Chapter 13

The Onlife in Emerging Adulthood: Experimentation, Exploration, and Change in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

Internet revolutionized our lifestyle. New generation devices like smartphones and tablets allow us to be always connected: the web represents a significant part of our days. These epochal changes bring with them questions about the potentialities and the risks of web. This chapter introduces a research whose purpose is to investigate the Onlife during emerging adulthood divided into two groups—youngerEA (18-24) and olderEA (25-29)—considering both the problematic and the functional side of the use of the internet. Self-esteem, self-control, online and offline social support were considered as factors that influenced the internet use habits. Typology of social networks, time spent online, device used, and number of online contacts are considered. Results show significant differences between youngerEA and olderEA in the use of the web both in problematic and functional way.

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet is an important part of our daily lives, and represents a basic tool for finding information, social interactions, and the consequent construction of knowledge (Frozzi & Mazzoni, 2011; Mazzoni & Zanazzi, 2014). The evolution of the Internet has been accompanied by, and it could be argued facilitated by, changes in the types of devices used to access the online world: tablets, laptops, and smartphones. These have transformed the ways in which people use the internet, where they do so from, and the people with whom they interact. Millions of people have chosen to engage with each other using virtual platforms, such as blogs, social networks, chat, and e-mail, sometimes in preference to interacting face to face, which generally requires more time and the geographical negotiation of the people involved (Lee & Cheung, 2014).

The integration between being online and offline is an important part of the psychology of human beings in current Western society (Turkle, 2012). In some cases, it is possible to find a balance between offline and online engagement that is functional for working, studying, and carry out daily activities. In other cases, though, people run the risk of pursuing behaviors that lead to problematic outcomes (Davis, 2001). These discussions about the outcomes of the online life are particularly relevant to emerging adults, as they navigate changing social networks, and explore and develop their own identity. The internet provides new and unique opportunities for identity creation and peer interactions that require further exploration. Particularly, in this chapter starting from the concepts described in the Onlife Manifesto (2015) we explored the factors involved in the use of the internet and web technologies during the emerging adulthood. To this end, we outline the current research into the impact of social media use on emerging adults, explore the ideas around functional and problematic Internet use, and discuss our own findings from a large online survey of internet use among emerging adults.

INTERNET USE DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD: PROCESSES OF EXPERIMENTATION, EXPLORATION, AND CHANGE

Arnett (2000) defined emerging adulthood as being between 18-29 years with a particular focus on 18-25. He argues that this is a distinct life stage where (commonly) individuals are afforded greater freedom than adolescents (for example, with fewer parental constraints) without the same level of responsibilities as adulthood (for example, parenthood or a mortgage). Arnett describes emerging adulthood as being characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities.

Identity exploration extends the process started in adolescence where young people experiment with love, work, and their worldviews. During emerging adulthood, individuals work towards achieving greater confidence in, and stability of, their romantic relationships (e.g. cohabitation, marriage), employment and study (focus on careers in contrast to casual or part time work for supplementary income), and worldviews (examining or re-examining beliefs learnt from families or exposed to through university/travel to form independent thoughts).

Emerging adulthood is also considered the age of instability by Arnett (2000). He writes that as part of their process of exploration, emerging adults are often changing residences, workplaces or roles and potentially romantic relationships. This leads to great instability in their daily lives. As a result of this process of exploration and instability, emerging adulthood is also described as the age of feeling in-
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