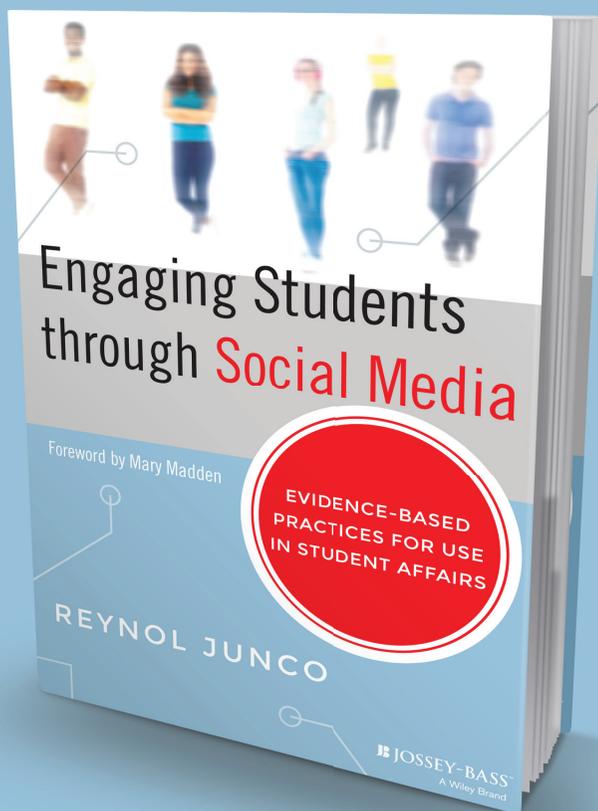


Social Media and Student Identity Development

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CHAPTER 3

Social Media and Student Identity Development

Very little attention has been given to how social media influence student development, although these sites and services are central to the lives of our students. There is a stark disconnect between student use of social media websites and the use of and interest in these sites by student affairs professionals. Of course, some student affairs professionals are true champions of social media; however, these individuals are few and far between. There are also student affairs professionals and other educators with explicit animosity toward the sites and services; these individuals are also few and far between. Most student affairs professionals fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum—anywhere between having a passing interest in social media, to more active use, to thinking that these technologies might be beneficial to students. What is missing in this ecosystem are student affairs professionals who understand how student behaviors on social media are connected

to students' overall development and how to put into practice strategies that help students along their developmental paths.

Generally, educators take a prescriptive approach in the rare instances when they do teach students about social media. A typical strategy is to discuss why “oversharing” is bad and how it could hurt a student’s future career prospects. While the pitfalls of sharing personal information online *should* be discussed, they need to be placed within a broader context of supporting student learning and development. When student affairs professionals take such a cynical approach, they are viewing student technology use from an *adult normative perspective*, by which they define what is appropriate based on their own expectations and norms; these expectations are no doubt influenced by popular media portrayals of social media as detrimental to youth development (see table 3.1). Perhaps an adult normative perspective is warranted at times and in certain situations; however, like other forms of education, there must be a balance. If we tell students how to behave on *their* social media sites without considering their psychological, emotional, and sociological relationship to the sites, then we’ve already lost them.

Unfortunately and surprisingly, by the time youth get to college, they have been the recipients of many adult normative messages about social media. For instance, social media sites are banned in almost all K-12 schools. The implicit message is that

Table 3.1. Differences between the adult normative and youth normative perspectives

	Adult normative	Youth normative
Viewpoint	Adult experience	Youth experience
Approach	Prescriptive	Inquisitive
Beliefs about social media	Negative	Balanced
Source of information	Self	Other

these sites are nonacademic in nature and can only serve to distract from the educational mission of the school. Additionally, policies in K-12 school districts ban educators from using social media with their students. Again, the implicit message is that the only reason that educators would use social media with students is to cross a boundary in the teacher-student relationship. These implicit messages, fueled by popular media stories about the evils of social media, get communicated to students.

