Identity, Sexuality, and Relationships among Emerging Adults in the Digital Age

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A volume in the Advances in Human and Social
Aspects of Technology (AHSAT) Book Series

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Chapter 1
Identity Development in the Digital Age:
An Eriksonian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore the role that networked platforms play in identity development during emerging adulthood. They use the stories of two youth to highlight dominant themes from existing research and to examine the developmental implications of forming one's identity in a networked era. The inquiry is theoretically informed by the work of the psychologist Erik Erikson, who depicted identity development as a process of exploration that ultimately results in a sense of personal continuity and coherence. The authors consider what insights this theory—formulated in the mid-twentieth century—has to offer in a digital world. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the practical implications relating to education, policy, and the design of new technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Questions of identity are central to adolescents and emerging adults. Questions like "Who am I?" and "What is my role in society?" represent focal objects of reflection, shaping youth's thoughts, actions, and commitments (Arnett, 2004; Erikson, 1968). For contemporary adolescents and emerging adults, the tasks of identity development take place in a world of ubiquitous social media use. It is increasingly challenging, if not entirely impossible, to disentangle 'digital life' from the contexts in which today's adolescents and emerging adults navigate key developmental tasks. Among 18 to 29-year-olds, 85% own smartphones and 82% of those who use the Internet are social media users (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015; Smith, 2015). Among a slightly younger group, 92% of 13 to 17-year-olds use the Internet on a daily basis, 88% have access to mobile phones, and 76% use social media (Lenhart,

2015). Moreover, more than 90% of these youth access the Internet on mobile devices, meaning that app use and digital communications accompany young people through the breadth of environments they inhabit during their daily activities.

Social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook have introduced new ways for young people to engage in self-expression: Posting selfies on Instagram, updating statuses on Facebook, sharing mashups of daily activities on Snapchat. Although the motivation for these self-expressions may be recognizable, they nevertheless appear distinct from pre-networked identity expressions. Contributing to this distinctiveness are the particular qualities of networked technologies, such as asynchronous communication, 24/7 connectivity, feelings of anonymity and pseudonymity, and the public, persistent nature of online communication. These qualities introduce new dynamics to the act of self-expression. In pre-networked times, images captured by a camera were typically seen by one's immediate friends and family members. The photos that young people post of themselves online today, by contrast, may be seen—now and years from now—by much larger, more diverse audiences, some of them intended, others not.

In this chapter, we ask: How do youth's expressions on and through digital apps and devices intersect with, enable, or impede their identity development? We draw on the stories of two youth, Lilli and Trevor, to characterize the forms that identity expression takes in a networked world. We use these stories as case studies to examine how the attributes of networked technologies shape the identities that young people express online. In the process, we synthesize current research investigating the opportunities and challenges associated with forming one's identity in a networked world. Lilli and Trevor are adolescents; yet, their experiences highlight core themes from research on emerging adults. In addition, the decisions that Lilli and Trevor make as adolescents will directly influence their experiences as emerging adults; in particular, they will eventually have to reconcile their online adolescent and emerging adult selves. In this way, their stories highlight the kinds of challenges that emerging adults are increasingly managing as they move from adolescence to emerging adulthood in a digital context. We therefore use the stories of Lilli and Trevor as entry-points for exploring the experiences of emerging adults in a digital age. Our analysis is framed theoretically by the work of the psychologist Erik Erikson, whose foundational writing on identity largely shaped how psychologists viewed identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood during the second half of the twentieth century. What insights, if any, does Erikson's theory have to offer in today's digital world? We also frame our investigation with an historical overview of scholarship addressing identity expression in a digital age, charting major themes from an early wave of internet research in the 1990s through to present day. We conclude the chapter with a discussion of the practical implications related to education, policy, and the design of new technologies.

BACKGROUND

An Eriksonian View of Identity Development

Erikson (1950, 1968, 1980) depicted the development of a satisfying identity as the central developmental task of adolescence. As more people living in Western societies postpone major life milestones, such as marriage and children in favor of pursuing further education and establishing a career path, it is now widely recognized that the work of developing one's identity extends into emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). Indeed, Erikson (1968) himself acknowledged that identity development is a lifelong process

that individuals revisit periodically as they engage in subsequent developmental tasks such as intimacy, generativity, and wisdom. Nevertheless, adolescence and emerging adulthood represent the first and potentially most important period for identity development during the lifecycle.

