<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Young - Nordic Journal of Youth Research*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Eek-Karlsson, L. (2019)

Between responsibility and positioning – a study about young people’s interactions in social media

Young - Nordic Journal of Youth Research, 27(1): 1-17

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308818761413>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-72020>

BETWEEN RESPONSIBILITY AND POSITIONING – A STUDY ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE’S INTERACTIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Liselotte Eek-Karlsson

Abstract

This article examines young people’s argumentation about their communication in social media. The purpose is to uncover what is taken for granted in their experiences and illuminate discursive patterns in their representation of everyday life online. 32 youths (14-15 years old) were interviewed. The result shows that there are three discourses involved that in different ways condition the youths’ acting space online. The discourses are called ‘taking responsibility’, ‘saving face’ and ‘social positioning’. There is a struggle between the discourses and they take on different power positions depending on the relation between three parameters: with whom the interaction takes place, the content that is to be published and the online characteristics. The discourse ‘taking responsibility’ is superior in interactions with close friends, unlike interactions with peripheral friends, where ‘social positioning’ is superior. The discourse ‘saving face’ is found in interactions with both close and peripheral friends.

Key words:

Youth, social media, discursive patterns, taking responsibility, saving face, social positioning, communicative act, strategic acts

Introduction

Carl: Social media is mostly about the outside. Your outward face in society, not much about the inside at all. About making a good image.

Fredrik: Of course some people do almost anything whatsoever to get attention.

The quotes above are taken from two 14-year-old Swedish boys describing why youth interact in social media¹. It appears that one main reason is to get attention from peers. For many young people adolescence is a time of turbulence, in which establishing social affiliations is an important element. Social affiliations do not solely satisfy humans endeavor to become a part of a community; affiliations develop social identities too. During adolescence both processes are central. Struggles about power, about popularity and status are key aspects, which include both inclusive and exclusive mechanisms (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Tajfel, 1981). Online communication has become an important arena constituting everyday practice for many young people. For example, the result in a survey conducted by IIS² shows that 79 percent of 12-15 year old youth use social media every day (IIS, 2017) and in another survey

¹ The concept can be explained as an “umbrella term that refers the set of tools, services, and applications that allow people to interact with others using network technologies” (boyd, 2008, p. 92). For example, Instagram. Facebook and Snapchat.

² Internet Foundation in Sweden is an independent public service organisation that promotes a positive development of Internet (Internetstiftelsen i Sverige, 2017).

75 percent of the same age group are daily users (Statens Medieråd³, 2017). Smart phones and mobile Internet have been of great importance for the development of online communication. On one hand there is a rapid development of social applications and web services for communication and from a marketization perspective there is competition between social media platforms where some win and others lose market shares. In this way one can say that the online arena is constantly changing. On the other hand communication is fundamental for human beings and irrespective where or when the interactions take place there are positioning processes containing both inclusion and exclusion mechanisms. Nevertheless, in comparing communication online and offline there are some differences between the two arenas that have to be problematized. Offline there is a sight (face to face) dimension that cannot be found online; instead the interactions often take place with a mediated face, i.e. a face you cannot see, which occurs asynchronously (Eek-Karlsson, 2015). Online, the youths have to write themselves into a 'being' or publish photos, which become essential for performing identity (Sundén, 2003; Thomas 2007). Visibility, duration, proliferation, and the possibility to be anonymous are others aspects specific for online interactions. In order to be successful in the peer group young people have to be aware of the specific online characteristics (boyd, 2008; Shariff, 2008).

There is much research in the field of young people's online communication. One topic is about the liberation potential. Due to the possibility of remaining anonymous there is a larger action space online which may contribute to a negotiation of identity (boyd, 2008; Angell, 2008; Davis, 2010; Livingstone and Helsper, 2010). However, research also points out that young people essentially communicate with peers whom they already know offline. Online interactions become central for developing and preserving relationships created offline, promoting a sense of belonging (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008; Davis, 2012; Vallor, 2012). Accordingly, online networks contribute to the construction of a social identity and studies show that the interactions affect the social development in the peer group. To contribute to a positive experience, it is important to have knowledge of the online context (Davis, 2010; Sjöberg, 2010).

Other studies report that stereotypical power orders, for example about gender, are recreated online. Norms and expectations developed in the surrounding society become visible when youths comment on each other or when they publish photos online. Norms become identity markers that contribute to the definition of the youths' social identity (Abiala and Hernwall, 2013; Forsman, 2014; Hernwall, 2014). There are also research showing that moral rules and obligations are displaced when the border between offline and online is overstepped. Often youths are described as unable to act as moral subjects online (Shariff, 2008; Lauren and Ratliffe, 2011). To conclude, online interactions cannot be seen as static; instead there is an ongoing negotiation for such aspects as privacy, gender and how to be a friend online (Selwyn, 2011; Sveningsson Elm, 2009; Marwick and boyd, 2014). This article aims to problematize and deepen the knowledge about online communication among youths. The main aim is to highlight conditions for young people's interactions in social media by illuminating discursive patterns in their argumentation.