A few years ago when I published a paper on the relationship between student use of Facebook and academic performance, I spoke to many campus newspaper reporters. These reporters were very interested in my finding that *how* students used Facebook was a stronger predictor of grades than time spent on the site (see chapter 2; Junco, 2012) and that Facebook use, in and of itself, was not related to poorer academic outcomes. Most of these reporters shared my results with their friends before contacting me, and every one of them said how they and their friends were all surprised. They said that they had heard many media reports about how Facebook *causes* students to have lower grades. In other words, these students had accepted the adult normative view that Facebook was harming them academically.

Student affairs professionals and other educators must ask themselves what harm they are doing by telling students that something they do daily, as an integral and normal part of their lives, is harming them. It's as if educators have subconsciously accepted the proposition that each and every one of our students is an addict, so in subtle ways we shame students for making social media such a significant part of their lives. Imagine how students feel being on the receiving end of such messages, especially from educators whom students trust yet who have no idea of what students' online world is like. Indeed, it is highly likely that one of your students is alive today because of a support system developed on Facebook that helped the student through a challenging time.

The time has come to move away from the adult normative perspective and see how social media use can, and does, support student psychosocial development. With this understanding, we can begin to reframe student social media use and understand its benefits and pitfalls. Only when we truly empathize with our students' experience can we educate them about how best to use social media to support their growth. Up to this point, I've been discussing taking an unempathic adult normative perspective in relation to social media; however, imagine if student affairs professionals behaved this way with students in other domains. For instance, imagine a residence hall director who tells residents to go to sleep at 8 pm because it's what the director does. Social media are no different. Indeed, one mistaken assumption adults make when engaging in the adult normative perspective is that what happens on social media bears no relationship to what happens in the real world. Not only is this a philosophical falsehood, but there is research to show that is not the case. For instance, students who are more extroverted in the offline world are also more extroverted on Facebook (Bachrach, Kosinski, Graepel, Kohli & Stillwell, 2012; Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim & Goh, 2011; Ross et al., 2009; Seidman, 2012).

By the time most students reach college, they have spent countless hours using social media. What youth are doing online is quite consonant with established models of human personality and identity development, such as those proposed by Erikson (1968) and Chickering and Reisser (1993). Unfortunately, most educators believe that youth are only using these sites for pointless activities. Many even state that youth use social media for "socializing," as if social interactions, in and of themselves, were pointless (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010). This adult normative view of youth social media use is far from the reality of the benefits students get from these sites. Youth actually use social media to engage in and support a critical maturation

task, *identity development*. Imagine a young person who is coming to terms with a gay sexual identity but, because of geographic location, has no offline space to explore this facet of identity without suffering serious social or physical consequences. It is only through online exploration of this identity that the young person can engage in healthy development. But how exactly does this happen? This chapter connects traditional models of youth identity development with the identity work that youth are engaging in on social media.

In order to understand just how social media use influences and is congruent with student identity development, it is first important to review the relevant theories. An exhaustive review of all models of student development is beyond the scope of this book in general and this chapter in particular; however, student social media use will be examined in relation to Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development; the Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1998) and Sue and Sue (2003) Racial and Cultural Identity Development (RCID) model; D'Augelli's (1994) model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development; and Chickering & Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of student identity development.

IDENTITY FORMATION

Identity is a "conscious sense of individual uniqueness" and an "unconscious striving for a continuity of experience" (Erikson, 1968, p. 208). Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development includes eight stages through which healthy individuals pass during their lives. Each stage has a *virtue* (strength), the favorable outcome of the resolution of the tension between the internal self and external environment within each particular life stage challenge. The virtue for the fifth stage in this model is *fidelity* and is reached through successful navigation of the *identity versus role confusion* duality. Youth pass through the fidelity stage typically

between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, and Erikson viewed this stage as a crucial integration of previous stages and a preparation for future ones. The main developmental task in the fidelity stage is for adolescents to solidify a stable sense of identity. To put it in layperson's terms, youth at this stage are trying to figure out who they are while being confronted with many new roles and adult statuses. The traditional-aged first-year student, for instance, is faced with the transition from high school, where the student likely had a great deal of parental input, support, and direction, to college, where the student is now living on his or her own and must engage internal motivation to reach goals.

