The Implications of Facebook Usage on Identity Development

Among Adolescents and Young Adults

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As our digital world collides with our real world, face-to-face interactions have become obsolete. It is common to already have an impression of someone even before meeting him or her. With the popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook, first impressions are often made not in person but by the description of your Facebook page. In essence, one can say the Internet has become an extension of us. As we move into a digital world, we must stop and remember that although communicating behind a computer screen may feel intimate, it is undeniably impersonal by nature. Today’s youth would disagree as this mode of communication is considered to be their “norm.” As adolescents emerge into young adults, they begin to develop a sense of identity. Based on the findings of the subsequent research, the proposed research hypothesizes that Facebook hinders identity development in adolescents and young adults because it allows users to continuously alter and exaggerate their online identity. By applying Erikson’s psychosocial life-span development theory, this paper will examine how social networking sites, mainly Facebook hinders adolescent identity formation.

Social networking sites have changed the means of communication between individuals. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). The phenomenon of social interaction has taken on an entirely new meaning. Since the creation of the first major social networking site (SNS) in 1997 called sixdegrees.com, hundreds have been launched (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, since the introduction of Facebook.com in 2004, no other social networking site has been able to withstand its popularity. Although Myspace.com presented itself as Facebook’s primary competitor, it did not cater to college networks like Facebook did (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The exclusivity of Facebook made it appealing; users were required to have a university email address to join (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As its popularity grew among Ivy League colleges, the site opened itself up to all universities, and then eventually to everyone.

Over the past decade, the use of social networking sites has become an integral part of our daily lives. Facebook has revolutionized the way adolescents and young adults communicate with each other. Currently, Facebook has over 1 billion users, and college-age users (between 18-25 years old) account for 30% of total user population (Kim & Lee, 2011). One study reports that U.S. college students spend an average of 10-30 minutes a day on Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Adolescents aged 13-17 account for the second highest total user population, with 61% of them logging onto Facebook several times on a daily basis (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Recently, Facebook has added the chat feature, which allows for instant messaging, video chatting, and e-mailing. It is also worth mentioning that Facebook is the number one downloaded application on any mobile device (“Facebook Newsroom Fact Sheet,” 2012).

Facebook’s platform allows users to customize their own personal page with a personalized profile picture and additional personal data such as their likes, dislikes, comments, pictures, status updates, education, opinions, political views, friends, videos, and so on. The current layout of Facebook consists of a timeline that illustrates a person’s life starting from birth (“Facebook Newsroom Fact Sheet,” 2012). With its one billion users, the act of creating a Facebook profile is considered to be user friendly and easy to do. However, that does not take away from the complexity behind the profile itself. A Facebook profile is not just a page with pictures and words, it is your online identity.

The process of identity formation during adolescence has been studied by many researchers. Erik Erikson became well known for his theory of life-span development where he proposed that developmental progression requires the mastery of eight stages. According to Erikson (1968), each stage featured a unique developmental task that required individuals to confront a crisis before moving on to the next stage. Erikson’s eight stages are as follows: 1. Trust versus mistrust; 2. Autonomy versus shame and doubt; 3. Initiative versus guilt; 4. Industry versus inferiority; 5. Identity versus identity confusion; 6. Intimacy versus isolation; 7. Generativity versus stagnation; and 8. Integrity versus despair.

Facebook requires that an individual must be at least 13 years old to make an account (“Facebook Newsroom Fact Sheet,” 2012). This age coincidently correlates with Erikson’s fifth stage: identity versus identity confusion (12-18 years). According to Erikson (1968), the fifth stage of the crisis is a time when adolescents develop a sense of identity. This is a period where adolescents try to figure out what makes them unique. Those adolescents who have a distinct sense of self and understand the role they play in society show achievement of this stage. Those who failed to establish an identity have a weak sense of self and their role in life. Erikson (1968) argued that adolescents who failed to establish an identity would have difficulty with the formation and maintenance of romantic partners.

