

Media and the Development of Identity

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Abstract

The shift from “media” to “social media” in the digital age has implications for processes of identity formation during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. First, the Internet provides young people with opportunities to co-construct entertainment and social environments tailored to their own needs and interests. Second, adolescents’ presentations of self take place on the same screens and in the same activity settings in which they access commercial media programming. These changes reflect increasing cultural emphasis on personal agency and self-expression which brings to bear new tasks for identity development during the transition to adulthood that involve both opportunities and challenges for creating a coherent, stable, and meaningful sense of self. In terms of opportunities, social media give youth enhanced control over presentations of self in social interactions and increased access to social information and large networks of others to solicit feedback and reify self-concepts. However, social media also bring new demands to negotiate heightened pressure to perform a socially desirable self in a commercial environment that bestows value on attractive images and popularity. Suggestions for future research include methods that bridge youths’ offline and online social contexts and that balance enthusiasm for the massive quantities of data that can be aggregated via data mining technologies with qualitative work that examines the lived experiences of adolescents’ everyday social practices.

MEDIA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY

Identity formation in a digital age increasingly involves constructing a self in online spaces via the same screens where commercially produced media are accessed. While time spent gathered around a television set is declining, personalized media consumption on laptops and mobile devices is surging. In the United States, 95% of 12- to 17-year-olds use the Internet and the websites they gravitate to *en masse* are social networking sites, capturing 80% of adolescent Internet users (Lenhart, 2012). Young people use social networking sites to craft public personas, articulate their network of social connections, and consume and recycle media content from the World Wide Web. Social

networking sites represent new kinds of social media landscapes traversed by young people coming of age in the millennial generation.

According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial model, coming of age requires constructing a *coherent* and *stable* identity that has meaning and value in society. Identity is achieved through exploration and then commitment, a process that is propelled by decreasing dependence on parents and increasing navigation of relationships in wider social spheres during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Using social networking sites, youth collect massive webs of social connections, averaging in the hundreds, and sometimes reaching into the thousands. This trend, coupled with opportunities to broadcast a polished self-image to those large audiences of friends, have prompted concerns that youth are in peril of identity constructions that prioritize superficiality over substance. More sanguine perspectives see digital worlds offering youth valuable opportunities for self-elaboration. Polarized research findings speak to trade-offs entailed in the implications of social media for identity development.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Youth are not passive pawns indoctrinated by media programming in their identity development. Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory and related empirical work suggest that youth are agents in media socialization. They actively interpret the symbols populating their media diets and learn behaviors that are appropriate, rewarded, and valued by seeking relevant and attractive media models. According to the Media Practice Model (Steele & Brown, 1995) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Rubin, 1994), adolescents' daily media preferences and practices reflect unique navigations of their identity concerns and personal interests. They selectively embody, reformulate, and appropriate entertainment media to express and affirm who they are, their tastes, their values, and what they believe in and stand for. Moreover, media converge with peer socialization. Youth culture draws from mass media to collectively construct what is valuable and worthwhile; adolescents develop identities by adapting to these peer cultures through social processes (Arnett, Larson, & Offer, 1995).

SOCIAL MEDIA

Personal agency in the form of self-expression among peers is pronounced within social media environments such as chat rooms, blogs, and bulletin boards (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Anonymity and the disinhibiting effects of computer-mediated communication afford youth with enhanced

opportunities to explore common adolescent concerns with peers, issues such as sexuality or dealing with parents. As adolescents project their own thoughts and issues onto digital screens, they actively shape the discourses in their media environments and learn interactively with a larger expanse of teens outside their immediate social circles. Teenagers can use blogs to tell their stories, clarify their sense of self, and assert their voices in the media landscape. Youth are no longer just consumers, but also media producers, co-constructing online media environments to make them more precisely relevant to their personal needs and preferences than was possible with traditional media use.

With the explosion of social networking sites in 2005, the most popular online media environments became less anonymous. Social networking sites such as Facebook provide youth with an efficient way to create a virtual Rolodex of the people they encounter in their lives, preserve past relationships or fleeting connections, and expand their social spheres. Much of what is done on these social media websites can be called *social grooming*: maintaining friendships, keeping track of what contacts in the network are doing via their public posts, what they are talking about and who they are interacting with, staying abreast of social events and trends, and managing one's own reputation to the network (Tufekci, 2008). As the second most popular website in the world next to Google, Facebook and its 618 million daily active users have made producing and consuming gossip a definitive feature of the multimedia entertainment package on the Internet.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