Identity formation involves the development of a stable sense of self. There is an "important need for trust in oneself and in others" (Erikson, 1968, p. 128). At this stage, youth have to develop an "inner sameness" that is matched to how their "sameness" is recognized by others. Perhaps this developmental stage accounts for youth's preoccupation with how others see them as compared to how they feel they are (Erikson, 1968). In this sense, youth are attempting to understand who they are within the context of their environment; once they have formed their identity, they know that who they are is consistent across situations and that others recognize this consistency. Youth who have not successfully traversed the fifth stage do not have strong relationships with others, have lower levels of self-esteem, are likely to be shy, and have more difficulty adapting to college environments (Kroger, 2008). Indeed, Erikson (1968) indicates that true intimacy is possible only once the task of identity formation is under way.

Racial and Cultural Identity Development

Erikson (1968) recognized the connections between his construct of identity and how the term was used in the literature on the African American experience of his day. Indeed, one can easily see

how Erikson's model might account for the development of a racial identity—for the development of a sense of self with its resultant interactions between internal and external environments should include how the person is situated within the wider cultural milieu of the society in which the person lives. Numerous theories address the development of racial and ethnic identity. The interested reader is referred to the excellent summaries of these theories found in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2009). Because racial and ethnic identity development models share dynamics that are based in the Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1998) and Sue and Sue (2003) Racial and Cultural Identity Development (RCID) model, only the RCID model will be reviewed here.

The Racial and Cultural Identity Development (RCID) model stages are as follows (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1998; Sue & Sue, 2003):

1. *Conformity*: Individuals have a preference for and identify with white culture, often harboring negative attitudes toward themselves and other members of their minority group.
2. *Dissonance*: While denial is used a great deal in the conformity stage, it begins to break down in the dissonance stage. It is usually a gradual process but an external event or challenges to the person's negative attitudes about their minority group may propel them to the next stage.
3. *Resistance and immersion*: Once the conflicts of the previous stage begin to be resolved, the person "flips" the views held in the conformity stage and now identifies with views held by the minority group and rejects those held by the dominant culture.
4. *Introspection*: The individual is disaffected from the rigid and polarized views held in the resistance and immersion stage and begins to move toward greater individual autonomy. The

individual starts to recognize that perhaps not everything in the dominant culture is “bad,” adopting a more balanced view and able to hold both the positives and the negatives.

5. *Synergistic articulation and awareness*: The conflicts from the introspection stage have been resolved, and the individual feels a sense of fulfillment in relation to their cultural identity. The values of both the dominant culture and minority culture are examined objectively.

LGBT Identity Development

Like racial and ethnic identity models, there are a number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identity development models (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2009). However, only one will be reviewed here—D’Augelli’s (1994) model of LGB identity development. D’Augelli’s original work focused only on LGB identity development, but Bilodeau (2005) found that the processes in D’Augelli’s model also applied to the development of transgender identity. As such, D’Augelli’s original model will be considered to encompass transgender identity development and will be labeled as LGBT throughout this chapter. D’Augelli (1994) argued that explaining the LGBT identity process without reference to historical, community, or social contexts in which such development occurs reduces homosexuality to a “dysfunctional individual identity detached from the common experience” (p. 317).

Three factors are involved in the D’Augelli (1994) model of LGBT identity development:

1. *Subjectivities and actions*: “How individuals feel about their sexual identities over their lives, how they engage in diverse sexual activities with different meanings, and how they construct their sexual lives and feel about them” (p. 318).

2. *Interactive intimacies*: “How sexuality is developed by parental and familial factors, how age-peer interactions shape and modify the impact of early parental and familial socialization, and how this learning affects and is affected by intimate partnerships of different kinds” (p. 318).
3. *Sociohistorical connections*: “Social norms and expectations of various geographic and subcultural communities; local and national social customs, policies, and laws; and major cultural and historical continuities and discontinuities” (p. 318).

D’Augelli’s (1994) model is a life-span development model that emphasizes the fact that people grow and develop throughout their entire lives. The model notes the importance of plasticity (that human functioning is very responsive to environmental, physical, and biological factors) and interindividual differences—or that each person’s developmental path is different and that there is a broad continuum of sexual feelings and experience.