Erikson (1968) portrayed the process of identity development as a conflict between identity synthesis and identity confusion. During a period of suspended consequences—what Erikson termed a psycho-social moratorium—individuals try on different identities, gain feedback and affirmation from others, and reflect on their beliefs, values, and goals. They successfully resolve the conflict between synthesis and confusion if they are able to achieve a sense of "self-sameness and inner continuity" (Erikson 1968, p.50). Those who are unsuccessful experience the fragmentation and instability associated with identity confusion.

Though both adolescents and emerging adults engage in identity exploration, the nature and expression of these explorations may differ. In adolescence, the focus of identity exploration lies largely in reflecting on who one is in relation to one's family, peers, and immediate community (Davis, 2010). As individuals enter emerging adulthood, their perspective shifts as they start to reflect on their place and purpose in the broader society (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Thus, identity exploration during emerging adulthood involves reflection on how one's interests and abilities intersect with societal values and concerns. Emerging adults consider such things as their desired career path, long-term romantic partners, and general lifestyle choices (Arnett, 2004).

The following excerpt from Erikson's writing illustrates his conception of a successful outcome of identity development:

The wholeness to be achieved at this stage [of development] I have called a sense of inner identity. The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see him and to expect of him. (Erikson, 1968, p.87)

According to Erikson, coherence and consistency lie at the heart of a healthy, satisfying identity (Cote, 2009; Schwartz, 2007). He recognized that social context shapes identities in important ways, requiring people to show different aspects of themselves in different circumstances. Yet, he claimed that these different facets of the self could—and should—be united into a coherent, whole identity. In this way, Erikson's writings bear resemblance to an earlier theorist of the self, William James (1890), who emphasized the synthetic nature of personal identity.

Subsequent work by identity scholars has emphasized the integrative function of identity development. These scholars have depicted identity as an informal theory about the self (Berzonsky, 2003a, 2003b); a story that brings together different aspects of the self (McAdams, 1996, 1997); and a foundational structure for understanding who one is in the world (Adams & Marshall, 1996). According to Baumeister (1993), "[I]dentity furnishes a basis for making stable, coherent, consistent choices" (p.182). These characterizations are united by a belief that identity provides structure and meaning to an individual's disparate experiences.

Postmodern views of identity are defined more by multiplicity than consistency, raising the question of whether an Eriksonian conception of identity holds relevance in today's world. According to Gergen (2000), achieving a sense of personal coherence is not possible in such a rapidly changing, socially and

technologically complex world. As we discuss in the subsequent section, early investigations into identity in a digital age emphasized the opportunities that the Internet provides for crafting and expressing multiple identities.

At the same time, one could argue that as our experiences become increasingly varied and distributed, the search for an overarching structure that organizes and imparts meaning to these disparate experiences becomes ever more important. Scholars, such as Giddens (1991) and Lifton (1993), asserted that the multiplicity that defines our postmodern experience does not preclude us from searching for and achieving a sense of personal coherence. Indeed, this sense of personal coherence may be essential for navigating successfully the challenges associated with living in a postmodern world.

A 'Dogged' Pursuit to Understand Identity Expression in a Digital Age

Be Who You Want to Be

A series of three cartoons - published in 1993, 2007, and 2015, respectively - offer witty popular culture portrayals of shifting trends highlighted by scholars who study identity in a networked context. The first cartoon, created by Peter Steiner and published in *The New Yorker* in 1993, features two dogs. One dog is sitting at a desk in front of a desktop computer, speaking to second dog who looks on with curiosity; the caption reads, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993).

An early wave of research in the 1990s underscored opportunities for identity play online. In her 1995 book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle described how the potential for anonymity online translated to seemingly boundless opportunities for identity experimentation. Turkle referenced Steiner's cartoon as an entry point to her discussion of identity expression within Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). MUDs, Turkle explained, enabled players "to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and try out new ones" (p. 12). Turkle even saw the potential for MUDs to function as therapeutic contexts in which players could do meaningful identity 'work' that translated to RL (i.e., real life) benefits.

