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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE EFFECT OF INTERNET ON THE IDENTITY OF ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to study the effects of Internet and the digital world on the identity of adolescents. In this regards, the adolescence and identity development, adolescent's identity crisis and the adolescents and the social networks are reviewed. The study showed that using Internet affects the youth's identity. In fact, the increasing spread of information and communication technologies in recent years has affected human life in different aspects of political, social and cultural development.

Key words:

Adolescents,
Identity,
Internet,
Social Networks

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INTRODUCTION

Computer access and use among adolescents have grown exponentially over the past two decades. Once connected, adolescents engage in a wide variety of activities, including doing schoolwork, playing games, shopping, and downloading music (Janis *et al.*, 2006). Research shows, however, that adolescents use the Internet primarily for social reasons (Gross, 2004; Roberts, Foehr, and Ride out, 2005). The Internet has become a virtual meeting place where teens hang out with their peers to pass time. Many adolescents reportedly prefer being online to other media, including the telephone, TV, and radio (2002 Gallup Survey, cited in Heitner, 2002). Because adolescents use the Internet for the purpose of connecting with others at higher rates than any other age group (Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis, 2001), a better understanding of how Internet use affects their social and emotional development is an important line of scientific inquiry (Janis *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, a small but growing body of research needed to examine the implications of various electronic forums for social interaction (e.g., chat rooms, news groups, message boards) on adolescent behavior (e.g., Gross, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes, 2004; Tynes, Reynolds, and Greenfield, 2004). The Internet may have particular relevance for adolescents who feel marginalized, because it provides a low-risk venue for finding others who share their perceived or real differences and exchanging information that is difficult to convey in person or when using one's real identity (McKenna and Green, 2002).

Adolescence and Identity development

Identity is an ambiguous and slippery term and it has been used—and perhaps overused—in many different contexts and for many different purposes, particularly in recent years (Ito, Mizuko *et al.*, 2008). Identities structure the way a person understands themselves and their world in both a descriptive and a prescriptive sense. From infancy onwards, a person is addressed by others through identities that invite the addressee to regard them in a certain way (Heaven and Tubridy, 2002). Nowadays, there are some diverse assumptions about what identity is, and about its relevance to our understanding of young people's engagements with digital media (Ito, Mizuko *et al.*, 2008). Identity plays a key role in virtual communities and in communication, which is the primary activity, knowing the identity of those with whom you communicate is essential for understanding and evaluating an interaction (Donath, 1998). The relationship between identity and community is encapsulated in the definition of communities as “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, and information, a sense of belonging and social identity” (Wellman, 2001: 18).

Erikson described adolescent identity exploration as a crisis of *identity versus identity diffusion*: “From among all possible imaginable relations, [the adolescent] must make a series of ever-narrowing selections of personal, occupational, sexual, and ideological commitments” (Erikson, 1968). Identity diffusion also results when such choices remain unresolved. The person does not seem to know who she or he is in this respect.

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Erikson argued that achieving a solid identity requires a period of *psychosocial moratorium* -- a time when the adolescent is relieved from the obligations and responsibilities of adulthood that might restrict his or her pursuit of self-discovery (ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, 2002). Adolescents who prematurely assume adult responsibilities, most often as parents or full-time workers, have a harder time achieving their own identity. They may prove fragile and immature later in life when faced with difficult challenges (ACT for Youth Upstate Center of Excellence, 2002). Adolescence has often been viewed as a key period in identity formation, and indeed as a period of "identity crisis," in which fundamental dilemmas have to be resolved (Ito, Mizuko *et al.*, 2008). At the edge of adulthood, adolescents are believed to be in the key process of identity formation, when the biological changes of puberty, emergent sexuality, transitions to more adult roles, and the formation of significant peer relationships all intersect. It is, for most young people, a time of transitions—to new schools, new jobs, new bodies, new relationships, and new responsibilities (Ito, Mizuko *et al.*, 2008).

Besides, for most young people, digital world is a significant modality through which they are seeking the answers to identity questions, consciously or unconsciously. Cognitively, young people move through adolescence with an increasing preoccupation with how they appear to others and adolescents frequently look to their social world for cues about what principles and traits to internalize, although the mixed messages they inevitably encounter can be bewildering as they figure out which to incorporate (Stern, 2008). With increasing experience and time, many of their self-doubts about beliefs and values are overcome, prompting late adolescents to focus more on their futures (who will I be?) (Harter, 1999).