Theoretical and methodological points of departure

The theoretical framework of this study rests on Goffman's (1959/1990; 1967/2005) theory about social interaction. The theory sheds light on how interaction orders, roles and

³ Swedish Council of Media is a knowledge center that investigates the media habits of children and youth. They conduct yearly studies on youths' experiences and attitudes toward the use of different media (Media Council, 2017).

positioning are developed in a social practice. In the analysis the concept 'the front and the back region' (Goffman, 1959/1990) is used to deepen the knowledge of how the interpersonal acts are directed online. Social interactions are also an issue with moral implications. Benhabib (1992) points out that there is always a tension between autonomy and community, irrespective of the setting (ibid). This duality often becomes visible in social media because of the online characteristics. Social interactions online can also be seen as a part of a societal integration process concerning how the individual become a part of a society, about conditions for relationships and how values are included in these processes. Habermas (1998) uses the two concepts of 'communicative' and 'strategic' acts to describe the two different processes which are running simultaneously in what Habermas calls 'life world'. Communicative acts are based on equality and symmetry, in which care, respect and mutuality are fundamental concepts. The endeavor is to reach consensus in a given situation. Unlike communicative acts, strategic acts are based on effectiveness and asymmetry. These acts are individualistic and oriented towards goals and success (ibid). The theories contribute to visualizing the vulnerability that characterizes communication in social media, as well as how values are put into action in positioning processes online.

Social and cultural changes create both possibilities and restrictions. The development of young people's online interactions is one example. Fairclough (1992) states that social changes seldom are transparent, but by using a discursive analysis there is a possibility to detect a 'change in knowledge (including beliefs and common sense), social relations and social identities' (p.8). In this article a discursive analysis is used as a methodological tool to gain an insight into the conditions for social relationships online. The concept discourse can be described as 'particular ways of using language' (p.3) and depending on how language is used different discourses are developed in a social practice. Often there are several discourses competing with each other. Related to this study is that the youths use language actively to interpret the world, both offline and online, and at the same time the world is interpreted through the discursive patterns they are exposed to. In this way, discourses condition both the constitution of the subject and the structures in society as a whole. Structures exert power and contribute to keep the social practice in order, which also affect the youths' space for action (Fairclough, 1992; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). Through structural processes the youths are positioned in the peer group. Their individual choices cannot always overcome the superior power orders in the social practice created online. The online practice is developed through their interactions and at the same time the acts also become meaning-making. By their acts 'normality' is constructed, which include both exclusion and inclusion processes. These processes lead to the constitution of social identities, social relationships and moral opinions etc. Fairclough (1992) points out the relation between discourses and identity:

The identity function relates to the ways in which social identities are set up in discourse, the relational function to how social relationships are set up between discourse participants are enacted and negotiated/.../. (p. 64)

Because of the online characteristics, lots of examples for being a young person, a girl or a boy, become visible. Different kinds of knowledge may be valid, true or useful from the practice internal logic, and the prevailing social norms, values and interests. The focus in this study deals with uncovering what is taken for granted in the youths' argumentation and highlights discourses conditioning their online interactions.

Empirical data collection and the analysis process

The empirical data is based on pair-interviews collected in two classes in two different schools situated in a medium-sized city in Sweden. In one class 12 youths of 23 (4 boys and 8 girls) from Grade 8 (15 years old) participated. In the other class 20 youths of 24 (9 boys and 11 girls) from Grade 7 participated. All parents were informed and gave their consent. Before the interviews I attended each class as an observer for approximately 40 hours in order to get to know the youths as individuals, but also to get an insight into their mutual relationships. This facilitated both the creating of pairs and the interpretation of the empirical data. The interviews were semi-structured; a list of questions and topics were constructed that had to be covered during the interviews (Bryman, 2016). Yet, the interviews can be seen as conversations with the intent of giving the youths a voice by letting them, as freely as possible, describe their experiences of interacting in social media. They themselves defined and demarcated the phenomenon and my task was to ask follow-up questions when needed to get a deeper understanding. The focus in the interviews was *what* the youths were telling me about their online interactions. This means that this study is without an individual perspective; i.e. it was not important who was saying what. Neither was the purpose to conduct a comparative analysis between the two schools; instead the focus was to get a broad empirical material. The total time for all interviews was 12 hours and 38 minutes and all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

A hermeneutic interpretation process based on the overall aim guide the analysis (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004). The analysis began with an overall reading of the transcription, followed by a deconstruction of the text. By asking questions to the empirical data I gained a step-wise deepening and understanding of the empirical content. While the initial question was answered, a new question emerged that required further readings and so on. Altogether, there were four questions addressed to the empirical data. Table 1 highlights the questions:

Aim	Analysis questions
To get knowledge of what condition youths' interactions in social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-What characterizes the relationships to peers online?-What kinds of strategies are developed?-In what ways is communication affected?-In what ways are group belongings constructed and maintained?

