

Intimate surveillance of the ordinary: youth's negotiation of digital location tracking with parents and peers

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Abstract

Digital location tracking (DLT) is increasingly prevalent in young people's lives. This qualitative study adopts a youth-centric lens, drawing on Feminist Science & Technology Studies and Communication Privacy Management theory, to investigate how young people negotiate DLT with parents and peers. Based on 21 focus groups with 147 young people (aged 13–16) in Belgium, the study demonstrates youth's DLT as an agentic process of boundary negotiation guided by their sense of autonomy and safety. Three implicit rules govern DLT boundaries: (a) access is reserved for close, trusted connections, DLT must (b) remain non-continuous, and (c) confirm ordinary, routine whereabouts. These boundaries are negotiated through 3 strategies: (a) humor, (b) revoking location access, (c) circumvention. The study shows how these negotiations build on a "risky world" premise and how young people reproduce and challenge gender stereotypes throughout. Ultimately, through both acceptance and resistance, young people question and normalize everyday surveillance culture.

Keywords: digital location tracking, youth, intimate surveillance, focus groups, privacy, gender, safety

Lay Summary

Digital location tracking is becoming increasingly popular with social media tools like Snapchat's Snap Map or dedicated tools like Life360 or Apple's Find My and AirTag. Research increasingly investigates digital location tracking in family life. However, this research remains limited, and young people not only use these tools with parents but also with peers. Therefore, this study investigates how young people negotiate digital location tracking with parents and peers. This study is based on 21 focus groups with 147 young people (aged 13–16) in Belgium. The results show that digital location tracking builds on the premise of the world as a "risky place" and is generally accepted, as long as it: (a) is used with trusted, close connections, (b) remains non-continuous, and (c) confirms ordinary, routine whereabouts (e.g., school routes) instead of new information. By using humor (e.g., jokingly calling others "stalker"), by revoking access to their location, and by circumventing, young people enforce acceptable practices of digital location tracking. In this process, young people reproduce and challenge gender stereotypes and ultimately question and normalize everyday surveillance culture.

Digital location-tracking (DLT) technologies have become seamlessly integrated into the fabric of daily life, shaping how individuals navigate both physical spaces and social relationships (Dungey, 2024). DLT refers to tracking young people's whereabouts based on the GPS-based geolocation of an electronic device (Davis et al., 2024). Its technological landscape is diverse, ranging from native smartphone tools like Apple's Find My to features within social media apps like Snapchat (Snap Map), WhatsApp (temporary location sharing) and Instagram (Map), to

dedicated monitoring apps like Life360 and physical devices such as Apple's Bluetooth tracker: AirTag (Davis et al., 2024; Dungey, 2024; Meta, 2025). The widespread adoption of DLT tools, particularly within families, is a growing focus of scholarly attention, with studies showing that a significant percentage of parents use them to monitor their children (Auxier et al., 2020; Boele et al., 2025; Burnell et al., 2023; Langlais & Marich, 2024; Mavoia et al., 2023).

Research has shown that DLT primarily stems from safety concerns (e.g., Chase et al., 2024; Ervasti et al., 2016; Özkul,

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2022). This aligns with rising feelings of unsafety in the public domain, systematically higher among women and young people (e.g., Federale Politie, 2024; García-Carpintero et al., 2022). In recent years, widespread bottom-up campaigns such as the hashtag “Text me when you get home” and “We claim the night” following the murders of 33-year-old Sarah Everard (UK in 2021), and 17-year old Lisa (the Netherlands in 2025), have raised public awareness of the structural insecurity women face daily, and women’s growing use of mobile safety apps (Glover & Stone, 2024; McCarthy et al., 2016). While the above campaigns emphasize the structural character of women’s insecurity in the public domain, DLT tools generally present themselves as technological “solutions” to risks such as stranger danger, thereby placing the responsibility to avoid harm on individual women (Glover & Stone, 2024; Hasinoff, 2016). By extension, this discourse also frames DLT as a responsible parental choice, responsabilizing parents to “keep children safe through DLT” (Dereymaeker, 2025; Marciano, 2022; Marx & Steeves, 2010). As such, DLT’s safety discourse not only reinforces gender dynamics, it builds upon and reinforces a broader risk discourse that constructs young people as fragile and in need of protection (Furedi, 2013; Lupton et al., 2016; Marciano, 2022). While this safety discourse encourages DLT, there is also a privacy discourse that raises questions about youth’s use of DLT tools and positions young people as uncaring and reckless concerning their privacy (Miller, 2006; Simpson, 2014; Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2019). Both discourses easily dismiss young people’s agency, and express an urgent need to understand how young people negotiate DLT in their everyday lives.

Despite DLT’s popularity, empirical work on DLT remains limited. A recent metareview (Davis et al., 2024) identified only a small body of empirical work, which consistently frames DLT within Western nuclear family structures and predominantly adopts a parental perspective. While different studies have been conducted with children or young people (e.g., Burnell et al., 2023; Chase et al., 2024; De Wolf et al., 2026; Ervasti et al., 2016; Langlais & Marich, 2024; Mols et al., 2023; Nakayama, 2011; Özkul, 2022; Sukk & Siibak, 2021a, 2021b), it remains critically underexplored how young people negotiate DLT in their everyday life, especially beyond family life, such as within peer culture.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to develop an in-depth, socio-cultural understanding of young people’s lived experiences with DLT. We put forward the following research question: How do young people negotiate digital location tracking with parents and peers? This study investigates these relationships simultaneously, arguing that parental and peer surveillance cannot be understood in isolation. Young people navigate both in their use of mobile tools, while simultaneously managing different sets of expectations. This study builds on the call by (surveillance) scholars for more nuanced and agentic understandings of surveillance practices such as DLT, particularly centering young people (e.g., Dereymaeker et al., 2025; De Wolf et al., 2026; Marx & Steeves, 2010; Özkul, 2022). To answer our research question, we draw on two complementary frameworks. First, Feminist Science and Technology Studies allows us to critically examine how DLT practices shape and are shaped by social roles, power dynamics, and gendered expectations. Second, we use Communication Privacy Management theory as an interpretative

framework to analyze the specific communication strategies young people use to manage their privacy boundaries.

