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### Identity Development in the Digital Age: The Case of Social Networking Sites

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#### **[–] Abstract and Keywords**

Youth are growing up amid profound sociocultural change driven by the worldwide spread of the Internet and social media that position the individual at the center of expansive social networks unrestricted by physical propinquity. This chapter reviews literature on the use of social networking sites among adolescents and emerging adults in Western societies and stakes out potential implications for identity development, arguing that social networking sites usher in new practices and meanings for interpersonal relatedness and personal autonomy that adolescents and emerging adults must negotiate during the process of exploration and commitment in identity formation. The concept of customized sociality as well as personal self-expression are key to managing these large social networks. *Customized sociality* and self-expression are cultural practices that manifest an emphasis on autonomy during identity development; however, ironically, evidence suggests that social networking sites may also foster a reliance on others to validate one's identity claims, value, and self-worth.

Keywords: Social networking sites, friendship, autonomy, relatedness, sociocultural change, identity development

The digital age is a time of profound sociocultural change driven by technologies that facilitate the transmission of information faster and more efficiently than ever before in human history. Since Marshall McLuhan's notion of the "global village" (1962), many have speculated that the convenience and efficiency of digital communication technologies would bring individuals around the world closer together. However, as we move further into the twenty-first century, human interdependence and individual independence are both paradoxically amplified in the panorama of social changes. For example, on the macrolevel, the Internet promotes the interdependence and homogeneity of globalization on the one hand and the atomization and heterogeneity of "glocalization" on the other (Meyrowitz, 2005). That is, Internet technologies accelerate the spread of dominant, often Western, paradigms around the world, but local interpretations can also be easily articulated on the web, creating a plurality of differentiated perspectives on a global stage. This paradox of social change penetrates the interpersonal level. The Internet and mobile devices offer "perpetual" human contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), yet ironically, the conveniences of these technologies are also conducive to independent mobility, fleeting social connections, and self-promotion (Turkle, 2011).

Adolescents are coming of age in the throes of these paradoxical sociocultural shifts. The Internet is a portal to a barrage of multimedia instilling young people all over the world with a global youth culture largely dominated by commercialism and values of consumption (Schlegel, 2000); however, the Internet, especially social media, also allows them to assert their own unique voice in the cultural landscape as they co-construct their own media environments (Mazzarella, 2005; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006). Indeed, the decentralization of media production and distribution that characterizes social media represents an important source of increasing personal agency and self-expression around the world (Benkler, 2006). Some even suggest that social media, such as social networking sites, promote a hyper preoccupation with the self by providing tools to broadcast personal information such as thoughts, feelings, preferences, needs, and life events (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012; Malikhao & Servaes, 2011; Turkle, 2011). At the same time, social networking sites promote a heightened focus on peer relationships (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). In short, media in the digital age are now "social media," and as their popularity spreads, they may usher in new practices, values, and meanings for

interpersonal relatedness and personal autonomy that adolescents and emerging adults must negotiate in forming a sense of self.

### **Social Networking Sites in the Landscape of Social Media**

Social media are defined as websites that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content, and thus the term encapsulates a vast and diverse swath of online activities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media include collaborative projects such as Wikipedia, social bookmarking websites such as Delicious, blogs and microblogs such as Twitter and Tumblr, content communities such as YouTube and Flickr, virtual game worlds such as World of Warcraft, virtual social worlds such as Second Life, and, of course, social networking sites such as Facebook. To understand the influence of social media on development, we must consider how young people make use of their various affordances (Ito et al., 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Using Tumblr for entertainment and using Facebook to interact with school friends likely have differing implications for development. For example, Blais and colleagues (2008) found that adolescents using the Internet more often for gaming or general entertainment had lower quality relationships with best friends and romantic partners, whereas using the Internet for instant messaging had a positive association with intimate relationship quality. These online contexts for friendship have a unique and perhaps powerful impact on identity development.

To precisely capture the social affordances of adolescents' and emerging adults' Internet use, I limit this review to social networking sites, which have been the most thoroughly researched of all the social media domains. I adopt boyd and Ellison's (2008) definition of social networking sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). Social networking sites beg for more research in the field of identity development because, unlike other social media, websites such as Facebook are "nonymous" virtual spaces (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008); that is, they are used to socialize with, and maintain a reputation to, friends and acquaintances known in the offline world. In this way, social networking sites infiltrate one of the most important contexts for identity development during adolescence and the transition to adulthood, the peer group. In essence, social networking sites have transformed electronic screens from places where youth consume commercial entertainment media to settings for peer interaction that are mediated by youth's production of their own multimedia content.

A focus on social networking sites is also warranted by their remarkable pervasiveness among young people, not only in Western countries, but also in many other parts of the world. Their popularity tells us something about the mass appeal of communication technologies in human relationships. Of the 95 percent of US adolescents on the Internet, 80 percent of them use a social networking site (Lenhart, 2012); of the 94 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in the United States on the Internet, 87 percent of them use a social networking site (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Similar rates exist in Europe: for example, in the United Kingdom, 91 percent of Internet users aged sixteen to twenty-four use a social networking site (Office of National Statistics, 2011). The growing popularity of social networking sites has also been documented in China (Jackson & Wang, 2013), Japan (Barker & Ota, 2011), Korea (Bae, 2010), Qatar (Leage & Chalmers, 2010), and Jordan (Al Omoush, Yaseen, & Alma'aitah, 2012). The most visited social networking site in the world is Facebook, with 1.19 billion monthly active users worldwide (Facebook, 2013). There are also social networking sites that are dominant in particular countries such as Cyworld in Korea, Mixi in Japan, and Orkut in India and Brazil. However, because the majority of the research on social networking sites has been conducted with youth, often college students, in the West, I provide an overview of Western adolescents' and emerging adults' behaviors on these websites.

