Social Media and Identity Formation of Millennials

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Theme: Problem of Identity

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Introduction

'Who am I?' is a question everyone asks in the course of their life because it is a 'defining question.' The topic for our consideration is the question, "How are the Millennials creating their identity?"

Millennials is a term referring to those between the age group of 18 to 35 years in India. They are also called the 'net generation' as they tend to spend considerable amount of time everyday on internet, specifically on social networking sites. The inception of online social networking has been a revolutionary thing in the history of communication. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Myspace, Tumblr, Vimeos, Whatsapp, SnapChat, Blogging, Viber, Google Plus, YouTube, LinkedIn, Vine, etc... all these sites have the highest percentage of users under the age of 30. Most of today's youth, including young adults use Social media on a regular basis, i.e., 24/7. Tweeting in sleep is a real thing. It is obvious that if young people are spending considerable amount of time on social media, it will affect their identity whether they like it or not.

Social media and Identity formation

Few more observations related to social media will set the stage for the ensuing discussion- the numerous cases of Millennials going to death taking 'selfies' in dangerous places like the edge of a cliff or moving train or a big running machine etc; the new phenomena of suicides being projected live on social networking sites; writing (posting) on social media whatever comes to one's mind- write what they feel and about things which they cannot talk to others face to face. Millennials are pushing boundaries and taking risks and I think what they are trying to do is explore themselves. But the most important observation and which is central to this paper is the observation of a kind of craving for 'feedback.' This one thing can be

attributed as major reason for much time spent on social media by Millennials. The feedback which they receive in the form of 'like,' 'share' 'view' or 'comment' not only determines their subsequent posts but is ascertaining their self and elucidating what others expects them to be.

Before Internet the feedback came from family, friends, teachers, colleagues, figures of authority. Today Millennials are looking for 'feedback' on Internet more frequently and one of the prime reason is that they get it instantly. Once certain feedback comes the user wants to know more feedback leading to cycle. Then, there are so many apps which tell what one's personality traits are. It compares the person with certain character from media or history. It looks like, to understand oneself one has to discover through virtual mirror. There is another trend which is- to let the world know what one is doing, where one is going, where one is staying etc. Social Media takes these details to bombard you with similar advertisements. These advertisements subconsciously affect what we buy, the clothes we wear, the music we listen to and even the food we eat. These things affect our psychology in formation of one's identity and personality. Another important thing to be noted among the Millennials is their preoccupation with 'online games.' Each player takes a different name and engages in a different character than the original self. Then there are other avenues- from dating sites to the problem of cyber bullying (3 out of 10 children face cyber bullying in India)[1] which are affecting Millennials in forming self-concept.

Formation of personal identity

I think there are two things involved in formation of identity- first is discovering self, which I propose today is increasingly happening through social media; and second aspect involved in identity is knowing how one is different, separate, unique, distinct from others. Both of these are taking place on Social Media. According to Erikson a prominent developmental theorist, Identity formation normally occurs between the ages of twelve and twenty. This is a time of searching for identity but not necessarily achieving one. Youth at this stage are trying to figure out who they are while being confronted with many new roles and adult statuses.

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[1] https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2012/01/3-out-of-10-indian-children-have-faced-cyber-bullying-research/

The conventional trend is that young people, when they are teenagers, try to discover and develop their identity in three spheres, namely biological, psychological and societal.[2] But today there is a fourth identity with the potential to overshadow all the three i.e., 'online identity.' According to Donath, online Identity can be expressed at any of the three levels:[3]

1. ***True identity:*** This level of online identity is the most basic unit of self in the offline world—a person's true identity. A true identity online is expressed by creating a profile that includes the person's real name, real demographic information, and real pictures.

2. ***Pseudonymity:*** This level allows the user a level of vagueness with the ability to increase a reputation. A user creates a fake name or a "handle" that is used to represent the user and his or her online contributions. The user is free to, and often does, create demographic information that is related to the pseudonym and not to the user's true identity.

3. ***Anonymity:*** This is the level where one completely hides the true identity. The user does not share any type of identifying information, not even a handle. When users are anonymous, they cannot increase reputation in online spaces, as those who might choose a pseudonym. They can share and engage with the community without anyone else knowing who they really are.