Literature review

DLT is a clear practice of *intimate surveillance*, which is defined as “the purposeful and routinely well-intentioned surveillance of young people by parents, guardians, friends and so forth” (Leaver, 2015, p. 153). Individuals actively participate in monitoring one another and contribute to what Lyon (2018) calls a *culture of surveillance*. Hence, surveillance practices become a normalized, unquestioned part of everyday life, to the extent that it becomes situated as a necessary culture of care (Leaver, 2017). DLT is primarily understood as a form of care and keeping loved ones safe (Boesen et al., 2010). Research consistently shows that safety is the main motivation for both parents and young people to engage with DLT (e.g., Chase et al., 2024; Ervasti et al., 2016; Özkul, 2022). DLT offers parents reassurance as their children gain independence, such as when they transition from primary to secondary school (Mols et al., 2023), to check if they arrive safely at their destination (Meyer Qvarnström & Demetriou, 2022) or to find them and guide them home in case they get lost (Widmer & Albrechtslund, 2021). Research by De Wolf et al. (2026), Ervasti et al. (2016), Özkul (2022) shows that children also hold positive perceptions of DLT because of the perceived safety benefits of their parents’ monitoring. DLT not only illustrates intimate surveillance, it also expresses the *surveillance of care oxymoron*, reflecting parents’ deep ambivalence in wanting to provide loving oversight without infringing on their children’s autonomy (Doty, 2020).

Youth as “at risk” subjects

DLT’s emphasis on safety can be better understood as a response to a societal *culture of fear*, where fear has become disconnected from concrete threats and is rather a cultural script, fostering worst-case thinking, for example about what could happen to a child (Furedi, 2006). As such, this safety discourse takes place within a larger society that is preoccupied by risks (e.g., Beck, 1992). Amplified by media discourses on risks like “stranger danger” and capitalized on by its marketing, DLT is positioned as an accessible technological solution to this cultural feeling of fear. DLT thereby offers parents a tangible sense of control and security, but also frames DLT as an essential tool for responsible parents (Dereymaeker et al., 2025; Furedi, 2006; Marciano, 2022; Marx & Steeves, 2010). As such, “DLT for safety” propagates a *technological solutionism* (Morozov, 2013) and contributes to the process of *moral responsabilization*, where the duty for managing risk is delegated to individual parents, who feel a moral obligation to use available tools to ensure their child’s safety (Boesen et al., 2010; Dereymaeker, 2025). These risk discourses frame and reinforce young people as vulnerable, at-risk, and in need of parental protection (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Furedi, 2013; Lupton et al., 2016; Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2019).

A youth-centric perspective on DLT

To deconstruct the previously sketched risk discourse and center young people's lived experiences, we adopt a youth-centric perspective that foregrounds young people's own voices and their lived experiences with everyday DLT. In what follows, we draw on Feminist Science and Technology Studies (Wajcman, 2010) to deconstruct gendered risk discourses. We also discuss youth's social roles and peer culture to interpret DLT. Further, to analyze how young people negotiate privacy in these contexts, we employ Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002).

Feminist Science and Technology Studies: deconstructing gendered risk discourses

Feminist Science and Technology Studies (feminist STS) provides a critical lens on the social construction of technology and gender. Feminist STS asserts that technologies are not neutral tools; their design and use embed social values and tend to shape and reinforce societal power structures, particularly those related to gender (Wajcman, 2010). While technologies are deeply embedded within existing gendered power structures, they are flexible, offering users entry points to negotiate, challenge and perform gender, even as those very interactions risk reproducing the inequalities embedded in the technology's design (Wajcman, 2004).

From this viewpoint, DLT is a practice that both shapes and is shaped by a specific social construction of youth. It builds directly on the discourse that frames young people as "at risk" (Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2019). This is not only a marketing narrative, but materially embedded in the design and features of the technologies themselves. The DLT technological landscape is diverse. Some tools, like dedicated parental monitoring apps (e.g., Life360) are explicitly asymmetrical, considering parent as the primary users, while young people are interpreted as subjects to be monitored through functions like geofencing around "known places" like the home or school (Hasinoff, 2016). A feminist STS perspective argues that even tools not explicitly designed for parental surveillance, such as native tools like Apple's Find My or social media features like Snap Map are appropriated by this same developmentalist logic. These platforms provide the technical features (e.g., live location tracking) that can be repurposed for parental oversight (Mavoa et al., 2023). Thus, the explicit design of parental apps and the appropriated use of general-purpose apps both function to reinforce the same social construct: youth as vulnerable, at-risk, and in need of protection (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Furedi, 2013; Lupton et al., 2016; Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2019).