In the sixth stage, Erikson (1968) described the crisis of Intimacy versus Isolation as a time where emerging adults worked on developing close and intimate relationships with others. Positive outcomes of this stage are evidenced by the development of both close friendships and loving relationships. If the young adult experienced crisis during this stage, it would be reflected by the individual’s feelings of loneliness, isolation, and fear of relationships. It is important to note that the difficulties experienced in this stage can stem from earlier failure or poor development of identity in the previous stage.

In light of Erikson’s stages of development with respect to the fifth and sixth stage, the next part of this paper will examine the implications Facebook has on identity development with specific regards to identity construction, (e.g., Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) social capital, (e.g., Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008) self-disclosure, (e.g., Forest & Wood, 2012) socialization, ( e.g., Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2012) psychological and emotional well- being, (e.g., Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011) and, lastly self-presentation (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2011). This paper will attempt to explore how a person’s identity formation is influenced by the aforementioned factors by demonstrating its effect on their sense of self-worth and their psychological well-being.

Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) posited that identity is composed of one’s self-concept, which they define as the “totality of a person’s thoughts and feelings in reference to oneself as an object, and identity is the part of the self by which we are known to others” (p. 1817). According to Zhao et al. (2008), identity is established when the feelings and beliefs associated with individual are endorsed and accepted by others. In face-to-face interactions, identity is constructed by certain characteristics that prevent a person from claiming certain attributes, such as physical features. Face-to-face interactions still allow for individuals to hide their background or certain personality traits, however, these identity claims can only go so far (Zhao et al., 2008). As for endorsement made by others, it is established by feedback and acceptance that occurs over time. Thus, in face-to-face interactions, identity development does not occur instantly, but gradually.

Online, where interactions are not face-to-face, individuals profiles consist of associations that help to makeup their identity (Zhao et al., 2008). These associations on Facebook can include their likes, dislikes, groups, friends, pictures, and so on. The amount of self-disclosure is up to the user on Facebook, therefore, they can manage the way they are presented in regards to the different things with which they are associated. The research by Zhao et al., (2008) suggests that online identities are represented by the “desired self” rather than “the true self”. They did a content analysis of 63 college student Facebook accounts. Zhao et al., (2008) found that participants presented themselves as being popular among friends and seen as being well- rounded. This was evidenced in the findings, as each account had an average of 88 pictures and 33% of those pictures were not visible to certain groups of friends, while 90% of them kept their profile picture as public (Zhao et al., 2008). Limiting certain visibility of images of oneself that may contradict the image portrayed in their profile picture may reflect an intent to portray oneself in a certain way. This study suggests the notion that an online environment is definitely conducive to constructing a socially desirable image of oneself.

Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) examined how social networking sites play a role in the way “emerging adults” (ages 18 to 25) maintain and develop relationships. The researchers suggest that this is a time where emerging adults start to build long term social skills that will affect their identity, self-dependence, career orientation, and relationship maintenance (Steinfield et al., 2008). The ability to maintain and form relationships is crucial for the accumulation of social capital. Steinfield et al. (2008) indicated that young people who have more social capital are “more likely to engage in behaviors that lead to better health, academic success, and emotional development” (p. 435). Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe (2008), posed a research question to investigate the relationship between intensity of Facebook usage and psychological well being, and bridging social capital. For this study, the independent variable was the intensity of Facebook usage, and the dependent variable was the individual’s overall satisfaction with life. The study was conducted through two surveys taken a year apart, once in 2006 and once in 2007. The first survey contained a random pool of 800 students at a large midwestern university where invitations were sent to participants in an online survey, and 186 students responded in 2006. In the following year, 92 students responded to the second survey. The researchers found a strong correlation between higher intensity of Facebook use and a student’s perceived connection to social capital. Another major finding made from this research indicated that students with lower self-esteem gained more from Facebook usage than high-self esteem students. The unique ability of socializing online makes it easier to maintain distant relationships and weak ties, that otherwise is more difficult to do in real life. Accordingly, it can be said that accumulating social capital online is more feasible and convenient online than it is offline. Thus, relationship maintenance online presents itself as an easier option than offline. This study supports the need for the proposed current study, as it shows a relationship between social capital and Facebook usage. Given these findings, the current study will use social capital as one of the variables that influence identity development.

Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011) found a negative association between the amount of time spent on Facebook and a person’s self-esteem. Their study examined the relationship between self-esteem and time spent on Facebook of 70 undergraduate students. Kalpidou et al., (2011) administered surveys to first-year and upperclass students. The Facebook survey included questions regarding the individual’s time spent on Facebook, number of friends, emotion, and social connection to Facebook. In conjunction with this, the researchers administered the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). The researchers predicted that greater numbers of Facebook friends may hinder academic and social adjustment, and the amount of time spent on Facebook will be negatively correlated with self-esteem. The study found that the more time individuals spent on Facebook, the more inclined they were to compare their lives with others, which as a result made them feel worse about themselves. Next, the number of friends was also linked to self-esteem what was the relationship between number of friends and self-esteem as both first-year and upperclass students with more friends reported having a lower emotional adjustment to college. Kalpidou et al., (2011) attributed this last finding to the fact that individuals cannot completely fulfill their emotional needs on the internet, let alone a social networking site. However, one limitation pointed out by the researchers is that today’s generation may rely on social networking sites such as Facebook to help them adjust to college not clear as to why this is a limitation of the study. Kalpidou et al., (2011), stated that future research in examining friendships and personality traits of profile owners with regard to college adjustment not a sentence. This suggestion for future research supports the present paper in that it is attempting to examine how young adults use their profile as an extension of their identity and the grave importance they give it when it comes to making friends and how they present themselves.

Kim and Lee’s research (2011) questions whether the number of Facebook friends has a positive or negative effect on the subjective well-being of an individual and whether this correlation is associated with perceived social support. Specifically, the researchers examined how self-presentation strategies increase the subjective well-being of college aged users. Kim and Lee (2011) interpret positive self-presentation as presenting oneself in a selective manner, only showcasing “favorable and appropriate images of themselves” (p. 360). Next, they defined honest self-presentation as presenting yourself in a “true-to-self manner, engaging in deeper levels of self-disclosure” (p. 360). Therefore, the researchers studied the two different strategies of positive self-presentation and honest self-presentation on Facebook users’ perceived social support and subjective well-being. In exchange for a course credit, 391 undergraduate students participated in a survey that measured the number of Facebook friends, positive self-presentation, honest self-presentation, perceived social support, and subjective well-being. Kim and Lee (2011) found that positive self-presentation was directly correlated with subjective well-being. As for honest self-presentation, researchers found that it had an indirect positive effect on subjective well-being when accompanied by perceived by social support. Lastly, the findings suggest that because Facebook allows users to visualize their social connections, it validates and enhances their self-esteem. Therefore, a user’s happiness can be enhanced through self-presentation. The researchers invoked positive illusion theory which posits that aggrandized perceptions of self help people deal with self-threatening situations and promote the ability to feel happy. It is likely that individuals alter their self-presentation, which makes it possible for people to present a more positive view of themselves in hopes to derive the psychological benefits that come with self-enhancement.