Research focusing on Facebook usage among college students and high school adolescents in Western cultures has established that online and offline identities are fluidly intertwined rather than dichotomous. Experimental research indicates that young people project offline identities onto digital screens, especially in the context of social networking sites where interactions are anchored in offline relationships (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Qualitative and mixed-methods studies also show that social networking sites promote self-conscious crafting of manicured, hoped-for, or intended selves (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). However, public feedback on self-presentations authorizes and validates identity claims in the absence of physical stimuli in virtual spaces (Donath, 2008). These online identity constructions in collaboration with peers impact adolescents' self-esteem, further demonstrating the way online and offline identities are interrelated (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

Gender and sexual identity development also cross online–offline divides. The desire to reproduce the self as physically appealing to audiences of friends on social networking sites is widespread, evidenced by photos and other multimedia youth broadcast that often adopt commercial media strategies for portraying socially desirable forms of femininity, masculinity, and sex appeal (Manago, Graham, Greenfield & Salimkhan, 2008; Ringrose, 2010). Social networking sites afford young people with increased agency in their physical self-expression; they can reflect on and edit how they are portrayed as they select certain backgrounds, poses, camera angles, or position themselves in relation to others. Social media can also empower youth to socially construct with friends, meanings for gender and sexuality that undermine dominant paradigms (Van Doorn, 2010). As they express their sexuality online, adolescents' bodies are increasingly projected as digital phenomena to be consumed alongside other commercially produced entertainment and advertising. One implication of this trend is that girls who use Facebook frequently show signs of self-objectification, that is, experiencing the body not for what it does or feels like but what it looks like to others (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010).

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Within the domain of social identity, the concept of bridging social capital has gained the most traction by demonstrating the utility of social networking sites for garnering social resources. Bridging social capital is robustly associated with active Facebook use; it is defined as having functional connections with instrumental resources and information from large social webs, and thus identifying with broad and somewhat diverse communities (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Convenient and efficient access to public posts from the networked public seems to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness to expansive communities beyond everyday face-to-face social groups. Participating in these sites can also cultivate identification with specific social categories, such as ethnic social groups. For example, Facebook supports engagement in race-related discourses with a diversity of others, thus providing ethnic minority adolescents with opportunities to elaborate ethnic identities (Tynes, Garcia, Giang, & Coleman, 2010). Facebook also provides youth with tools to create a profile that builds their ethnic self-concept (Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Increased opportunities for personal agency and self-expression on social media present polarizing questions for identity researchers. Do social media provide access to social resources that promote identity exploration, elaboration, and clarification during adolescence and the transition to adulthood? Alternatively, does the ability to broadcast the self to large audiences of friends rob youth of a sense of privacy or intimacy in social relations and promote hollow self-concepts and forms of self-worth based on concerns about reputation and popularity? On the one hand, social networking sites do allow youth to experiment with various aspects of themselves online and gauge feedback from peers. Because online communications are asynchronous, youth can control their presentations of self, reflect on who they are and who they want to be, perhaps actualize idealized or potential selves into a shared social reality. The more they circulate self-concepts with others, the more likely those traits are integrated into a sense self. On the other hand, communicating and presenting the self in a one-to-many style, as if on stage to an audience of others, and strategically selecting flattering photos or cleverly worded public comments could also encourage self-involvement and a heightened concern with social approval.

There does seem to be a link between the proliferation of social media and increasing self-involvement among youth in the millennial generation (Twenge, 2013). The process of image management to large amorphous networked publics on social networking sites seems to encourage notions of the self as a brand to be socially marketed (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Salimkhan, Manago, & Greenfield, 2010). Moreover, popularity seeking is one of the most important motivating forces of Facebook use among undergraduates (Lee, Moore, Park, & Park, 2012; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012), suggesting that sociality on Facebook is more self-focused rather than other-focused. Furthermore, building a profile that filters negative information and highlights positive information about the self, and then traversing through the network via this digital representation, likely promotes increased consideration of one's self-image and a positively biased sense of self-awareness. In fact, Facebook use is associated with enhanced self-views (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2011).

Another perspective in the literature emphasizes that new norms for sociality and personhood in the digital age reflect shifting value priorities conducive to more elaborated identity constructions. Evidence suggests that it is not narcissistic self-involvement, but openness to sharing information about

oneself that predicts self-focused status updates and photo sharing on Facebook (McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012). Personal self-expression is increasingly emphasized and valued in an age of social media where the production and distribution of entertainment is decentralized away from large commercial enterprises. In fact, the process of acculturating to Facebook entails increasing public self-expression. Large-scale studies with college students (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009) and with the general population of Facebook users (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010) illustrate that individuals' public self-disclosures on the site increase as more people in their networks disclose.

