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Social Network Sites & Youth: Understanding Identity Formation in Teenage Social Life

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Abstract:
One major after effect of the socioeconomic process of Globalization can be termed as the globalisation of culture – Or what media theorist Marshall McLuhan once meant when he said that slowly but surely the world is becoming a "Global Village". What this has done is put increasing stress and emphasis on the increase of connections of the world and its people. This can be perhaps, better understood by understanding and evaluating the changing dynamics of the relationship shared between the world's youth and their sense of identity It has become increasingly commonplace and fashionable to accumulate the world youth into a kind of Homogenous category and think of them as highly receptive, or, more critically a bit more susceptible to, foreign cultural practices. As some social researchers are increasingly coining the slogan-"If childhood means acceptance, and adulthood means conservatism, youth means rebelliousness." Hence this concept of a modern day youth gets increasingly linked to a process of cultural borrowing that is disruptive of the reproduction of traditional cultural practices, from modes of dress to language, aesthetics and ideologies. This increasing need for connectivity has also resulted in a rapid adoption of social network sites by teenagers all over the world. This has raised some important queries like- What is it that makes the youth join these sites? What actually are, they expressing in them? What roles do these sites play in their social life? What kind of participatory models are they building up by a use of these sites? These online activities of chatting or messaging are they replacing face-to-face friendships – or can they be termed totally different, or are they complementary? This paper seeks to first put these questions in perspectives and then tries to address them, while exploring the repercussions on youth identities- identity formation, status negotiation, and peer-to-peer sociality.

Keywords: Globalization of culture, global village, Marshall Mcluhan, youth, youth identity, social networking

1. Introduction

"If you're not on Myspace, you don't exist" – Skyler, 18, to her mom[i]

It was during the year 2005, that online social network sites like Myspace and Facebook became common destinations for young people in the United States. Throughout the country, young people were logging in, creating elaborate profiles, publicly articulating their relationships with other participants, and writing extensive comments back and forth. By early 2006, many considered participation on the key social network site, Myspace, essential to being seen as *cool* at school. While not all teens are members of social network sites, these sites developed significant cultural resonance amongst American teens in a short period of time. Although the luster has since faded and teens are not nearly as infatuated with these sites as they once were, they continue to be an important part of teen social life. And this is not limited to America any more, with the lure of these networking sites affecting teens from all over the world.

The rapid adoption of social network sites by teenagers in the United States and in many other countries around the world raises some important questions.

1. Why do teenagers flock to these sites?
2. What are they expressing on them?
3. How do these sites fit into their lives?
4. What are they learning from their participation?
5. Are these online activities like face-to-face friendships – or are they different, or complementary?

This paper seeks is to address these questions, and explore their implications for youth identities. While particular systems may come and go, how youth engage through social network sites today provides long-lasting insights into identity formation, status negotiation, and peer-to-peer sociality.

To address the aforementioned questions, we begin by documenting key features of social network sites and the business decisions that lead to mass adoption, and then seek to situate social network sites in a broader discussion of what Dannah Boyd call's

"networked publics." We then examine how teens are modeling identity through social network profiles so that they can write themselves and their community into being. Building on this, we investigate how this process of articulated expression supports critical peer-based sociality because, by allowing youth to hang out amongst their friends and classmates, social network sites are providing teens with a space to work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues, and negotiate public life. We argue that social network sites are a type of networked public with four properties that are not typically present in face-to-face public life: persistence, search-ability, exact copy-ability, and invisible audiences.

These properties fundamentally alter social dynamics, complicating the ways in which people interact. We conclude by reflecting on the social developments that have prompted youth to seek out networked publics, and considering the changing role that publics have in young people's lives.

2. Methodological Imperatives

The arguments made in this paper are based on ethnographic data collected during Dannah Boyd's two-year study[ii] of United States-based youth engagement with Myspace. It is an ethnographical take in understanding in youth identity formation, status-role deficits, traditional communication vs. alternative communication platforms. Where the well-defined "participant observation" and "deep hanging out" are sued side by side with qualitative interview techniques.