In a similar vein, Stone (1991) and Waskul and Douglass (1997) wrote during the same period as Turkle (1995) about how the disembodied nature of online identity directly facilitated exploration. Stone highlighted the fluidity of gender, exemplified by "computer crossdressing" (p. 84), while Waskul and Douglass described how the identities of multiple "cyberselves" could "emerge" due to the disembodied, anonymous, and faceless nature of the communicative context (p. 395). Because cyberselves in the 1990s generally existed as distinct from offline life and relationships, it was left to each individual to decide whether – and when – to adopt a different identity or to express a more authentic, 'true' self. One of Waskul and Douglass' (1997) participants commented: "You can be anything. I may stretch the truth, and be with whoever I want - no inhibitions" (p. 389). Another participant similarly found the online context liberating, but for a different reason: "The anonymity allows me to be myself, allowing a certain freedom of expression in which I rarely indulge in person" (p. 389). Indeed, in spite of the potential for dramatic identity play, other research from this period (e.g., Baym, 1995; Kendall, 1999, Kennedy, 2006; Miller, 1995; Tetzlaff, 2000) similarly found that Internet users nevertheless often created online identities consistent with their offline selves.

Be Recognizable

A second cartoon, created by Rob Cottingham in 2007, bears close resemblance to Peter Steiner's 1993 illustration – though the dogs are seated in front of a slimmer, laptop computer. In this version, the caption reads: "On Facebook, 273 people know I'm a dog. The rest can only see my limited profile" (Cottingham, 2007).

In the beginning of the 2000s, social networking sites (SNSs) "hit the mainstream" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 216). Early SNSs, including MySpace and Friendster, allowed users to create their own profiles and form explicit, ongoing connections to others' profiles. Aided by these affordances, SNSs started to "bridge the physical and digital" (boyd & Heer, 2006, p. 9). The connection between offline and online selves became even more pronounced with the rise of platforms like Facebook. Launched in 2004, Facebook explicitly facilitates the creation of online profiles grounded in an individual's offline identity and connections. Although privacy settings (e.g., the aforementioned 'limited profile') allow users to share selectively with different audiences, the platform forbids users from maintaining more than one profile (Facebook, 2015).

Facebook is but one of the digital contexts through which adolescents and emerging adults connect and communicate. Yet in the years following the platform's release, scholars began to document the consistent and considerable overlap between young people's online and offline social networks (Davis, 2010; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Weachter, & Espinoza, 2008). As offline friends became a defining part of individuals' online lives, cyberselves ceased to be faceless, disembodied, and anonymous. To the contrary, existing friends expect their friends' online identity representations to be recognizable, familiar, and consistent with offline behavior (Davis, 2012a; 2014). Notably, one benefit of using social networking sites to connect with friends from offline life is that digital disclosure and communication can enhance closeness and strengthen peer relationships offline (Davis, 2012a; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Be Who You Are

A third cartoon, created in 2015 by Kaamran Hafeez, features two dogs again. In the 2015 version, the dogs both sit on the floor while their owner occupies the seat in front of the computer. The caption – seemingly a comment from the first dog to the second dog – reads, "Remember when, on the Internet, nobody knew who you were?" (Hafeez, 2015).

For Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg, it is unlikely that Hafeez's cartoon would evoke feelings of nostalgia about fewer opportunities for identity play. To the contrary, Zuckerberg criticizes the mere practice of adjusting identity portrayals for different contexts. As he told author David Kirkpatrick:

You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly...Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity. (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p.199)

To be sure, there exists a plethora of apps and platforms that still purport to offer anonymity (e.g., Whisper, Insider, mood; see Roose, 2014). Yet digital life increasingly intertwines with offline life, and users as young as 13 years old – just entering the throes of identity development – are welcomed to Facebook, Instagram, and other contemporary SNSs that tend to anchor digital selves in real names,

images, affiliations, and connections to offline peers. What, then, are the implications of navigating the ongoing processes of identity development and expression in digital spaces that increasingly presume consistency, authenticity, and accountability across contexts as feasible and worthwhile objectives?