In essence, millennial youth growing up with social media may increasingly prioritize the role of self-expression in social connectivity compared to previous generations. Indeed, an intergenerational study of MySpace showed that adolescents (13–19 years) compared to older users (over 60 years old) disclose more emotions in their self-descriptions and broadcast those self-expressions to larger networks (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009). Emotional self-disclosure is the most popular use of the status update feature on Facebook, and college students perceive increased social support the more friends they estimate observing those status updates (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). In addition, larger audience size for status updates is associated with more shallow social networks consisting of loose ties and distant friendships such as fleeting acquaintances. Thus, the proliferation of social media reflects sociocultural changes in practices, meanings, and values for social connection that prioritize personal self-expression, asserting one's voice in the media landscape and painting portraits of the self to solidify one's place within very large communities of close and distant others.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Social media present both new opportunities and challenges for the process of identity development. One way to frame discussions surrounding identity development and social media is to delineate the tasks involved in forming a coherent, stable, and valued sense of self in a digital society that affords increasing personal agency and self-expression, and convenient access to large social networks. A focus on tasks moves researchers away from conceptualizing studies in terms of either ominous or overly optimistic questions about the impacts of communication technologies on human development. Rather, it encourages examinations of the ways in which social media are part of shifting social norms, meanings, and values that give rise to new milestones adolescents must navigate as they form a mature sense of self. Many of the identity development tasks that adolescents now

face revolve around consolidating a sense of meaning and self-worth, given extensive opportunities for identity exploration, and a heightened emphasis on forming a digitally represented and socially desirable reputation in networked publics.

EXPLORATION AND COMMITMENT

Much of the research on identity development has traditionally used James Marcia's Identity Status Model to examine the ways in which adolescents move through a period of identity exploration to a state of commitment, that is, dedication to an autonomously negotiated set of stable self structures that is adaptive to one's social world. Millennial youth possess enhanced capabilities to engage in identity exploration via Internet highways through diverse communities of ideas and information. Indeed, Mimi Ito *et al.* (2010) have found that digital youth venture into potentially rich learning landscapes online, cultivating expertise in niche interests by using social media to "geek-out" with other like-minded individuals.

However, the nearly unlimited possibilities online combined with a bombardment of stimulation and distractions plus new opportunities to engage in anonymity in virtual spaces could also inhibit the process of consolidation and commitment. Very little research has examined the role of social media in the process of identity commitment, although early work suggests that the utility of the Internet in identity consolidation depends on whether online usage is balanced with identity work in offline relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). A topic ripe for new research is how identity fragmentation versus self-concept unity could arise from social media use, depending on how usage is balanced with offline interactions and depending on the personal and social resources young people bring to the table.

SELF-VALIDATION

Another important component of identity development is forming an identity that is personally meaningful and also socially sanctioned. Interestingly, social media paradoxically engender increased expression of unique selves and also increased access to the opinions of others. Thus, millennial youth face new tasks in coordinating heightened capacities for social validation and autonomous expression as they process who they are during adolescence and emerging adulthood. With access to information and feedback from multiple and diverse social groups in their online networks, youth could be cultivating sophisticated capabilities for sourcing multiple points of view to formulate an independent sense of self. Alternatively, crafting a self in anticipation of feedback from large networks of peers may also foster dependence on social

validation and peer approval. In the context of social media, youth must reconcile the increasing salience and availability of others' opinions with their own internal locus of security, confidence, and stability.

SELF-WORTH

Because attention to the self is often a goal on social networking sites, these online self-presentation contexts could foster fragile self-esteem by creating pressure to construct a socially desirable identity that attracts attention and publicity. A study examining associations between social networking sites and college students' sources of self-worth found that frequency of Facebook use was associated with public-based contingencies of self-worth, that is, self-satisfaction dependent on social approval and appearances (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011). Heightened awareness of the self as an image to be evaluated and valued based on attractiveness could also explain previously mentioned associations between Facebook use and self-objectification among adolescent girls (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). These studies are correlational, meaning that it could be that youth who are attuned to social approval and who are concerned with appearances are drawn to use Facebook in the first place. However, it is also not hard to imagine that spending time broadcasting the self to large audiences could foster an orientation toward psychological absorption with self-image and popularity. These are sources of self-worth that may be variable and fluctuating, leading to fragility in self-worth.