### **A Historical and Sociocultural Approach to Identity Development**

The aim of this review is to consider cultural changes in relatedness and autonomy that are crystallized in the use of social networking sites and the potential implications for identity development. I define identity from Erikson's (1968) perspective of the *ego identity*, a unique, coherent, and stable sense of self that is continuous over time. Understanding the nature of relatedness and autonomy afforded by social networking sites is significant for identity development because a balance between social connection and self-determination constitutes the fulcrum on which a coherent identity is consolidated during the transition to adulthood (Kroger, 2004). Indeed, the field of identity development is built on the basic idea that the primary task of adolescence and emerging adulthood is to

individuate and find a sense of personal volition while maintaining a secure sense of attachment to parents and peers (e.g., Allen, Hauser, Bell, O'Connor, 1994; Arnett, 2004; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). The way in which autonomy and relatedness is balanced in the process of establishing an identity in the transition from childhood to adulthood varies across culture and historical time.

A historical and sociocultural perspective provides a reference point for recognizing current practices, meanings, and values for relatedness and autonomy and how they impact identity formation (see Cote & Levine, 2002). In his presentation of historical evidence of changes in conceptions of the self across time, Baumeister (1987) cogently argues how the self has increasingly become a "problem" since the medieval period. That is, as the notion of a self separate from others has increased over the course of history, personal meaning-making and personal fulfillment have become emphasized, which has made defining the self and one's place in society a more onerous developmental task. In essence, navigating a complex process of exploration and then commitment has become central to identity formation. This is in contrast to premodern societies, where an emphasis on the self as related to others channeled adolescent identity formation through a process of apprenticeship, adherence to hierarchy, and fulfillment of social obligations (see also Arnett, this volume). Youth learned traditional knowledge to acquire ascribed social roles within enduring, interdependent networks of kin. This process would be categorized as "foreclosure" and maladaptive in the West (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011); however, it is adaptive to sociodemographic conditions where possibilities for adult roles are limited and where functional interdependence facilitates survival. Moreover, identity exploration is irrelevant in premodern environments, which generally have high levels of social consensus based on tradition (Lerner, 1958; Manago, 2012). Social consensus means collective validation of an ascribed social identity, such that experimentation and reconciliation of diverse possibilities is unnecessary.

In this paper, I consider how social networking sites are extending trends in the modern era toward increasing emphasis on autonomy in identity development. In reviewing the literature with this historical lens of analysis, I hope to avoid what others have pointed to as a tendency to view the social significance of the Internet in either optimistic or pessimistic terms (Hogan & Wellman, 2012; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). The goal here is to explore the complex aspects of sociocultural changes via social media and consider the ways in which adolescents are enacting new forms of relatedness and autonomy to adapt to increasingly digital social worlds. In doing so, I aim to highlight that there are tradeoffs in the sociocultural changes for identity development, some potentially positive and some potentially negative, depending on one's perspective and values.

### **Relatedness, Autonomy, and Networked Individualism on Social Networking Sites**

New forms of relatedness on social networking sites must be understood in terms of the enhanced capacities for individual agency engendered by these technologies. Social networking sites facilitate the creation of egocentric networks—webs of close and distant associations all relative to the individual (Donath, 2008). In other words, they provide the individual with efficient and convenient tools for maintaining contact with potential social resources based on personal needs and interests, rather than based on superordinate needs of a community. As such, social networking sites epitomize the kind of relatedness that sociologist Barry Wellman (2002) calls "networked individualism." He suggests that the Internet reflects and further amplifies social and technological changes that have promoted individual mobility and independence in developed nations across the twentieth century, all of which have shifted the nature of social relations from tightly knit, homogenous face-to-face social groups based on common goals and shared geography to "personal communities that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual.... The person, rather than the household or group, is the primary unit of connectivity" (Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002; p. 160). Networked individualism provides a useful framework for conceptualizing the way in which human needs for relatedness persist in the digital age, but in a way that prioritizes the autonomy of the individual operating as an independent agent among multiple social circles.

Indeed, there is little evidence of a psychological sense of community among young people using MySpace and Facebook (Reich, 2010). Adolescents and college students tend not to express feelings of group membership or common goals with their social network site community; rather, they describe their experiences as nodes of individuals operating within personalized webs of connections. Although youth do sometimes use Facebook to form groups based on common interests (which is associated with civic engagement; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), much of the behavior on social networking sites has been described as *social grooming*, defined as the cultivation

of social ties (Tufekci, 2008b; Donath, 2008). With social grooming on social networking sites, the individual independently traverses through the announcements and photos broadcast by people in their personalized networks. This involves observing others' activities for entertainment or information, posting announcements or offering commentaries in response to others' broadcast activities, and generally maintaining a reputation to friends by way of the self-expressions posted on these network excursions.