D’Augelli (1994) identified the following six processes that play a role in LGBT identity development. He noted that they are not stages such as those found in traditional identity development models but are dynamic processes mediated by the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in which they occur (D’Augelli, 1994).

1. *Exiting heterosexual identity*: This involves understanding that one’s attractions are not heterosexual. It also involves telling others about one’s identity, a process often referred to as “coming out.”
2. *Developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status*: This involves developing, within the context of the lesbian/gay/bisexual community, one’s own definition of what it means to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. An essential facet of this process is working through internalized myths about nonheterosexuality.

3. *Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity*: This is a lifelong process of building a network of friends who know and accept the individual's sexual identity and who can offer support.
4. *Becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring*: The major task of this process is coming out to one's parents. Often, the relationship with parents is disrupted after disclosure of sexual orientation. Luckily, this is often a temporary state that reverts with input from the lesbian, gay, or bisexual person.
5. *Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status*: The relative invisibility of lesbian and gay couples in our society as compared with heterosexual couples leads to uncertainty and ambiguity in the development of meaningful homosexual relationships.
6. *Entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community*: This involves becoming politically and socially active. Some never do so because of the dangers inherent in being "out" in our society or because they view their sexuality as a purely private matter.

Student Identity Development

In 1969, Arthur Chickering published *Education and Identity*, introducing his theory of student identity development. He later collaborated with Linda Reisser in 1993 to refine the theory. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory consists of seven vectors and is an incremental developmental model whereby a student progresses through discrete stages. The theory allows for the fact that entering a new vector may bring up issues from previous vectors that need to be resolved along with the new developmental tasks. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors can be seen as breaking down Erikson's (1968) fifth stage into granular components, as follows:

1. *Developing competence*: There are three types of competences that develop in college—intellectual, physical, and interpersonal.

2. *Managing emotions*: College students begin to recognize their emotions and develop intrapsychic strategies for coping with them.
3. *Moving through autonomy toward interdependence*: Students first learn to become self-sufficient and to function without the input and direction of others (like parents); then students realize that they cannot function independently of others and move toward interdependence.
4. *Developing mature interpersonal relationships*: This involves the capacity to tolerate and appreciate differences in others and to build the capacity for intimacy. This development makes one better able to engage in relationships based on interdependence and equality.
5. *Establishing identity*: Involves the development of a stable sense of self that includes being comfortable with one's body, sexual orientation, cultural heritage, self-concept, self-esteem, and personal stability.
6. *Developing purpose*: After clarifying who they are, students need to develop a sense of who they want to be. This includes the development of a career plan that takes into account personal interests and familial commitments.
7. *Developing integrity*: Closely related to the previous two vectors, on this vector students humanize and personalize their values and develop congruence, matching their personal values with those of society and engaging in socially responsible behavior.

ONLINE IDENTITY: REAL IDENTITY, PSEUDONYMITY, AND ANONYMITY

The identity development models reviewed thus far focus exclusively on identity development in the offline world—the expression of and interaction within a community that leads to changes and movement along a developmental path. However, the

emergence of online social spaces has allowed youth to explore their identities in ways not previously possible. This section reviews the most global levels of expressed online identity, here referred to as *online identification*. Afterward, the concepts of online self-presentation and the online disinhibition effect are discussed in relation to the development of a stable identity.

Three Levels of Expressed Online Identification

Identity can be expressed online at any of three levels:

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 anonymity with the ability to accrue 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 fullest level of true identity obscurity, with users not sharing any type of identifying information, not even a handle. When users are anonymous, they cannot accrue reputation in online spaces, as those who might choose a pseudonym. In other words, reputation is impossible when being anonymous online (Donath, 1999).

Examples of the Three Levels

Imagine an online discussion forum where users may register for an account and post under that account or post anonymously. Users who choose to register with their real name, and therefore

their true identity, will accrue reputation. They might answer questions from other forum members or post helpful information. Over time, they might accrue a reputation as someone who is helpful and will be identified by their true identity. Others on the site are free to Google them and learn even more background information about them than what they share in the forum.