Using social networking sites to observe others, rather than to broadcast the self, also has implications for self-worth. Although it may promote bridging social capital, youth engaged in social information gathering on Facebook are likely to be exposed to unrealistic standards from their contacts because posted content tends to be manicured for public broadcasting. Upward social comparisons are elicited when young people browse through information posted by friends in the newsfeed and unwittingly conclude, based on a disproportionate amount of positive data from users' promotional content, that others have better lives than they do (Chou & Edge, 2012). Upward social comparison resulting from the consumption of misleading media content may be detrimental to identity development, discouraging youth as they reflect on their progress or achievements relative to their counterparts on Facebook. By balancing out the consumption of rosy pictures posted by acquaintances online, face-to-face relationships can help youth gauge their standing in the world in more realistic ways.

NEGOTIATING A PUBLIC PERSONA

Healthy adolescent identity development also involves learning to negotiate and integrate multiple aspects of the self that exist in different social contexts, for example, the self that exists with parents versus school teachers, friends who are jocks versus friends who are computer geeks. Interestingly, the collection of diverse contacts in one locale in the online social network presents the opposite problem, one that constrains multiple social identities. When youth post status updates or upload photographs from their latest social event, they are communicating to the entire network of known others who likely have multiple beliefs, opinions, or hold various roles of authority in their lives, a phenomenon known as *context collapse* (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In addition, as preadolescents and adolescents begin to construct an online identity profile, they must come to understand the repercussions of their identity expressions being permanently indexed in digital storehouses and potentially accessed by unknown others. The need to appropriately package the self as a public spectacle, and edit self-expressions for potentially unknown future audiences, presents new challenges and also opportunities for growth and maturity. Youth may desire to express their deepest thoughts, their uniqueness and individuality, and must also yield to a certain amount of conformity in their self-presentations so as not to offend differing social groups, to attract multiple audiences to their posts, and to avoid potentially incriminating information that could come back to haunt them at a later date. How will youth come to understand themselves knowing that their digital self-expressions will constitute permanent and perhaps publicly searchable records of their identities? How will they negotiate a desire for attention from an audience with a desire to be authentic and unique? How might the opportunity to create a personal brand for public consumption offer a new vehicle for consolidating a sense of self and how might it flatten the complexity and flexibility of self-constructions that are attuned to various social situations?

In general, the line between media commercialism and self-portrayals is increasingly blurred in an age of social media. Identity development has long involved negotiating meanings and values from pop culture and commercial entertainment, yet as youth face new image management demands on the same screens where they access multimedia commercial stimuli, what is at stake is a sense of authenticity and self-worth that transcends commercial values and one-dimensional marketing packages. Identity researchers in the coming years will be challenged to understand how to help youth feel empowered by social media to express who they are and cultivate their interests and expertise while avoiding attachment to a conditionally valued public persona constructed around mass appeal.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PARADIGMS

On the research horizon are bridges across methodological and disciplinary paradigms. Future research will require developmental psychologists to understand broad societal-level trends articulated by sociologists and communication researchers that are impacting young people's social development. Social structures penetrate and shape interpersonal relationships that constitute cultural environments and thus shape intrapersonal dynamics, including emotional and cognitive processing during identity development. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches are well-suited to take advantage of the increasing viability of tracking enormous amounts of data from traces of human behavior projected onto digital screens. "Big data" promises to transform behavioral research by allowing researchers to visualize and describe large-scale trends in social behaviors. Of interest to developmental psychologists are longitudinal analyses that could identify the propagation of large-scale patterns of behaviors over time in different social media contexts. Longitudinal analyses will be particularly insightful for developmental psychologists to understand the mechanisms involved in correlational data and for understanding human maturation, continuity, and change, especially during important transitions in the life span. Theoretical understandings of identity and youth development will be critical for framing and understanding the implications of these big data sets. Furthermore, broad patterns elucidated by big data sets must be complemented by qualitative and in-depth studies into lived experiences and meanings. Finally, researchers must connect online activities to offline lives, daily rhythms, and face-to-face relationships. Understanding social media means capturing the ways that digital tools are integrated into the flow of daily practices and interactions.

Last but not least, in an age of globalization, research must continue to explore the ways in which social media are incorporated into different cultural communities and systems of meaning. How will various cultural value systems and historical traditions influence the way social media are used and the impacts social media will have on social relationships and identity development? As information and trends spread across the globe via social media, they promote both cultural homogeneity and cultural heterogeneity. The Internet is a conduit for the mass diffusion of values, meanings, and ideologies and it also foments a plurality of differentiated perspectives, all with the capacity to be articulated on the world stage. Youth around the world will increasingly navigate these complexities as they interact with local and global communities. They will be called to figure out who they are under conditions of shifting frames of meanings and values as they move back and

forth from their immediate social contexts to global panoramas of heterogeneous perspectives depicted on their digital screens.

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