Table 1. The aim related to the four analysis questions

One purpose of the deconstruction was to track meaning units. Meaning units should be understood here as central meaning-bearing terms that permeate the transcription. Based on the overall aim, I have placed the meaning units together into three clusters, which form the basis for the discursive patterns. The analysis involved connecting theoretical perspectives to the empirical data in order to deepen the understanding. The meaning units are presented in the beginning of each discourse and they are italicized within the text. Representative quotes from the empirical data highlight the meaning of each theme. Due to space considerations, the analysis process tracking the meaning units is not presented in this article. Instead focus is put on the last step in the analyzing process, i.e. highlighting the discourses that emerged in the empirical material. The discourses are named 'Taking responsibility', 'Saving face' and 'Social positioning'. The three discourses have been constructed by the following meaning units, which are presented in Table 2:

Meaning units				Discursive pattern
Care	The responsibility remains intact	Possibility to affirm each other	Contextual language	<i>Taking responsibility</i>
Precaution	Distancing	Hidden vulnerability	Increased courage	<i>Saving face</i>
Challenging moral boundaries	Balancing between public and privacy			
Strategic acts	Strive for attention	Negative sanctions	Increased acting space	<i>Social positioning</i>
Manifesting of hierarchies				

Table 2. Meaning units in the three discursive patterns

Generalization is central in qualitative studies. 'Internal validity' is a concept that is used to describe the relation between theory and empirical data (Bryman, 2016). A critical moment in this study has been the construction of discursive patterns. In a discourse analysis it is important to place the empirical data within a theoretical framework in order to give meaning to the content. The specific context may in this way be understood at a more principle level. Consequently, the result in this study may be valid outside the specific context by means of the theoretical framework and from a generalization perspective; it is the quality of the formulated theoretical conclusions that is important for the valuation.

Discursive patterns in the youths' argumentation

For most of the respondents in this study, there is a need to be well-informed about what is happening in the peer group. Because of that, it is important to join the same social media as peers. Some youth have 50-60 online friends, while others have over 500 friends. Three of them did not use social media at all. However, most of them describe a number of advantages of interacting online. But, there are also specific conditions, for example visibility and proliferation possibilities, that are important to be aware of.

The first discourse deals with how to handle relationships to close friends online:

Taking responsibility

In the empirical data a specific social practice, containing moral rules, related to the closest friends is visualized. The present discursive pattern highlights what it means to be a close friend online. The discourse has communicative overtones, where reciprocity and respect are guiding words. When Benhabib (1992) discusses the relation between autonomy and community she uses the concept 'concrete others' (p. 10) to focus on ethical demands related to people that we are connected to, for example our family or close friends. She says that 'we as concrete individuals know what is expected of us in virtue of the kind of social bonds which tie us to the other' (p. 10). To be in a community characterized by care, respect and mutuality is a fundamental human need (ibid).

When analyzing the empirical data the concept *care* emerges in relation to close friends. According to Noddings (1999, 2012) care is a central quality for developing a community and she highlights the importance of creating, preserving and encouraging a caring relationship. To support is essential and Ebba says for example:

Yes, you back each other...that's actually the thing with friends...then it doesn't really matter if someone hates you.

An ability to be empathetic and caring becomes even more important online in order both to avoid misunderstandings and to make the close friendship visible. Habermas' (1998) discussion about the tension between communicative and strategic acts becomes visible in this discourse. Here, communicative acts are superior and strategic acts get a subordinated position. It can be verbalized as close friendship legitimates some acts, but excludes others. The endeavor is to be a moral subject and a caring person. It is important to discover and interpret the friend's need:

Johanna: I know you cannot just say whatever you want.

Interviewer: Because?

Johanna: You may hurt someone...you just know that certain things you just don't say.

The care-giver must have an ability to both discover and interpret the need of the care-reipient. Noddings (1999) explains:

Care as a moral orientation requires receptivity, motivational, displacement (the direction of a carer's energy towards the projects or needs of the cared-for), and completion in the cared-for. (p. 16)

A caring relationship is also characterized by an ability to listen. Both Habermas (1998) and Noddings (1999, 2012) mean that there are different ways of listening. On one hand listening may be strategic and based on one's own purposes. On the other hand listening may also be communicative and used as a way of understanding another person's perspective. Henrik and Johan discuss the importance of being empathetic:

Henrik: I usually know if the other person is going to feel bad about what I write.

Johan: You always think twice before you comment on something.

