Critically Evaluate How Digital Technology Support the Social Engagement of Young People

Marlia Shukry

School of Education and Technology, University of Portsmouth

Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the influence of digital technology in the social development of young people (aged 13-15). It is assumed that use of digital technology by young people between age 13-15 years old may decrease their social inclusion, which is a process that where social interaction between individuals with different socially relevant attributes is encouraged. However, the emergence of social media which is the digital platform has opened one more avenue for socialisation. Hence it is critical that young people make use of various digital platforms to socialise effectively. Without this skill, some young people may be at risk of social exclusion.

Keywords: Digital Technology Support, Social Engagement, Youth

1. Introduction

We are living in an era where the increasing use and influence of digital technology pervades not into our home lives but throughout our social lives as well (Ofcom, 2016). Digital technology has influenced people of all ages (Byron, 2008) and in particular young people (Bennet et al., 2008; Boyd, 2014). Young people are the first generation to grow up digital (Fenton, 2016). Use of digital technology in the form of computers, the internet, social media, and mobile phones to express themselves has become second natures to them.

This research will, therefore, present the process of social development and engagement in young people and then critically reviews the impact of digital technology on the social development of young people in the contemporary UK. It locates this discussion within the stages of adolescent development proposed by Erikson and Marcia. The further it presents how digital technology in the form of social media helps in the identity formation of young people. Then the it critically examines the negative impact of social media on the young generation. The final section discusses the concept of identity and its fluid form and impact of multiple identities on young people.

2. Literature Review

In 1960, Erikson presented the theory that describes the eight stages of identity and psychosocial development process of young people. These stages were 1)Oral Sensory 2)Muscular – Anal 3)Locomotor 4)Latency 5)Adolescence 6)Young Adulthood 7)Middle Adulthood and 8)Maturity (Erickson, 1960). Erikson's description of adolescence as a "psychosocial moratorium," a period of "time out" is particularly important concerning this paper. As according to Erickson at this stage, young people experiment with different potential identities, and this may expose them to various risks as well. Erickson's The theory was further extended and refined by Marcia (1980) who was a developmental psychologist with the focus on adolescent development. He proposed four proposed additional Identity Statuses within Erikson's adolescent moratorium stage. First, Marcia identified the stage of identity diffusion, an adolescent does not have a sense of making or having choices, and he or she has not made any commitment or willing to make any commitment. Second, he identified foreclosure in which the adolescent displays willingness to commit to some values or future goals that are relevant. Until this stage, according to Marcia, an adolescent does not experience an identity crisis. However, identity crisis is experienced in identity moratorium stage; where he or she explores various commitments and is now ready to make choices, however commitment to these choices is not made yet. Finally, when the adolescent undergoes an identity crisis and commits a sense of identity (i.e. certain role or value) an identity achievement stage is reached.

However, for Erikson stages of development were linear but for Marcia, these stages were seen as non-sequential. It is here, in this process of psychological identity development that the social development of adolescents most vulnerable to the influence of digital media. In particular, with the proliferation of social media sites, this process can constantly be influenced because they facilitate a higher level of interaction (Fisher and Reuber,2011). This involves the use of popular sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, etc.To share views, photos, images and other forms of content. Facebook involves the creation of a profile.

> *'Despite its diversity and vast applications, the key to social media is the interaction. Standard media traditionally broadcasts its message via television, newspapers and radio. It is a one-sided conversation. Social media, on the other hand, is a two-sided conversation. It not only educates the audience, but it also allows the audience to participate in the discussion (Harris,2009).'*

Various activities are done on social media provides young people with an opportunity of creating their profile. While the creation of profile the young people takes the one more step towards creating his or her identity(Baker and Fortune,2008). This platform has also made making others aware of one's identity easier. The audience can change their status and presentation easily. The interaction with other is more in this virtual environment compared to a traditional pattern where one has to personally visit to interact. According to Goffman (1959) in the process of interaction with others, individuals attempt to guide and create an image about oneself. This image is the one that individual actions assist an individual to present positive ideas about oneself and gain their desired identity. Thus social media offers increased opportunity for interaction with many people. These interactions assist another person to see him and gain an understanding of their nature. Therefore, interactions thus aid in the process of identity achievement.

"*Part of identity formation is thinking about the type of person you want to be*"(Arnett, 2010, p.340). Young people's web page focuses more on presentation of self; effectively this allows young people to tell the world who they are and sometimes gives hints about who they want to be. Social media is the resource that gives young people constant flow of information. This information can be used by young as a guide for social comparison. Although this information is not always reliable however it gives young people ideas about the formation of one's identity. Therefore, the need for self - representation is created which makes young people choose the best information that describes one's image to the group.

