

# Assignment #2

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**Title: You no longer need to go to Europe to “find yourself”: Youth and forming identity using social media communities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The rise and popularity of social media platforms has become a significant part of young adults' social and emotional development. These social media networks (SNS) provide adolescents with new opportunities to perform, practice, and explore diverse individual identity expressions online. All while forming influential and supportive connections within these virtual communities. This paper defines a social media site as a website that allows social interaction and investigates adolescent SNS use from a sociological viewpoint. It explores sources focusing on the positive and negative aspects of youth's identity performance online. Case studies of Emma Chamberlain, TikTok and LGBTQ youth are discussed. The sources were taken from journal articles, a thesis, readings, SNS, and news articles. The findings of the paper show that identity is always evolving, online communities have a strong influence on youth, SNS enables connections, and provides them with a supportive stage on which to practice identity. Young adults' identity emerges through a process of performing diverse self-expressions within online communities, demonstrating that there is no authentic identity.

**Key words:** Identity, adolescent, social media, online communities

## INTRODUCTION

Social Network Sites (SNS) have had a substantial rise in recent years with youth as they have a significant cultural resonance within younger communities. This is because participation in online culture has become compulsory among young people, reshaping their lives and having an incredible influence on them. Studies show that “22% of teenagers log on to their favorite social media site more than 10 times a day, and more than half of adolescents log on to a social media site more than once a day” (Shabir, Hameed, Safdar, & Gilani, 2014). This leads to adolescents developing their identity through participation and performance in online communities. These communities enable youth to explore new ideas with less adult influence and regulations. Dr Amy Guy, in *The Presentation of Self on a Decentralised Web* (2017) argues that there is no such thing as authentic identity, as young adults’ identity are constructed from both physical and virtual experiences. Online communities are changing young adults’ lives, exposing them to diverse ideas and lifestyles, and helping them become people they would not be without technology. Although it is claimed that authenticity is necessary online, social media platforms provide adolescents with opportunities to perform diverse identities and form strong and supportive communities.

Social media platforms provide adolescents with exclusive opportunities to perform diverse identities. Performance, when used regarding actions online, means the user depicts their self doing certain things to appear a certain way. Youth control what they present about themselves online, most likely to perform in ways they believe are popular (Boyd, 2008). Through this, they can establish themselves and their identities virtually. Each individual creates an online and offline identity, directly influenced by their

online community. This is because of the new ideas and media presented to them through these communities (Boase, 2008). They try on these different skins to see what they like and don't like, exploring their identity and shaping their attitude. Digital media enables adolescents to access resources and connect with other likeminded people in online communities, as well as practice identity performance.

Adolescent online identity performances are carefully curated and controlled (Boyd, 2008), as it is seen as a reflection on their personality and social standing. Evidence of this is seen in the popularity of having two Instagram profiles: One account for professional, serious posting for the public's consumption and one private account, affectionately nicknamed a "spam" account only for close friends, where the user posts constant photographs ranging from memes to strangely angled selfies. In a study conducted by Joanne Orlando, a professor from Western Sydney University (2018), she interviews 118 Australian adolescents about this practice. She describes the use of the two accounts in the following quote: "Private, less visible accounts allow teens the opportunity to move away from the carefully cultivated, public persona on their... [main] Instagram account – and present a rawer... personality to a smaller group of closer friends." (Orlando, 2018). The private account is viewed as a safe space for individual identity expression, where the youth can practice performance away from a parent's watchful eye and gives them "more control over their digital identity" (Orlando, 2018). This connects to Guy's argument that when we use digital technology, we are pushing ourselves through a filter on the communities we use (Guy, 2017) which relates to how adolescents filter themselves for the different identity expressions on both accounts. One is more of a professional identity presentation, and the other is much more intimate.

These accounts both present an authentic person but performing for a certain community in differing contexts. To promote a certain identity, youth choose different language and image use when communicating on each profile.