Self-presentation on Facebook may have a significant impact on self-esteem and identity development. A recent study done by Forest and Wood (2012) contends that individuals with low self-esteem benefit from using Facebook. Those with low self-esteem tend to have difficulty with self-disclosure, which is an important part of forming intimate and meaningful relationships. Since Facebook allows for self-expression to be done online, lacking the face-to-face aspect, Forest and Wood (2012) hypothesized that individuals with low self-esteem would benefit from self-expression online, resulting in enhanced self-esteem. The first study investigated 80 undergraduate Facebook users and whether they found Facebook to be a safe environment in that it was low risk for hurt or rejection. Their research revealed that individuals with low self-esteem spent just as much if not more time on Facebook than those with high self-esteem. Forest and Wood found that individuals with low self-esteem perceived Facebook as a “safe, appealing place for self-disclosure” (2012, p. 300). In their second experiment, the researchers found that when 170 Facebook users with low self-esteem expressed negative status updates, members of their social network liked them less. In their third experiment, when 92 Facebook users with low self-esteem expressed more positivity and socially desirable status updates, it was better received from their social network. The findings of the last two studies suggests that individuals with low self-esteem might benefit from making more positive and less negative updates. The study done by Forest and Wood suggests that individuals with low self-esteem may benefit from Facebook by selectively choosing their updates and posting more information about the positive things that have happened in their life (2012). However, this study had one major limitation in that it did not account for individuals with low self-esteem posting false or exaggerated updates about themselves so that they receive a positive response. This limitation reinforces the need for the current study as it suggests that further research needs to be done concerning authentication of user activity on Facebook.

This next study examines whether the observable information found on an individuals Facebook profiles is consistent with their personality traits (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman and Gaddis, 2011). The purpose of this study is to gauge how accurate observers are in their interpretation and impression of a person based on their Facebook profile. Like other studies, since the college population makes up a large demographic of users, the participants were made up of 133 college students from Texas. The researchers suggest that certain personality traits are manifested in Facebook behaviors. Here, personality was assessed by using the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) which measures the Big Five personality dimensions: extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience. The results of the TIPI revealed that extraversion is correlated with Facebook behaviors associated with maintaining up to date presence which was evidenced by frequently making new Facebook friends and commenting on other’s profile pages. Agreeableness is marked by viewing profile pages of many different people, as opposed to just your own and your close friends. Participants low in conscientiousness spent more time on Facebook than did those high in conscientiousness. Openness is associated with replacing and adding photographs. A high level of openness was related to individuals who engage in a wide range of activities. Neuroticism did not correlate to any self-reported Facebook behavior (p. 484). The researchers found that there is a relationship between Facebook activity and personality and postulate that this will be consistent with the individual offline. However, since the findings were based on self-reports, the responses could be a reflection of the individuals desired self rather than actual behavior.

Therefore, in efforts to remedy this potential limitation, the researchers employed a method of rating that would compare the participants responses to unacquainted observers and well acquainted observers. The unacquainted individuals consisted of five research assistants who did not know of the participants. These ratings served as proxies for how the profiles would be viewed by strangers. Next, the well-acquainted individuals consisted four peers associated with the participant. Independently, each individual was asked to use a 15 point scale and “rate how well each trait describes the profile owner” (p. 485). According to Gosling et al., the best validity criterion is one that combines perspectives. The personality judgments made by both the unacquainted and well acquainted observers suggest that their analysis of profile information and personality was consistent with the results of the participants self-report. The findings of this study imply that accurate impressions of basic personality traits can be made based on an individuals observable profile information. However, a major limitation of this study is that it does not measure for consistency of personality traits over time. In the present study, assessing how Facebook hinders identity development among adolescents and young adults, can be measured by their personality traits for consistency. As previously mentioned, achievement of identity formation is evidenced by establishing a strong sense of self by maintaining consistency with regard to their personality traits, personal views and values.

