

Identifying Generational Differences in the Formation of  
Identity in Online Communities and Networks

Hannah Bluett

Curtin University

# IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

## Abstract

This paper is to examine the generational differences in the formation of identity in online communities and networks. A focus on Erik Erikson's theory of identity formation and Erving Goffman's theory on the presentation of self is used to understand the emerging influences on identity formation. The generational differences are explored through looking at ideas of forming identities before we are born following through to digital footprints. The theme that online networks and communities can have both a positive and negative effect on identity is explored. The paper uses implications of new technology as a way to highlight the argument that identity formation has become more complex than it previously has been. In the article adolescents are referred to this can be assumed for the purpose of this paper children aged 10-19. Older generations for the purpose of this paper is referring to those who did not grow up in a fully digital world (30+).

*Keywords:* generation differences, online identity, identity formation, presentation of self, social networks, online communities

# IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

## Identifying Generational Differences in the Formation of

### Identity in Online Communities and Networks

The appearance of generational differences in the formation of identity online is becoming apparent because online spaces are more accessible from a young age. The rapid shift in modern technology and online spaces can be held accountable for this. Online communities and networks as a whole can be a positive experience opening minds and educating opinions. There is also a dark side to networks and communities where people can be bullied anonymously and unrealistic body images portrayed can have detrimental effects on young children/teenagers as they go through the important stages of identity formation. Where immediate surrounding were once the only aspect shaping our identities this is no longer the case in an online world. In relation to this, this paper will explore how forming our identities before we are even born and the exposure to online spaces from a younger age impacts on identity formation compared to older generations. Anonymity online and the rapid shift in new technologies will be used to outline the difference in generational experiences of forming identity. Our digital footprints follow us well past the point we leave our online identities, knowledge of digital footprints have strong impacts on ones presentation of self.

### **Defining Networks and Communities**

A community in the general sense is a group of individuals who have a common center to participate in discussion and activities (Coyle, 1941). Communities can be large or small and take many forms such as forums, pages, groups, blogs and chatrooms on or offline. Similarly, to communities, a network (most commonly associated with social networks) can be defined as the linking of groups and individuals online (“What is a Network,” 2016). Networks and communities work together to create spaces for like-minded individuals.

## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

Within these spaces expression of individual identity is encouraged and almost always positively welcomed, however, some online spaces can lead to identity confusion.

### **Discussion**

With the advancement of new online platforms for networks and communities the idea of online identities and presentation of self has become more complex. Our youth is an important time to discover ourselves as we begin to decide what we identify with. Our identity refers to ones core values, beliefs and background with many aspects of life having both positive and negative effects on this (Kasinath, 2013). During adolescence, and in the current climate of online culture, it can be difficult to distinguish right from wrong and how you define yourself. With so many outside influence, adolescents can easily be swayed in their opinions, causing them to conform to social pressures from a young age. This continuous pressure during the adolescent stage can lead to identity confusion (Kasinath, 2013). Kasinath (2013) states that when we are in infancy we form a sense of self but as we grow into adolescence we seek to answer the question of who we are. A psychological theory formed by Erik Erikson about the formation of identity follows eight stages of crisis to be resolved by the individual (Kasinath, 2013). It can be argued that older generations were able to overcome these stages more successfully as they were not strongly influenced by negative outside factors and the influence of social media. This is not to say that today's adolescent generation is worse off than older generations, just that there are visible differences between how their identities are formed. People often use social media to document the highlights of their life, leaving a digital footprint in the process. Leaver and Highfield (2018) explore the way in which people share information about others who cannot speak for themselves and how this information creates a digital footprint. With the rise of technology platforms such as Instagram have rapidly gained popularity and visible networks and communities are visible

## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

on Instagram through followers, following and hashtags. It has become a rite of passage for many expecting mothers to post a photo of their ultrasound images to social media using distinctive hashtags where the image can appear in a collective space of similar images (Leaver & Highfield, 2018). Little do many parents know the information they are sharing about their child can hold some very specific and personal identifying factors and this is likely to follow them into the future staying with their online identity forever. Information such as this helps social networking sites who data mine to make predictions and assumptions about their future audiences before the user has even known themselves (Leaver & Highfield, 2018). This initiation of an identity before children are even born is something emerging in social culture now, with the first generation to grow up fully digital now entering adolescence the depiction can be made between generation identity gaps.

