In-between Child's Play And Teenage Pop Culture:

Tweens, TikTok & Privacy

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Abstract

Introduction

The short-video sharing social media platform TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular

social media among children between 8 to 12 year old. For these children, who are also known as

tweens because of their liminal identity between 'being a child' and 'being a teenager' (Abiala &

Hernwall, 2013; Coulter 2013; Kennedy, 2018), living a networked life has become an

increasingly important rite de passage (Vanden Abeele, 2016). The tween community lacks from

TikTok's official user statistics due to its corresponding age-demographic not meeting the legal

age requirement. Recent survey results, however, show that the popularity of TikTok among

tweens surpasses that of other social media such as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, with 44%

of 6 to 12 year olds regularly participating on the short-video sharing platform (Demeulenaere et

al., 2020). Moreover, TikTok's predecessor "Musical.ly" was already known for attracting a user

base well below the legal age limit of 13 year old (Herrman, 2016). The popularity of TikTok

among tweens raises pertinent questions about TikTok's architecture as a short-video sharing

social medium, and how tweens' networked participations on this platform are situated within a

broader socio-cultural ecosystem.

TikTok can be conceived as a networked public: It is a digital space structured by a

networked architecture and constituted by imagined communities that traverse its mediated

environment (boyd, 2010). Networked publics' dynamics often cause concerns over children's

safety due to both the posed challenges for protecting privacy on these platforms and young

people's assumed propensity for reckless disclosure behaviors (boyd, 2007; De Leyn et al., 2019;

De Wolf & Joye, 2019; Marwick, 2008). There are at least two reasons why perceptions of

tweenhood, TikTok and privacy are especially relevant to examine in the case of tweens'

participations on TikTok. First, they can unveil how tweens and parents imagine and respond to

TikTok as a networked public. Second, tweens' ascribed position in-between childhood protection and teenage autonomy might inform how these children and their parents regard and manage tweens' online privacy (Kim & Davis, 2017). Therefore, questions can also be asked about how tweens' privacy is shaped, not only by TikTok's dynamics as a networked public, but also by socio-cultural beliefs about the tween life stage.

This study answers these questions by investigating how tweens and their parents perceive and manage risks and opportunities on TikTok, including privacy risks. We visited 10 middle class households in Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), in which we performed 20 interviews with tweens and their parents. In the tween interviews, we used the media go-along method (Jørgensen, 2016) to explore how tweens interact with TikTok's affordances. In our investigation, we approach tweenhood as a socio-cultural construct (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013; De Leyn et al., 2019) in order to move beyond a developmental framework that locates children's media use and privacy management within the socio-biological process of growing up (e.g. Davis & Carrie, 2013; Shin, et al., 2012; Lwin, et al., 2008; Youn, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Tweenhood

Tweens are commonly depicted as 8 – 12 year old children who are in the process of 'becoming adolescents' (Kennedy, 2018). The emergence of tweenhood as a separate life stage is often attributed to the earlier onset of puberty and to pre-adolescent cognitive developments (e.g. Herman-Giddens et al., 2001). However, tweens' negotiation of their ambiguous and, at moments, clashing identities as 'neither children nor teenagers' is not only determined by biological processes (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013; Coulter, 2013, Kennedy, 2018). Tweenhood is

also a socio-cultural construction that reveals norms, values and assumptions about what it

means to be a child and a teenager, and how society ought to guide children during their

transition into adolescence (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013; De Leyn et al., 2019).

> The construction of tweenhood as a separate life stage in-between childhood and

adolescence is part of larger socio-cultural imaginations of the lifespan. Socio-cultural

imaginations of the lifespan and the institutions that shape and are shaped by them (e.g.

education, legal system, consumer market), draw from modernist narratives of progress

(Comaroff & Comaroff, 2005; Durham, 2017; Jeffery, 2020). These narratives perpetuate linear

notions of 'growing up': They construct adulthood as 'the normal human condition' which

appoints to younger life stage categories the continuous process of moving towards assumed bio-

psychological completeness (e.g. cognitive maturation) and a desired societal ideal (e.g. full-time

employment) (Durham, 2017: Sabry & Mansour, 2019).

In the Global North, childhood is oftentimes nostalgically imagined as a state of

innocence, naivety and protection (Sabry & Mansour, 2019). Adolescence on the other hand is

considered a phase of expanding autonomy but also of reckless risk-taking (Durham, 2017).

Influenced by similar developmental paradigms and by the post-feminist project to continuously

work on 'the self', tweenhood emerged as a transitional life stage which demarcates a *"journey*

of transformation" from innocent child to autonomous adolescent that goes with the

development of a gendered and sexual identity (Cody, 2012; Kennedy, 2018, p. 21). As a result

of their social positioning between childhood and adolescence, tweens inhabit both child and

teen identities as they navigate the liminal space between *"the frivolity and playfulness of*

childhood" and the *"freedoms of adolescence"* (Abiala & Hernwall, 2012; Coulter, 2013, p. 21).