Social grooming suggests that social practices in a culture of networked individualism revolve around consuming and producing personal self-expressions, a hallmark of increased individual agency that is engendered by social media. In a clever experiment, Schwammlein and Wodzicki (2012) showed that the design and structure of social networking sites evoke communications referencing the self, in contrast to communications addressing a superordinate group's goals and interests, which are more common in online content communities such as Wikipedia. In fact, the marketing taglines on the two most popular social networking sites in the world, Facebook and Twitter (Alexa, 2012), emphasize that achieving a sense of belonging comes from engaging in the ongoing real-time flow of digital self-expressions: "Connect with friends and the world around you" by reading and posting to the Facebook newsfeed, and "Find out what's happening, right now, with the people and organizations you care about" via 140-character tweets on Twitter. If personhood in premodern societies was about being embedded in tight-knit, interdependent communities of social obligations, personhood in the digital age, at least on the Internet, seems about being embedded in streams of human expression that offer information and entertainment, as well as an audience for one's own personal broadcasts. Under these conditions, heightened levels of exploration with larger networks of peers become possible, as well as an increasing expectation to create, or consolidate, an image of the self that is appropriately packaged for an audience.

Self-expression on social networking sites is distinctive from self-expression on other social media in that it is directed to large numbers of contacts anchored in offline relationships. Study after study finds that adolescents' and college students' primary motivation for using social networking sites is to stay in touch with their offline peers, rather than to meet new people or connect with strangers (Ellison et al., 2007; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). However, friendship networks on social networking sites are larger than youths' offline networks of friends (Acar, 2008), numbering in the hundreds and reaching 1,000 at the extreme ends (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Reich et al., 2012; Steinfield et al., 2008). Adolescents report that they interact "frequently" in face-to-face settings with about 77% of the friends listed on their social network site profile (Reich et al., 2012), and it is estimated that about 21% of undergraduates' Facebook networks are comprised of close friends, whereas 51% are acquaintances (Manago et al., 2012). Because maintaining connections on social networking sites is so convenient, the technology provides an effective way to materialize a "latent" or potential social tie deriving from a fleeting offline encounter into something more permanent (Haythornthwaite, 2005). As such, social networking sites allow users to sustain large numbers of acquaintances and thus gain more diversity and breadth in social relationships that transcend offline-online dichotomies (Donath, 2008; Donath & Boyd, 2004).

In sum, networked individualism is a useful starting point for understanding new forms of relatedness and autonomy on social networking sites, where relatedness assumes and prioritizes the autonomy of the individual. The dominant mode by which individuals connect on Facebook or Twitter is not through privately shared experiences or mutually sustained obligations, but by independently navigating and contributing to streams of publicly broadcast personal self-expressions. In the following sections, I describe new forms of relatedness and autonomy evidenced in studies of adolescents' and emerging adults' use of social networking sites and their impacts on exploration and commitment.

First, I suggest that new forms of relatedness can be understood as *customized sociality*, a term that reflects the way in which social networking sites support the individual's pursuit of social resources that meet her or his needs. Second, I examine the nature of self-expression on social networking sites as a heightened form of personal agency and autonomy in the digital age. Both of these practices reflect increasing opportunities for exploration. I propose that customized sociality and self-expression must be understood in terms of the need to sustain connections with others in a loosely connected world. That is, in contrast to preindustrial and even modern societies, where relationships were rather stable, based on kinship and physical communities, social relations in a postmodern networked individualistic world are considerably more impermanent. Although social networking sites make it easy to digitally preserve a social tie in the list of "friends," the association must still be nurtured to some extent for the relationship to yield social resources. I suggest that youth in the digital age are learning to nurture

and tend their relationships through a one-to-many style of interaction that emphasizes individual expressions. As they broadcast self-expressions on social networking sites, they are experiencing themselves as a public brand or image that is appropriate for, and appealing to, large online networks. In describing each of these trends—customized sociality and public self-expression—I summarize both potential costs and potential benefits for identity formation during adolescence and the transition to adulthood.

### **Relatedness on Social Networking Sites: Customized Sociality**

In the early days of the Internet, much of the research was framed by the “displacement hypothesis,” which posited that adolescents’ online interactions with relative strangers would replace more stable, permanent, and high-quality in-person relationships, leading to isolation and loneliness (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000). Although the developmental consequences of supplanting face-to-face interactions with screen time, especially among children, begs for further investigation (e.g., Pea et al., 2012), studies with adolescents, emerging adults, and adults reveal that using the Internet specifically to augment, rather than replace, offline relationships is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including higher levels of social support and less loneliness (Blais et al., 2008; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Hogan and Wellman (2012) argue that, in fact, this is largely how the Internet is being used in networked individualistic societies—technologically mediated interactions are intertwined with offline connections such that it makes little sense to treat them as discrete processes. Online and offline communication modalities aid, extend, and supplement one another. As these technologies become more widespread and embedded into the social fabric, the poignant questions will revolve around how the Internet penetrates our everyday social lives. I suggest that social networking sites constitute part of the digital age infrastructure that enables adolescents and emerging adults to manage their everyday relationships, and further, to explore larger social networks outside the family and customize their social worlds to suit their needs.

Social networking sites enable the customization of social worlds because they make connecting to friends easy and convenient. During adolescence, peers emerge as a primary source of social support (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1992), yet those relationships are subject to restrictions such as curfews, lack of transportation, and limited access to unsupervised social spaces. Social networking sites (along with cell phones, Instant Messenger, and other social media) provide adolescents with increased control over their social environments and make peers accessible 24/7 at the wave of a computer mouse or press of a touch screen (Clark, 2005; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). As boyd (2008) nicely articulated in her ethnographic account of youth and social networking sites, Friendster, MySpace, and then Facebook have given adolescents a place to interact in unregulated public spaces while living in regulated physical environments. Social networking sites equip adolescents with enhanced mastery over their social lives, allowing them to circumvent physical constraints and restrictions imposed by parents and other authority figures to sustain ongoing contact with peers.