Consequently, there are moral rules and obligations related to close friends independent of the context. With Habermas' (1998) words, there is an importance to face one another as mutual subjects and he means that communicative acts have a binding effect:

...the speech act can develop an action-coordinating effect only because the binding and bonding force of a speech act that is both understandable and has been accepted by the hearer/.../. (ibid, p. 223)

The binding effect becomes visible when the youth express that the responsibility of close friends *remains intact*, irrespective the context. Depending on the content of the communication it is important to choose the arena. Some content may be published online in contrast to another content, which fits better to be discussed offline. Disclosing a private content or commenting in an inconsiderate way online, may lead to mean comments from peers.

Another example of care-taking deals with conflicts, such as when a close friend has been mean or has challenged the group's social norms and when there is a need to be serious. These conflicts are often handled offline:

Elin: If you are mad at someone then of course you say that to that person.

Interviewer: You do that face to face?

/.../

Elin: If it is your best friend, then you often do it in reality.

Johanna: Of course you feel safer with your best friends and then you can say more and express yourself more if you are sad or angry.

The more serious the content the more important it is to meet each other face to face to avoid misunderstandings, where it is easier to show sadness, anger and indignation. Both body language and verbal utterances reinforce the seriousness.

An aspect of being a close friend deals with the importance of *affirming each other*. Affirmation from close friends is important for self-esteem. Online, there are lots of possibilities to act in a nice way. Frequently using the like-button is one example and sending cute messages, for example 'I love you' is another. The visibility online strengthens the relationship. When you cannot see each other, it is much easier to be nice:

Alice: /.../people for example SMS "How sweet you are!" and "What nice clothes you had on today!" But in real life you don't say anything.

Olivia: We comment each other, like "You look so nice today!"...You don't say that in reality, but on the Internet it is not unusual at all...

Affirmation can also be connected to the last meaning unit, which deals with developing a *contextual language* with one's closest friends. Close friends connect to each other by special ways of interacting online, where only their own group fully understands the meaning. Some friends are linked together by sending affirming comments 'You are the best' many times during the day. Other friends use a tougher way of communicating. It is easier to joke roughly to close friends, which you cannot do with peripheral friends, because of the risk of misunderstandings:

Michael: Nah...I usually joke a lot more on the Net. I usually joke sort of maliciously, but they usually understand that I don't mean anything bad.

Summarizing, the discourse 'taking responsibility' sheds light on how the youth look upon and act online in their relationships with close friends. They have developed social norms in which both a caring attitude and an empathetic ability are central. It is important to nurture these relationships both online and offline, yet because of the online characteristics it is important to interact carefully.

The second discursive pattern that was identified is associated with the vulnerability that characterizes human interactions and the endeavor to protect one's social value online:

Saving face

Irrespective context, all humans strive for preserving their own social value. If it is questioned it may lead to feelings of sadness, anger or being embarrassed, especially if there are other people watching. There are lots of comments in the empirical data about the capability of online proliferation and visibility. There is great fear of being insulted by peers and that other peers would see:

Roger: Sometimes you see people wrote a post and then others have commented on it in a mean way...Then there are 12 people who liked the comment ...so all of them agree /.../ darn, there are some who are against me now...I will take that away before anyone sees it.

The present discourse highlights arguments about saving face when interacting online. 'Face' is a concept from Goffman, and he means that, on one hand, face is a personal belonging, which keeps us safe and secure. But on the other hand, face is also borrowed from the social world. He describes the concept as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' (Goffman,

1967/2005, p. 5). In most interactions there is a unified effort not to let anyone lose face. The discourse sheds light on how the youths try to develop a 'face-saving practice' (p.13) in a space where one cannot see the face of the other. On one hand there are difficulties in balancing the interactions, but on the other hand online interactions also facilitate this endeavor.

Goffman's (1959/1990) concept 'the front and the back region' contributes to understanding the difficulties that may occur in online communication. Interactions in the front region are like a performance in front of an audience, while interactions in the back region are not visible for a specific audience (ibid). Online the distinction between the regions is not so obvious; you are in the front and the back region at the same time. This entails both possibilities and limitations. On one hand the vulnerability increases because you are in the front region and the interactions are more or less public. On the other hand you are in the back region, hidden behind a screen, which implies both invisibility and distance. It is important to handle this duplicity in an appropriate way in order to 'save face'. To act with *precaution* online is important, for example when a friend is insulted:

Interviewer: You do not get involved because you are afraid that it will come back to hurt you?

Stina: Yes, a little.

Interviewer: If you saw that someone got picked on then...someone who was really treated badly. Let's say people ganged up against Felicia...

Stina: Then I would talk to her...I am here for you...You can talk to me. I'm not going to get involved because I don't want to be exposed.