TWO CASE STUDIES

Meet Lilli

When [sixteen-year-old Lilli] Hymowitz first joined Instagram, in middle school, her account was private, but by the time she started high school she had opened it to the public. She has posted thousands of photos, but fewer than 500 are extant because she began to realize that many of the things she used to care about didn't fit with her current persona. "I deleted a bunch of the photos I didn't like anymore," she says. "Now I think I'm at a place where I don't really change that much." …The oldest photo Hymowitz has not deleted, and thus the earliest moment she has deemed relevant to her current self-image, is of a marijuana-leaf bracelet, posted when she was 13. (Wiedeman, 2015)

For an identity scholar who lived and studied adolescents and emerging adults solely in a pre-digital era, certain aspects of the above excerpt would almost certainly be confusing. The word 'Instagram' would be unfamiliar, as would the concepts of 'opening one's account to the public' and 'deleting' old photographs. Yet other practices characteristic of identity development during adolescence and emerging adulthood would seem entirely familiar: Experimentation with various roles, exploration, and evidence of a shift toward greater continuity and self-coherence.

Crafting a Curated Online Identity

Lilli Hymowitz's narrative presumes a connection between her online, Instagram self and her offline self. She does not anonymously post in a digital world akin to the faceless context described by Sherry Turkle and others in the 1990s. Rather, Lilli uses her real name on her Instagram account. She is not faceless; her face is quite literally a focal point of many of her posts and identity expressions. Although she does not personally know all of her followers, her close friends are among them.

Lilli's digital representation offers a carefully crafted, 'glammed up' (Davis, 2014) portrayal of her life. Indeed, online identity expressions often constitute heavily curated, idealized constructions of self and life (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). In Lilli's words, "You can edit your life on Instagram" (Wiedeman, 2015). Lilli's friends note that her Instagram "definitely" does not fully capture her personality. "[Lilli's] Instagram is like, 'She does cool stuff.' It's a lifestyle that people want to live," one of her friends observed. Yet, although her identity expressions online offer a thin, edited version of her life, they are neither fictitious nor unrecognizable. Adolescents and emerging adults engage in a kind of identity editing through an intentional, effortful selection process, which they use to determine which moments and expressions to post online.

In their book, *The App Generation,* Gardner and Davis (2013) described the pervasive contemporary pressure to present a polished and packaged self online. They voiced a concern that pressure from an early age to present a well-curated, clearly articulated identity may prompt premature identity foreclosure

among young people, who in turn avoid exploring alternative identities and roles. Such premature fore-closure bypasses the psychosocial moratorium described by Erikson (1968) as an important component of the identity development process.

Outgrowing Past Identity Expressions

Hymowitz also describes a second type of 'editing': Removing old expressions or posts that she no longer feels are representative of her current identity. In a similar vein, Davis (2010) documented self-described shifts in online expression as female bloggers moved from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Drawing on her interviews with these youth, Davis differentiated adolescent practices from those characteristic of emerging adulthood. As adolescents, the bloggers regularly restructured blog layout, wrote emotionally-charged posts, and were heavily influenced by friends in both deciding to create their blogs and in crafting their posts. As emerging adults, they described increased stability and greater self-assuredness in their expressions, a shift from focusing heavily on personal issues to a greater emphasis on issues of social concern, and a more pronounced and explicit orientation toward the future. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these practices and emphases are closely aligned with attributes that characterize and differentiate adolescence and emerging adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2004; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Weinstein and colleagues (2015) also documented a shift in young people's approaches to online expression in their longitudinal study of youth with strong civic and political identities. In Weinstein's (2014) original interviews, the researchers found that most youth – 50 of their 70 participants (72%) – tended to express their civic interests through personal social media accounts. Approximately two years later, Weinstein, Rundle, and James (2015) followed up with participants in an effort to understand whether their approaches to online expression remained stable. Forty-one of the 70 original participants participated in the follow-up study; these participants spanned late adolescence and emerging adulthood (ages 16-25) at the time of their initial interviews and were all emerging adults (ages 18-27) at the time of the follow-up study.

More than 40% of participants had changed their approaches to online expression, with most participants moving in the direction of greater restraint for what they posted (Weinstein et al., 2015). These participants cited a range of considerations related to their quieting expression, including more salient concerns about the future, unintended consequences, and their careers. Those who modified their expression patterns also contributed to a group level shift. Whereas most young people shared the civic aspects of their identities online at Time 1, a majority quieted or entirely withheld their civic expression on social media two years later.

Gavin, for example, was 16 at the time of her initial interview, and she reported that she clearly portrayed her civic identity and political interests on her Facebook page (Weinstein et al., 2015). Two years later, as an 18-year-old, Gavin described herself as "much more cautious about the information [she] shared with others online." She explained that she still openly discusses her views offline, but "would rather not risk ever being penalized for what I posted on Facebook as a teenager."