Recent statistics indicate that TikTok is an attractive platform for tweens specifically (Demeulenare et al., 2020). Considering the exceptional popularity of TikTok among tweens, this raises the question whether TikTok constitutes a networked public that draws specifically from tweenhood's ambiguous realities. To proper contextualize tweens' participations and privacy on TikTok, the first aim of this paper is therefore to explore tweens' lived experiences and parents' socio-cultural imaginations of tweenhood (RQ1).

The construction of TikTok as a networked public

TikTok is most famous for its short-videos (oftentimes no longer than 15 seconds) portraying lip-syncing, dancing, and playful activities that resemble to some extent the video meme culture that was already witnessed in Vine (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). TikTok can be conceived as a networked public (boyd, 2010): It affords users to express mutual connections (e.g. followers), to build a profile page containing personal information, and to create, share and consume online content (boyd, 2010). Because TikTok's architecture is made up of these features and affordances, people's navigations on the TikTok platform result in dynamics that not only facilitate identity performances and sociality but also complicate boundaries between public and private.

Different from other networked publics such as Facebook or Instagram, however, TikTok's architecture actively downplays interpersonal connection (e.g. Kaye et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2020) Conceptualizing TikTok as an 'imitation public', Zulli & Zulli (2020) observed how TikTok mainly thrives on content exploration and (re-)creation. These processes are actively stimulated through the default algorithmic-driven 'for you page' that recommends a seemingly endless stream of publicly available content (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Moreover, Kennedy (2020) found how TikTok specifically stimulates the production of content

that transforms 'traditional' private spaces into a public stage for TikTok videos (e.g. dance

videos performed in the teenage bedroom)

While emerging scholarship has successfully mapped TikTok's key affordances using

digital ethnographic and walkthrough methods, the perceptions and experiences of TikTok users

themselves have rarely been explored (cfr. Abidin, 2021). It is paramount to supplement the

existing literature with the perceptions and experiences of TikTok users because these can reveal

how TikTok is perceived and appropriated as a networked public (boyd, 2010; Nagy & Neff,

2015). Although TikTok is now popular among a wide range of age-groups, tweens remain a key

demographic participating on TikTok in Belgium. Furthermore, parents are equally important to

consider, as it is well-established that parents mediate children's media use (e.g. Jeffery, 2020;

Kim & Davis, 2017; Lwin, et al., 2008) and may thus indirectly act as TikTok navigators.

To explore the interactions between tweens' participations on TikTok and parents'

mediation of these practices, it is valuable to consider how socio-cultural imaginations of the life

span, as outlined above, contribute to TikTok's dynamics as a networked public. Relevant in that

regard, is Nagy and Neff's (2015) notion of imagined affordances as they remind us that

affordances are *"not merely material qualities but they also depend on the interactions between*

perceivers and their environment" (p. 5). The concept of imagined affordances emphasizes how

a same set of affordances can be perceived and appropriated differentially based on users' social

roles (cfr. Hurley, 2019; Witteborn, 2018). From this perspective, we can understand how

TikTok's construction as a networked public is not only informed by its technological

architecture but also by tweens' and their parents' socio-cultural dependent experiences,

perceptions, emotions, and expectations (Nagy & Neff, 2015). For example, tweens – who

generally enjoy less autonomy than teenagers – might recognize and appropriate TikTok as an

opportunity to connect and experiment with youth culture early on (Castells et al., 2007). In turn, tweens' active engagements with TikTok's 'for you page' can generate an imagined community based on tween subculture (cfr. Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Parents, on the other hand, could draw from their developmental understandings of life stage categories to evaluate the appropriateness of TikTok and decide upon suitable parental mediation practices in order to ensure a healthy transition from childhood to adolescence (cfr. Jeffery, 2020; Savic, 2016).

We argue that applying the concept of imagined affordances can illuminate how the socio-cultural construction of tweenhood shapes and is shaped by TikTok's dynamics as a networked public. More specifically, we aim to explore how tweens and their parents make sense of TikTok's specific affordances and imagined communities from their own vantage points. In other words, how do tweens and their parents perceive and appropriate TikTok as a networked public, and how do their perceptions align with the socio-cultural construction of tweenhood? (RQ2)

Tweens' privacy

Privacy risks are a central trope in public discussions on tweens' TikTok participations. For example, several media outlets provide 'TikTok survival guides for parents' in which caregivers are educated on how to keep children safe (e.g. Hodge, 2020; Thurrot, 2019). Reproducing a risk discourse surrounding youth's social media use (Korkmazer et al., 2019), these survival guides play into the public anxiety of how 'reckless' disclosure behaviours might invite attempts from unwanted strangers to connect with children (Kim & Davis, 2017). As a result, the importance of altering privacy settings and of monitoring children's behaviors in order to mitigate privacy risks is highlighted (e.g. Hodge, 2020; Thurrot, 2019).

