon shared understandings of trust and closeness. Sadie explained the importance of the former in deciding who has access to her account:

[It’s a] very intentional audience behind my Finstagram, and I have this trust in everyone that follows it, that no one’s going to share the pictures, and they’re not going to circulate. I’ve tried to reduce the number of followers to people I really think are going to be respectful of whatever sort of privacy [setting].

Comments like this reaffirm Marwick and boyd’s (2014) findings about teenager’s privacy disclosures, namely that they only share individuals only reveal personal information when they feel confident that it won’t negatively impact them (p. 1061). But there’s a tradeoff: when young people decide to share personal information, it makes them vulnerable while also helping to establish intimacy (ibid). Marwick and boyd note that there is no infallible remedy to risks of disclosing personal information on social media. The culture of omnipresent social surveillance further intensifies the vulnerability of young people, as exemplified by Kylee’s cynical considerations of the audience: “Oh, wait. Do I trust all the people I let follow my finsta?” Tellingly, she added, “Not that I post anything super scandalous or bad because I realize that if I post something on the internet it could pop up somewhere that I wouldn’t want it to.” Inherent in Kylee’s comment is a fear of being monitored and the associated unknown consequences.

**Conclusion**

Paralleling the profound growth of our social media culture and economy are persistent warnings about institutional and social surveillance; such foreboding is captured by the dictum, “you never know who’s looking” at your social media profile(s). Our research indicates that young people are socialized to anticipate digital surveillance from various social institutions—family, educators, and above all, employers. The advice they furnish—packaged in wider directives of “appropriate behavior” or “professionalism,” and hence overwhelmingly oriented toward employability—becomes part of a *hidden curriculum* of ubiquitous monitoring (Turow, 2017; Edwards, 2015). By teaching young adults—who represent the first generation to experience the career-related opportunities and, crucially, challenges of online self-presentation—to *imagine* such surveillance, these activities get normalized as part of everyday digital life. Young people, significantly, have learned to vary their surveillance imaginaries and self-presentation across social media platforms to shape and re-articulate the digital spaces they encounter (Livingstone; 2008; boyd, 2014; Lincoln and Robards, 2016). Indeed, platform-specific affordances of (in)visibility and exposure configure social media within a larger constellation of “surveillance technologies” (Gandini & Pais, 2018).

The ever-looming threat of imagined surveillance has instigated a variety of preemptive social media practices—from the use of privacy settings to judicious self-monitoring to calculated efforts to sever the ties between one’s “real” identity and their digital persona. These activities seem to exist on a continuum from technological affordances (e.g., privacy settings) to social practices (deleting/avoiding material to enact self-surveillance)—neither of which can be understood discretely. Yet, importantly, they continue to evolve and take shape against a rapidly evolving social media landscape, wherein individual platforms are framed as a way to project distinctive elements of one’s identity. In other words, the use of different platforms helped users shore up the boundaries that are inevitably eroded within the collapsed contexts of social media (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

While our study showed how young people circumvent persistent monitoring, the issue of resistance is more complex. Resistance is an intentional practice that expresses opposition to or undermines power-relations (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Yet, much like privacy controls, deliberate acts of self-surveillance—censoring photos with alcohol or hemming in expressions of perilousness—are largely compliant with the imagined surveilled gazes, especially of future employers. Owing to a wider surveillance culture (Lyon, 2017), individuals don’t just learn about the “dynamics of surveillance,” but also about “the duties of surveillance” (pp. 829-830). Opting out—or lacking a robust social media presence—is, in many fields, not an option. To this end, we contend that the imagined surveillance occurring on social media cannot be understood apart from other modes of corporate surveillance propelling the digital economy. After all, a hidden curriculum that prods individuals to expect scrutinization of their *personal* social media profiles is the same one that renders *professional* surveillance permissible. Workplace surveillance, of course, comes in various incarnations—spyware on computers, programs that log the time spent on work (and non-work) tasks, and even biometric devices that calibrate the performance of employees (Levy, 2015; Neff & Nagus, 2016; Moore, 2018). Employers, perhaps predictably, frame such activities as a boon to their workers with upbeat assurances of safety, responsiveness, or productivity. But in workplace surveillance—much like social media—the boundaries between the personal and professional get blurred in alarming ways. Such was the case in early 2018, when American cheerleader Bailey Davis was fired after uploading a photograph of herself in a one-piece bodysuit—on her *personal* Instagram account. Subsequently, Davis filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, noting the staggeringly different rules about social media for (male) players and (female) cheerleaders (Belson, 2018).

Cases such as this underscore the importance of taking seriously the politics of digital monitoring, including the question of “who” gets surveilled—both inside and outside of the workplace. Summarizing survey findings about a marked political divide views on surveillance, Turow et al. (2018) note: “Those who express warm emotions toward surveillance or don’t see that their sense of security is threatened in the face of these practices…may not change their feelings as forms of surveillance expand to disproportionally impact other population segments (for example, those based on age, gender, religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identification, and the intersections among these categories)” (ibid, p. 26; see also, Ball, 2010; Gilliom, 2001). Put simply, acts of surveillance are not evenly deployed. The concept of surveillance culture (Lyon, 2017) may open up some new directions for thinking about the unevenness of surveillance and its role in exacerbating social hierarchies. For example, who is more vulnerable to the disciplinary outcomes of imagined surveillance? What are the ethical implications of unequal distribution of surveillance imaginaries/ practices?

In the end, the contemporary hidden curriculum of surveillance goes far beyond prescriptions for *how much* or *what kinds* of information we can control; it also instructs us how we *should* organize our digital traces to conform to the (commercial) logics of surveillance/self-branding. Across an expansive social media ecology, we are prodded to carefully craft and maintain a self for public consumption—a production that entails incessant invisible labor: cultivating social relationships as “followers,” “friends,” and “connections,” producing and sharing online portfolios, and curating a consistent digital persona that will withstand public scrutiny. While online self-branding is used by workers of all stripes—especially among cultural or knowledge workers (e.g., Hearn, 2008; Cohen, 2015; Gandini, 2016)—current students and newly minted graduates are increasingly directed to present themselves through the language and form of brands. The desire to present oneself as “professional” is perhaps a reality of a hypercompetitive job market where employers caution that *we’re only as good as our last tweet*. But we must consider the stakes of a society wherein parents, educators, and young people themselves become socialization agents who normalize unbounded surveillance. Bringing the hidden curriculum of surveillance to the foreground helps us to question the implications of a digital media environment where young people are expected to be always *on* and *eminently employable*.

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1. Noteworthy exceptions include Livingstone’s (2008) analysis of teenage self-presentation across MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, and Friendster and Marwick and boyd (2014)’s article on networked privacy. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Arnett (2004) for a discussion of “emergent adulthood” as a distinct phase of life. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This is not to suggest that they are necessarily the so-called “social media natives” or a homogenous group of users, but to highlight how they are socialized into various kinds of social media surveillance, as they grow up [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The majority was from the authors’ home institution. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)