Taken together, these studies and Lilli Hymowitz's more recent personal narrative underscore several points related to online identity expression. First, young people do indeed alter their online identity expressions, including both the content and nature of their posts, over time and as they develop (Davis, 2010; Weinstein, Rundle, & James, 2015). Hymowitz's more recent practices also include retroactively reviewing and removing previous posts (Wiedeman, 2015). Second, the motivation for altering identity expressions may stem from simply feeling like previous expressions from earlier adolescent years no

longer 'fit' one's current identity. Or they may instead be symptomatic of shifting concerns characteristic of development into and through emerging adulthood, such as less anxiety about fitting into one's immediate peer group and conveying 'who I am' right now, alongside greater concern about society and setting oneself up for 'who I will become.'

Revisionist History?

Herein lies a central question for today's emerging adults, who are tasked with navigating digital identity expressions as their identities develop and change: How should they manage past identity expressions from earlier childhood and adolescent years, which increasingly remain persistent, searchable, and linked to their online identities long after they are personally relevant? In her 2010 TED talk, cyborg anthropologist Amber Case explains that managing digital profiles and identities from a younger age means that:

a lot of people now, especially adolescents, have to go through two adolescences. They have to go through their primary one, that's already awkward, and then they go through their second self's adolescence, and that's even more awkward because there's an actual history of what they've gone through online.

Hymowitz describes her deliberate practice of deleting old posts, likely in an effort to revise the history to which Case (2010) refers. Yet posts can easily live on in digital copies that are downloaded, saved, or stored elsewhere. Therefore, retroactively removing old posts is an imperfect strategy for cleansing one's digital footprint from adolescent activities, expressions, and experimentation.

Essena O'Neill, an Australian youth, model, and Instagram celebrity, serves as a case-in-point. In November 2015, O'Neill decided that her Instagram account was an inauthentic representation of her life and determined that she wanted to remove her old posts (Hunt, 2015). However, she preceded the mass-removal of her posts with a phase of editing their captions to reveal additional context, including how she felt at the time when they were taken (e.g., lonely, insecure) and how much effort she put into capturing the 'perfect' shot. While crafting a curated version of her life for Instagram is seemingly an entertaining pastime for Lilli Hymowitz, Essena O'Neill reveals the considerable discomfort and stress generated by her Instagram portrayal. O'Neill explained, "I made myself into a machine that gave others what they wanted from me, never knowing or valuing my true self. I was lost to expectations, pressures and a fearful desire to be accepted" (Safronova, 2015). As of late November, 2015, O'Neill deleted all of her Instagram posts from her account – yet because posts were downloaded or 'screenshotted' before they were taken down, many of her old posts are still easily retrieved with a quick Google Image search.

Meet Trevor

Not too long ago, the first author of this chapter received an unexpected phone call from a public defender's office in a small city on the West Coast of the United States. The investigator was seeking an expert witness in the case of a 17-year-old boy accused of murdering his grandmother. The boy had recently moved to a new state to live with his grandmother after experiencing several years living in a turbulent household. The detective described Trevor as a shy, insecure boy desperately seeking acceptance from his peers. As it happened, the peers from whom he most wanted acceptance were involved in gang activity.

To appeal to these peers, Trevor (pseudonym) created a persona on Instagram in which he depicted himself as a hard-hitting, seasoned 'gangsta.' The first author of this chapter spent an afternoon scrolling through three years' worth of Instagram posts that included pictures of Trevor with wads of cash stuffed in his mouth, flipping gang signs, and holding guns, as well as a steady stream of violent, misogynistic quotes from hip-hop songs. Since moving out of state, the only way for him to stay in contact with his friends back home was through social media and texting, and so his Instagram posts became more important than ever.

The prosecution wanted to use Trevor's social media postings as evidence in the case against him. Specifically, they wanted to make the argument that his Instagram persona proved that he was involved in gang activity and capable of committing such a horrible crime against his grandmother. Trevor's legal team wanted the first author of this chapter to help them make the counter-argument that the identities that young people display online are sometimes quite different from those that they express offline.