While some forums have a culture that encourages (or even requires) registration with a real name, others allow or encourage registration with a pseudonym. A pseudonym in this case can look like a real name, or it can be a nickname or handle. Like users who register with their true name, those who register with a pseudonym can also accrue reputation in the forum community. The key difference between those using their real name and those using a pseudonym is that those with a pseudonym can choose to disconnect their true identity from their pseudonym. They can share and engage with the community without anyone else knowing who they really are. Using a pseudonym allows online participants to accrue a reputation; after repeated engagement the person behind the pseudonym can become a known member of the community and be seen as a regular contributor, a firebrand, or any other such identity they will convey through their participation.

Finally, some forums allow for anonymous posting and participation. In this case, the user posting anonymously will neither be able to be identified or accrue reputation. Alas, using pseudonyms or being anonymous online is often viewed with suspicion—if people have nothing to hide, then why hide their true identity? As with other issues raised in this book, and almost all issues having to do with student development, taking a binary approach obfuscates the range of possibilities, many of which are very beneficial for student development. As will be discussed later, there are certainly times when people hide behind the mask of

anonymity for nefarious reasons; however, there are many times in the regular course of student development when anonymity, pseudonymity, and a perceived disconnection from one's true identity help students more easily move through developmental tasks.

Why Are Levels of Online Identification Important?

Participating online using a pseudonym or a true identity not only allows the user to build a reputation but also to accrue the benefits received by participation in a community. One of these is the accrual of *social capital*—the psychological and physical benefits gained through connections with friends. People with more social capital are generally healthier and more connected to their communities (Adler & Kwon, 2000; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). Furthermore, research shows that using social media like Facebook for connection and communication leads to increased social capital (Burke, Kraut & Marlow, 2011; DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield & Fiore, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; 2011; Ellison, Vitak, Gray & Lampe, 2014). The difference between using a real name and a pseudonym is the most (in)visible—those who use a pseudonym have an added layer of privacy and, therefore, increased social distance. The importance of this distinction will be explored later in the section on the online disinhibition effect.

When users participate anonymously online, they are afforded a great deal of interpersonal privacy—that is, other users cannot tell who they are. The downside is that the users cannot accrue the benefits associated with being identified online, either using their true identity or a pseudonym. The upside is that the users generally do not experience the negatives associated with being identified online. For instance, someone may not feel comfortable posting that they are exploring their sexuality on an

online forum. They may be so reticent as to not even want to have a pseudonym associated with their posting. In some communities being gay and out could lead to negative social (and perhaps even physical) consequences for a young person. Those posting anonymously then often feel free to post things they otherwise wouldn't post when their identity is known, a facet of the online disinhibition effect examined later in the chapter.

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, stated, "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity"—exemplifying his belief that nothing good can come of being anonymous online (Helft, 2011). In an interview with Matt Ingram, Nancy Baym pointed out that Zuckerberg's view on identity "indicates just how privileged Zuckerberg as a wealthy, white, heterosexual male really is—in other words, someone who has nothing to fear from being transparent about his life, and no need to maintain two different identities" (Ingram, 2010). The different affordances of social media sites and services impose restrictions on or open up opportunities for levels of online identification. Facebook, for instance, during its early history required that users sign up with their real names and a college or university e-mail address. While individuals may sign up with any e-mail address now, Facebook works to enforce their name policy, which "require[s] everyone to provide their real names" for personal accounts (Facebook, 2013a). Zuckerberg has long expounded his interest in having all users use their real names (as well as his interest in having users share as much as they can, a topic raised in chapter 1). Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities states, "Facebook users provide their real names and information, and we need your help to keep it that way"; "You will not provide any false personal information on Facebook, or create an account for anyone other than yourself without permission" (Facebook, 2013b). In other words, you may not register a pseudonym on Facebook or participate anonymously.