Strategic acts (Habermas, 1998) emerge when it comes to supporting friends online. The risk of being drawn into a conflict or impolite behavior is imminent. One way to handle this is to be *distanced*, by not supporting each other online. Henrik says, 'It is better letting people handle things by themselves; otherwise they could ruin me as well'. Instead close friends often support each other offline. Even greater precaution and distancing emerges when the youths talk about peripheral peers. So, unless you are a close friend to someone, you do not get support either online or offline:

Interviewer: But I wanted to ask...if you would see that someone was picked on...if you knew that someone in the class was a victim like of a gang at the school...would you dare to say something on the Net then?

Victoria: Yes, but if I don't know the person then I wouldn't do that.

Another example in order not to lose face online is the importance of *hiding one's vulnerability*. To show sadness online is not successful. Online is online, and there is an acceptance of the social norms developed in this space. Sara says:

/.../ I think you repress things when it comes to the Internet. It's quite easy to do that.

On one hand there is an increased vulnerability because of the feeling of being in the front region. But, on the other hand it is easier to interact online, because the vulnerability can be hidden. Lots of comments deal with the feeling of being protected behind the screen. No one can hurt you and no one can see your sadness. 'What can they do?' Fredric says. When you cannot see the reaction on the peer's face, you do not have to be responsible in the same way as offline:

Olivia: It's quite clear that people dare more ... no one is standing right in front of you /.../ then you only have to say that is not what I meant ... like, sorry... it's actually pretty strange.

In contrast to the importance of acting as moral subjects to close friends, there is a distancing attitude towards peripheral friends. This leads to an *increased courage* to comment more honestly, but also more insultingly. Something happens with moral principles and rules when you cannot see the person you are interacting with. In school some peers do not say a word, but online they blurt out in different ways. Sam says, 'It's all about self-confidence, namely if you have a low self-esteem it's much easier to dominate online'. In order to show off for a moment, one can discredit a peer, without risking losing face. The responsibility for the interactions online decreases, as do feelings of shame and guilt. Because of that, *moral boundaries can be challenged*:

Martin: It's like you get an adrenaline rush. You can't manage it. You think you can do anything. There is nothing in that person's eyes that says, "Stop...I don't want this, stop it."

Interviewer: Even if you talk to someone in the class or someone else, and they know that it is you...you dare to go on?

Martin: That's because you don't look them in the eyes...the eyes of course are the window to the person's soul.

Another consequence of blurred perception barriers online, deals with the ability to *balance between private and public* communication. On one hand it is important to be personal, to get attention from peers, but on the other hand there is a risk of being too private:

Johanna: A girl is having a hard time. She has hurt herself a bit.

Elin: She put out a bunch of pictures...her mother is sick...her grandfather is sick...she is sick. People react to that...I feel sorry she wants attention. I think people think so. They write that you are fat because she takes pills. You are so fat, so die, Sabina. /.../ It seems like she wants to get those comments, that people should feel sorry for her. It's too bad for her...that's not it. It was just... it was too much.

You get attention, but it is the wrong kind of attention. The limit is subtle and infringing upon the limit is a social norm violation, which may lead to negative sanctions from peers. It is difficult to make distinctions when publishing content online, i.e. how much of one's private life is to be disclosed? Some peers are not able to decide what is appropriate.

To sum up, this discourse deals with the youths' endeavor to preserve their social value. When interacting online a duality appears. Vulnerability increases because of the visibility and proliferation possibilities online as well as the difficulty of interacting with a mediated face in a front region. At the same time, vulnerability decreases since there is a feeling of being hidden behind the screen in a back region, which leads to a negotiating of moral borders and increased courage.

The third and last discursive pattern found in the empirical material deals with positioning strategies in and between peer groups:

Social positioning

This discourse sheds light on how the use of social media can be seen as a part of a social identification and positioning process conditioned by different social norm systems. These processes lead to normative expectations at an individual as well as at a group level. Through the interactions a hierarchical order is both developed and preserved online, which generates

different power and status in the peer groups (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Tajfel, 1981; Goffman, 1959/1990). This discourse is characterized by *strategic acts* (Habermas, 1998). Online there are lots of possibilities of presenting yourself to peers to get them interested in you, but it is essential to think tactically before publishing. A main reason to interact in social media is to *get attention* from peers. Fredrik explains:

Everyone wants attention. Everyone wants to be liked by everyone and everything... otherwise programs like Big Brother wouldn't work of course.

The attention has to be an attention that strengthens one's social value or status in the peer group. Another example of strategic acts deals with accepting or denying a friend request. There are lots of comments about the importance of choosing online friends very carefully. The right to choose online friends is taken for granted:

... It's some of your private life you show, so of course you shouldn't feel that you have to accept someone ... then I don't think it's mean.