Speaking on the demographic and constituents of the study, Boyd specifies her target population and says

"While the subjects of these interviews and direct observations are primarily urban youth (ranging in age, sex, race, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic class), we have also analyzed the profiles, blogs, and commentary of teenagers throughout the United States. Although the researcher has interviewed older people, the vast majority of people that she have interviewed and observed are of high school age, living with aparent or guardian. There is no good term to reference this group. Not all are actually students (and that role signals identity material that is not accurate). Vague terms like "youth," "young people," and "children" imply a much broader age range. For these reasons, and in reference to the history of the term "teenager" in relation to compulsory high school education, we have consciously decided to label the relevant population "teenagers" even though the majority of individuals that I have spoken with are 14-18.While strictly speaking, there are non-high school age individuals in this category, the vast majority of them are; I will focus primarily on that group."[iii]

In her study, Boyd formally found basically two types of non-participants: disenfranchised teens and conscientious objectors. The former are those bereft of internet connectivity, and those "whose parents succeed in banning them from participation, and online teens who primarily access the Internet through school and other public venues where social network sites are banned."[iv] On the other hand the group of conscientious objectors, who stay away from these network spaces on issues like: Political concerns, parental objections, marginalized socialization leading them to believe these sites are not for them. But what can't be denied is, participant or not, every teen knows about these sites and has a definite opinion about it.

Interestingly, Boyd and other researchers like hers have increasingly found evidence to suggest that race and social class play little role in terms of access, excluding the aforementioned uninterested/disenfranchised population. Thus leading us to believe that in the case of social network sites, there seems more a genuine divide in participatory paradigms than an access divide.

But more and more researchers seem to have found evidence to suggest that gender plays a crucial and critical role in the participation of youth in these kind of platforms.

Younger boys are more likely to participate than younger girls (46% vs. 44%) but older girls are far more likely to participate than older boys (70% vs. 57%). Older boys are twice as likely to use the sites to flirt and slightly more likely to use the sites to meet new people than girls of their age. Older girls are far more likely to use these sites to communicate with friends they see in person than younger people or boys of their age.10 while gender differences do exist and should not be ignored, most of what we discuss in this article concerns practices that are common to both boys and girls.[v]

3. Social Networking Sites: A History of Evolution

If we trace the beginning of social networking sites we would have to trace it back to Friendster, the first internet platform that brought into limelight the present features that characterize any modern day social networking site-a personal profiles, the possibility of posting comments, and a visible and connectible list of friends. Friendster, launched in 2002 amassed wide scale popularity amongst American youth. In a year or so, some musical bands based in America realized and understood what an important avenue this site could be for them to connect to their fan base. Myspace which followed it only made it more accessible to the bands thus increasing its own popularity in the process.

Music, as many cultural commentators stress upon acts as a kind of cultural platform for youths to bind and increase discussions. And Myspace did just that-an active participation in youth sub cultures. After Friendster and Myspace other social networking sites like Orkut and Hi5, started capturing the youth's attention. Orkut became a phenomenon in India. And then in 2005b it was the current craze. Facebook that opened its avenue to high school students, creating what can be called the beginning of an era.

It is tremendous importance that in a country like India-in the social network sites, participation tends to follow cultural and linguistic lines. With participants in India having increasingly seemed to have compartmentalized themselves within the system along caste lines.

4. Deconstructing a Social Networking Site

Before we go into a discussion of how social networking sites work, it would be worthwhile to remember that the genesis of these sites stem from dating portals. Even Friendster itself was made primarily as a dating platform. Hence most of these sites have what can

be initially called a "Profile" a brief database about a person that consists of some demographic details (age, sex, location, etc.), tastes (interests, favorite bands, etc.), a photograph, and an open-ended description of who the person would like to meet. These so-called profiles are generated when the users on their fill out forms that convey details about themselves, which generally determines the content their site will have. Apart from these the social network site preferably contains some comments from other designated and active members, and also generally a categorical list of the people, displayed publicly that the user in question nominates as *Friends* within the network.

Once a profile is generated participants can invite others to join. Or in some other platforms like Facebook they can search for profiles that match their taste and addthose people to their list of Friends, it is here that the question of approval for the relationship emerges. On being added by one as a friend the other person receives a message seeking confirmation for the same. If and when this confirmation is granted, this "friendship" is displayed publicly inn the platform.This makes it possible to track one friend from the name4-prfile-image-comment of the other. Apart from these what social network sites provide typically, is a section earmarked as to comments by Friends. This is in effect a generation of testimonials that can be read by other friends in the network, thus encouraging the value and integrity of the content.

Apart from this publicly displayable avenues of communication, social networking sites also bring in the privacy element by allowing people to privately message, each other, so that another avenue of direct communication emerges.