For emerging adults, social networking sites offer sociality customized for instability. Youth in this period of life are often trying out a number of different jobs, relationships, and living arrangements, and embracing opportunities to move to a new city or backpack through Europe before settling down into adult commitments and responsibilities (Arnett, 2004). Facebook is useful for this kind of hypermobile, unsettled existence because it can be used to integrate into new social milieus while maintaining attachment to past communities (Ellison et al., 2007; Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). Correlational studies show that intensity of Facebook use predicts increased involvement in college life and, at the same time, increased connection to hometown friends and resources (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe, 2010; Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Lou, Yan, Nickerson, & McMorris, 2012). Emerging adults in the digital age can have their cake and eat it too; they can pursue new adventures at college, while preserving a safe home base by keeping track of hometown friends on Facebook and posting status updates to them.

Conveniently, college students can find something to post home about by using social networking sites as a lubricant for social engagement in their new social settings. In an ethnographic exploration of the role of Facebook in college life, Barkhuus and Tashiro (2010) found that Facebook facilitates social gatherings with new acquaintances because it provides a noninvasive way to extend invitations. They also describe how Facebook facilitates ad hoc meet-ups. In one example, a student posts a status update, “who wants to go to taco Tuesday?” to summon companions from the network; in another example, a student posts, “I need caffeine” evoking a

response from someone in the network, “let’s go.” Thus, Facebook can be an efficient platform for mobilizing face-to-face interactions when you want it, how you want it.

A central reason why social networking sites are optimized for integration into new social circles is that they provide quick and easy access to social information. “Social supernets” comprised of large numbers of “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) on social networking sites expand users’ informational resources (Donath, 2008). Normative Facebook activities, such as creating a profile and exchanging public commentary, reveal a number of data points about users and their relationships, which means one can find out a lot about people whom one does not know very well (Brandtzæg et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2010; Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2008*b*). Indeed, young people do use Facebook to seek social information from their “social supernets” (Brandtzæg, Luders, & Skjetne, 2010; Courtois, Anissa, & Vanwynsberghe, 2012; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Tufekci, 2008*b*; Valenzuela et al., 2009). One daily diary study showed that college students spend more time observing content on Facebook than posting information themselves (Pempek et al., 2009). Youth today can mobilize elaborate social knowledge more than ever before, which enhances their independence, exploration, and mobility between social groups.

### **Benefits of Customized Sociality for Identity Development**

A benefit of customized sociality is the potential to effectively mobilize social support. Social networking sites function as a foundation for maintaining and seeking relationships, and also as a sounding board for self-reflection. As outlined earlier, social networking sites offer a way to fortify a home base that can embolden exploration of new experiences, where exploration serves as a central process in identity achievement. College students do indeed report that they value Facebook because it provides them with a sense of security, knowing that past associations will not be lost as they pursue new adventures (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). In addition, online social networks are a source of feedback for adolescents’ identity experimentations (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Adolescents can try out versions of themselves and gauge responses from their network. Status updates are also frequently used to convey one’s current emotional state to the network, and the more people college students estimate to be observing their status updates, the more they perceive that Facebook is a useful tool for garnering social support (Manago et al., 2012). College students who are substantially invested in Facebook report that when others respond to their feelings and needs broadcasted via status updates, it signals to them that someone out there cares about them and how they are doing (Vitak & Ellison, 2012).

As cursory as virtual feedback to status updates may be, it can be psychologically significant. Evidence for this comes from a study with a sample of college students who felt socially rejected, anxious, and depressed (Szwedo, Mikami, & Allen, 2012). A year later, they showed a decline in anxious-depressive symptoms that was related to the volume of comments they received on their Facebook profile pages over that period of time. Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006) also showed in a self-report survey study with adolescents that positive feedback in response to status updates predicted higher levels of self-esteem. Another study demonstrated that college students who disclosed more about their emotional needs on Facebook were more likely to receive social support on Facebook, which then predicted higher subjective well-being (Kim & Lee, 2011). However, studies also suggest that emotional disclosures may be conducive to well-being only within more intimate social networks. For example, those with smaller, tight-knit Facebook networks are more likely to emotionally disclose via status updates and report higher levels of emotional social support from Facebook than those with larger networks (Kim & Lee, 2011; Stutzman, Vitak, Ellison, Gray, & Lampe, 2012). Yang and Brown (2012) found an association between the frequency with which college students post status updates and poor psychosocial adjustment, but only among those who reported using Facebook to meet new people and thus had less intimate networks.

Yet these large networks can also be beneficial in that they offer a window into the lives of peers who are outside one’s immediate social circles, thus providing a more expansive consciousness for identity explorations. Adolescents can gather information about various cliques and crowds at school, which then leads to increased understanding of acquaintances’ points of view (Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; Courtois et al., 2012). This may be especially useful for shy or socially anxious youth. As one fifteen-year-old explains, “Facebook makes it easier to talk to people at school that you may not see a lot or know very well” (from Ito et al., 2010; p. 89). However, very little research has empirically examined whether social networking sites in fact foster exposure to alternative perspectives or whether they are used to locate similar others. Compelling evidence for the former comes from a longitudinal study with 2,000 people in Norway, aged fifteen to seventy-five (Brandtzæg, 2012). The

study found that social networking site users, compared to nonusers, reported having more people in their network of friends who were different from them (i.e., endorsed another political view, came from a different cultural background). Evidence for the latter comes from a study that asked college students to think about a person on their Facebook network with whom they frequently interact online but not offline (Craig & Wright, 2012). Perceived similarity to the self predicted more social attraction, more depth of conversation, and more closeness. Taken together, the studies suggest that, although social networking sites are conducive to amassing large networks of diverse others, young people are more likely to be engaged with people who represent the familiar. Customized sociality on social networking sites means a potpourri of diverse others from which to choose and a vehicle to find the people one wants to find.