A reason to deny a friend request is the quality of the relationship offline. Isac says for example, 'If I don't like the person he won't be my friend'. If the peer already is marginalized in school, it is easy to exclude him or her online, too. Joseph talks about Bill, who has cognitive difficulties and he is only joining the class in practical subjects:

Interviewer: Is there any reason that if someone wants to be friends with you on Facebook...is there anyone that you would ignore?

Joseph: Of course I would ignore certain ones...cp-kids.

Interviewer: Who are they then?

Joseph: Bill for example...

Interviewer: Why is he a cp-kid?

Joseph: I add most people, but I would never add him.

Interviewer: Why not?

Joseph: You might not like the person or something.

As obvious as the right to choose one's friends online, is also the right to 'block' someone and to ignore a publication from a peripheral friend.

Often the youths describe themselves as affiliated to a group, for example, they are 'horse-girls' or 'skateboarders'. This leads implicitly to conforming to a social norm system related to the specific group. When using Goffman's dramaturgic concepts, these inclusion processes can be explained as an awareness of how acts are perceived by peers. To be looked upon as a 'group' requires both coordinated acts and an ambition towards a common goal (Goffmans, 1959/1990). As mentioned in the discourse 'taking responsibility,' both the like-button and comment publications are used in order to both affirm each other and to strengthen the group bonds. Through the online visibility these acts also become effective for uniting the group members.

The online interactions can also be characterized as a struggle of power between individuals and between groups. It is important to set limits for peer comments. To be subordinated with a feeling of less power is not successful:

Elin: If he writes like this, "Ugh, how ugly you are!" then I would just kind of... "but you are, too!" ... You don't just say, "Thanks".

Ellen: Yes, you don't want to be the weak one /.../ so like he doesn't get the better of me.

The status associated with group affiliations both enables and restricts the youths' acting space. Some peer groups have higher status than others and these social hierarchies created offline follow into the online communication. As said in the beginning of this section, the online arena is a great part of everyday life for most of the youths, but some of them are locked out. In some way there is a self-imposed exclusion. These youths have a very low ranking in the class, which they are fully aware of, and they will not risk being offended or even more excluded online. Martin says, for example, 'I have only a few friends so I don't need social media'. He has not got a strong social affiliation and being online is a dangerous thing for him. No one will protect him if someone is mean. He has a couple of friends in school and that is enough. So, in order to avoid *negative sanctions* from peers it is important both to have an awareness of the power differences in the peer groups and in which ways these differences can be related to the acting space online. Thus, a secure friend affiliation affects the acting space online. Having close friends means to be surrounded by a supporting structure; the greater supporting structure the more *increased acting space*. This makes it easier to argue against mean or insulting comments.

Several studies show that stereotypical power orders about gender are recreated online (Abiala and Hernwall, 2013; Forsman, 2014; Hernwall, 2014). Both boys and girls use gender markers to show their gender identity. Norms and expectations developed in the surrounding society become visible when they comment on each other or when they publish photos online (ibid). One example in this study is that girls need more affirmation than boys and that is why girls send nice things to each other all the time. Another example is the different kinds of photos girls and boys publish. To show the body in order to get 'likes' is female-coded, and if a boy publishes such a photo there is a great risk of being insulted. Instead boys are 'doers'; they publish pictures when they act. It also emerges that boys and girls have different access to each other's acting space. It is easier for girls to use boys' acting space, for example publishing photos when they are acting. The opposite condition prevails for most of the boys. There is a great risk for boys publishing photos when they are exposing their body.

The different acting spaces are not solely related to gender, but also to hierarchies in the peer group. A published photo may be perceived both as accepted and norm-breaching depending on who the sender is. For example, a girl from a low-status group is risking being insulted if she publishes a picture of herself when she exhibits her body. Sara says:

This person has got a bad reputation ... look at her! She would be exposed in school.

This girl would be looked upon as a 'slut'. On the contrary, if a girl from a high-status group publishes the same kind of picture, she gets positive comments and even higher status:

Stina: Some girls have a kind of status ... and it's clear that if they put out such photos they get even more ...

The same discussion emerges in discussions about boys' photos. Some boys have high status and they can show their body, muscles and 'six-pack', without risking being insulted by peers. However, most of the boys would never publish photos where they expose their body, since there is a risk of being looked upon as a 'faggot'. Accordingly, the higher the status the greater the acting space, which leads to more possibilities to challenge the prevailing order. But, challenging the prevailing order there is always a risk of being insulted. In this way there is a *manifesting of hierarchies* online.

To conclude, the discourse ‘social positioning’ relates to the youths’ endeavors to get attention from peers. The interaction in social media can be seen as a social categorization and positioning process in which the acting space is conditioned by different norm systems derived from both a group and a structural level. The youth act strategically in order not to get negative sanctions and to preserve their social position in the peer group. Depending on the social position in the peer group, the youth have a different acting space online.