Furthermore, this social construction of "fragile youth" is itself deeply gendered. The dominant risk discourse is not neutral, but disproportionately built upon anxieties surrounding young women's physical and sexual vulnerability. There is a clear emphasis on women's propensity to experience sexual violence, perpetrated by strangers, amplified by this media framing despite more common violence by known individuals (World Health Organization, 2021). Furthermore, media coverage is often one-dimensional, reducing women's stories to their victimization (García-Carpintero et al., 2022). This discourse reinforces the idea that specific environmental contexts (specific places at

certain times) are dangerous for women (Valentine, 1989). Women associate certain locations with risk of assault due to personal experiences and reported accounts. Through media coverage and parents' fears, girls are socialized into a restricted use of public space (Valentine, 1989). Moreover, because of the rather delineated risk of sexual violence, women are expected to adopt prescriptive safety measures as a form of *safety work* (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020), placing the responsibility to avoid harm on individual women. This safety work increasingly includes the use of new communication technologies, such as DLT apps and messaging, to monitor journeys home (García-Carpintero et al., 2022; Simpson, 2014). However, research on women's use of mobile safety apps is scarce (Glover & Stone, 2024; McCarthy et al., 2016). Some scholarly attention has been geared toward the discourses of mobile safety apps, revealing how they tend to reinforce normative gender scripts and responsabilize women, while being unreliable safety tools (Glover & Stone, 2024; Kalms, 2017). This perpetuates long-standing scripts that construct girls and (young) women as "at risk" subjects, justifying monitoring (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Research also shows that parents more commonly track girls than boys (Burnell et al., 2023; Nakayama, 2011).

Youth's social roles

While this safety discourse frames young people as passive subjects of surveillance, they are active agents who negotiate surveillance practices (e.g., De Wolf et al., 2026; Sukk & Siibak, 2021b). For example, in their study, De Wolf et al. (2026) demonstrate how children emphasize the importance of being able to call instead of being monitored. Crucially, this agency is not just exercised in relation to parents, but also within peer cultures. Sociologically, peer culture is a semi-autonomous social space where young people collectively build and negotiate their own social worlds, meanings, and norms, often in distinction to the adult world (Corsaro, 2005). Within this space, young people negotiate friendship, social status, and trust. Digital interactions have become a way to foster norms, shared practices, and collective identities in peer groups (Lim, 2022). As such, a key way to understand the navigation of agency in DLT practices is through the multiple social roles young people inhabit. Within the role of a "child," DLT can be a means to comply with parental expectations of safety and honesty. Özkul (2022) has, for example, shown that children (aged 8–11) value the peace of mind that their location brings to their parents. Simultaneously, young people inhabit the role of a "friend" where DLT can be a horizontal practice that can signify loyalty, perform group belonging, or coordinate social life (e.g., via Snap Map). Lim (2022), for example, discusses the ways in which mobile phone communication, including DLT are part of peer culture characterized by flexibility, accessibility, and signification. By using DLT technologies, young people disclose personal information. When it comes to the privacy and surveillance practices of young people, Marwick and boyd (2014) argued that too often, research focuses on the "individual" level, ignoring how young people actually engage in networked privacy. However, when the relational aspect of privacy and the networked affordances of social media are taken into account, this image proves not to be entirely accurate. Given that DLT also involves an act of disclosing personal information, it also requires moving beyond early privacy

scholarship's focus on individual control to a more contextual approach that considers the social groups an individual is part of (De Leyn, 2022). This also leads us to the second component of our theoretical framework: Communication Privacy Management theory.

Communication Privacy Management theory: youth's negotiations

To analyze how young people negotiate disclosures of private information, we turn to Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory. CPM theory posits that individuals view private information, like their location, as something they own and have a right to control via metaphorical privacy boundaries. When a person shares their location, the recipient becomes a *co-owner* of that information, and this co-ownership is governed by *privacy rules*, which can be explicit or implicit. *Boundary turbulence* occurs when there is disagreement about the rules or a violation, prompting a renegotiation.

Research demonstrates these dynamics in action. For instance, a study by Sukk and Siibak (2021b) found that while children (aged 8–13) view parental DLT positively and not as breach of privacy, they still desire to be informed about the tracking and have the opportunity to negotiate boundaries. Research by Mols et al. (2023) further confirms that young people show both acceptance and forms of resistance to parental monitoring. Furthermore, these CPM rules can themselves be gendered. Research showing that girls are stricter in their privacy management than boys (e.g., De Wolf, 2020) can be interpreted as their rules being a strategic response to the “at-risk” construct they are expected to inhabit. This negotiation is constant: Boundaries are continually renegotiated based on factors like age, gender, and context (Auxier et al., 2020; Burnell et al., 2023). Tracking prevalence seems to increase as young people gain independence, as well as access to DLT tools, before decreasing at later ages (Auxier et al., 2020; Burnell et al., 2023; Chase et al., 2024; Meyer Qvarnström & Demetriou, 2022). Likewise, there are social limits to the intensity of monitoring, with a study by Boele et al. (2025) showing that only 10% of respondents felt it was acceptable for parents to check their location multiple times per day. Even with general acceptance, a notable portion of young people (one in four in Boele et al., 2025) find parental access to their location unacceptable, underscoring the constant and personal nature of these privacy negotiations (Boele et al., 2025; Sukk & Siibak, 2021b).

The current study

The existing literature establishes DLT as a normalized practice of intimate surveillance (Leaver, 2017), framed by safety concerns and entangled with gendered norms. However, the focus has largely remained on the parent-child relationship, leaving young people's own negotiations, particularly with their peers, under-examined. This study addresses this gap by adopting a youth-centric perspective. By integrating the critical lens of feminist STS with the interpretative framework of CPM, we analyze how young people actively navigate DLT across different social relationships, each with its own set of expectations and power dynamics. We therefore ask: How do young people negotiate digital location tracking with parents and peers?