On the face of it, Trevor's story seems worlds apart from Lilli's. Indeed, the facts of their life circumstances stand in stark contrast, geographically, socioeconomically, racially, and culturally. It is no surprise, then, that their Instagram feeds bear little resemblance to one another: Bikini shots by pools versus guns, gang signs, and mouthfuls of cash. And yet, both Instagram feeds reflect a desire—typical and strong among adolescents and emerging adults—to portray an identity that they believe is attractive to the particular peer group with whom they identify and from whom they seek acceptance.

Online Identity, Then and Now

From an Eriksonian perspective, Trevor's actions can be understood as an attempt to search for and establish an identity that is both personally satisfying and recognized by others (Erikson, 1950, 1968, 1980). If Erikson were alive today and had access to Trevor's Instagram account, he would likely view his posts as an attempt to carve out a 'psychosocial moratorium' where he could try on a new identity and assess the reaction it elicited from his peers. The key to such exploration is that it is done in a context in which there are no grave consequences for one's identity expressions. Erikson believed young people needed a safe space to explore different identities and see which of them fit.

Sherry Turkle, writing in 1995, described how the nature of MUDs supported the Eriksonian concept of a psychosocial moratorium. Turkle explained:

The adolescent moratorium is a time of intense interaction with people and ideas. It is a time of passionate friendships and experimentation. The moratorium is not on significant experiences but on their consequences…The moratorium facilitates the development of a core self, a personal sense of what gives life meaning. This is what Erikson called identity. (Turkle, 1995, p. 204)

In other words, actions and identity moves in MUDs could remain safely disconnected from offline life and repercussions, and thereby facilitate the kind of exploration and experimentation paradigmatic of the Eriksonian moratorium.

In stark contrast to the world of early online environments, Underwood and Faris' (2015) contemporary study of thirteen-year-olds reveals today's apparent dissipation of boundaries between online and offline life. The authors observe:

Examining the social media communication of…13-year-olds made clear that there is no firm line between their real and online worlds. Social media is an extension of their social lives, a context in which real and meaningful relationships develop and at times take some seriously wrong turns, and is very much integrated with their ongoing daily lives and their offline interactions. (Underwood & Faris, 2015, p.1)

As this excerpt suggests, friends play a central role in the desire for consistency across online and offline contexts. Davis described the "anchoring role" of peers in her explanation of how friends' expectations influence youth's online identities (Davis, 2014, p. 18). The adolescents interviewed for her study noted that friends would disapprove of online expressions that seemed inconsistent with offline behavior. Friends tolerate digital portrayals that are, to some extent, "glammed up" (p. 20). Yet a firm and recognizable anchoring in offline identity is paramount in order to avoid seeming "two-faced" (p. 19).

Who Is Most Likely to Experiment Online?

Though consistency in self-representation represents the stated ideal for most young people (Davis, 2014; Gardner & Davis, 2013), there do exist contexts and situations in which some youth feel comfortable with and motivated to explore identities online that differ substantially from the day-to-day identities they convey offline. This motivation is fairly common among youth whose interests lie outside the mainstream activities of their peer group, for instance, youth who write fan fiction or play certain types of video games (Gardner & Davis, 2013). The identities that youth express in these online interest-driven communities may appear quite different from the identities they express when they are hanging out with their peers offline. One college freshman interviewed by Gardner and Davis (2013) reflected on her use of LiveJournal to express her identification with fan culture:

I can definitely be more of a deranged fan girl in my LiveJournal than I can in real life…I don't have to like kind of censor myself. It's not even really censoring myself in real life; it's kind of recognizing that people aren't that interested and kind of dropping off before I freak them out. (p.90)

Some youth try out new identities in anonymous or pseudonymous online environments before they feel comfortable enough to claim those identities officially offline. In her ethnographic study of teens' networked lives, for instance, boyd (2014) described one girl who was exploring her sexuality at the time she was interviewed. Living in a conservative state in the Midwestern United States, the girl did not feel comfortable conducting this exploration in her everyday offline environment, and particularly not with her parents' knowledge. She found an online chatroom in which other queer girls shared their personal experiences as well as helpful LGBT-related resources. Although it took concerted effort on her part (effort that likely would not have been needed twenty years earlier), the girl was able to achieve some measure of anonymity online, enabling her to explore her sexuality in a non-threatening environment.