5. The Creation of "Networked Publics"[vi]

What then is social in social networking sites? To understand the connotation, we must first understand the notion of Public. Dannah Boyd in her discussion on public spaces that derives a lot from the Habermasian understanding of public and public sphere[vii] says that Defining the term public is difficult at best. Bistirna Baruaas an adjective, it is commonly used in opposition to private. When referring to locations, public is used to signal places that are accessible to anyone (or at least anyone belonging to a privileged category like adults). In reference to actions or texts, public often implies that the audience is unknown and that strangers may bear witness. As a noun, public refers to a collection of people who may not all know each other, but share "a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest." In some senses, public is quite similar to audience as both refer to a group bounded by a shared text, whether that is a worldview or a performance. These words often collide conceptually because speaking to the public implies that the public is acting as an audience.[viii]

In discussing and disseminating the notion of apublic, it has become increasingly essential to understand and accept the possibility of an existence of multiple publics. A reality that emerges from a post-modern look at collectivities which points out to the fact that there can be, and in fact are different collections of people depending on the social context, the geo-physical imperatives. What then constitutes the boundaries of a given public?

This paper moves and tries to find a common ground between these many different meanings of public. One important element of the existence of Social network sites is that they allow publics to gather. But at the very same moment by allowing itself to be used as a well-defined space where speech occurs, they are in themselves: publics. Another important facet of these sites is that they allow the creation, though it might be miniscule between private and public. Where when connoted with the term "public" becomes the open visibility of a profile, while private points to a Friends-only viewing.

Another important to be kept in mind while discussing the public/private connotations of these social network sites is that interaction, any interaction between members of these aforementioned social spaces always takes place in a mediated environment. And the publics involved in these platforms are either knowingly or unknowingly affected by these mediated quality of the interactions. Hence, for reasons cited above researchers deem it necessary to qualify these spectre of public involved in networking sites as networked publics, not simply publics. This term basically means

"…About the spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks (i.e. the Internet, mobile networks, etc.). Networked publics are one type of mediated public; the network mediates the interactions between members of the public. Media of all stripes have enabled the development of mediated publics."[ix]

It is but the intrinsic difference in the process of social interaction that mandates this differentiation between networked publics from mediated/unmediated publics. When it comes to intrinsically unmediated environments, the audience/communication boundaries are defined structurally. The audience in question is hence restricted spatio-temporally. But there exists another possibility too, where the public in mind can be broadened to include those who would come into the communicative radius through word-of-mouth or hear-say. On the information being shared.

But when mediating technologies like television, radio, and newsprint come into the picture, the whole paradigm undergoes a change. The possibility of recording and broadcasting changes how information travels and how it gets communicated and to whom. Hence it is of no secret that the character of the potential audience is affected by the properties of the mediating technologies, namely persistence, replicability, and invisible audiences. Networked publics add an additional feature – searchability – while magnifying all of the other properties.

The characteristics that then define a networked public can thus be pin pointed as the following[x]

- Persistence: Networked publics keep communication as recorded for posterity, that they can be retrieved at anyone's prerogative and persistence.
- Searchability: As the expressions are stored in the form of a defined body of images-text-audio-videos the discovering of a person's online avatar becomes rather easy. Search and discovery tools only add to this ease.
- Replicability: Communication in networked public can be copied/transferred/shared/propagated verbatim such that there the distinction between original and copy is blurred.

- Invisible audiences: In case of unmediated communication, the target audience or people who can hear

Our speech is in most times clear to do the same in mediated publics is almost an impossibility.

What is clear in this discussion is the fact that the modes of communication in of networked publics means a lesser dependence on the geo-temporal factors when compared to unmediated publics. But this also creates certain communication problems for when the context at times is not properly understood the interpretation of the communication differs in a networked public, from what it was intended to, thus creating a conundrum of understanding, and frustration.

6. Identity Formation of Youths in Social Networking Websites
To understand the process of identity formation in a social networking website of a youth/teenager, we have to define and differentiate the different levels that the teenager goes through in these platforms

6.1. Profile Creation as the Rites of Passage
Teens learn about this websites from word of mouth of friends, and their desire to join is accentuated by a friend's invitation. When they join, the first thing they do is create a profile by filling in details on the site. This generates a generic profile with content like "favorite books" and "about me." Before they write stuff about themselves, it is common behaviours for teens to undertake a thorough viewing of others' profiles, especially of friends that made them aware of the website in the first place itself. By doing so they get a sense of what they must present on their own profile. While profile creation are quite generic a process, there is still some possibility of maneuvering manipulating the profiles to express themselves.

This is the rites of passage for a teen into the social networking background where the first thing he concerns himself is with the building of a viable profile. This process, hence socializes them to these sites, by learning what is apt and desirable both0-technologically and socially.