Young people who lack in communication which could be due to limited knowledge of the language or inability to articulate their thoughts or speech related issues can speak about their identity find it easier to communicate their views and opinions. Further, Enli and Enli & Thumim, (2012) mention that to be part of online community one has to socialise, and this process of socialisation facilitates the creation of one's identity. Young people are already growing up in the environment where presence on social media is familiar and widespread. It is therefore important for them to have an online identity to interpret the world around them. social networking sites can help in the creation of ideal identity and increase self-awareness in adolescents. This concept of online identity is then passed on into the making of offline identity where individuals create a new understanding of self-which is based on the feedback given by others on presentation of self on social media platforms. Tosun (2012) supports this argument and mentions that use of internet leads to the formation of a close relationship with people active on social media. He further says users make use of online networking site Facebook to socialise and create offline relationships and existing relationship stops strengthened. Being online not only removes the constraints related to location but also constraint related to individuals' personality. Individuals get a platform where they can express their real or inner selves. .Danah Boyd's chapter on a similar topic also mentions that many social networking sites facilitate social interaction and affiliation which is extremely important for the development of young people. These networking platforms offer opportunities that are all the more relevant in today's scenario where access to offline public spaces is getting all the more restricted. Livingstone (2008) suggests that "social networking creates a space for teens to be visible

to peers where they can construct and experiment with a reflexive project of themselves" (p.399). Social networking applications can be used as tools for self-promotion and self-representation (Berki and Jakala,2009).

Self disclosure plays a crucial role in identity formation (Ellison et.al, 2006). Young people find online platforms as an easy way to disclose about themselves to others in a way that is more comfortable. These self-disclosures further facilitate and deepen interpersonal relationships with their peers and friends (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). Online communication speed up the process of interaction as well as self-disclosure this facilitates relationship building. Therefore, social media can be considered as, the virtual space that is coherent with social space which exists within computer wherein new rules and ways of forming self-identity could emerge (Hardey,2008).

Various earlier studies and recent studies (McMillan and Morrison, 2006; Blankstein,2008; Anderson, 2011) suggest that online and offline are connected. Social networking sites, blogs, chats are interactive platforms that assist in the construction of online environment, and these online and offline worlds are connected psychologically as the users discuss their offline issues in the online world. (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Šmahel,& Greenfield, 2006). This claim is also supported by Livingstone (2008) and Barker (2009) where they mention that young people's use of digital social media, offline communications extend online, and there is no sharp distinction between offline (physical sites) and online (digital social media) communication. In their study, Edwards and Wang (2016) also found that young people's online social networking is woven into the daily task of managing complex relationship networks.

However, social media can also negatively impact identity development in young people. Social media gives an individual an opportunity to create and ideal identity.According to Marcia, identity is "constructed rather than societally imposed..." (Bosma, 1994, p.70).Taking into consideration this definition an adolescent may develop an identity on social media which is different from his real identity. Each social media platform impose its own standards of identity.Wang and Edwards (2016) also found in their study that online communications are getting this process of extension and

reconstruction of communication extended and reconstructed depend upon the tools available with each media. Like Tumblr which is is a blogging site allows their users to express themselves and bare their true self so that can find like-minded community online (Tumblr,2014). Facebook provides its users with an opportunity to disclose personal information where the user can share his range of tastes, favourite quote to personalities. In addition to this user announce their activities and describe oneself (Robin,2008). Apart from providing information user gets the option of choosing any picture that describes the user. Thus this provides the user with an opportunity to carefully pick and construct their identity. On similar lines, LinkedIn tasks for information, but this platform focuses more on professional information and less of personal information. LinkedIn asks for detailed academic and professional background which create and identity narrative of the user. On some social networking platforms like Bebo and MySpace users can make use of "narrative bits (narbs)" to share their information. These narbs include statements like, "dry, sarcastic, clever witted," which are pre-formatted. These narbs must be carefully selected by the user who is providing the narbs. These complete processes offer the user an opportunity to deliberately offer information that the controls and constructs identity Narbs. Choosing narbs is a process that is mindful as well as deliberate. Here users consciously provide specific information about oneself. This process is different from the real-life process of identity management. In real life process, many attributes get communicated without control, for example, non-verbal communication that unconsciously happens in response to the environment. In the case of the digital social network, there is nearly nothing that is not controlled or constructed by the person providing the narbs. Most of the digital social networking systems allow their users to constantly change the narbs. In the process of creation of dynamic narbs users may move away from a stable identity narrative (Mitra, 2009). Therefore, varied formats of varied social network sites lead to the creation of multiple identities that could also lead to confusion in young people. Due to its nature, social media offers an option the creation of identity-based on one's popularity (Palfrey and Gasser, 2013).