Youth from sexual, ethnic, or other minority groups may especially benefit from this new tool for gaining social information about others (Antheunis et al., 2010; Ito et al., 2010). Minority youth may feel marginalized in their hometown communities but may be able to find peers more similar to them on social networking sites, peers with similar perspectives who can support a better understanding of themselves. Gray (2009) notes that lesbian-gay-bisexual-transsexual (LGBT) youth in rural America use social networking sites and other social media to find other LGBT individuals, alleviate feelings of isolation, and help legitimize their queer sexual identities. Tynes and colleagues (2010) have found that some ethnic minority adolescents use Facebook to find others who are engaging in sophisticated discussions on race relations, thereby providing opportunities to explore their ethnic identities more elaborately. These examples illustrate how social networking sites empower the individual by opening up access to a broader range of possibilities for customizing a social world accommodated to one's particular circumstances and interests. An important caveat here is that shy and socially awkward youth who prefer online communication to expand their social networks are at a higher risk for Internet addiction (Smahel, Brown, & Blinka, 2012). Social networking sites may be most beneficial to identity development when online resources translate to the offline social world.

Finally, this access to a broad purview of social information can also be conducive to acquiring *bridging social capital* or instrumental social resources in the process of identity development. Bridging capital has been defined as the sense that one is linked to and can effectively derive resources from an all-encompassing, heterogeneous community of humanity (Ellison et al., 2007). Bridging social capital is associated with a specific kind of Facebook use among college students, *social searching*, perusing Facebook profiles and public exchanges to learn more about acquaintances in the network (Brandtzæg et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2010). In effect, having more bridging social capital endows young people with many practically useful contacts that can be exploited to enrich their identity explorations, such as connections to a new job, volunteer opportunities, internships, or involvement in social organizations. Others have found that simply the frequency of Facebook use and the centrality of the site to one's social life predicts college students' beliefs that human beings are good and can be trusted (Valenzuela et al., 2009). These studies suggest that using social networking sites to access social information outside of one's immediate social circles may increase young people's faith that "everyone is connected" and thus feel a sense of belonging to a far-reaching community of diverse others. However, it is important to keep in mind that these studies are correlational. It is therefore possible that those who are already skilled and socially competent in the first place may be drawn to Facebook, although longitudinal studies also support the idea that Facebook use over time promotes bridging capital (Steinfeld et al., 2008).

### **Costs of Customized Sociality for Identity Development**

The costs involved with customized sociality begin with the way digital communication technologies foster perpetual contact with peers, perhaps detracting from quality time with parents and family. One correlational study with a nationally representative sample of US adolescents found that time spent online with peers was associated with less time spent with parents (Lee, 2008). Other studies have found correlations between the time adolescents spend online and lower levels of perceived closeness with parents (Mesch, 2003; Willoughby, 2008). Although peer relationships offer important opportunities for identity work, the importance of parental support and closeness persists during adolescence (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Adolescents face unrelenting peer presentation contexts with digital communication technologies such that they have fewer opportunities to let down their guard and experience unconditional love and support from their families (Clark, 2005). This lack of distance from peers is particularly troubling given the rise of cyberbullying, when negative experiences with peers follow adolescents home from school and are thereby intensified (Tokunaga, 2010).

Another potential drawback of convenient access to peers involves the ease by which friends can be accumulated on social networking sites, which may draw young people's attention to the superficiality of popularity as a goal during identity development. In a survey study with undergraduates, the need for popularity was the most potent predictor of Facebook use, over and above the need for social stimulation, need for belonging, and desire to learn about what friends are doing (Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). Others find that some youth use Facebook to increase their popularity and self-esteem (Zywica & Danowski, 2008), but that, in fact, accumulating friends rather indiscriminately is associated with low self-esteem, especially among those with higher levels of concern about how others view them (Lee, Moore, Park, & Park, 2012). An emphasis on popularity could devalue the importance of close, intimate relationships as contexts for identity development in young people's lives. Instead of seeking belonging within smaller, intimate groups, young people may increasingly seek acceptance within large, shallow networks, which demands promoting a socially desirable self, an issue discussed in the next section on self-expression.

Moreover, collecting large numbers of friends, many of whom one does not interact with regularly in face-to-face contexts, may be detrimental to identity development because of tendencies for social comparison. Qualitative studies with adolescents and college students (Livingstone, 2008; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008), as well as a large-scale international survey of more than 1,000 Facebook users of various ages (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), suggest that a substantial amount of social comparison occurs on social networking sites. This is problematic because users are likely to be exposed to a disproportionate amount of positive information about others on Facebook, given that social networking sites provide tools for selective self-presentation and self-promotion. When observing acquaintances, youth do not have an accurate picture of their lives because they are not interacting with acquaintances regularly offline. One study finds that the more time college students spend on Facebook and the more casual acquaintances on their Facebook friend lists, the more likely they are to believe that other people have better lives than they do (Chou & Edge, 2012). Another experimental study manipulated whether undergraduate participants looked at a physically attractive or unattractive Facebook profile; those who looked at the attractive profiles reported lower body image and less positive emotions (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011). Exposure to attractive peer presentations online could have a more powerful effect than exposure to beautiful celebrities because the former are more relevant standards for self-evaluation.

