Chapter 4
Agency and Identity in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social and group interactions in online and virtual communities develop and evolve from expressions of human agency. The exploration of the emergence of agency in social situations is of critical importance to understanding the psychology of agency and group interactions in social media. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the prevalence of agency in existing research in educational psychology relative to its potential impact on the burgeoning field of identity in social media. Published articles from leading theorists in identity theory, agency, life course studies, and educational psychology provide a framework in which agentic behavior and digital identity formation in social media can be studied. Through an examination of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory of Agency (Bandura, 1989, 2000, 2006), this chapter identifies and discusses agentic behavior evident in social media and its potential impacts for research and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Social media enables identity expression, exploration, and experimentation; something innate to the human experience. Over the past decade, the proliferation and use of social networking in mainstream society has grown exponentially (Lenhart et al., 2010). In North America alone, over 78% of the population is connected to the Internet with more than 50% using the social network site Facebook™ (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2011). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, over 82% of the population is connected to the Internet with 48% using Facebook™ (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2011). Research into the application of social networks within and across academic disciplines mirrors this mainstream growth. For example, a search of the Web of

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Science® database (Thompson Reuters, 2012) using the keyword “social network” reveals that the number of articles on the topic has increased over 700% in the last decade (Figure 1).

Individuals are continuously embedded within and among networks of social relations and interactions. Social scientists often study the impact and effect of the types of ties between people within a social network; ties usually described relevant to the similarities, social relations, interactions, and beliefs people share within that network (Borgatti et al., 2009). Further, the extant social science literature places emphasis on the individual’s environment for explanations of behaviour, whether through influence processes (e.g., individuals adopting their friends’ occupational choices) or leveraging processes (e.g., an individual can get certain thing done because of the connections she has to powerful others)” (Borgatti, et al., 2009, p. 894). The influence an individual has on another person in the network and how they leverage their connections to powerful others within the network is an expression of agency. With the proliferation of social networks enabled by the Internet, understanding the influence of powerful others in the expression of human agency is of critical importance. A perfect example of this mediated agency expression is in the role that social media played in the “Arab Spring” protests of 2011. Although social media had little to do with the underlying socio-political and socioeconomic factors behind the protest movement, the mobilizing effects of social media led to the rapid disintegration of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt (Stepanova, 2011). Examining the role and effect social media had in these movements is ongoing (see Lotan et al., 2011).

Within the social science literature, various applications of social networks are usually described in terms of the structure or mechanics of the technological application as opposed to what the networks enable. For example, in their forward of a special section of the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication on social network sites (SNS), danah boyd and Nicole Ellison offer a specific definition of social networks. They state

Figure 1. Number of articles published and indexed using the keyword “Social Network” in the Web of Science database from 2001-2011 (© 2012, Jillianne Code, Used with permission)