6.2. Identity Performance- The Goffman-ian Take
In the kind of interactions that take play day to day it is, but our bodies that play a pivotal and an integral in and as an extremely important site for the manifestation of our identity. In the truest Goffman-ian dramaturgical approach it is through movement, spoken words, facial overtures and our clothing that we use our body to project who we are. And although we do try our level best to express who we are every time, sometimes, we do fail and the interpretation becomes different from what we wanted to convey. It is by analyzing and interpreting those responses and feedback that come to us that we assess how well we are interpreted. And then, we can manipulate our performances to suit our response. This entire process was defined by the great socio-psychologist Erving Goffman calls impression management.

This whole scenario falls under a behavioral understanding of societal process, where the moot aim of people is to define a situation through the kind of behavior they exhibit. Hence leading to the birth and propagation of a certain kind of societal norms via situational definitions and understanding. This understanding and analysis of situational behavior is done via experience. The first step towards this is understanding that our actions determine the kind of reactions that come in return. The expressional skills of people in general are developed and bettered through interactions in diverse environments. Hence the ability to decipher-interpret-understand-apply societal cues becomes a core part of our individual socialization. And social psychologists, world over have pointed out that although these kind of socialization begins in the o=confine of our homes, as kids, its in our teenage that they can are mostly perfected and hence their ripeness.

But all these undergo a considerable change in a mediated environment, where the body's importance as a site of impression management decreases. And as behavioral psychologists in the absence of our bodies, it is what we write that becomes a marker of our identities. It is also helped by photographs-video-audio-videos in making up for the body's absence. Hence, in a Foucaldian sense it is quite viable to imply that it is but online that an individual has more behavioral control-in what they choose to project themselves. And the fact that they can at any time alter, what they have already projected, only gives the individual more behavioral control, something that is never possible in an unmediated scenario.

7. Who Then Are the "Youth"
It was in the US during the "Great Depression" and the severe economic travails that came up in its trail that jobs became scare, really scare. What this entailed that there were very few job and plenty of applicants, including the young. The progressive labor intellectuals came in to suggest, that a solution to this was making school attendance mandatory, to reduce the applicant size. On the other hand social reformers believed that young people venturing out more frequently were leading them to drugs and alcohol and it was better if they stayed home. They as two pressure groups succeeded in convincing congress to pass labor entitlements and compulsory education laws, thus creating effectively a group of adults and young adults. It was this step that etymologically we can find the genesis of the separate "youth" category.

What this led to was a kind of age based segregation. Very soon marketers also realized that these kind of an age-segregated population gave them a kind of target audience for their products. And this direct targeting began in full scale post the Great War debacles and losses. A kind of segregated teen culture, hence opened up. What this led to was a generation of certain particularized spaces for the interaction of these age groups: clubs, activity halls, dancing alleys, etc. developed, which became the new sites for socialization; the resultant target driven consumer policies only helped in strengthening the segregation of the age gap

In the late 20th century, it was the big and gigantic shopping malls that replaced the earlier places as the targeted teen space for social interactions. But with the consumerist tendencies becoming more aggressive each passing day, and the minimal procurement ability of

the teens, the malls began to increasingly seem the as mere window shoppers and hence became hostile to their presence. It was at such a juncture that the Internet emerged. With its connectivity and open for all access it gave another space for the teens, to hang out, socialize, and just be. Thus becoming an important site for socialization, and social networking sites have only built on this.

8. Conclusion and Deliberations

The whole process of public interaction helps a teenager assess his/her own self and develop himself/herself accordingly with the guide of social mores and norms. This whole process is more action oriented than theoretical and involves a trial and error setup, where we learn from our very own mistakes. These also help the youth to understand the boundaries that the society sets on their behavior. They also learn of the modus-operandi of their actions and how much of a maneuverability they have with respect to their actions. Hence the whole process of *impression management* becomes *a* key to developing and sustaining a social identity.

But with the emergence of this avenues of mediated publics have also led to an increase in scale and temporality of the publicity that stems from an act in such a domain. For the internet and especially social networking sites have made the possibilities of our personal histories to be retrievable and publishable at any point in the future. As the fore core principles of easy searchability, tremendous replicability, tremendous persistence and a core imagined audience of the *Networked Public* domain makes our histories almost indelible. And also thus increasing the chances of mis-representation.

This is where as a society we need to be more considerate and concerned with the kind of social interaction that they undergo in mediated social media platforms. While parents have generally focused on increasing surveillance and restrictions on their usage of these platforms, performs a middle path needs to be found, where maybe a dialogue takes place to understand what the teens are going through and how they are expressing what they are going through. For social media, either we like it or not, is here to stay!

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