The cognitive demands of filtering all this readily accessible social information could also derail adolescents' attempts to organize and integrate information about experiences and relationships to consolidate a sense of self. In their sample of emerging adults, Misra and Stokols (2012) concluded that cyber-based information overload, when cognitive demands exceed an individual's ability to process content, was predictive of higher levels of perceived stress, which interferes with concentration and self-reflection. Social networking sites create unrelenting demands to manage social information and needs, perhaps overwhelming younger teens before they have established a coherent and stable sense of self capable of selectively regulating the bombardment of stimuli. The storehouses of information provided by social networking sites may be convenient and efficient for socializing but may also interrupt in-depth contemplations during this sensitive period for identity development.

In sum, the pernicious effects of social networking sites often are difficult to observe because the websites are socially sanctioned and have become widely popular across social strata. Thus, although many studies show that young people often report positive feelings about social networking sites, they may not be fully cognizant of the ways Facebook and other social media could subtly and adversely affect their happiness and well-being.

### **Autonomy on Social Networking Sites: Self-Expression**

To exist on a social networking site is to "write oneself into being" (boyd, 2008) by expressing who one is to one's network of friends. Expressing who one is begins with constructing a profile, selecting a representative photo, articulating defining characteristics, likes and preferences, and adding friends. "Writing oneself into being" continues as the user broadcasts status updates to the network, uploads photos, shares links and news stories, and "likes" or comments on someone's newsfeed post. These communications are asynchronous, meaning that they are nonspontaneous, allowing users to edit and reflect on the kinds of messages they want to project and thereby giving them increased control over their self-expressions (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; 2011). Increased control means more responsibility for crafting a self-image for audience consumption. It also translates into opportunities to promote idealized aspects of the self to one's friends (Manago et al., 2008; Livingstone, 2008;

Salimkhan, Manago, & Greenfield, 2010; Zhao et al., 2008). Idealized selves on social networking sites are not artificial selves, largely because these websites are “nonymous” (Zhao et al., 2008), thus users are motivated to present accurate identity statements to people they know in the offline world. In fact, a number of personality researchers have found high correspondence between offline and online personality traits on Facebook (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012).

Notwithstanding this tendency for accuracy, portraying oneself in a flattering light is an important motivating factor in young people’s social networking site use (Kramer & Winter, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Zhao et al., 2008). Computer-mediated communication allows people to employ strategic self-presentations to optimize their most attractive features because it affords time to craft ideal messages and highlight positive attributes (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Walther, 2007). Emerging adult users of social networking sites utilize various applications such as self-descriptions and selection of flattering photos that are conducive to boasting and putting forth a worthwhile persona (Kramer & Winter, 2008; Salimkhan et al., 2010). Thus, self-expression can be thought of as self-conscious self-presentations, virtual refractions of hoped-for or possible selves that are perceived to be socially desirable in one’s community (Manago et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008).

The use of photos is especially popular among young people in these digital worlds (Livingstone, 2008; Pempek et al., 2009; Siibak, 2010; Tufekci, 2008a; Zhao et al., 2008), and they indicate how important it is for both young men (Hirdman, 2010; Manago, 2013; Siibak, 2010) and young women (Ringrose, 2010; Manago et al., 2008; Magnuson & Dundes, 2008) to reproduce oneself online as physically attractive. Photos are considered a premier strategy for establishing the validity of one’s attractive persona because they “show rather than tell” (Zhao et al., 2008). Yet, photos can also be used to creatively stretch the truth or promote a certain positive aspect of the self by distributing only photos that reflect how one wants to be seen, in just the right light, involved in exciting or other valued activities, and socially situated within certain peer groups to demonstrate that one is popular and well-liked (Manago et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008). In addition, young people can embellish who they are online by incorporating multimedia such as music, videos, or brands from pop culture into their self-presentations and thus define themselves through popularly valued aesthetics (Livingstone, 2008; Pempek et al., 2009; Salimkhan et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2008). The imagery and strategies for self-presentation that appear in advertising and mass media entertainment emerge within youths’ own self-portrayals of beauty and sexual appeal on social networking sites (Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012; Manago, 2013; Ringrose, 2010; Siibak, 2010).

However, juxtaposed to the increased power to control and craft the self, social networking site users are also at the mercy of others to authorize their self-presentations. The lack of physical cues online means that social endorsements from the network are critical to the legitimacy of self-presentations (Donath, 2008; Donath & boyd, 2004; Livingstone, 2008, Manago et al., 2008). In fact, research on impression formation with college students has found reliable support for the “warranting principle,” which suggests that other-generated information is regarded as more truthful on social networking sites because it is perceived to be unsanctioned by a profile owner (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). Experiments find that when drawing conclusions about a profile owner’s likeability and attractiveness, evaluators prioritize peer commentaries over self-statements on the profile (Hong, Tandoc, Kim, Kim, & Wise, 2012; Walther et al., 2009). This phenomenon may be particularly strong with regards to claims to physical attractiveness, which can be deceptive online (Walther, Van der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2009).