Erik Erikson would argue that socialization is very important when it comes to identity formation. However, the original intent of his definition of socialization would not include online interactions. It is likely that an adolescent or young adult will learn and grow differently from a real-world social interaction than from an online social interaction. The studies above provide us with several examples that show how self-presentation can influence a persons Facebook activity. Kim and Lee (2011) found that self-presentation influenced the type of Facebook activity a person engaged in. They found that positive self-presentation yielded a more positive response which correlated with spending more time on Facebook. Similarly, the study done by Forest and Wood (2012) found that individuals with low self-esteem may benefit from Facebook as they found that positive updates on Facebook was better received than negative posts. Considering Eriksons fifth stage of identity formation, it is possible that individuals will explore different personalities online and may exaggerate different traits of their identity to appear more socially desirable. Fittingly, Zhao et al. (2008) found evidence that individuals are more likely to present themselves in a more socially desirable manner on Facebook than not. However, in view of Eriksons fifth stage, it is also possible that individuals may use Facebook as a means of establishing a distinct identity. Gosling et al. (2011) found that personality traits exhibited on Facebook were consistent to behaviors observed by those individuals in an offline context. Their research indicated that the personality traits associated with their profile page was consistent with how observers unacquainted and acquainted with them perceived. Personality traits can be measured, however, the studies above lack the measurement of personality traits over time. Furthermore, the studies above indicate there is a potential for exaggeration in self-presentation which questions authenticity of the individuals profile information. However, the study done by Gosling et al. (2011) alleviates concerns for inauthenticity with their multi-rating system. Given the aforementioned literature has provided, the purpose of this research is to examine how the following three constructs; authenticity, time spent on Facebook, and self-presentation influence identity formation among adolescents and young adults.

The proposed hypothesis posits that identity development is inversely correlated with Facebook activity. As the time spent on Facebook related activities increases, the individual’s self-esteem and authenticity decreases. Authenticity is operationally defined as how accurately an individual represents themselves both in the 'real-world' and in the 'online-world'. The more related the two are, the more authentic an individual is. With respect to the proposed study, consistency will represent little change in Facebook related activities and self-presentation throughout the one year period. In accordance to Erikson’s theory of development, this proposed study suggests that achievement of identity formation will be established by authenticity and consistency.

Method

Participants

The sample will consist of 200 participants, with an equal ration of male to female, between the ages of 15-21. Participants will be recruited from a high school and college within the Western New York area, specifically: 100 students from Amherst High School and 100 students from the State University of Buffalo. A second set of participants will be recruited to aid in measuring authenticity of the individuals partaking within the study. These participants will include four acquaintances composed of two close friends and two family members, as well as a panel of four individuals who have never met the participants. To ensure confidentiality, participants will be given a unique identification number. Upon successful completion of the study, participants will be provided a link where they can claim a gift card valued at fifty dollars valid for one year, from specifically outlined retailed sponsor: University of Buffalo Psychology Department. Participants will be asked to partake within the study for one year.

Measures

Participants will be administered a series of questionnaires regarding authenticity, time spent on Facebook, and self-presentation. When measuring self-esteem, the Self-esteem Scale designed by Rosenberg will be administered. According to the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, self-esteem is often analyzed as an independent or intervening variable. Therefore, before the start of this experiment, participants will be asked to complete the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. Rosenberg defines self-esteem as a positive or negative orientation toward oneself; an overall evaluation of one's worth or value. This particular scale will be implemented as it has high reliability and does not require a lot of time to answer.

The first item of measure will be the time spent on Facebook. Participants will be given a record sheet with which they will keep to track the number of times they checked their Facebook throughout the day as well as how long they were on Facebook. Students will be provided these sheets as well as access to it online to ensure as accurate responses as possible. The website address and login information will be administered following their agreement to participate in the study. Each participant will have their own unique login information where they will submit their hours and answer questions that pertain to their Facebook activity. Therefore, the researchers will have access to their information on a weekly basis. Upon completion, researchers will compare both hand written and online record sheets and calculate an average.

The next questionnaire will be a measure of their Facebook activity which will correlate to their self-presentation. Their Facebook activity will be determined by using the personality inventory of the five factor model (FFM) which measures personality traits. Additionally, this study will use the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) to measure the Big Five personality dimensions: extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience (Gosling et al., 2011). The TIPI will be modified to include questions related to Facebook usage and how changes to participant's platform relate to their self-presentation. The purpose of utilizing this scale is because all five traits target specific areas of the self, which can be translated into the online world. For example, the openness trait can be measured through how may pictures are visible to all versus filtered members. that assess each personality trait. The questionnaire will ask two identical sets of questions that will pertain to each personality dimension. The first set of questions will pertain to their online behavior and the second set of questions will pertain to their offline behavior.