Youth who are insecure, shy, or lonely offline are also more likely to explore different identities online (Barker, 2009; Davis, 2012a, 2013). In her study of college freshmen, Barker (2009) found that participants low in self-esteem were less likely to use SNSs to communicate with their offline peer group. Similarly, participants low in *collective* self-esteem—perceiving their social group to be unpopular—were more likely to use SNSs for social compensation, or to distance themselves from their offline peer group and align themselves with a more desirable peer group. These results are consistent with Davis' (2013)

finding that greater online identity experimentation and lower levels of online peer communication were connected to lower self-concept clarity among high school students.

This body of research sheds light on the apparent disjunction between Trevor's online and offline personas. Trevor was described to the first author as an insecure boy who desperately wanted to be accepted by a group of peers whom he admired. He used his Instagram account to craft an identity that he believed fit with this group but which bore little resemblance to the way he actually presented himself offline, which was more reserved and shy.

Colliding Contexts

The challenge with such identity exploration today is that it is increasingly difficult to control the audiences that see it (boyd, 2014). Trevor's Instagram posts were intended for one particular audience, but they were ultimately seen by an audience that he never anticipated. This convergence of diverse audiences in one online setting is a distinguishing characteristic of networked environments and one that makes it difficult for youth to use the Internet as a site for low-stakes self-exploration. The girl discussed in the previous section, who went online to explore her sexuality, took deliberate measures to keep her various online and offline contexts separate. boyd (2014) described how she used different browsers for Facebook and LGBT-related chatrooms and websites, and she was careful to erase her browser history after each use.

In her book *It's Complicated*, boyd (2014) recounted the story of an African American boy who was not so successful at keeping his contexts separate. This boy had written a strong college essay about his desire to escape the gangs in his community by attending college and getting a high-quality education. The admissions officer at the Ivy League University to which he had applied conducted a Google search that brought up the boy's MySpace page. She was concerned to see references to gang activities and images of gang symbols. Which version of the boy's identity was true? According to boyd, both versions were true and appropriate to the different contexts in which they were expressed. The boy expressed an identity on MySpace that allowed him to gain acceptance from his peer group and community at home. At the same time, he aspired to an education and recognized that he would have to express a different side of himself in order to secure that opportunity. Though these identities were appropriate to the audiences for which they were intended, their expression was complicated by the convergence of multiple disparate audiences online.

Far from providing a low-stakes context for expression, then, many of today's social media platforms instead create a digital history that may be searched years later by college admissions officers and future employers (e.g., Singer, 2013; Smith, 2013). In Trevor's case, his social media postings were discovered by law enforcement and used to portray his personality and actions offline. In such a networked world, can today's adolescents and emerging adults still find spaces for valuable identity experimentation and exploration with a moratorium on consequences?

Finding a Space to Play Online

Recent trends in youth's online activities suggest they are actively looking for ways to carve out spaces for low-stakes identity exploration. In November 2015, Valeriya Safronova wrote an article for *The New York Times* in which she described the increasingly common practice among teens and young adults of creating fake Instagram ('finstagram') accounts. Safronova (2015) explained:

Some young adults, weary of trying to live up to their annoyingly perfect online avatars, have created 'finstagrams,' or fake Instagram accounts, that present truer versions of themselves than their main profiles. These locked, pseudonymous accounts capture something rarely seen by people who follow these same users on their main accounts: reality.

The rise of practices like maintaining finstagrams and of apps like Snapchat, which are characterized by an intentionally ephemeral nature, may be symptomatic of a search for digital spaces that allow for less carefully curated, performative, and lasting identity expressions. Some policymakers, too, are advancing legislative efforts such as California's 'eraser button' law, which requires sites to provide minors with the option to remove or anonymize previously posted content (Ingis, Signorelli, & Wolf, 2014). Evolving practices and policies are illustrative of ongoing efforts to address the puzzles that attend coming of age in a digital world.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As new technologies are introduced at an increasingly fast pace, new opportunities and challenges associated with identity expression will undoubtedly follow suit. Emerging trends like finstagrams and Snapchat are important for scholars to track, as they shed light on how youth navigate identity development in an ever-changing digital age. These recent trends suggest that youth feel the pressure to be perfect online, which has grown with the rise of widely used SNSs like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and they are pushing back by carving out spaces to be less polished. What do these practices tell us about young people's needs and desires around self-expression? What insight can we gain about the challenges youth face when their needs and desires bump up against the distinct properties of networked technologies? What strategies do youth use to cope with such challenges, and with what effects on their self-expressions? Future research should explore such questions in order to provide continued and evolving insight into the impact of digital technologies on emerging adults' processes of identity development.