Moreover, social networking site users articulate their social connections in order to promote a particular self-image. Having more contacts in one’s Facebook friend list and appearing with friends in photos strengthens evaluators’ perceptions that a target is socially connected, although having an excessive amount of friends weakens judgments about the target’s “real” level of social connectedness (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Zwier, Araujo, Boukes, & Willemsen, 2011). The list of contacts can also serve as indicators of identity markers such as social status, political beliefs, and artistic tastes because evaluators assume Facebook users have things in common with the people on their friend list (Donath & boyd, 2004; Ellison et al., 2010; Tong et al., 2008; Zwier et al., 2011). College students judge how good-looking Facebook targets are by how attractive their friends are (Walther et al., 2008) and how friendly Facebook targets are by how extraverted their friends appear in their photos (Utz, 2010). Indeed, undergraduate MySpace users reported that they enjoyed exchanging messages with friends publicly on the site because it demonstrated their social competency and offered statements about who they are through the people with whom they are affiliated (Manago et al., 2008; Salimkhan et al., 2010).

Along this vein, boyd and Heer (2006) suggest that constructing the self on social networking sites is not a solitary endeavor, but rather is constituted through public conversations. Qualitative analyses of youth interactions on social networking sites highlight the way friends use language to validate, shore up, and also add meanings to an individual's self-expressions. In a study of a group of Dutch emerging adults on MySpace, Van Doorn (2010) describes how men and women exchanged sexually charged flirtations with same and other sex friends and, in doing so, established their queer sexual identities in their networks. Another qualitative study demonstrated how adolescent girls collaborate by sharing sexually explicit messages on each other's walls to construct self-confident, sexually knowledgeable selves (Garcia-Gomez, 2011). Other examples come from research on the behaviors of romantic partners on social networking sites (Manago, 2013; Mod, 2010; Salimkhan et al., 2010; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). These studies illustrate how adolescents and college students engage in public displays of affection online, reciprocating comments on each other's profiles such as "*I love you billy buns*" to socially construct their identities as loving and worthy of devotion and affection. Thus, ironically, although social networking sites afford increased opportunities for agency through self-expression and customized sociality involves heightened autonomy in interpersonal relatedness, communication on social networking sites also involves dependence on others to verify and shore up identity claims in virtual spaces.

### Benefits of Self-Expression for Identity Development

The ability to express oneself to audiences of friends can be beneficial in that larger numbers of people in one's network can validate self-conceptions and help the individual shape and manifest desired selves. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) suggest that social networking sites create enhanced opportunities for adolescents to gauge the desirability of their self-presentations through feedback from friends, adjust accordingly, and thus feel better about themselves. In one study, the frequency of social networking site use among a sample of Dutch adolescents predicted higher levels of feedback from friends, and the more feedback adolescents received, the more likely that feedback was positive, which in turn predicted higher levels of self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Negative feedback decreased adolescents' self-esteem, although negative feedback was rare. On the other hand, feedback on social networking sites could also reinforce deviant behavior as part of youths' self-image. One study showed that college students who posted pictures of alcohol use on their social networking site profile were more likely to have alcohol-related problems a year later (Szwedo et al., 2012).

Yet, even without the feedback, simply seeing oneself projected to an audience may heighten the awareness of one's self-image and, if it is crafted in a flattering way that realizes a desired self, increase self-esteem. Evidence for this comes from a study with three experimental conditions; college students completed a task either next to a mirror, next to a computer screen with their Facebook profile open, or in an empty cubicle (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Those with their Facebook profiles open reported the highest levels of self-esteem after the manipulation, whereas those next to the mirror reported the lowest levels of self-esteem. The authors concluded that awareness of a self that has been enhanced on Facebook might remind young people of their ideal selves, leading to the boost in self-esteem. Supporting this view is another study that asked college students to either edit and write about their Facebook profiles or use and write about Google Maps: those assigned to the Facebook condition subsequently scored higher on self-esteem than those assigned to the Google Maps condition (Gentile et al., 2012). Kim and Lee (2011) found that, among college students, there is a direct association between using Facebook to present oneself favorably (i.e., "I only show the happy side of me") and feeling good about oneself and one's life.

In addition, because social networking sites require users to create a profile and thus commit to a particular construction of the self in a public or semipublic space, these sites could promote identity consolidation. One study provides evidence that young people may integrate qualities they display online into their identity (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). College student participants were randomly assigned to either behave in extraverted or introverted ways by answering questions about their lives either in a private Word document or in a public online blog. Those who answered questions as if they were extraverted in the public blog subsequently rated themselves as more extraverted compared to those who were assigned to behave as if they were introverted, but no difference was found in the private condition. The increasing normativity of self-expression on social networking sites in the digital age could provide enhanced opportunities for self-concept clarity.

Clearly, the experience of the self is heightened on social networking sites; young people are drawn into managing

their reputations to large online networks, and some studies suggest that this translates to higher levels of self-regard and self-worth. So could the proliferation of social media contribute to an exaggerated sense of self-worth and self-importance among the millennial generation? On the one hand, social networking sites provide forums for self-promotion, vanity, and attention-getting, and nonclinical narcissists do collect larger number of friends and are more likely to engage in self-promotional behaviors on these websites (Carpenter, 2012; McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012; Mehdizadeh, 2010). An intergenerational study of MySpace showed that adolescents (thirteen to nineteen years old) are more likely than older users (more than sixty years old) to collect more friends and more likely to use more self-references when describing themselves (Pfeil, Arjan, & Saphiris, 2009). It is unclear whether this finding is due to maturation or due to sociocultural and psychological shifts in self-involvement across generations.