Methods

Study design and sample

This qualitative study draws on data from 21 focus groups with 147 young people (mean group size = 7; 99 identifying as female, 48 as male) conducted between January and March 2025 in Belgium. Participants, aged 13–16, were recruited via purposive sampling from six Dutch-speaking secondary schools. To ensure sample diversity, schools were selected across four provinces, capturing a range of urban and rural contexts. By Belgian standards, the study included small municipalities (fewer than 35,000 inhabitants), medium-sized cities (between 100,000 and 300,000 inhabitants), and a large metropolitan area (over 1.2 million inhabitants). This geographical and demographic spread also captured a variety of daily commuting habits. The sample included pupils from a broad range of educational tracks (academic, technical/arts, and vocational). Table 1 provides an overview of the focus groups.

Focus group procedures and ethical considerations

We contacted high school teachers in social sciences, ethics and religion studies to help us organize focus groups. We provided them with information sheets detailing the research goals and participants' rights, which they shared with their school boards to obtain permission. Focus groups were then conducted in classrooms during school hours as part of the media literacy curriculum. Ethical approval was obtained from the Political and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at Ghent University. Prior to data collection, participants and their parents/guardians provided written informed consent after receiving detailed information sheets about the study's objectives, their rights, and data protection procedures. All data were processed per Ghent University guidelines, stored securely with restricted access, and pseudonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Given that risk discourses and DLT practices are often gendered (e.g., Burnell et al., 2023; Lupton et al., 2016), focus groups were organized primarily by gender to create a comfortable environment for sharing experiences. Group 19 was an exception, based on practicalities and groups 20 and 21 were conscious mixed-gender groups toward the end of data collection to explore gender dynamics further. Focus groups followed a semi-structured guide, averaging 57 minutes and consisting of three parts. First, a mapping exercise prompted participants to list the DLT tools they used, and discuss with whom, when, and how they shared their location. Second, we explored personal experiences, perception, and social norms regarding DLT with family and friends. This section focused on agency, boundaries, gender, connectivity, and availability, informed by feminist STS and CPM concepts. Third, participants responded to a series of statements using colored cards (green for agree, yellow for an in-between position, red for disagree). This activity was designed to provoke deeper discussion and argumentation among the participants on the aforementioned themes.

Table 1. Description of focus groups.

FG id	Gender	Number of participants	Age (years)	Studies	Location type
1	Girls	5	13	Arts and creation	Small municipality
2	Girls	6	13–14	Arts and creation	Small municipality
3	Girls	6	14–15	Business and economics	Small municipality
4	Boys	4	14–15	Business and economics	Small municipality
5	Girls	7	14–15	Society and welfare sciences	Small municipality
6	Girls	10	14–16	Society and welfare sciences + Business sciences	Small municipality
7	Boys	4	14	Business sciences	Small municipality
8	Boys	9	14–15	Business and economics	Small municipality
9	Girls	3	14–15	Business and economics	Small municipality
10	Girls	7	14–15	Health and social care	Small municipality
11	Girls	6	14–15	Health and social care	Small municipality
12	Girls	6	14–15	Health and social care	Small municipality
13	Boys	8	15–16	Economics and sciences	Small municipality
14	Boys	10	15–16	Economics and sciences	Small municipality
15	Girls	4	15–16	Economics and sciences	Small municipality
16	Girls	11	13–14	Modern languages and sciences	Large city
17	Boys	5	13	Modern languages and sciences	Large city
18	Girls	11	15–16	Visual and architectural arts	Medium city
19	Mixed (5 girls, 1 boy)	6	14–15	Society and welfare sciences	Small municipality
20	Mixed (10 girls, 4 boys)	14	15–16	Visual and architectural sciences	Medium city
21	Mixed (2 girls, 3 boys)	5	15–16	Natural sciences	Medium city

Data analysis

Focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and data were organized and coded in MAXQDA to facilitate interpretation. The lead researcher started with analyzing a diverse subsample, following constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). By separating, sorting, and synthesizing data through qualitative coding, constructivist grounded theory allows for theory construction. As such, the analysis builds analytic categories from the data and refines them with additional data (Charmaz, 2014). The analysis proceeded through the two main stages of coding as outlined by Charmaz (2014). First, during initial coding, the lead researcher stayed close to participants' own words (e.g., a snippet like "because I think, in general, girls are just less safe on their own" was coded as "girls alone are less safe"). Next, in focused coding, the lead researcher developed conceptual categories from the most significant initial codes (e.g., grouping codes like "DLT appropriate when not answering calls" and "parental DLT is for exceptional circumstances" under the category "no continuous DLT"). Finally, all researchers jointly built our final analysis by investigating the relationship between these categories. This, for instance, reveals how "no continuous DLT" is one of the three *rules* that governs acceptable DLT. This further informs the final analysis that youth's DLT can be understood as an agentic process of boundary negotiations. With the analysis of the 11th focus group, the framework of relationships between categories became clear and the structure of the overarching story was laid out. The lead researcher continued analyzing the remaining 10 focus groups to refine these categories and identify additional nuances to further theoretical refinement (Charmaz, 2014).

Results

The majority of young people in our study used DLT with parents, friends, or both. The most popular tools were Snapchat's Snap Map, used almost exclusively among friends, and the pre-installed Find My app (with both friends and parents) or dedicated monitoring app Life360 (mainly with parents). Some participants also mentioned using WhatsApp or the AirTag. The general sentiment was that DLT is "not a big deal," something young people rarely questioned and perceived as ordinary. Our analysis, however, reveals that this acceptance is conditional upon negotiated boundaries. More specifically, the analysis demonstrates DLT as an agentic process of boundary negotiations, guided by young people's sense of autonomy and safety. The analysis has identified three rules that govern DLT boundaries and three strategies to negotiate these. We detail these in the first two parts. In the third part, we discuss how DLT negotiations build on the premise of "the world as a risky place." Last, the analysis shows that young people challenge and reproduce gender stereotypes in this process of boundary negotiations, which we discuss throughout.