Although privacy concerns on TikTok are not unwarranted, the contemporary discourse displays several characteristics of a so-called 'technopanic', a moral panic around media technology (Marwick, 2008). In a technopanic, broader moral panics about young people's perceived vulnerability intersect with societal fears about the detrimental consequences of new technologies (e.g. 'the disappearance of privacy as a value'). In the case of TikTok, tweens are seen as vulnerable social media users who are at risk of becoming victimized due to TikTok's networked environment and their assumed limited skills to protect their online privacy (cfr. De Leyn, et al., 2019; Marwick, 2008). Indeed, the image of young people as naïve and reckless social media users who forsake privacy has been found to be a persistent myth in public discussions on youth's networked participations (De Wolf & Joye, 2019).

However, empirical studies provide ample evidence that young people are concerned about their privacy and capable of protecting their personal information (e.g. Balleys & Coll, 2017; Blank, et al., 2014; De Wolf, 2016) albeit not always in the ways envisioned by adult society (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Although the scholarship on youth's online privacy dispels common misconceptions, tweens are rarely part of studies' research populations (Stoilova, et al., 2019). Moreover, their privacy perceptions and management are generally explained through a developmental lens: Tweens' privacy management strategies are described as less advanced, and are mostly attributed to parental mediation under the assumption that tweens are not equally capable as teenagers or adults to understand the networked nature of social media (e.g. Davis & Carrie, 2013; Shin, et al., 2012; Lwin, et al., 2008; Youn, 2009).

Addressing the limited attention paid to tweens' privacy in the scholarly debate, we posit the following research question: How is tweens' privacy conceptualized and managed on TikTok? (RQ3) Moving beyond developmental understandings of the lifespan, we aim to inquire

how the intersection between perceptions of tweenhood and TikTok as a networked public

shapes privacy discourses and practices.

Methodology

This study explores parents' and tweens' perceptions of TikTok, and investigates how privacy is

conceptualized and managed by tweens and their parents. The methodology draws on 20 semi-

structured in-depth interviews that toke place between June 2019 and October 2019. In total, we

visited 10 households where we conducted interviews with 12 tweens and 13 parents in Flanders,

Belgium (see table 1).

Because of our focus on the tween life stage and TikTok, we made use of purposive

sampling to recruit the participants. Households with at least one child aged 8 to 12 using

TikTok on a regular basis were eligible to participate. Contact with the participating households

was established through primary schools and online public platforms (e.g. community pages on

Facebook). We chose to sample based on participants' age because of our primary aim to explore

how socio-cultural imaginations of the tween life stage intersect with perceptions of TikTok and

privacy. We did not set requirements regarding other demographic information such as SES and

ethnic identity. Although the participating households were varied in size, composition and

ethnic identity, there were certain elements indicating that these households occupy a middle

class status in society (e.g. involvement of parents in children's lives, ability to afford internet

connection and digital devices).

We received the ethics committees' approval from the lead author's university

department [omitted]. When visiting participants' households, we informed parents and tweens

about their rights, the goals of the study, and how data would be processed and stored. Written

informed consent was obtained from both children and parents. We made sure that parents and children were interviewed separately in order to safeguard confidentiality between the different members of the households.

The guides for the parent and tween interviews were similar in structure: They first explored participants' perceptions of tweenhood, then discussed TikTok as a networked public, and finally introduced the topic of privacy. The 'parent interviews' additionally inquired into parental assumptions about and their mediation of their children's networked behaviors while the tween interviews explored how tweens participate on TikTok and how they experience parental mediation. Moreover, the 'tween interviews' also incorporated the media go-along method (Jørgensen, 2016): By asking tweens to show a typical 'TikTok-session', we were able to witness firsthand how these children engage with the short-video sharing social media platform. Although we did not capture and store the short-videos displayed during the media go-along, this information was collected in an observational manner by taking notes. By interviewing both parents and tweens and supplementing these interviews with the media go-along method, we aimed to increase the reliability and validity of the results through triangulation.

The interviews were transcribed and then coded using Nvivo11. The transcripts and coding were regularly discussed between the involved researchers. In the first round of coding, we used the general themes in the topic guides (tweenhood, affordances, opportunities, risks and privacy) as upper-level codes to organize the transcripts. The next rounds of coding refined the code scheme by inductively adding more specific lower level codes based on participants' perceptions and experiences (e.g. tweenhood was specified with codes such as child identity, teenage identity, references to liminality).

Results

In what follows we describe and analyze the main themes from the conversations we had with parents and their children on tweenhood, TikTok, and privacy. First, we examine parents' socio-cultural imaginations of the lifespan and tweens' everyday experiences of the liminal space between childhood and adolescence. Armed with these insights, we analyze how these perceptions and experiences shape understandings of TikTok as a networked public and the management of tweens' privacy in that space.

