



Self-presentation and gender on MySpace

Adriana M. Manago*, Michael B. Graham, Patricia M. Greenfield*, Goldie Salimkhan

Department of Psychology and Children's Digital Media Center University of California, Los Angeles 90095-1563, United States

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ABSTRACT

Within the cultural context of MySpace, this study explores the ways emerging adults experience social networking. Through focus group methodology, the role of virtual peer interaction in the development of personal, social, and gender identities was investigated. Findings suggest that college students utilize MySpace for identity exploration, engaging in social comparison and expressing idealized aspects of the selves they wish to become. The public nature of self and relationship displays introduce feedback mechanisms by which emerging adults can legitimize images as associated with the self. Also, male–female differences in self-presentation parallel, and possibly intensify, gender norms offline. Our study suggests that social networking sites provide valuable opportunities for emerging adults to realize possible selves; however, increased pressure for female sexual objectification and intensified social comparison may also negatively impact identity development. A balanced view, presenting both opportunities and drawbacks, should be encouraged in policies regarding youth participation in social networking sites.

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1. Introduction

In 2008, 530 million people across the world are visiting social networking sites. MySpace and Facebook are the most popular, each with more than 100 million visitors per month (Comscore, 2008). Released in 2003, MySpace was originally a site in which aspiring bands advertised themselves. But MySpace immediately experienced phenomenal growth, initially among adolescents and emerging adults. By 2006, MySpace had expanded its appeal to a greater age range. Nonetheless, more than ten million emerging adults between 18 and 24 were visiting MySpace every month (Comscore, 2006). The present study investigated how emerging adults experience the issue of self-presentation as they and others interact with peers on MySpace. The goal of this investigation was to conceptualize the impact of these online self-presentations on identity development. For analytic purposes, we differentiate three components of identity: personal, social, and gender.

1.1. The role of cultural context and cultural tools in identity development

Identity forms over time from the bidirectional interaction between the individual and his or her context (Lerner, 2002). Adams and Marshall (1996) theorize that cultural values manifest in social institutions, which impact the dialogue and interactions between individuals. These interpersonal processes then influence identity. Socio-cultural researchers have also proposed that adaptation to cultural context through social processes is central to identity formation (e.g. Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Cote & Levine, 2002). We suggest that MySpace introduces a cultural context in which norms of social interaction and self-presentation develop and create new possibilities for experimentation and reflection on both actual and possible selves.

In addition, the socio-historical approach to development has asserted that a culture's tools, the byproducts of technologies, are internalized in the development of intellectual skills (Bruner, 1966; Cole & Griffin, 1980; Maynard, Subrahmanyam, & Greenfield,

* Corresponding authors. Manago is to be contacted at Tel.: +1 408 416 6345. Greenfield, Tel.: +1 310 825 7526.
E-mail addresses: aamanago@ucla.edu (A.M. Manago), greenfield@psych.ucla.edu (P.M. Greenfield).

2005; Vygotsky, 1978). This notion is based on a fundamental idea in Vygotskian psychology, well expressed by the Russian psychologist, Tikhomirov (1974, p. 374): “Tools are not just added to human activity; they transform it”. Up to now, this powerful idea has been applied only to cognitive development, never to social development. In the present article, we take a socio-historical approach to the development of self-presentation as a marker of identity and examine how the tool of an online social networking site, MySpace, is transforming the human activity of constructing personal, social, and gender identities.

1.2. Personal identity

Emerging adulthood has been described as a critical period for identity development (Arnett, 2000). Building on Erikson (1968), researchers have conceptualized identity as an ongoing process of exploration and commitment to possible selves (Waterman, 1999). Emerging adulthood, roughly from eighteen throughout the twenties, represents a period of extended exploration afforded by the circumstances of contemporary society (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adults are in a liminal stage characterized by instability and self-focus, exploring a variety of possibilities in work, relationships, and beliefs before committing to adult roles (Arnett, 2004).

One important way that emerging adults engage in exploration is through peer interactions. Erikson (1959) viewed adolescents' interactions with peer groups as the primary mechanism by which they create a healthy sense of self. Research has confirmed that friendships are related to adolescents' abilities to create a coherent identity (Reis & Youniss, 2004). But in our culture it is not until emerging adulthood that a coherent identity is typically established (Waterman, 1999) and a variety of research demonstrates the important role peers play in emerging adults' transitions into adulthood (Nurmi, 2004).

Social scientists such as Cooley (1902) have long believed that a sense of self derives from individuals' reflections from others in social interactions. Symbolic interactionists such as Goffman (1959) have theorized that the way individuals present themselves to others through impression management is involved in the development of self. Similar to the notion of the “looking-glass-self” (Cooley, 1902), Goffman's theory posits that individuals develop a sense of self from creating an impression they wish to give to others.

By the time individuals reach emerging adulthood, they possess abstract notions of the self, internalizing the social approval they have received for their self-presentations (Harter, 2003). As emerging adults present themselves within social interactions, they share goals and reflect common values, helping one another consolidate identities as they move into adulthood (Nurmi, 2004). Also, research increasingly illuminates the role that self-presentation through narrative plays in identity development (McAdams, 1999). The autobiographical stories we tell ourselves and others are used to develop and maintain the self (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

Researchers have suggested that the online environment differs from other media environments in that participants co-construct their own environment. Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield (2006) suggest that the flexibility of communication capacities, in formats such as chat, frees individuals from existing at the effect of an externally created media environment. Rather, they are creating and co-creating their virtual environments through social interaction. Identity becomes socially constructed in environments such as a chat room (Greenfield, Gross, Subrahmanyam, Suzuki, & Tynes, 2006), actualizing adolescent identity issues in new forms.

Compared with chat, the flexibility of the MySpace “profile” provides many additional ways to present oneself to others. It is a personalized, prefabricated webpage that displays personal information and links users to networks of friends. Users utilize profiles to describe themselves and whom they want to meet; to list their favorite music, movies, and books; and to post videos, pictures, music, art, and blogs. All aspects of the MySpace profile page are customizable from the background to photos. Profiles are often a cacophony of media. One user described the profile as “another way to express ourselves; how we feel, and how we view life” (Flores, 2006).

The nearly infinite number of ways to display oneself to others through the profile may give users expanded opportunities to realize aspects of selves limited in their offline lives. Indeed, research has demonstrated that adolescents often experiment with their online identities, with some pretending to be older or someone else entirely (Greenfield et al., 2006). The potential for anonymity and expression of multiple selves online has been cited by postmodernists as evidence of increased fragmentation of the self (e.g., Turkle, 1995). Turkle claims that with human-computer interactions, individuals accept reality as it appears, with disparate role-playing identities all having legitimacy in their own right, no longer integrated within the individual.

However, others, such as Wynn and Katz (1997) challenge this point of view, arguing that multiple aspects of the self are not unique to the Internet but are also experienced in different contexts in the offline world. Further, they point to evidence showing interactions online are socially grounded and connected to lives in the offline world, rather than anonymous. Others concur, finding that online interactions facilitate intimacy and self-disclosure, actually allowing individuals to express what they feel are their true selves, rather than false selves (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Researchers are only just beginning to question the ways in which emerging adults are navigating the social norms and virtual affordances of online networking sites. Youth are at the forefront of technologies that are transforming social interactions in ways we have yet to fully understand (boyd, 2007). In the present study, we were interested in how virtual rather than physical and real-world presentations of self might express personal identity.

1.3. Social identity

Individuals' memberships in social groups help to define who one is, and people are motivated to have positive feelings toward their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A large body of work in social psychology has elaborated upon Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity

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