What’s your Status? Facebook, Morality, and the Self among Tongan Youth

Similar to young people in many other parts of the world, youth in Tonga and associated diasporic communities now consider social media to be a critical part of everyday life. While online social networking ‘play’ can seem ephemeral or inconsequential to older adults and social media critics, I argue that the culturally-specific ways in which Tongan youth employ social media tools provide insight into how they situate themselves within a world that is increasingly transnational and transforming—and, as a result, fraught with moral tension. An ethnographically situated investigation of Facebook use among youth in social circles that span the distance between Tonga, New Zealand, and other environs highlights the connections between the rich, multilayered interactions online and everyday, “real life” contexts. The specific ways that youth create and manipulate Facebook profiles provide a unique window into understanding how youth understand culturally-constructed concepts of self as they struggle with morally-laden decisions regarding responsibilities to family, school, and work. In this project, I combine anthropological ideas of selfhood from classic ethnography in the Pacific region on the one hand with contemporary research on digital media on the other. Bringing these perspectives together helps to reveal the links between the presentation of self online and understandings of moral action for Tongan youth.

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