Neither children nor teenagers

The parents in this study mostly adopted developmental understandings of tweenhood. Parents described their tween child as *"being in transition"*, *"evolving"* and *"becoming"* (cfr. Coulter, 2013; Kennedy, 2018). These terms highlight parents' linear imaginations of the lifespan in which children are positioned vis-à-vis childhood and adolescence by drawing upon 'typical' characteristics of children and teenagers. The parents of Melany, an eleven-year old girl, for example state about their daughter:

Fiona: *"I see her more as a child. She's evolving though but now she's still a child to us."*
Interviewer: *"What do you mean with evolving?"*
Fiona: *"She's already starting to show adolescent behavior, her interests are revolving more around music, dancing, friends and parties so she isn't really playing anymore. She's also looking for an identity, like what's cool and what's not cool."*
[...]
Interviewer: *"How do you notice a difference with what you already see as teenagers?"*
Bart: *"For me, a teenager is really interested in the other sex and that's not present yet"*
Fiona: *"And she's still very much attached to mum and dad. She still thinks it's OK to be identified with mum and dad while a teenager is more withdrawn and on its own."*

The image of tweens as children who are in the process of becoming teenagers was pervasive in parents' understanding of this liminal life stage. Consistent with linear assumptions on 'growing up', parents expect their children to shed characteristics attributed to childhood while acquiring adolescent features. They imagine tweenhood to be a temporary transition phase in which playfulness evolves into identity construction, dependency becomes autonomy, and innocence succumbs to hormonal impulses (cfr. Kennedy, 2018).

Similar to parents' perspectives on tweenhood, most children in this study positioned themselves in-between 'being a child' and 'being a teenager'. However, the children's responses did not include explicit references to the existence of a liminal transition phase. Rather, they seem to alternate between 'being a child' and 'being a teenager' dependent on concrete situations. For example, 11 year old Ayla describes herself as a child when she is playing outside with the neighbors, while she believes to act as a teenager at home. As 11 year old Melany points out, being a tween is an ongoing negotiation of both 'child' and 'teen' identities:

Melany: *"Sometimes I see myself more as a child and sometimes more as a teenager. For example, some children in my grade are just like children from kindergarten and then I think that I'm not a child like them. Other times there are other, older [children] and then you see yourself more as a child."*

Talking to tweens about smartphones and other networked technologies in their daily lives revealed that the use of these devices aligns with their liminal identities. Overall, the tweens contemplated how access to networked publics affords them to explore contemporary youth culture and to alleviate some of the tensions stemming from their restricted autonomy as not-yet teenagers. The 11 year old boy Erik for example, expressed a sense of frustration over the fact

that he does not enjoy the same autonomy as older teenagers. For tweens like Erik, networked

publics provide new opportunities to perform their identities and socialize with friends:

Interviewer: *"If you don't have to take anything into account, what would be the first thing that you would like to do after school?"*
Erik: *"I would go to my friends but I'm not allowed to do that yet."*
[…]
Erik: *"What I like about TikTok is that we can make videos together and that I'm able to show my videos to my friends. […] Also, I can be myself on TikTok and I can dance on music and I can share these things [music, videos] with my friends and everyone that I know."*

Parents, on the other hand, lamented an acceleration in their children's development due to the

ubiquitous presence of technology in everyday life. More specifically, they expressed loss of

control over their tween child's life trajectory and struggled with a perceived loss of the

household's protective bubble in contemporary digitalized society. Expressing a prevalent

sentiment among parents, Amelia reported that she felt caught off guard by her 11 year old

daughter's desire to participate on networked publics. Amelia experiences tensions between

restricting her children's networked participations and the observation that *"children feel ready*

to be on it at a younger age than before". She especially voiced concerns over the fact that

"there are a lot of things you don't have a hold on" as she feels powerless over what her

children do and see on these networked applications.

Tweens & TikTok: a perfect match?

The interviews revealed that parents' socio-cultural imaginations of tweenhood and tweens'

lived experiences align with their understanding of TikTok as a networked public. In the case of

parents, it was especially noticeable how they conceive TikTok as a social medium that is

particularly appropriate to fulfill tweens' assumed desire to explore their adolescent identities,

while still retaining 'innocent' childhood play. For example, the parents in this study most

commonly referred to TikTok's distinct affordances for content (re-)creation (cfr. Zulli & Zulli,

2020) and their children's appropriation of them. According to Bart and Fiona, TikTok

stimulates children to document a dynamic process of content creation instead of disclosing a

finished and static endproduct:

Fiona: *"On TikTok you're more displaying in images, so it's not like 'look here is a tasty
pancake' but it's more about showing how they're making pancakes."*
Bart: *"It's more dynamic in a way."*