DLT boundaries governed by three implicit rules

The analysis shows that for DLT to be acceptable, it must adhere to three implicit rules.

First, DLT expresses a close and trusting connection. Participants typically shared their location only with a small circle of trusted friends and family whom they believed would understand and adhere to social norms and boundaries. Young

people considered their location to be “not everyone’s business” (Lucas, 16, FG14). They generally deemed it wiser and safer to share their location with only a limited group. As Stella (13, FG2) stated: “only my parents, my sister, and my best friend can see it.” Girls generally restricted access to their location more than boys, who often evaluated the risks associated with disclosing their location differently. Within close peer relationships, DLT has a clear social function and is generally reciprocal. This contrasts with parental relationships, where young people rarely checked their parents’ location and often had no access to it.

Second, DLT is not intended for continuous use. With parents, DLT is typically established “just in case.” Parents are expected to consult young people’s location only under extraordinary circumstances, such as when they are not home at an agreed-upon time, are traveling alone, or not answering their phone. Participants underscored their autonomy and viewed this period of their lives as critical for learning independence and explicitly argued that they needed the opportunity to make independent judgements and learn from mistakes. They considered this an important aspect of responsible parenting. As Jackie (14, GF2) argued:

Jackie: I believe they should let us independent [sic] ... So if we were to do something now, the mistakes we make, we learn from them, you know? So they actually need to ... if you’re going to lock us up all the time, we won’t know what mistakes there are and that you can make.

With peers, DLT is meant to be “low-key.” For example, participants used DLT to check who was nearby to facilitate hanging out. Cedric (15, FG14), for instance, mentioned: “To find people. Quite often, actually. Just this morning. I was at school early and I checked to see who was here, but I didn’t really see anyone.” Young people emphasized that location access does not imply that others can watch continuously. Chloe (15, FG12), for example, explained that she revoked her best friend’s access because she checked it too frequently:

Chloe: The only reason I do it [pausing her location] is for my best friend, so she doesn’t see that I’m online. (...) Sometimes she’ll seriously stalk me every 20 minutes. She calls me because she has something to tell me about one of the guys she’s talking to.

Furthermore, location access does not imply that others should explicitly act upon this information. It requires “social antennae” to gauge whether this is appropriate. Kobe (16, FG21), for instance, recalled finding it unsettling when a schoolmate showed up unannounced because he had seen Kobe’s location on the Snap Map.

Third, DLT is supposed to confirm ordinary, expected whereabouts. Generally, close friends and parents are kept up to date with young people’s plans via prior discussions or messages sent when arriving or leaving certain locations, or when plans change. As such, DLT serves as a way to get confirmation (and possible reassurance) of expected whereabouts. We can understand DLT as an “intimate surveillance of the ordinary,” as it is intended to reveal routine locations, as opposed to new

information. Participants underscored their autonomy and emphasized that DLT should not be used to verify compliance with agreements, which they interpreted as controlling and indicative of a lack of trust. Imane (16, FG18), for instance, argued that she understands parental DLT, but that it shouldn’t be used to police her movements:

Imane: I mean, I understand they [parents] want the location on, but they also just need to understand that their child ... we’re all teenagers now. We want to go out. We want to do what we want without real control from our parents.

The acceptance of “intimate surveillance of the ordinary” is underpinned by the idea that being tracked is inconsequential provided one is not where one shouldn’t be. Participants often explained that DLT poses no issue if one has nothing to hide, as Thomas (14, FG4) argued regarding his parents’ use of DLT:

Thomas: I don’t really care much. I don’t do a whole lot, so I think it’s okay.

Moderator: Because there isn’t really anything for them to ...

Thomas: ... no, I have nothing to hide, so I guess it’s fine.

This argument resonated in parent-youth relationships, but also in youth’s romantic relationships. Many participants argued that if a partner has nothing to hide, they should not oppose DLT. Rather than framing it as a sign of distrust, young people viewed it as proof that their partner was deserving of trust. As Maya (13, FG16) mentioned: “Yeah, that [DLT] makes you trust them even more, because you see that they don’t do anything wrong.”

Strategies of boundary negotiation

The analysis shows that these rules are not isolated, but function in a dynamic interplay. When participants argue that their location is “not everyone’s business” (rule one), it aligns with rule three (DLT should not reveal new information). Interestingly, participants sometimes shared their location widely (rule one) (e.g., to show that they were on vacation), as they did not expect others to act upon this information (rule two), illustrating how these rules function in tandem. Further, young people constantly negotiate boundaries and the analysis reveals three strategies to negotiate boundaries: humor, revoking access, and circumvention.

First, the analysis highlights humor as a key tool for making boundaries explicit. Participants often jokingly used the word “stalker” to describe peers and family members who crossed a line by checking their location too often, as well as contacting them or checking their social media profiles too often. While used easily and jokingly, the label carried the clear message that such practices were inappropriate. While “stalker” was a term easily used for peers, it was also used to describe when parents crossed boundaries. Eva (13, FG2) even jokingly called her grandmother a “little stalker” because her grandmother inquired about places she had seen Eva on the Snap Map. To avoid this negative label, participants sometimes explicitly framed that they consulted others’ location in a “non-stalking

way.” When describing how she uses the Snap Map with peers, Zuri (13, FG1) mentioned:

Zuri: Sometimes I can see if they [peers] are home or not. I mean, I don't stalk them or anything, but I can see if I want to meet up with someone, if I'm nearby or something. Or how long it's been since they were last online.

This negotiation is also shaped by the specific platform features, which create ways to both detect boundary turbulence and manage it. Participants spoke of friends “skipping” them if the Snap Map showed they were online but not responding. Here, the “last active” feature enables the detection of “skipping.” Similarly, participants noted how features like showing a user's battery percentage (on Snapchat and Life360) invalidate the excuse of a dead phone.