These changes during adolescence provide a context in which online content creation can take on special meaning. Indeed, listening to firsthand accounts of their online authorial experiences helps to explain why young people generate personal sites at more than twice the rate of adults (Lenhart and Madden, 2005). Their comments and reflections demonstrate that online publications can provide important opportunities for managing the complex situations and shifting self-expectations that characterize adolescence (Stern, 2008).

Adolescent's Identity Crisis

An identity crisis is when an individual loses a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity (SalehiAmiri *et al.*, 2010). The term was coined by the psychologist Erik Erikson. In Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the emergence of an identity crisis occurs during the teenage years in which people struggle between feelings of identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1970). Researcher James Marcia (1966, 1976 and 1980) has expanded upon Erikson's initial theory. According to Marcia and his colleagues, the balance between identity and confusion lies in making a *commitment* to an identity. Marcia also developed an interview method to measure identity as well as four different identity statuses. This method looks at three different areas of functioning: occupational role, beliefs and values, and sexuality (SalehiAmiri *et al.*, 2010).

The adolescents and the social networks

People are not passively affected by technology, but actively shape its use and influence (Fischer 1992, Hughes and Hans 2001). The Internet has unique, even transformational qualities as a communication channel, including relative anonymity and the ability to easily link with others who have similar interests, values, and beliefs (Bargh, 2004). Of course, some believe that despite past media headlines to the contrary, the Internet social networks do not make their users depressed or lonely, and they do not seem to be a threat to community life---quite the opposite, in fact. If anything, the Internet, mainly through e-mail and social networks, have facilitated communication and thus close ties between family and friends, especially those too far away to visit in person on a regular basis. Hence, the Internet social networks can be fertile territory for the formation of new relationships as well, especially those based on shared values and interests as opposed to attractiveness and physical appearance as is the norm in the off-line world (see Hatfield and Sprecher 1986). And in any event, when these Internet-formed relationships get close enough (i.e., when sufficient trust has been established), people tend to bring them into their "real world"---that is, the traditional face-to face and telephone interaction sphere. This means nearly all of the typical person's close friends will be in touch with them in "real life"---on the phone or in person---and not so much over the Internet, which gives the lie to the media stereotype of the Internet as drawing people away from their "real-life" friends (Bargh, 2004).

Still, the advent of the Internet is likely to produce dramatic changes in adolescent's daily lives. For example, together with high-speed computing and encryption technology it already plays a significant role in crime and terrorism by enabling private communication across any distance without being detected (Ballard *et al.*, 2002, p. 1010). And we quite rightly have been warned that repressive regimes may harness the Internet and all of the data banks that connect to it to increase their power over the population (Manasian 2003, p. 23; Shapiro 1999). For instance, the type of "friending" activity that occurs on social networks, where users link to each other's profiles to grow their networks, highlights the radically changing notion of being acquainted with someone. It is so compelling to some teens to display big friendship networks and so easy with a click or two to establish online connections that it is possible for teens to have virtual ties to others on social networks whom they have never met in person (Lenhart, 2007).

In general, Teens use social networks for the creation and the maintenance of friendships. Many teens are using the networks to stay in touch with people they already know, either friends that they see a lot or friends they rarely see in person. Teens are also using the online networks to make new friends. Boys are more likely to report using the networks to make new friends than girls. Teens from middle and lower income families were more likely to say that they use the sites to make new friends than higher income teens (Lenhart, 2007).

Conclusion

Psychologists have long noted that the teenage years are host to a tumultuous period of identity formation and role development (Lenhart, 2007).

Adolescents are intensely focused on social life during this time, and consequently have been eager and early adopters of internet applications that help them engage with their peers. Research has also found that the relative anonymity aspect encourages self-expression, and the relative absence of physical and nonverbal interaction cues (e.g., attractiveness) facilitates the formation of relationships on other, deeper bases such as shared values and beliefs. At the same time, however, these “limited bandwidth” features of Internet communication also tend to leave a lot unsaid and unspecified, and open to inference and interpretation. Putting together the results of similar studies in relation to the Internet and national identity, it can be concluded that using Internet affects the youth’s identity. In fact, the increasing spread of information and communication technologies in recent years has affected human life in different aspects of political, social and cultural development.

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