Online communities on SNS provide an outlet where adolescents can explore individual identity expressions freely whilst making connections and forming friendships (Boyd, 2006). For youth, SNS are an avenue of spending time with friends without restrictions. In offline public spaces such as shopping centers and schools, their actions are constantly watched and patrolled by authority figures. This is the same with private offline spaces in homes with many regulations being controlled by adults. Both offline spaces have real-life consequences with how young adults choose to act in those spaces, such as being grounded at home or being expelled from school. Certain online spaces are an escape because they aren't patrolled as frequently by adults, letting the youth have a sense of freedom and motivation to explore different communities and develop their identity without parental pressure (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). These sites give the opportunity to have more chance for social interactions, learn more about their peers, and make connections they would not have made otherwise. Youth have limited time in public spaces, but they can be online 24/7. Adolescents can connect with others and practice, rehearse, and perform their unique identity expressions to their chosen virtual community.

The lack of moderation in online communities demonstrates that adolescents are more vulnerable to negative content influencing their identity performances. Within these virtual communities, youth are enabled to explore freely with less adult influence and

moderation. Evidence shows they are even likely to fabricate key information about themselves like their name, age, and location, to protect themselves from predators and/or parents online (Boyd, 2008). Youth see SNS as an easy place to escape from everyday life, rather than having to face offline problems. However, there is a real danger within these sites, as content being under little to no moderation means that dangerous influences arise. A model of this would be challenges within the TikTok community. A “challenge” is defined as an activity to complete within a short video (Alfonso, 2020), with users’ completion videos often going viral. Young adults observe others becoming famous from these challenges and in spite of the risks, endanger themselves in the pursuit of online prominence. Examples of the challenges would be the skull breaker challenge, the Coronavirus challenge, and the salt challenge. Each one of these are popular among youth but incredibly dangerous. The skull breaker challenge involves two people kicking the legs out of a third person, causing them to fall. The Coronavirus challenge involves licking public toilets and door handles. And the salt challenge involves pouring large amounts of salt directly down your throat. These challenges have been reported to cause serious injuries, with the skull breaker challenge leading to hospitalization (Rolfe, 2020), the Coronavirus challenge allegedly causing a young male to be diagnosed with Coronavirus (O’Neill, 2020), and the salt challenge being reported to cause nausea, seizures, and possibly even a coma (Alfonso, 2020). The identity performance of adolescents seeks popularity and social validation by their peers (Stern, 2004), allowing them to be vulnerable to dangerous influences from their community.

Young adults’ performances online are modelled to their preferred audience, with the intention of creating connections (Guy, 2017). Users have more control online with

this presentation of their digital body than they do with their physical body. They use identity markers to communicate themselves both online and offline (Guy, 2017). An example of an online identity marker would be seeing a friend post about an interest that another friend shares: this way they make a connection, whereas they may have never known the other person shared their interest. The only way for those people to have that connection is through digital media. The idea of an “instant bond” over shared experience online is explicit evidence of the strong connections made through communities every day. Online communities provide a way for youth to discover new content, express identity, and find others with similar opinions. This curation and control enables the formation of supportive communities around different aspects of identity.

There is no authentic identity of a young adult, as their identities online and offline are constructed of physical and virtual experiences (Guy, 2017) in addition to being susceptible to identity influence. Youth are arguably the most vulnerable age group to new influences due to their developing identities and bodies (Stern, 2004). Online, identity is more fluid changing depending on the situation and the audience, as evidenced with the popular two Instagram profiles practice. Caroline Calloway, a well-known Internet personality and writer, asks “If you build a life around an identity that springs from your own imagination, is it ever inauthentic?” (Calloway, 2020, as cited in Greenspan et al., 2020, para. 1). Youth adjust their identity to encourage positive feedback from their desired community. Their individual identity performance is strongly influenced by observation of and feedback from their online communities, as well as the offline culture they live in. “Identity is socially constructed” (Guy, 2017), and for young adults, it is a complex mix of physical and virtual experiences within their communities. The experiences they have in these spaces shape them into who they end up becoming.

The performance of diverse identities demonstrates that identity is fluid and complex, especially in online communities.