In the years 1994-1995 online networks and web-based communities, in the form of notice boards and forums, began to appear but were still foreign to most (Lake, 2009). During the early years on the web, when online networks and online communities began to form, individual presentation of the self online consisted of multiple avatars and identifying handles not directly linked to their offline presentation of self (Leaver & Highfield, 2018). However, this is very different to what we see today, Leaver and Highfield (2018) stating the shift towards presentation of an 'authentic self' as the realname web. This shift between generations can be explained by the ages technology is introduced to us when the older generations began using social networks and online communities they had already formed an identity offline and to have an online identity felt like it needed to be privatised and different to their offline presentation of self. Adolescents now have formed their online and offline identities simultaneously which has resulted in a more authentic and real presentation of self online. If we look more deeply into the theory of presentation of self by Erving Goffman, the idea is explored that we present different versions of ourselves in different situations

## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

(Kuznekoff, 2012). The appeal of multiple presentations of self is that you can use different presentations to seek benefits (Urlick, 2014). The idea that our identity is a performance and our online identities are an extension of ourselves reflects in the way that social media and being a part of an online community has taken over the way we think. Often adolescence will think about their decisions not based on who they will see in person but who will see their online posts from the event. Older generations built relationships based on face-to-face communication where technology has pushed for a shift toward online communication. This means our online presentation of self feels more important than ever and can have some serious implications. As with any performance such as an actor or actress the audience has free will to interpret the meaning (Kuznekoff, 2012). Thus meaning that rather than just freely being yourself the thought is often playing on your mind of what others think of you, this constant pressure adolescents are facing can lead to anxiety, depression and body image issues. Cyberbullying is also a major impact that has been on the rise in more recent years as social media and online communities become a prevalent part of teenager's lives. In a study by Van Der Nagel and Frith (2015) it was stated that anonymity is useful in allowing exploration of identity without fear of judgment, however, it does open the doors for cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the act of sending online messages, comments, photos or posts in order to offend or hurt someone's feelings (Kuznekoff, 2012). With constant access to the online space when bullying in the playground was once escapable it is now much harder to do so when it follows you home. This can largely impact on the way people form their identity as they see this as part of themselves when they can be much more than what the bully is reducing them to. However, online communities can provide a safe haven for like-minded individuals to escape from reality and thus help them further develop their identities in this sense. Anonymity has often been seen in a negative light due to bullying but it has been found to be an important feature in navigating identity exploration in an online world

## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

(Van Der Nagel & Frith, 2015). This suggests that one generational difference in forming identity is that it has become a more complex process of exploration and navigating the online space to form a strong identity compared to what may seem a straight forward path for generations who did not grow up online.

As discussed our online presentation of self is often an extension of our offline identity and in the era of realname web the link between online and offline is synonymous. This means anything online linked to your name creates a digital trace which stays with you forever, even after you pass (Leaver & Highfield, 2018). What makes up your digital footprint can be seen to make up part of your identity and lead people to make assumptions about you based on what a simple search of your name presents. It can be assumed a generation who has grown up digital will have a larger digital footprint than their elders and there are implications that this can have on present life and legacy. When anyone can link your name to an online identity through a simple google search, it is safe to assume potential employees have easy access to much of your online presentation of self. Depending on the circumstances this can be either a negative or a positive implication of a digital footprint. The pressure younger generations have to keep their digital footprint clean can often be a burden on identity formation as it hinders them expressing their true selves. In Bennett's study (as cited in Kuznekoff, 2012) it was found that 90% of employers use social networking sites to determine potential employees and 70% had rejected a potential employee due to their social media. This leads to the idea of privacy being an issue for young children who don't understand the concept of how data spreads and remains online forever (Kuznekoff, 2012). Young children enter private details into online networks and communities having no idea where this information might end up in the future, making them vulnerable to online attack (Gray & Christiansen, 2010). Similarly, to how data mining can use ultrasound images to predict future users, adolescents information can be data mined from networking sites and

## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

online communities allowing targeted advertising and suggested friends to be directed straight towards you (Kuznekoff, 2012). These suggested friends may be complete strangers and for a young child on social media this presents many threats. As we age identity can be in constant movement and having documentation of each small and embarrassing part of your identity is not often thought of until a reminder of your twelve-year-old self is brought back onto your Facebook timeline. As we change our identity it is not unusual to no longer identify with specific things and when these things are attached to your name online it can be hard to escape these labels. Older generations are able to grow and move forward without this reminder of their past, while it is not to say this is positive or negative we can conclude that the experience of a digital footprint is vastly different between generations. Once we pass and our online presentation of self lives on creating a timeline from beginning to end of our online lives we no longer have control or say over what stays and goes, or maybe it is hard to say that we ever did have control.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has explored the rapid shift in modern technologies that has allowed children to explore online communities and networks earlier than ever before. This has impacted on the way adolescents form their identities in an online world compared to older generations who were not exposed to online networks and communities until later in life. The road to forming identity has become seemingly longer and more complex with the addition of online networks and communities. This is not to say it is harder for younger generations to form their identities but the experiences between generations is vastly different. Outside influences, such as bullying, could once be escaped but the shift toward and online presence has made these influences more prevalent. However, there are negative influences on identity within networks and communities, there can also be strong



## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

positive influences in communities that help people find inspiration that guides identity development and open minds to new ideas. The role that this has on forming identity online can be seen in a physical presentation of self on and offline. Digital footprints are an important aspect in the appearance of generational differences. Younger generations are faced with their young identity following them through their lives even if they no longer identify with this presentation of self. This digital footprint has been proven to impact on individuals search for a job where potential employees make judgments based off this. Younger generations exploration of identity online can take many forms, most of which, are logged and will always be an accessible part of them. Our identities are no longer shaped by our immediate surroundings but by a variety of influences within these online networks and communities.

## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

### References

- Coyle, D. C. (1941). What Is a Community? *The American Journal of Nursing*, 41(11), 1290-1290.
- Gray, D. M., & Christiansen, L. (2010). A call to action: The privacy dangers adolescents face through use of facebook.com. *Journal of Information Privacy & Security*, 6(2), 17-32. doi: 10.1080/15536548.2010.10855886
- Kasinath, H. M. (2013). Adolescence: Search for an identity. *I-Manager's Journal on Educational Psychology*, 7(1), 1-6. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/1476284556?accountid=10382>
- Kuznekoff, J. H. (2012). *The online presentation of self: Re-examining goffman's presentation of self across contemporary CMC contexts*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/1034564908?accountid=10382>
- Lake, M. (2009, July 5). Timeline: the evolution of online communities. *Computer World*. Retrieved from <https://www.computerworld.com/>

## IDENTIFYING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES OF IDENTITY

Leaver, T., & Highfield, T. (2018). Visualising the ends of identity: pre- birth and post- death on Instagram. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(1), 30-45. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2016.1259343

What is a Network? (2016, Jun 29). *Progressive Digital Media Technology News*  
Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/1800380713?accountid=10382>

Urlick, M. J. (2014). The Presentation of Self: Dramaturgical Theory and Generations in Organizations. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 12(4), 398-412. doi: 10.1080/15350770.2014.961829

Van Der Nagel, E., & Frith, J. (2015). Anonymity, pseudonymity, and the agency of online identity: Examining the social practices of r/Gonewild. *First Monday*, 20(3),  
Retrieved from <http://www.ojphi.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5615/4346>