The problem can be better suggested by illustration of someone who has the capacity to change his/her face completely- the ramifications can be immense. When Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, stated, "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."[4] He is of the opinion that nothing good can come of being anonymous online. Nancy Baym, a principal researcher at Microsoft sarcastically pointed out that Zuckerberg's view on identity indicates him as someone who has nothing to fear from being transparent about his life, and does not need to maintain two different identities.[5]

Trending self

I would like to call the online identity as "Trending Self." I call it 'trending' because the self is being continuously created or built digitally. Personal image is being constantly

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[2] Erikson, Erik. Identity, Youth and Crisis. New York: Norton, 1968, p. 87, 95, 254, 261.

[3] Reynol Junco, *Engaging Students Through Social Media: Evidence-Based Practices*, (Good Reads, 2014)

[4] http://www.michaelzimmer.org/2010/05/14/facebooks-zuckerberg-having-two-identities-for-yourself-is-an-example-of-a-lack-of-integrity/

[5] http://blog.reyjunco.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/07/Social_Media_and_Student_Identity_Development_Junco.pdfnt

upgraded. This identity is unlike any other identity created by an individual based on two things namely:

➤ First, selective information about self

People on social media present an aspect of themselves that may not be an accurate profile of who they really are. They manage their impression by presenting either a profile picture or data about themselves that may be inconsistent with their real self. Teens often treat their online identities almost like creating a brand. With the focus on tailored external image, it does not take much to predict how much of time would ever be spent on internal reflection, if they do so.

➤ Second, feedback of others on first

Social Media offers a tool to do or say something in a certain way, and if it doesn't work or if they do not get the reaction they expected they modify the way they do or say things. If self-presentation is accepted, the adolescent may internalize this social reception and proceed with this element of identity formation. If self-presentation is uncomfortable or rejected, the adolescent more easily avoids face to face criticism and can go on exploring alternative identities.[6]

The major focus of this exercise is to experiment, test and try to find a way of feeling good about them based on the perception of others. This becomes unsafe especially of teens that use social media to interact with strangers more than friends. Now, for those young people who may try to avoid creating a 'trending self,' I think there will be an increasing pressure because of the economic value it adds to individual. For example employers search the background of the their employees on social media before appointment for job, police and government keeps an eye on what you post, potential friends and even brides/grooms ready for wedding are being inspected on social media.

Challenges posed by Trending Self

1. Split Identity

The biggest problem with the "trending self" is that it would create a self which may not be the real self because the identity on the online is always try to put the best foot out. This self

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[6] (Reid & Boyer, 2013) http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00094056.2013.815554

is happy, intelligent, and good looking. An increased preoccupation with this image would create split identity.

2. Dissatisfied Generation

Millennials are always looking at each other, comparing themselves to each other. The same thing that's been going on with the previous generation is going on online but the difference for teenagers today is that there's an endless supply of people to whom they can compare themselves. I think we will be witnessing one of the most dissatisfied generation.

3. Unable to make distinction between private and public

One of the questions the net generation will struggle to define will be the meaning of 'privacy'

4. Incompetence in simple decision making

The app-dependency and review dependency determines decisions as small as which movie to see or even to resolve personal or moral dilemmas.

Possible ways to handle the issue

Social issues of Millennials can be addressed by various agencies- parents, teachers, counsellors, elders and friends. However one must be cautious about condemning the use of social media because social media in itself is a useful networking took and is something that Millennials do daily. However there is need to create awareness about their psychological, emotional, and sociological affects upon individuals.

Secondly, it may be helpful for the Millennials to know that identity formation is not the absolute essence of life, although it is pertinent. In today's social networking, Millennials are worried about how many "likes" they can get, how many followers they gain and how many retweets they have, even though none of it matters. What they don't see is how much of an impact it has on their self-esteem. These things have become big time cause of depression and severe insecurities.

- The more engrossed they are in trying to discover their identity as their main essence of living, the more frustrated they could be. Identity formation is a lifelong discovery and not the attainment of a goal.

- Millennials have the responsibility to consciously not accept every definition of themselves given to them by others
- Parents and teachers need to find ways to talk about dual identities that Millennials are trying to live.

Thirdly, philosophy need to deal with the challenges society and individuals are engaging in their life changes brought in by the technology. Artificial Intelligence is at our door step. There are a few philosophers dealing with this issue here and there. It may perhaps be time for more philosophers to engage in conversation about the affect of technology or even better a multi disciplinary approach led by philosophers.