In modern society today, youth have more options of what they can choose to represent with new ideas presented to them through online communities. Not only do they have more decisions to make regarding performances for virtual audiences and friendships online and offline; they also must decide who they are and what they want when it comes to factors like gender, sexuality and romance. As it is now more socially acceptable to explore your identity, youth can now construct an identity narrative of their own. Online communities adolescents choose to join can have a direct effect on their decisions online and offline. Guy (2017) discusses how communication technologies are extensions of our bodies, which changes the way we construct our identities. Nancy Fraser (1992, as cited in Boyd et al., 2008, p. 137) further corroborates this view, saying that publics “are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities”. These statements agree that a significant part of their social and emotional development happens online. When youth interact with strangers and friends online, they practice their social skills with a wide range of people who have the possibility of influencing their individual identity performance. They learn how to more accurately perform their preferred identity, observing role models and studying the reactions to each performance to understand how to communicate effectively. Adolescents consciously perform and present their developing identity online, while learning more about themselves in the context of community.

Online communities also provide new kinds of role models for young adults to mimic their identity performance. Youth discover these role models online, admiring and respecting their virtual performance, and begin to emulate them physically. An example of this would be the concept of a 'VSCO girl'. When Googling VSCO girl, the search bar suggests 'VSCO girl starter pack' and 'VSCO girl checklist' (<https://www.google.com/>) implicitly demonstrating that it is a popular Google search. A young woman wanting to imitate a 'VSCO girl' would most likely follow Emma Chamberlain's performance on Instagram, TikTok or YouTube. An Internet personality, Emma Chamberlain is eighteen years old and has eight million followers on YouTube as of 2019 (Bromwich, 2019). She first started online by making craft videos on YouTube. When asked why she started with crafts, she said "I don't know what I was thinking, I was honestly just trying to imitate what was popular at the time" (Chamberlain, 2018, as cited in Ward et al., 2018, para. 10). Her words tie back in with the previously mentioned idea of copying a popular performance of identity. The yearning to be famous, appealing, and admired is part of a deeper need to be validated and liked. Young adults particularly thrive on attention and positive interactions, which is what Chamberlain was aiming for through her craft videos and then later, with documenting her daily life. Young women see Chamberlain being adored and want that, so they adjust their identity to emulate her performance with how they dress, what they post online, and how they act. SNS gives youth the opportunity to study other identity performances within a community.

As previously mentioned, a critical matter young adults deal with is their individual identity development. Online communities are incredibly valuable in aiding youth who may struggle to find the right identity for them. A case study of this statement



would be the facilitation of LGBTQ individuals within online communities, as discussed in an University of Toronto research paper by Shelley Craig and Lauren McInroy (2014). Digital media allows LGBTQ youth access to a more thorough exploration of their identity, discovering LGBTQ content, and engaging with others who identify similarly. The surveyed youth agreed that they felt more comfortable with their own identity after viewing content made by LGBTQ individuals about their journeys, which influenced them to be more honest with others about their identity (Craig & McInroy, 2014). The online communities they find empowers them to express their identity publicly and privately or at least gives them a safe space to exist in while performing as heteronormative offline. This online access of LGBTQ information and virtual communities are often more secure, supportive, and more relevant than offline assistance (Craig & McInroy, 2014). These LGBTQ adolescents can freely explore new identities and try them on, knowing that they belong with the support of their online peers. For adolescents, having this connection with likeminded people is extremely valuable. They develop their identity through connecting with others, feeling validated, supported, and understanding more about who they are as a person. This case study emphasizes how online communities can become support groups with an incredibly positive impact on its participants and their individual identity exploration.

## **CONCLUSION**

The individual identity of adolescents changes frequently, to reflect them and their growth throughout this vulnerable time in their life. Online communities grant them the freedom to explore and learn. Young adults perform online, rehearsing and practicing for the offline stage, seeking for positive validation from their peers while controlling the information they disclose. This process of performing diverse identity

expression clearly displays that there is no one authentic identity for a young person, but rather that it is still evolving. Social media platforms provide youth with valuable opportunities to perform different identities and form lasting, supportive connections within their communities.

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