Playful banter through the use of these terms also reinforces and challenges gender stereotypes. A gendered binary was often reproduced. “Stalking” was often associated with girls, specifically in romantic contexts, framed as an over-invested act of frequent texting and location tracking. Both boys and girls voiced this idea. In contrast, “skipping” (the act of being online but unresponsive) was often ascribed to boys, arguably as part of a “performative nonchalance” to avoid the stalker label. In this sense, “skipping” can be understood as an act of under-investment. Girls noted that while “skipping” was generally meaningless, it became significant in dating contexts. Isabella (14, FG12) explained the frustration this causes: “You're just there waiting. Seriously, just looking at your phone every second, [thinking] ‘When is he going to text back?’. And he's just over there, like, ‘Okay, I don't feel like answering it.’”

While these terms often reinforced a gender binary, participants also actively challenged it. Girls challenged the notion that stalking was performed by girls only, emphasizing this was a false stereotype. Yana (15, FG12) explicitly stated: “We have so many stereotypes about boys like ‘boys don't do this and do this.’ However, there are many [boys] who do [stalk].” Moreover, the “stalker” label was not exclusive to girls. Boys also lightheartedly called one another a stalker, sometimes even jokingly internalizing the term, as in the case of Bob (14, FG7):

Bob: I am kind of a stalker, but not like, I mean, my friends call me a stalker too. It's just out of boredom, like on a Sunday afternoon, I'll think “Oh yeah, I'm doing nothing, what are others up to?”

Moderator: But why do you think that? Why do you all call that stalking?

Bob: Yeah because actually it is none of my business. But you all choose to share your location with me, so I can do what I want with it.

In conclusion, terms like “stalker” and “skipping” are flexible, humorous tools used to make boundaries explicit, thereby reproducing and challenging gender stereotypes.

Second, young people revoke access to their location. For example, Zoë (15, FG21) turned off her location for people she was no longer close with, saying: “It's especially about people I was friends with before but not anymore. Yeah, they shouldn't be allowed to have my location, I mean, they don't need to be

checking it all the time anymore.” Multiple participants recalled temporarily turning off their location for certain friends during arguments. Among peers, revoking location access was common, and participants argued that distant connections wouldn't notice it and close friends would understand its intended social significance. Among parents, however, revoking location access was deemed controversial as participants generally felt that parents could impose DLT by virtue of their parental role. When discussing whether his mom would be allowed to have his location during his future studies, Léon (15, FG14) stated:

Léon: Yes, if she really wanted that. I can't say no, you know? [group reacts surprised] Yeah. Yeah, that's my mom. What am I supposed to say to that? (...) I'm definitely going to argue. But I'm not going to ... I mean, if she really forces me, yeah, then it's hard for me to say no.

Because of this role, some participants shared their location in a context of parental distrust, sometimes as an explicit vehicle to regain trust. Participants disliked this and wished for it to decrease or assume a more trusting form.

Third, young people engage in strategies of circumvention when they consider it inappropriate to revoke location access or want to avoid turbulence. When DLT reveals young people at places they aren't supposed to be or they don't want others to know, it turns DLT consequential (see rule three). To claim autonomy, participants actively subverted DLT, particularly with parents and sometimes peers. Such acts include making excuses as to why their location is off, generally relying on parents' limited technological literacy. It also includes disabling internet services so the Snap Map would continue to show their “last active” location, while they went elsewhere. Similarly, Otis (15, FG21) recalled turning off his location and going elsewhere to avoid a peer showing up: “I experienced someone saying: ‘Ah you are in the neighborhood, I am coming.’ No, that was no fun. (...) I went somewhere else (...) and turned my location off.” Other strategies included leaving their phone at an appropriate location (e.g., a friend's house) while going out. Some participants even used two phones to circumvent tracking more easily. Participants were aware that discovery would constitute a significant breach of trust. However, rather than deceit, they framed these actions as a necessary negotiation of their autonomy.

Staying safe in a risky world

While the previous sections outline how youth's acceptance of DLT is conditional upon implicit rules and negotiated boundaries, this section addresses the premise of that acceptance. The analysis shows that DLT negotiations play out against the backdrop of safety concerns. Safety was the primary and most widely cited reason for young people's DLT. Participants shared an understanding of the world as a risky place, particularly for girls. To varying degrees, young people considered themselves to be “at risk” when outside, particularly regarding unwanted encounters. While participants remained critical of the likelihood and stereotypical framing of some of their parents' concerns (e.g., “a stranger jumping out of the bushes” or

“abductions”), they did not question the underlying assumption of insecurity, as exemplified by Lily (14, FG6) and Célin (16, FG6):

Lily: It’s because there’s just so much about those kind of things in the news. I think, in general, they [her parents] dwell on that more.

Célin: They see it on the news. It’s mostly girls that it happens to and then they start saying again: “Gosh, you have to be careful, look what’s happening!”

Lily: But on some level, I get it, because that kind of stuff is really in the news daily, and it’s also happening close by.

Rather than concrete fears, participants experienced a cautious awareness of potential dangers. It is worth noting that this was sometimes reinforced by unsettling personal experiences, such as being followed by a car or receiving uncomfortable messages.