A recurring sentiment among parents was that other social media such as Facebook or Instagram

are used as digital photo albums to publicly show off. On TikTok, however, the creative process

of performing and disclosing dance acts, trampoline stunts and do-it-yourself activities is

believed to be idiosyncratic to the platform's design and imagined community. Contemplating on

what their children make and share on TikTok, the parents often described their activities as

"innocent", *"fun"*, and *"playful"*. Moreover, tweens' participation on TikTok was also

frequently portrayed by parents as a valuable learning opportunity to acquire the necessary skills

for a continuously evolving digital society. It was striking in these accounts how the interaction

between tweens' content creation and disclosure practices and TikTok's imagined affordances

constructs the platform as a rather appropriate space for mediated childhood play. Emma's

recollection of a short-video that her children recently made constitutes a typical illustration of

this dialectical construction:

Emma: *"Last week I thought they made something very funny using one of the effects on TikTok.
They played the video back so that Samuel jumped downward and then back up again and
Madelyn showed it to me and they found it amazing. They're still discovering but eventually you*

can do a lot of amusing stuff with camera and sound. Now, they're still copying videos but I just think that dancing is fun, it's just fun! So having fun and being creative, it goes hand in hand. But it probably depends on what your children are doing with it."

When showcasing a typical TikTok-session, the tweens elaborated on how the algorithmic driven *"for you page"* is central to how they imagine and appropriate TikTok as a digital space that provides them with *"fun"* and *"cool"* content. Moreover, the interface of TikTok allows tweens to easily mimic and share the short-videos they encounter along the way (cfr. Zulli & Zulli, 2020). The 11 year old Melany, for example, was eager to show how TikTok enables her to get acquainted with dance acts and subsequently perform these herself:

Melany: *"First, you're like oh that's so much fun I'm also going to do this often and then you discover something new and you also think it's fun and so it goes on actually."*
Interviewer: *"So it's a bit varied?"*
Melany: *"Yes! First, I like this dance act for example and suddenly you see a new dance act and then you think I want to do this and so you start doing it."*

Similar to Melany, the tweens in this study attributed their fondness of TikTok to both the entertainment value of short-videos and the ability to create interactive content themselves. It was especially noticeable how TikTok affords content exploration and (re)-creation in ways that seem to tap into the lifeworld of tweens specifically. For example, the content on TikTok is less dependent on activities (e.g. going out with friends) that require independent mobility (cfr. Kennedy, 2020): Tweens can create and share videos in which they showcase trampoline stunts in the garden of their home, perform dance acts in front of a wall inside their house, and integrate these performances into playful activities with friends. Moreover, TikTok grants these not yet-teenagers access to contemporary youth culture (cfr. Vanden Abeele, 2016). As Riley pointed

out, having a TikTok account generates social capital among tweens because the music, dance

acts and influencers encountered on TikTok have become important youth cultural artefacts:

Riley: *"I downloaded TikTok because everyone was doing dances on the playground and I
didn't know them so then I thought: well yes I'll also download it and eventually I loved it!"*
Interviewer: *"Yes, because you noticed that on the playground…"*
Riley: *"Yeah, they were talking about it all the time!"*

Next to the attractiveness of TikTok's content exploration and creation, we observed that the

participating tweens perceived the social connectivity afforded by the platform as a valuable

alternative to stay connected with friends. Several tweens reported that creating videos for

friends, commenting on each other's content, and using the private messaging function are

essential for maintaining friendships. Similar to how other social media thrive on exchanges of

texts and imagery as contemporary forms of phatic communication (cfr. Niemelä-Nyrhinen &

Seppänen, 2020), TikTok content is used to create a mood of sociability among friends that

transcends time and space constraints. For the 10 year old Mila, this is especially relevant during

the summer months when she is not able to see her friends as often as she would like. Mila

showed us a video in which several images of her friends are accompanied by a voiceover:

Voiceover: *"Because you're the best friends ever."*
Mila: *"I made this video of my friends in the fourth grade."*
Interviewer: *"Did you have someone in mind when you made this video?"*
Mila: *"It's just a video and I think it's nice because if someone would make this for me I would
also love it. Because then you feel like [we will not forget each other], when it's summer holiday
and you don't see each other often. This, for example, is the girl from my dance class and you're
thinking of each other and that's what I love!"*

Privacy discourses & practices

When the parents reflected on the appropriateness of TikTok for tweens, it was striking how they

spontaneously mentioned that they did not experience overbearing privacy anxieties over their

children' disclosure practices. In these accounts, the parents drew from their perceptions of

TikTok as a networked public that affords relatively innocent and playful content and from their

imaginations of tweens being suspended between children's innocence and adolescents'

deviance. Linda, for example, conveyed trust that her daughter would not disclose inappropriate

content on TikTok as she imagines her 11 year old as a not-yet teenager:

