Chapter 1

Identity Development in the Digital Age: An Eriksonian Perspective

Katie Davis
University of Washington, USA

Emily Weinstein
Harvard University, USA

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, DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1856-3.ch001
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.
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