When discussing gender and risk, participants navigated a tension between reproducing and challenging traditional discourses of female vulnerability. There was a shared understanding that girls are more at risk of unwanted encounters, but participants often struggled to articulate precisely why. First, participants generally perceived boys/men to be the perpetrators, which implied girls were the targets. At the same time, participants challenged this view, stressing that it is often overlooked that boys can also be targets. Second, boys shared an understanding that a discourse of female vulnerability was outdated, yet they considered girls to be at a physical disadvantage in unwanted encounters. Girls actively challenged this discourse by asserting their capacity for self-defense. Rayan (13, FG16), for example, stated: “It’s not like because she’s a girl, she’s not strong. Everyone is strong. Some girls are even stronger than boys.” Likewise, while participants explained that their parents took into account their individual character and age, rather than gender alone, discourses of female vulnerability still resonated in parents’ discussions on DLT. Alina (14, FG12), for instance, criticized how her parents’ concerns are gendered:

Alina: They’re [her parents] already making up whole scenarios in their heads, when I go for a walk along the canal because I live close by. They say, “Yeah, someone’s going to jump out of the bushes there. They’re going to grab you. This and that.” But I tell them that’s not even going to happen. I said, “I can defend myself better than August.” August is my brother. Then they say, “You shouldn’t be so mouthy.” I tell them, “I’m literally just speaking the truth.”

Despite these critiques, the discourse that the world is risky, especially for girls, continued to resonate and shape behavior, and DLT became part of a suite of safety practices. Consequently, participants shared their location with both parents and peers “for safety.” While DLT often followed parents’ demands, some participants had instigated parental DLT themselves for their own peace of mind. As Amber (14, FG6) stated: “I said it myself, I’m going to share my location. Just for myself, to feel safe. So if something happens, they’ll [her parents] see it right away.” DLT for safety was also part of peer relationships, especially among girls who commonly checked if friends arrived home safely, as Leila (14, FG12) explained:

Leila: With my best friend, we always do this: When we leave and when we get back home, we message each other. Just so it’s like, “Ah yeah okay, we know she’s home,” and stuff. When I’m not home, I share my live location with her. Then she’s like, “Yeah, okay, I’ll just check where she is. If she’s still there, I won’t worry.”

While DLT as a safety practice is part of both peer and parent relationships, its rationale differs. Peer-based DLT is distinguished by its practicality, as a friend is often physically closer and better positioned to intervene or alert parents if necessary. Rina (13, FG16), for example, emphasized: “If something happens, they’ll [her close friends] go straight to my parents, because they have their number.” Parental DLT, conversely, often followed directly from parents’ concerns. These ranged from an abstract desire for young people’s well-being to concrete fears regarding traffic accidents or unwanted encounters. Participants largely accepted parental safety concerns as a normal manifestation of care, viewing this as an inherent part of the parental role. Thomas (14, FG4), for instance, expressed: “I feel like sometimes they [his parents] are too worried, but I feel like that’s typically parents.” Consequently, for many young people, parental DLT is intended to manage parental concerns, which can be understood as a reciprocal act of being a “responsible child.” For example, Lena (15, FG11) indicated that her father watches her location because “otherwise he can’t sleep,” Lily (14, FG6) mentioned that her parents can watch her location “if they are worried,” and Billie (15, FG18) explained:

Billie: I’d prefer my location to be off in general. But I do understand that my mom wants me to turn my location on when I go to my girlfriend’s [place], because she lives all the way in [town name] and it’s not such a nice... I have to take bus 55 and in the dark, it’s not very pleasant sitting on that bus. And then I still have to walk.

As such, DLT serves simultaneously as a safety measure and a reciprocal act through which young people demonstrate responsibility toward their parents. As discussed above, the findings show that young people accept this when it adheres to the three implicit rules. However, when DLT is consulted infrequently and only to confirm the ordinary, it undermines the potential for active intervention. Likewise, participants expressed considerable skepticism about the actual efficacy of DLT in a genuine crisis. They argued that others are not constantly (expected to be) monitoring their location, and a stationary icon is not a reliable indicator of distress. In discussions about serious threats like kidnapping, the notion that an abductor would allow them to keep their phone was often met with ridicule. Participants concluded that DLT offers little capacity for direct intervention. Nevertheless, it provides many young people, especially girls, with a valuable sense of safety.

Discussion

This study adopts a youth-centric lens (informed by Feminist STS and CPM theory) to investigate young people’s negotiation of digital location tracking (DLT) with parents and peers.

The results demonstrate that young people's negotiation of DLT can be understood as an agentic process of boundary negotiations, guided by young people's sense of autonomy and safety. The analysis reveals three rules and three strategies through which young people negotiate DLT boundaries. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that young people's DLT negotiations build on the premise that the world is a risky place. Last, while engaging in boundary negotiations and navigating risk discourses, young people both challenge and reinforce gender stereotypes. These insights contribute to an in-depth understanding of young people's DLT negotiations, extending the academic literature as well as nuancing public assumptions on youth's DLT.

First, this study shows that youth's general DLT acceptance is conditional upon three implicit rules: (a) DLT among close connections, (b) DLT as non-continuous, and (c) DLT to confirm the ordinary (e.g., everyday routes to school) instead of revealing new information, which we term "intimate surveillance of the ordinary." DLT happening among close connections calls for a socio-cultural perspective accounting for DLT within peer culture. The result that girls seem to restrict location access more than boys because of safety concerns aligns with results on girls' stricter privacy management (De Wolf, 2020). The result that DLT shouldn't be continuous provides context for Boele et al.'s (2025) finding that only a minority of young people consider it acceptable for their parents to check their location multiple times per day and Burnell et al.'s (2023) findings that only a minority of parents are "always" monitoring youth's location. This aligns with the finding that children are not constantly watched by their parents even when access may be constant (De Wolf et al., 2026). These results provide a counterbalance to the public discourse that young people "share their location with everyone," "always" and that DLT "reveals sensitive information" (e.g., De Wolf & Joye, 2019). Further, this study demonstrates three strategies to negotiate DLT boundaries: (a) humor, (b) revoking access, and (c) circumvention. While research has underscored humor within surveillance imaginaries as a way to challenge surveillance perceptions (Marx, 2023), this study makes a unique contribution by identifying humor as a key mechanism to communicate DLT boundaries. This study further discusses acts of resistance also observed by Boesen et al. (2010) such as leaving the phone at a friend's house, claiming DLT technology fails, and relying on parents being less technologically-savvy.