Linda: *"Maybe I would look at her TikTok videos if she would show different behavior but for now, these videos are still very innocent and like I said, she's still very much a child. I can't imagine her doing bad things."*

Nonetheless, Linda and the other parents expressed concerns over the future potential for these

'playful', 'educational' and 'innocent' activities to develop into reckless privacy-endangering

practices due to 'deviant' teenage communities performing on TikTok and tweens themselves

transitioning into adolescence. Leah, for instance, reflected on how she would have to keep a

closer eye on her 10-year old daughters' TikTok practices when she transitions from primary

school to high school:

Leah: *"Maybe next year I'll be like… Now she's still in the protected environment of primary school and then she'll enter the big bad world, yes then maybe I'll be looking at it differently. Now she still is in that cocoon of primary school and you know with who she's interacting."*
Interviewer: *"You're still able to keep an eye on it?"*
Leah: *"Yes you still know those parents, you know who lives where and high school changes everything. And also because of what you hear what's going on with children on social media, that they're occupied with affairs of which the parents are totally in the dark"*

The imagined 'inappropriate' behaviors that tweens could start to display on TikTok are shaped

by parents' perceptions of online youth culture, which seem to match extant technopanic

narratives (boyd, 2007; Marwick, 2008). For instance, most parents expressed fears for what they

perceive as an unhealthy 'like culture' in which youths are at risk of becoming 'addicted' to the

gratification experienced after receiving likes on their short movies. Furthermore, parents were

worried that the 'like culture' on TikTok could foster cyber-bullying, displace 'real' friendships

and pressure tween girls to produce and disclose sexual suggestive content. Pondering on the

possible negative evolution of her children's disclosure behavior, Emma expresses a popular

sentiment among parents about the potential consequences of the imagined 'like culture' on

TikTok:

Emma: *"I don't think that it [posting] is a big problem but it's about what you post and that they don't go too far in putting themselves in the spotlight. I think that's important because the selfie culture is sometimes a bit…"*
Interviewer: *"Putting yourself in the spotlights with selfies? " [Repeats answer]*
Emma: *"Yes, self-glorification while it's all fake actually. It's better to show yourself as you really are because after a while it becomes a real competition. If they would engage in it too much, so if I would feel that they lose their spontaneity and that it becomes too stylized in order to put themselves in the spotlight, I would have a conversation with them."*

Moreover, tweens are perceived as 'too young' to grasp the complicated implications of a

networked life. Parents believe that tweens' current innocence and spontaneity cloud their ability

to consider the persistence and searchability of online content, which might result in unwanted

audiences accessing privacy violating content. A recurrent figure in the parental anxiety of

unwanted audiences is the sexual predator who lurks among the tween community on TikTok.

Laura, for example, stressed the importance of limiting her 11 year old daughters' audience in

order to protect her from malicious strangers:

Laura: *"I explained to her that she could only accept people who she knows."*
Interviewer: *"Is this something that worries you then?"*
Laura: *"Yes, I think you know that it can be dangerous when people with bad intentions are trying to connect with or want to meet up with your child. So I think they have to know that they need to be careful."*
[…]
Interviewer: *"And do you think that children themselves would be aware of it? If you hadn't said 'don't accept anyone that you don't know', would they accept people they don't know?"*
Laura: *"Why not? If you're not taking a second to think about it. If someone has a nice profile, funny movies. Oh that person likes me, why not?"*
Interviewer: *"And do you explain to her why it is important to only accept people you really know?*
Laura: *"Yes, I tell her about people with bad intentions who might abuse these images and information. They're starting to be old enough to know this."*

Although Laura indicates that she is rather explicit during conversations about online risks, most parents revealed that they have difficulties deciding upon the delivery of this message, as they believe that tweens might not be ready yet to process the harsh reality of sexual predators. However, all parents did provide their children with warnings about stranger danger and the possible consequences of – unintentionally – disclosing explicit content. To further mitigate the privacy risks from tweens' networked participations, several parents went through the privacy settings with their children and a restricted private profile was in all cases imposed as a non-negotiable prerequisite for the creation of a TikTok account.

Next to conversations and explicit rules, parents also employed more invasive intimate surveillance practices (Leaver, 2015). Parents reported to actively look into which kind of content their children post on TikTok and stated to scour the followers list to detect connections with unknown others, albeit in varying degrees of intrusiveness. This intimate surveillance was facilitated by some of the structural conditions of tweenhood as a life stage in-between childhood protection and teenage autonomy: Tweens' TikTok profiles were oftentimes installed on shared

smart devices that parents manage. Moreover, parents were cognizant of their children's

passwords which enabled them to easily access tweens' TikTok accounts and keep track of what

they perceive as inappropriate content and dangerous connections. For these parents, surveillance

techniques which might violate tweens' privacy were justified because of their responsibility to

keep their child safe and ensure a healthy development of tweens' identity and social skills:

