

## **Evanescent Adolescents**

### **Digital Natives and Identity Experimentation Online**

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#### **Abstract / Growing Up Digital**

Much like music and other types of media in the past, technology has become the distinctive element separating generations: the definition of today's youth as "Digital Natives"<sup>1</sup> only proves the importance that computer-based communication has taken within the identities of teenagers. The present paper aims at exploring how Social Media can become a stage for the enactment of "experimental identities" (cf. Ellison et al, 2006), allowing teens to gain the skills necessary to interpret social cues in both digital and real life (boyd, 2008). Given the permeation of the Internet within the social lives of the young, it seems relevant to focus on how Social Media can be used to make sense of one's identity in a time of drastic changes and transformations.

#### **Networked Provisional Selves**

Only a couple of years away from their generational christening as "Digital Natives", today's teenagers are at the center of the public debate, thanks to their apparently privileged relationship with technology as a tool for social interaction (Bennett et al, 2008). On the Internet, however, dialogue is hardly ever a simple exchange of opinions: through Social Media profiles, individuals disclose elements of their identity with each shared piece of information, achieving a potential for self-expression hardly reproducible "in real life".

During teenage years, when the sense of self is gradually constructed, in-group and out-group relationships are a tool for making sense of physical and emotional evolutions as they take place (Barker, 2009). Furthermore, in the relationship with others, impression management skills are developed, rendering mere interaction an exercise in "learning to read social cues and react accordingly" (boyd, 2008). Through identification processes, peer comparison and definition of personal spaces, teenagers discover who they are through a process of identity experimentation

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<sup>1</sup> Digital Natives are defined as the generation born between 1980 and the middle of the 1990s (Prensky, 2001), and defined as "living lives immersed in technology" (Bennet et al., 2008)

and re-elaboration (Ellison et al., 2006). Online more than offline, teenagers are granted unprecedented opportunities to “try identities on for size”.

The Internet, and Social Media in particular, represent a stage on which actors are capable of changing roles at a fast speed and with a broad reach: self-messages are created, audiences are strategically chosen, profiles are opened, customized and closed as individuals change tastes and life patterns (Zhao et al., 2008). Compared to the teens of the '90s, Digital Natives have advantages in immediacy while navigating online self-presentation practices (cf. Bennett et al., 2008): when technology becomes so embedded in everyday routines, the distinction between online and offline results significantly blurred (Livingstone, 2008), minimizing the differences in languages between the two worlds.

Under this perspective, the importance of digital self-expression grows exponentially: online interaction becomes an extension of face-to-face relationships, rather than an alternative to them. Similarly to what happens with online gamers and avatars (Wolfendale, 2007), we could think of Natives as establishing a level of “attachment” to their social network profiles: this implies an emotional connection with the chosen online persona going beyond purely strategized self-representation. This also presumes increased closeness between the offline and the online person, with a potential for authenticity in disclosure which, at the same time, helps in the growth of a sense of self, and exposes the fragility of a unique time of one's life (cf. Christofides et al., 2011).

If, therefore, online self-communication enters in the process of identity discovery, then Digital Natives are capable of supporting their transforming sense of self with provisional online identities, exploiting a potential for self-establishment, change and re-invention far superior than “in real life” (Manago et al., 2008). Furthermore, as the Internet offers the possibility to choose the audience addressed with a personal message, the possibility to encounter “meaningful others” is maximized: in a period of life where “potentially marginalizing” characteristics emerge, finding peer support online can prevent isolation and foster the establishment of self-esteem (Mckenna et al., 1998). Online relationships, compared to their offline counterpart, stress the value of “homophily”, that is, the increased closeness experienced with individuals perceived as similar (Choudhury et al., 2010): this can foster a feeling of belongingness, even just for a brief phase within the metamorphosis leading to adulthood.

If online interaction can provide acceptance for diversity and “otherness”, this also applies to alternative ethics and systems of beliefs: with controversial behaviors such as substance abuse (Morgan et al., 2010) or eating disorders (Haas et al., 2011), anti-recovery support groups can play a significant role in influencing the choices of a teenager. Much like real life friends, online

contacts play a role in the establishment of what is “right” and “wrong”: if Social Media increases dramatically the potential of self-expression, the effects of peer pressure can be as dramatic, as proven by the extent to which cyber-bullying can be harmful to its victims (Smith et al., 2008).

Processes of identification work in positive, as well as not-so positive perspectives, leading to a very complicated, but potentially very fertile, ground on which to construct, and modify, one’s growing identity. Conscience of the potentialities, and of the dangers, of self-communication online should therefore be at the center of the agenda of educators, in order for teenagers to be inspired in a use of the Internet which can be beneficial to their self-affirmation, confidence and healthy perception of a time in their lives which will shape their stability and wellbeing as adults.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, it seems like computer-based communication has achieved a dimension of self-expressional hyper-reality: the Social Media induced sociality magnifies the positive and negative effects of offline teenage life giving, at the same time, more challenges, and more opportunities to identity creation, experimentation and transformation.

The presence of technology in our lives is, however, not going to become any less predominant in the next years. If the Digital Natives are capable of embracing technology as a distinctive trait from the “grown-ups”, that might not be true for the next generation, for which interaction through computers, or through even more direct means (such as Touch-mediated devices, or remote-less videogames) might become just part of routinized behaviors. For this reason, I auspicate further research to be conducted on digital self-expression and the young, focusing, in an empirical manner, on how digital communication is entering in the identity definition process of individuals whose defining traits are “under construction”. Only by focusing on such processes we can have a guess in establishing what it really means, to grow up digital.

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