Second, this study underscores how youth's DLT primarily follows safety concerns (e.g., Boesen et al., 2010; Hasinoff, 2016) and extends this perspective by demonstrating that young people understand today's world as risky, where chances of unwanted encounters are small but real, particularly for girls. As a result, young people adopt safety measures, including DLT. This study underscores that young people hold positive perceptions of DLT for safety, as long as it respects their boundaries (see De Wolf et al., 2026; Ervasti et al., 2016; Özkul, 2022). Building on Özkul (2022), this study shows that young people understand their parents' safety concerns as a manifestation of "responsible parenthood," in turn internalizing the role of a "responsible child." By revealing young people as active participants in this logic, this study adds a crucial layer of depth, showing that moral responsabilization (Dereymaeker, 2025) not only

concerns parents but extends to young people's daily life (De Wolf et al., 2026).

Last, this study's youth-centric lens shows that young people reproduce and actively challenge gender stereotypes (Wajcman, 2004). Young people challenge dominant gendered risk discourses by considering them outdated and emphasizing girls' capacities for self-defense. Likewise, young people use terms as "stalker" and "skipping" jokingly and flexibly—terms that are tied to the platform's technical features—to communicate boundaries and instigate renegotiations. Crucially, these terms are not neutral; they are the very tools through which gender roles are policed and performed.

Conclusions

This study has adopted a youth-centric perspective to provide insights into young people's agency, gendered experiences, and social roles. This study is innovative in bringing in peer culture in addition to the parent-child relationship as young people navigate both in their use of mobile tools. Youth simultaneously manage different expectations and this study has underscored the importance of this sociocultural perspective, as the roles of a "friend," "child," and "parent" fundamentally shape DLT negotiations. For instance, the "responsible parent" and "responsible child" roles are connected to the expectation to manage safety, while this expectation did not equally apply to "friends," even when "DLT for safety" functioned within both relationships. Likewise, the interpretation and adherence to youth's DLT boundaries depend on shared social rules.

This study has identified DLT as an "intimate surveillance of the ordinary," which further normalizes intimate surveillance as a form of care within close relationships. Furthermore, this creates a perception of transparency and oversight as young people share routine activities to reassure, show closeness, and build social credit. However, they tactically disengage from DLT technology when their actions fall outside expectations. This study has shown that through both their acceptance and acts of resistance, young people question, reproduce and normalize everyday surveillance culture.

The normalization of intimate surveillance becomes particularly critical when DLT is framed as a tool for active intervention. If DLT is only considered acceptable when it is being consulted infrequently and to affirm the ordinary, it is at odds with its framing as a tool for active intervention. Moreover, young people are skeptical about DLT's utility in a genuine crisis. However, this skepticism did not lead to outright rejection, but rather reframed DLT as a form of "passive care." We term this phenomenon "connective safety": the hope that DLT provides safety, despite limited concrete outcomes. This aligns with Marler's (2021) concept of "connective ambition," which describes the material promise of social media to better people's lives, stemming from platform discourses. Likewise, building on the material promise of safety offered by platform discourses, "connective safety" allows young people and their parents to feel secure and manage uncertainty, even while young people simultaneously harbor doubts about the technology's actual protective power.

Without dismissing the value of feelings of safety for both young people and their parents, "connective safety" calls for a

critical societal evaluation. In a context in which DLT becomes a prescriptive safety measure, reinforcing gender stereotypes and contributing to moral responsabilization of both young people and their parents, it is critical to emphasize DLT's limitations for intervention and question DLT technologies' safety discourses (Glover & Stone, 2024; Hasinoff, 2016). We call for greater emphasis on the structural character of young people's and girls' insecurity in the public domain to resist DLT functioning as a mechanism of moral responsabilization.

Limitations and recommendations

Two important limitations follow from the scope and ambition of this study and associated practicalities. First, while we aimed for a substantively large and diverse sample to capture a broad range of perspectives, logistical constraints meant that data collection and analysis occurred sequentially rather than iteratively. Our data collection, analysis, and reporting were informed by the five indicators of good qualitative research by Small and Calarco (2022). We examined whether our research demonstrates cognitive empathy, embraces heterogeneity, conveys findings in a palpable way, is self-aware of its own assumptions and influences, and remains responsive to emerging insights. The latter is defined as "follow-up" by Small and Calarco (2022). Due to the separation between data collection and analysis, follow-up was not interpreted in classical terms where data collection and analysis are part of an iterative process. Rather, it was interpreted differently, such as the mixed groups to explore gender dynamics further. Second, as this study aimed to investigate young people's lived experiences with both parents and peers, as well as study gender dynamics, this scope can be considered too broad for one study. Consequently, we want to emphasize that this study is a starting point, truly adopting a youth-centric perspective. We encourage future research to explore these dynamics further and specifically to adopt an intersectional lens. Participants' argument that their parents consider young people's individual character and age instead of gender alone, clearly motivates an intersectional lens to account for the complexities of surveillance, both in the experiences of young people and parents.

Data availability

Data cannot be shared for ethical and privacy reasons. The datasets generated during this study are not publicly available due to personal and sensitive information, shared with the researchers in confidence for the purpose of this study. Further, informed consents and approval from the Ethics Committee are obtained on the condition of complete anonymization, which is not possible for these datasets given the risk of re-identification.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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