On the other hand, perhaps we are witnessing a new form of sociality and personhood in the digital age that is simply perceived as narcissism among “digital immigrants” but normative among “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). Recent studies find that narcissism is not related to general Facebook use, partly because use of the site is so normative (Bergman, Fearington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Gentile et al., 2012). Broadcasting information about the self on Facebook is also increasingly common. A study using Facebook servers to collect data among a 140,000-person sample of new users across a variety of ages (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009) and another with a sample of college students (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009) showed that people begin to disclose more about themselves the more that their contacts are doing so. In other words, to acculturate to Facebook is to engage in public self-expression at the expense of a certain amount of intimacy and privacy in social interactions. Thus, youth growing up with social media are acculturating to a social world permeated by an Internet media spotlight.

Indeed, a number of researchers have noted intergenerational changes related to social networking sites and the meaning of privacy (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012; Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2008b). It seems that millennial youth are concerned about privacy, but they prioritize other benefits such as publicity, attention, and customized sociality. In fact, one study provided evidence to show that it is not narcissism, but rather openness to sharing information about oneself (i.e., “I like letting people know a lot about me,” “I let a wide circle of friends know a lot about me”) that predicts posting self-focused updates and photos to Facebook (McKinney et al., 2012). This is the sociality of networked individualism, a way of connecting to others that emphasizes the appropriateness and value of self-expression to wide circles of known others. Self-expression may be more valued because it is necessary for forming and sustaining connections in a digital mediated social world of loose relations. That is to say, given the increasing autonomy in the relatedness of customized sociality, people have increased opportunities to choose among a wide selection of potential affiliations. Thus, individuals must prove their desirability, value, and worthiness in the marketplace of potential connections. In this way, young people may be under increased pressure in their identity formation to create selves that are easily attractive to a broad range of others, thus dependent on shallow relations for validation and worth.

### **Costs of Self-Expression for Identity Development**

Some studies illustrate how this pressure to be popular could play out on social networking sites. The finding that college students associate social support on Facebook with higher numbers of people paying attention to their status updates (Manago et al., 2012) suggests that attention to the self is becoming an important social resource in the digital age (see also Donath, 2008). Might young people become dependent on attention from audiences to feel good about themselves? One study examined this possibility. University students who reported public-based contingencies of self-worth (deriving good feelings about themselves from appearance and social approval), especially those who ranked higher in appearance contingency of self-worth, were more likely to engage in photo sharing on Facebook (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011). Those who had higher levels of private-based contingencies (i.e., virtue and family) were less likely to spend as much time on social networking sites. Of course, peer social acceptance has long been an important component of feeling a sense of security in one’s identity, yet what happens when youth seek this belonging in very large, shallow social networks? More work is needed to understand the social developmental impacts of seeking attention to the self from expansive online audiences.

Moreover, because status updates on social networking sites require a “one-to-many style of interaction” (Pempek et al., 2009), multiple identities may be constrained when adolescents communicate to a flat, one-dimensional audience (boyd, 2008; Brandtzæg et al., 2010; Tufekci, 2008a). This issue has been termed “context collapse”

(Marwick & boyd, 2010). Tufekci (2008a) suggests that this phenomenon represents a return to village life, one in which everyone “knows your business.” However, networks on social networking sites are not homogenous; they represent multiple, independent groups of people with differing beliefs and agendas. This presents youth with a challenging landscape to navigate. Maintaining multiple identities is necessary when one holds multiple group memberships in a society of networked individualism, yet the culture of social networking sites seems to encourage young people to create an identity that is appropriately packaged for and desirable to a homogenous singular audience.

Take, for example, a qualitative study that illustrated how first-year college students struggled to present themselves on Facebook in ways that would be appropriate for both hometown and college communities (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). The task they faced was to maintain a connection with past selves while cultivating an updated sense of self in their new social milieus, all in one social context. These youth desired to express their uniqueness and individuality, but had to yield to a certain amount of conformity in their self-presentations so as not to offend differing social groups. Marwick and boyd (2010) found similar themes among adult and emerging adult users of Twitter, which is becoming increasingly popular with teens. Twitter users wanted to amass large audiences for their tweets but also wanted to be unique and authentic. In reconciling these needs, they talked about “audience management” and “personal branding,” in essence, commodifying themselves with strategic hooks that are palatable to a mass audience. How will young people negotiate a desire for attention from an audience with a desire to be authentic and unique? Does creating the self as a personal brand offer a new vehicle for consolidating a sense of self, a chance to be our “real” selves regardless of our interaction partners? Or does it flatten the complexity and flexibility of self-constructions that are attuned to various social situations?

### Conclusion

Shifts in the organization of sociality from premodern, to modern, and now digital societies represents a movement away from tight-knit close communities to increasingly large, diverse, and geographically distant networks of connections revolving around the autonomy and agency of the individual. As we move further into the twenty-first century, the Internet and social networking sites position young people at the command center of their social lives, endowing them with the capacity to create personalized networks of contacts that can be explored and accommodated to their needs. Deriving the potential benefits of social networking sites requires transmitting signals to effectively transform online resources into offline realities, and, to do so, one must engage in public self-expression. In some sense, these self-expressions represent efforts to socially construct attractive selves that will be evaluated positively in the marketplace of the newly customized social world. Digitally manufactured representations of the self for audience consumption is becoming increasingly normative, and we are only beginning to understand implications of these shifting social practices on identity development.

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