Next, the same exact questionnaire given to the participants will be administered to the four acquaintances composed of two close friends and two family members, and four individuals who have never met the participants. Although, the questionnaires will be modified to meet the needs of the acquaintances as the original measures were designed for the participants. Thus, friends and family members will be asked how much time they believe the participants spend on Facebook, and after observing their Facebook page, will judge how authentic and confident in their self-presentation the particIpants are. The panel who have never met the participants will based their responses specifically on authenticity, therefore, will only be administered the TIPI, as they cannot speak to consistency and time spent on Facebook.

Procedure

All participants recruited from the Western New York schools will be given access to an online link, so that they are able to answer questions at their own convenience. Students under the age of 18, specifically those recruited from the specified high schools will be provided with an informed consent sheet outlining the research and purpose, asking parents to return the sheet should they not want their child to participate. Therefore, all those who have not returned an informed consent sheet, will be assumed that they are able to participate. Upon opening the designated link, participants will be directed to the consent form, outlining confidentiality and the purpose of the study. They will be prompted to click on the consent button should they agree with the terms.

Participants will be asked to list two close friends and family members whom we can contact to help decipher authenticity. We will also utilize peer researchers who do not have any contact with the participants to represent the unacquainted panel. The acquaintances will be administered all three designs, however, they will be modified to meet their needs. . The panel of fellow researchers will be administered the TIPI. They will be asked to aid in determining if the participant is representing themselves within their actual self or desired self. If the responses match between both sets of acquaintances, we can generalize that the participants are being fairly authentic. To check for consistency, participants will be asked to respond to the same questionnaires over a period of one year; every six months, consequently participants will be asked the same set of questions three times.

Limitations

As the research is based on self-disclosure, there is no way to monitor actual Facebook usage. Therefore, we will not know if students are using Facebook once a day compared to multiple times as well as the length of time they are on Facebook.

A second limitation of this study is gauging how honest will the participants’ friends and family be. It is well understood that people show different angles of themselves to different people. For example, one behaves differently in a meeting room as compared to when they are with their friends. Therefore, responses gathered from friends and family are representative of what the participant wants them to know and see.

This study has been essentially based on Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development. The third limitation of this study is that it is uncertain if identity development ever occurs past stage six, because participants are only followed for one year.

Future research

The proposed hypothesis for this study suggests that the more time spent on Facebook, the lower self-esteem and individual will have. Therefore, the prospective study will try to implement a way of tracking. Ensuring accuracy is a challenge, thus future studies will need to  decipher a more efficient and methodical format to keep record of participants time spent on Facebook.

Erikson’s theory of development does not stop once individuals have gone through stages five and six, it goes on until the individual has passed away. The proposed study posited that identity formation is negatively correlated with time spent on Facebook, in other words, an individual is unable to form a solid identity if they are spending more time on Facebook. Because majority of those who spend time on Facebook are between the ages of 12 and 40, they may not successfully move to the next stage which is middle adulthood, generativeity vs. stagnation. Hence, future research needs to be longitudinal so that researchers can follow their participants beyond a year in order to maintain that time spent of Facebook does in fact hinder self- presentation and authenticity.

The purpose of this paper was to explore how one formed their identity within the online world. Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development was utilized as a reference to how one develops and forges their identity. Past research aimed to find how social networking sites effected one’s persona, and if that differed from the real world to the online or desired world. As gains were made, researchers did not address the duration of time spent on Facebook in correlation to authenticity and self-presentation. Thus, the proposed study suggests that a relationship exists between these factors; the more time one spends on Facebook, the lower self-esteem they will have producing a less authentic version of their real self.

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