Sarah: *"We told her that we have to look at her messages once a while."*
Interviewer: *"How did she react?"*
Sarah: *"Not nice. However, my colleagues tell me that most children are like that, they react kind of aggressive. She says 'it's mine and I'm finally allowed to have it and now you're going to [check my messages], it's my privacy! You can't touch it!' That has its limitations in my opinion, you have to control them and protect them against people who could hurt, influence and take advantage of them."*

In order to know whether parents' assumptions match tweens' lived experiences, we inquired

how the tween participants manage their privacy on TikTok. When tweens showed us the short

movies on their TikTok profiles, we asked them to reflect on the audience that could access this

content. As all tweens had private profiles, the immediate response referred to how only 'friends'

can watch their videos. However, unlike previous research suggested, these tweens displayed an

in-depth understanding of how a networked public's architecture complicates the ability to truly

know one's audience. For example, tweens spontaneously nuanced the meaning of the word

'friend' on a networked public. They made a clear distinction between close friends, parents,

acquaintances from school, and famous TikTok-creators. Moreover, they told us that their –

albeit private profiles – contain only a small fraction of the videos they create, while a majority is

never made public.

The tweens in this study make extensive use of the 'concept feature' in which the

TikTok-user can store content that is only visible to the owner of the TikTok-account. Although

the participants' TikTok profiles are 'private', they seem to regard their profile page as a semi-

public space by default. The short-videos on their profiles are described as content that is *"good*

enough", *"not embarrassing"*, and *"likeable by others"*. On the contrary, the concept page

contains videos that they like for themselves but might 'embarrass' them or their friends.

Recalling a play date with friends, the 11 year old Melany illustrated how she negotiates which

kind of content she wants to keep private on the concept page:

Melany: *"This is also a video that I'll never share on my profile. This is my friend and she's singing and it was really funny! And suddenly she started to dance. We recorded it but we didn't post it on our profile because that's not nice to do to her of course."*
Interviewer: *"Why wouldn't that be nice?"*
Melany: *"Because she was singing out of tune and dancing. We asked her if we could post it though but she said no. She thought it was embarrassing."*
Interviewer: *"And you didn't post it?"*
Melany: *"No I didn't! Look, there is a key here [on top of the video]. That means it's only visible to me."*

Similar to older teenagers and adults, tweens thus make sure that their posted content is

appropriate for a wider audience (Hogan, 2010). Compared to the concept page, the profile page

displays stylized content that reveals aspects of the participant's identities. Melany for example,

who attends aerobatics classes, mainly makes videos of herself performing gymnastic techniques

on the trampoline. Erik, on the other hand, proudly posts heavily edited clips of him performing

soccer-tricks. These self-representation practices illustrate how tweens selectively disclose pieces

of personal information on their profiles while keeping the bulk of their content for them and a

few close friends to see.

Finally, we probed into tweens' experience of their parents' intimate surveillance

practices. Overall, the interviewed children did not report to be particularly troubled by parents'

monitoring of their networked participations, nor did they perceive this monitoring as intrusive.

Several participants claimed that their parents only sporadically check their short-videos and, therefore, it does not bother them. Moreover, some expressed a sense of security and comfort knowing that their content is being evaluated by parents. It thus seems that tweens perceive parents' intimate surveillance as a normalized practice of care which protects them against the potential negative consequences of spontaneous disclosure. However, some tweens have started to question these practices as they describe their surveilling parents as *"weird"* and *"annoying"*. Mila, for example, thinks that her dad's monitoring of her TikTok-account can be unnerving and states that her motivation for complying to this practice is rather centered on avoiding conflict with her parents:

Mila: *"I always have to show my videos before I can post them on my profile."*
Interviewer: *"How do you feel about it?"*
Mila: *"I think it's annoying sometimes. But also I feel like it's OK. Because then I'm sure that my parents know and that they allow the video to be posted on my page. I don't feel like I have to watch out because they couldn't see the video. I mean, you don't have to hide it so I feel that I'm not lying to my parents then."*

Conclusion

The scholarship on tweenhood, networked publics and online privacy tends to frame tweens' media use and privacy management within linear assumptions of 'growing up' (e.g. Davis, & Carrie, 2013; Shin, et al., 2012; Lwin, et al., 2008; Youn, 2009). This study aimed to move beyond such a developmental framework by taking into account how tweenhood, and the associated narrative of progress, are socio-culturally constructed (cfr. Durham, 2017). By doing so, we scrutinized how the socio-cultural construction of tweenhood shapes and is shaped by TikTok as a networked public, and how this informs privacy discourses and practices.