Between responsibility and positioning

This study contributes with perspectives regarding the conditions in young peoples’ online interactions. There is a tension between the endeavor to be a close friend, to get attention from peers and the vulnerability that characterizes online interactions. The relation between the front and back region (Goffman, 1959/1990) online is complex, and within this complexity the youth act. The study shows that online and offline practices cannot be regarded as isolated from each other. Both ideals and social norm systems (Tajfel, 1981, Goffman, 1959/1990) are mediated between the two arenas, which is highlighted in the three discursive patterns, ‘taking responsibility’, ‘saving face’ and ‘social positioning’. In this way the social order among the youths is preserved. As Fairclough (1992) indicates these processes are continuous negotiations in which the youths learn partly how to become and be a friend and partly how to position themselves in the peer group. Being in the ‘the front and back regions’ (Goffman, 1959/1990) at the same time creates great demands. Some youths challenge the prevailing order in the peer group and the norms about how to interact online, which increases the risk of being insulted. The vulnerability online can also be related to disciplinary forces that occur in the social practice online. One example is the construction of gender that appears in the argumentation. The separation of gender, which implies a different norm system depending if you are a boy or a girl emerges in the analysis. The gender stereotypes emerge for example in discussions of what kinds of photos boys and girls publish. This result is consistent with other studies about performing gender identity online (Abiala and Hernwall, 2013; Forsman, 2014; Hernwall, 2014). Furthermore, this study shows that disciplinary forces also deal with status in the peer group. The higher the status, the larger the acting space online irrespective of whether you are a boy or a girl. More research is needed concerning positioning processes among youths, for example from an intersectional perspective, and how these processes can be related to the intersection between online and offline.

The discursive patterns have a controlling effect, and for the youths, it is important to have knowledge about these conditions to be successful online. They have to relate to aspects highlighted in the discourses, and in this way a ‘struggle’ among the discourses appears (Fairclough, 1995; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). Three parameters are involved in decisions about online communication, which are changeable depending on the purpose of the interactions. The first parameter deals with *whom* the interaction takes place, whether it is a close or a peripheral friend. The second parameter is about what kind of *content* is to be published, and the third and last parameter highlights the *online characteristics*. In what ways should visibility, durability, dissemination, and the front and back regions be handled in a given interaction? The discourses get different power positions depending on the relationships among the three parameters. This ‘struggle’ contributes to the development of a social identity, but also to how to become a part of a social affiliation.

As Goffman (1959/1990) highlights, humans’ social value is constructed in relation to other. The youth act from their social position, in terms of expectations based on their position in the peer group and fear of reprisals (ibid). A secure affiliation plays an important role when interacting online and social media is used to re-enforce these friendships. This result

correspond to other studies (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008; Davis, 2012; Vallor, 2012). Benhabib (1992) highlights the ethical demand to the 'concrete other', and it became obvious in the respondents' arguments that interaction orders and routines developed with close friends function both as limits and as bearers of expectations. It is of great importance to nurture these relationships. A secure social affiliation contributes to a feeling of decreased vulnerability online. Close friends function as a shield against mean comments from peers. Group membership is secured and affirmed through interactions online, and expectations are created both within and across different groups (Berger and Luckman, 1966). The discursive pattern 'social positioning' deals with making conscious choices, in order to get attention from friends. Thus, for best results, it is important to act strategically. Knowledge how to present oneself, in order to get good attention is essential.

Both Noddings (1999, 2012) and Habermas (1998) discuss morals as collective processes. The youth in this study relate their acts both to themselves and to the peer group. On one hand there are moral rules connected to close friendships irrespective where they take place, on the other hand moral boundaries are negotiated in social media. The fear of losing face online decreases, which leads to braver, more honest and mean comments, especially to peripheral friends. The interactions online may be an arena for social compulsion, because the negative sanctions often are immediate and public. A balancing act occurs, between the youth being agents and at the same time being subordinated to the conditions developed in the social practice online.

The struggle between the discourses can also be looked upon as a social integration process (Habermas, 1998). In the discursive patterns there are logics, which constitute the social practice in different ways. They contribute to constituting the youths' acts, and at the same time they create meaning for the individual. By applying Habermas' (1998) communication theory about social integration, one can use the social and discursive practice that develops in social media to get a deeper understanding of the youths' online communication. Communicative and strategic acts rest on different logics and as Habermas (1998) emphasizes, the 'life world' contains both acts, and the result in this study is one example of the tension between them. In the discourse 'taking responsibility', communicative acts dominate, whilst strategic acts dominate in the 'social positioning' discourse. In the discourse 'saving face', both communicative and strategic acts are present. The youth orientate their acts according to different motives, with respect to friendship, categorization processes and online characteristics.