If the opportunity for an Eriksonian moratorium is deemed valuable for individuals and society, the onus is on researchers, policymakers, educators, and designers of new technologies to attend to the ways in which digital life can support or interfere. Educators can use insights gained from research to develop curricula aimed at helping youth to become self-reflective about their online identity expression and to help them navigate the particular identity-related challenges they face in different networked environments. Policymakers can use these insights to promote policies that recognize the challenges associated with growing up in a networked world and seek to shield youth as they inevitably make mistakes while navigating these challenges. Technology developers can take research insights into account as they design devices and applications that satisfy young people's need to explore their identities in a safe, low-stakes environment. What might it mean to deliberately 'design for identity development' in recognition of the possibility that users will grow up on and through their sites?

CONCLUSION

This chapter has documented the considerable changes to online life over the last twenty years. These changes have precipitated a movement away from the anonymity of the 1990s Internet toward an increasing interweaving of online and offline life. As a result, offline connections exert a profound influence

on emerging adults' online identity expressions. Digital connections to offline friends, family members, and colleagues often facilitate closeness and enhance relationships. At the same time, the increasing overlap between online and offline life fuels pressure for consistency and accountability across contexts.

To cope with the challenge of managing developing identities in the face of persistent digital footprints, emerging adults often respond by carefully packaging, editing, and curating their online identity portrayals. They still find places and adopt practices that enable them to explore and experiment online. Yet contexts from offline life often collapse online, sometimes to the knowledge of the individual, other times in ways beyond what that individual ever anticipated.

Decades after Erikson developed his influential work on identity, his theory continues to provide a valuable framework for understanding youth's motivations and behaviors. Adolescents and emerging adults are in the midst of exploring different identities, expressing their identities to others, and seeking and interpreting social feedback. The online world offers a ripe context for both expression and feedback. Erikson would likely be unsurprised to learn that youth indeed explore their identities online, seeking spaces that function as psychosocial moratoria. Eriksonian theory highlights the value of preserving online spaces for youth to try on and try out different identities without lasting consequences.

At the same time, Erikson's concept of identity coherence also has its place in a digital age. While recognizing the multiplicity of online life, Erikson would likely assert that the search for a coherent sense of self is not merely possible in a digital age, it is essential for gaining a sense of mastery over this multiplicity. This is not to say that individuals should strive to be singular beings both online and offline; indeed, Erikson would no doubt express concern about the pressure young people experience to portray fully realized, polished selves before they have adequately explored alternatives. Rather, his focus on coherence underscores the value of seeking to coordinate one's self-expressions in such a way that imparts a meaningful, purposeful sense of self.

There are few endeavors more salient during adolescence and emerging adulthood than the construction of a synthesized identity. At the same time, there are few daily practices more universal among contemporary youth living in developed countries than checking, connecting, and communicating through digital devices and platforms. This chapter has focused on the intersection between identity development and the digital age, synthesizing the current state of research in this area. Through this synthesis, we have sought to characterize the distinct opportunities and challenges that emerging adults face growing up in a networked world and pave the way forward for continued research and public discourse.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Asynchronous Communication: The ability to communicate with others at different points in time and in different geographic locations.

Finstagram: 'Fake' Instagram accounts in which people limit the audiences that can see their Instagram posts in order to express themselves in a style that is often different from their 'real' Instagram accounts.

Fragmentation: An inability to coordinate the multiple facets of one's self into a coherent whole.

Identity Confusion: A failure to craft a coherent and consistent picture of one's self.

Identity Synthesis: The achievement of a coherent and personally meaningful sense of self.

Pseudonymity: A state of partial anonymity in which one is recognized by an invented alias rather than one's real name.

Psychosocial Moratorium: Described by Erikson as a period of suspended consequences during which one is free to explore a variety of values and goals before making commitments to any of them.

Social Media: Networked platforms that support content sharing and interpersonal communication to various audiences.

Social Networking Sites: A type of social media platform that allows users to create individual profiles and link them to the profiles of other users.