The interviews illustrate first of all how tweenhood gains traction as a life stage category in Belgium and, more importantly, how parents' construction of this liminal identity do not necessarily match tweens' lived experiences. On the one hand, parents drew from developmental understandings of the life span when describing tweens as 'being in transition from childhood to adolescence'. In turn, these developmental understandings fuel parents' anxieties over their children participating 'too soon' on networked publics such as TikTok (cfr. Kennedy, 2018). Tweens themselves, on the other hand, did not report to have delineated experiences of 'being in transition'. Rather, they elaborated on how liminality manifests itself in everyday life through their ongoing negotiation of both child and teen identities.

Second, the results indicate that there is a dialectical relationship between the socio-cultural construction of tweenhood and TikTok as a networked public. Both the tweens and the parents in this study highlighted the centrality of TikTok's affordance to easily explore and (re-)create content (cfr. Zulli & Zulli, 2020). However, it was noticeable how their respective social roles (that of parents and of tweens) resulted in somewhat different perceptions and appropriations of this feature (cfr. imagined affordances, see Nagy & Neff, 2015). The parents primarily stressed how TikTok's facilitation of content creation provides relatively age-appropriate opportunities for their not-yet teenagers to engage in 'innocent' childhood play. The tweens, on the other hand, recognized the potential of TikTok to not only engage in mediated play but also to maintain relationships with peers, connect with contemporary youth culture and practice self-representation. This shows that TikTok's imagined affordances are constructed by both parents' developmental understandings of tweenhood and tweens' everyday experiences of that liminal space.

Finally, our study shows how the dialectical relationship between the socio-cultural construction of tweenhood and TikTok as a networked public shapes the management of tweens' privacy. Surprisingly, parents did not convey pressing fears over their children's privacy on TikTok. Nonetheless, they reported to actively practice intimate surveillance practices (Leaver, 2015). Contextualizing these seemingly contradictory findings, it becomes clear that parents first and foremost aim to protect their children from 'external' privacy threats (e.g. strangers) and from future 'adolescent' disclosures, while being less concerned over tweens' present 'playful' and 'innocent' disclosures on TikTok. Drawing from their developmental understandings of tweenhood, parents furthermore describe tweens as less capable than older age groups to understand the implications of participating in TikTok's networked environment. However, our interviews illustrate how tweens consciously consider TikTok's affordances as well as the repercussions of sharing short-videos during the process of information disclosure. For the tweens in this study, privacy management is considered highly important in order to engage in effective self-representation practices.

These results should be interpreted with caution as they only represent the perceptions and experiences of middle-class households in Flanders, Belgium. We acknowledge how perceptions and experiences of tweenhood, and thereby appropriations of media use, can vary between families from divers socio-cultural contexts. However, cultural theories on youth note that there are certain universalized notions of childhood, youth, and adulthood (cfr. Durham, 2017). This is especially true for countries similar in their social organization. As a Western-European nation, we can conceive of Belgium as a country that is similar in its social organization to other neoliberal societies in the West. Moreover, the participating households did show variation in terms of family composition and dynamics (e.g. single vs two-parent families),

work-life balance, and ethnic identities. Nonetheless, the generalizability of the study may be

limited. Given the diversity of households around the globe, we invite scholars to further our

understanding of this topic by exploring how varied socio-cultural contexts give rise to diverse

socio-cultural assumptions on tweenhood and how this subsequently shapes negotiations of

tweens' media use.

That being said, our study illustrates how tweenhood is experienced and perceived by

Flemish children and parents, and how this constructs TikTok as a liminal networked public that

is in-between child's play and teenage pop culture. This construction in turn informs how

tweens' privacy is conceptualized and managed. We argue that our study demonstrates that

media appropriations are not exclusively situated within the realm of the individual user

responding to the dynamics of networked publics. On the contrary, tweens' networked

participations are managed within the structural context of the household, and informed by socio-

cultural norms, values and assumptions on what it means to be a child, teenager and adult.

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Appendix A

Table 1. *Overview of participants within each household*

Interview	Household
Interview 1	Melany (11 year old, girl)
Interview 2	Fiona (mother) and Bart (father)
Interview 3	Mila (10 year old, girl)
Interview 4	Charlotte (mother) and Harry (father)
Interview 5	Lisa (11 year old, girl)
Interview 6	Sarah (mother)
Interview 7	Riley (10 year old, girl) and Oliver (8 year old, boy)
Interview 8	Hannah (mother) and Thomas (father)
Interview 9	Sophia (11 year old, girl)
Interview 10	Amelia (mother)
Interview 11	Erik (11 year old, boy)
Interview 12	Anna (mother)
Interview 13	Madelyn (10 year old, girl) and Samuel (8 year old, boy)
Interview 14	Emma (mother)
Interview 15	Ayla (11 year old, girl)
Interview 16	Linda (mother)
Interview 17	George (9 year old, boy)
Interview 18	Inne (Mother)
Interview 19	Hailey (10 year old, girl)
Interview 20	Leah (mother)

Note. Names are pseudonymized