To conclude, young peoples' online communication cannot be expressed as 'black' or 'white', instead a picture rich in nuances appears. The result in this study shows that social identity is negotiated in the intersection between online and offline practices. The youth are tactical in order to find and preserve their group position and at the same time take care of their close friends online. They can be seen as jugglers with many balls in the air at the same time, balancing between responsibilities and positioning.

References

- Abiala, Kristina and Hernwall, Patrik (2013) Tweens konstruerar identitet online-flickors och pojks erfarenheter av sociala medier. [Tweens constructing identity online-girls and boys experiences of social media]. *Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige* (18)1-2:10-35.
- Angell, Ian (2008) As I see it: enclosing identity. *Identity in the Information Society* 1 (1): 23-37.

- Berger, Thomas and Luckmann, Peter L (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Benhabib, Sheila (1992) *Situating the Self. Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. Oxford: Marston Book Services Limited.
- boyd, danah (2008) Why Youth Heart Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life. In David Buckingham (Ed.) *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*. Cambridge, Mass,: MIT Press.
- Bryman, Alan (2016) *Social Research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chouliaraki, Lilie and Fairclough, Norman (1999) *Discourse in Late Modernity. Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Davis, Katie (2010) Coming of Age Online: The Developmental Underpinnings of Girls' Blogs. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 25(1): 145-171.
- Davis, Katie (2012) Friendship 2.0: Adolescents' experiences of belonging and self-disclosure online. *Journal of Adolescence*. 35: 1527-1536
- Fairclough, Norman (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Forsman, Michael (2014) *Sociala medier, onlinespel och bildkommunikation bland killar och tjejer i årskurs 4 och 7*. [Social media, online gaming and image communication among boys and girls in grades 4 and 7] Statens medieråd. Stockholm: Kulturdepartementet.
- Goffman, Erving (1959/1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Goffman, Erving (1967/2005) *Interaction Ritual. Essays in Face to Face Behavior*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Aldine Transaction.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1998) *On the Pragmatics of Communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hernwall, Patrik (2014) "Vem är du? Om genus och makt i ungas kommunikation online". [Who are you? About gender and power in youths' communication online.] In Elza Dunkels and Simon Lindgren (Eds.). *Interaktiva medier och lärandemiljöer*. Malmö: Gleerups förlag.
- Internetstiftelsen i Sverige (2017) *Svenskarna och Internet 2016. Undersökning om svenskarnas internetvanor*. [Internet Foundation in Sweden (2017). *Swedish people and Internet. A study about Swedes and Internet habits*].
https://www.iis.se/docs/Svenskarna_och_internet_2016.pdf [17-05-30]
- Lauren, Mark and Ratliffe, Katherine T. (2011) Cyber worlds: New playgrounds for bullying. *Computers in the Schools*, (28)2: 92-116.
- Lindseth, Anders and Norberg, Astrid (2004) A phenomenological hermeneutical method for researching lived experience. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 18(2): 145-153.

- Livingstone, Sonia and Helsper, Ellen (2010) Balancing opportunities and risks in teenagers' use of the Internet: The role of online skills and Internet self-efficacy. *New Media & Society*, 12(2): 309-329.
- Marwick, Alice, E and boyd, danah (2014) Networked privacy: how teenagers negotiate context in social media. *New media and society* 16(7): 1051-1067.
- Noddings, Nel (1999) Care, justice and equity. In M. S. Katz, N. Noddings and K. A. Strike, (Eds). *Justice and caring: the search for common ground in education*. New York: Teachers College Press: 7-20.
- Noddings, Nel (2012) The language of care ethics. *Knowledge Quest. Caring is essential* 40(4).
- Selwyn, Neil (2011) Making sense of young people, education and digital technology; The role of Sociological Theory. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(1): 81-96.
- Sjöberg, Jeanette (2010) Chat som umgängesform. Unga skapar nät-gemenskap. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet. Institutionen för barn- och ungdomsvetenskap. [Chat as a form of social intercourse. Youth create network community. Stockholm: Stockholm University. The Institution of child- and adolescent science.]
- Shariff, Shaheen (2008) *Cyber-bullying. Issues and Solutions for the School, the Classroom and the Home*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis group.
- Subrahmanyam, Kaveri and Greenfield, Patricia (2008) Online communication and adolescent relationships. *Children and Electronic Media*, 18(1): 119-146.
- Sundén, Jenny (2003) *Material Virtualities*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Statens Medieråd (2017) *Ungar & Medier 2017*. Stockholm: Kulturdepartementet. [Swedish Media Council. Children & Media 2017. Stockholm: Department of Culture].
- Sveningsson Elm, Malin (2009) Exploring and negotiating femininity. Young women's creation of style in a Swedish community. *Young - Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 17(3): 241-264.
- Tajfel, Henri (1981) *Human Groups and Social Categories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, Angela (2007) *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Vallor, Shannon (2012) Flourishing on Facebook: virtue friendship and new social media. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 14(3): 185-199.