Development of identity is not always guided by the online community, but young people may create an identity they make them feel better (Ellison et al., 2007; Liu, 2007; and Salimkhan et al., 2010). This attribute of self-presentation may lead to confusion in young people and their identity development process by inhibiting them in the finding their original identity. Some researchers have raised concerns about the impact of digital technology on young people's psychological, social and emotional health and development and their 'sense of self' (Byron 2008, p.34). Young people's access to images of violence, gaming sites, pornography does not promote a positive and healthy self-image. Byron (2008) claims, "action and interaction online may have an impact on children's sense of self and be a particular risk for those who are already vulnerable in the offline world" (p.33). Byron (2008) has raised an important issue related to risk associated with the development of identity, but according to Livingstone et. al (2010), young people take risks in order to explore and learn and develop into adults. Therefore, identity development whether online or offline is associated with a certain amount of risk.

The above discussion presents the impact of digital media particularly social media in the development of identity. However, the question that arises at this point is there anything like real identity or ideal identity. An identity development is also influenced by membership in social groups. Martin and Nakayama (1997) observed:*"Identity is created in part by the self and in part by relation to group membership"* (p.64). Therefore social media offers a platform to create an identity which is about the group individual is present on. The relationship between an individual and group differs across social media platforms so is the identity. Young people's need for identity formation has not changed however according to Giddens (2008), the process of forming our self-identity has changed and has become more subjective, and the process also needs to be constantly changed. As Giddens suggests,

> *"Modern individuals have to be constantly self-reflexive, making decisions about what they should do and who they should be. The self becomes a kind of project that individuals have to work on: they have to create biographical narratives that will explain themselves to themselves, and hence sustain a coherent and consistent identity."* (Giddens, 2008)

Thus, according to Giddens identity is not fixed but is a concept that is fluid and malleable. Bauman and Raud (2015) claim that there is nothing like ideal identity and there is no longer fixed identity. This claim of identity being flexible is also supported by Buckingham (2008) when he mentions that "in digitised social context identity formation is highly fluid but also highly reflexive". Access to digital media has led to the creation of multiple identities. As Warburton (1998) mentions "we define who we are by participation and interaction" (p.3). These multiple identities help in the learning process (Shih, & Sansez, 2009). Social networking platforms like Facebook are capable of boosting young people's social capital where young people's identities are shaped by the information users share with them and also by the opinion of other about the shared information of the user. Davis (2012), argues that social networking sites provide users with the platform for self-expression for users however these outlets of expression also creates an issue where the user has to balance multiple selves and their respective audiences. Davis stated that social networking allows for multiple personas and outlets for personal issues, creates a testing ground that is, "Practice for real life. The test being one person online, see how people react, then trying it in real life." (Davis 2012, p.644). Further, mentioned by Buckingham (2008) that identity formation extends to offline social relationships online, but this complicates relationships and subsequent social development for some adolescents.

Therefore, it cannot be assumed that identity status of young people is uniform across all the stages of development. Different domains like work, politics, religion, etc. Can have different identity status. It can be compared to with an adult identity where an individual has a different identity at work place, in clubs, with friends, etc. From this perspective, young people can have more than one identity status at a time. Then the theory proposed by Marcia should have multi-directional movement between and among the various identity statuses.

Conclusion

The technology offers extraordinary opportunities for all including young people. The young generation is born in the period where the use of technology is the norm. Technology has removed the constraints associated with traditional forms of socialisation. The emergence of digital social networking sites has offered young people platform to socialise and develop their identity. Different platforms offer different ways in which young people can express themselves or create their own identity. It was also observed that online environment and social media poses a certain risk in identity development like it may lead to the construction of false identity which may confuse young people. With a flow of information, the decision about what type of person one wants to be can be challenging for some young people. Identity can either be enforced or even constructed by a having false impression about oneself. However digital technology opens new avenues for young people to have social interaction. Any form of social interaction has its innate risks.

Many researchers are of the opinion that identity is not a fixed concept. As many of them have claimed identity as fluid and support existence of multiple identities. Young people today are growing in two different worlds. One word is offline where face to face communication and practical tasks takes place, and then there is an online world that is electronically connected and which provides a huge range of positive possibilities. This world offers young people multiple places where they can meet and hang out. Multiple ways of communication and networking are offered to young people. Multiple ways of gathering information and entertainment and multiple platforms to express themselves and their identity are present. Social networking sites allow selective posting which helps young people to present oneself in various forms and feedback given by the audience assist used in the creation of a new identity and thereby they can understand what want to become. Thus young people can control their identity formation and understanding of self. By feedback given online, young people can choose how to present them offline.

Digital technology in the form of social media has offered young generation the freedom to define oneself. It has provided them with the tool that will assist them to decide how they want to portray and promote themselves. Therefore, it can be concluded that digital technology in the form of social media assists in the identity development of young people.

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