The opposing viewpoint is that anonymous participation online is essential, not just for individuals' identity development, but also for their basic democratic and human rights. In a report on free expression online, an independent expert to the United Nation's Human Rights Council stated, "The right to privacy is essential for individuals to express themselves freely. Indeed, throughout history, people's willingness to engage in debate on controversial subjects in the public sphere has always been linked to possibilities for doing so anonymously." The report goes on to state that "the Internet also presents new tools and mechanisms through which both State and private actors can monitor and collect information about individuals' communications and activities on the Internet. Such practices can constitute a violation of the Internet users' right to privacy, and, by undermining people's confidence and security on the Internet, impede the free flow of information and ideas online" (La Rue, 2011).

In his keynote speech at the SxSW Interactive Conference in 2011, Chris "moot" Poole, the founder of 4chan, an image board website popular for its /b/ (random) board, declared that "anonymity is authenticity" and described how being anonymous online helps people take more risks with their creativity because "the cost of failure is really high when you're contributing as yourself." Diametrically opposed to Mark Zuckerberg's ideas about anonymity, Poole's site 4chan embraced, celebrated, and supported anonymous contributions. Users of 4chan have been responsible for many of the early and significant Internet memes such as lolcats and Rickrolling, as well as the hacking of *Time's* "World's Most Influential Person" poll to declare moot the winner. Also notable is that 4chan is recognized as the birthplace of Anonymous, the decentralized collection of online activists that has become famous for efforts to bring awareness of and foment resistance to corrupt governmental and corporate entities. Poole (2011) cites the success of many of the memes created anyony-

mously on 4chan as evidence that anonymity fuels creativity and experimentation. Critics argue that allowing users to participate anonymously allows them to more easily lie, deceive, and express themselves in ways that are hurtful to others. However, research has found that the opposite is true: when people communicate anonymously online, they are more likely to reveal intimate details about themselves (Whitty & Gavin, 2001) and self-disclose more (Qian & Scott, 2007).

Online anonymity is a powerful force for democratic freedoms, interpersonal growth, and creative expression. Therefore, it is vital for student affairs professionals to support online outlets for expression that allow youth to be anonymous or pseudonymous. It is helpful for us to take a more balanced approach when viewing the merits of online anonymity and not to subscribe to Zuckerberg's ideas about online identity. These ideas reflect not just his personal beliefs but also his company's interest in having users share as much as possible in order to mine their data for advertising purposes. Supporting students' ability to be anonymous and pseudonymous online allows them the freedom and creativity to explore who they are in relative safety and allows them to engage in the experimental identity play that may not occur effectively, if at all, when "the cost of failure is really high" while students are projecting new facets of a developing identity. This freedom is especially important for youth from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds, those who are developing an LGBT identity, and those who are from other disenfranchised groups.

Online Self-Presentation

Self-presentation is the conscious or unconscious process by which people try to influence the perception of their image, typically through social interactions. Self-presentation is a natural process that occurs in the offline world—people have a perceived image of

themselves and they expend psychological energy in trying to ensure that others see them the same way. So, if people believe they are generous, for example, they will act outwardly in generous ways; they may also highlight the ways in which they are generous so that others make the same evaluation of them. Self-presentation occurs through conscious processes such as selectively sharing self-relevant information. This process is analogous to what happens online—people do not share all aspects of their personality with the public. Details that they find distasteful, rude, or embarrassing never make it into the public sphere. Self-presentation also occurs through unconscious processes, as when people aren't aware of psychological dynamics they bring to interpersonal interactions. In this case, there is no outward declaration of these intrapsychic phenomena, because people themselves are not aware of these phenomena. Indeed, this is one of the focus areas of psychodynamic psychotherapy—addressing the subconscious drivers of behavior that lead to negative social, career, and interpersonal outcomes.

Through self-presentation (either conscious or unconscious), humans portray a desired image of themselves by controlling social interactions. Online platforms allow for different degrees of self-presentation and impression management. For instance, an online video chat platform allows for transmission of facial features and nonverbal facial expressions, as well as voice tone, accent, and volume. In contrast, a text-based forum may allow the user only one small, static profile picture (which, depending on the culture and mores of the forum, may not actually be an image of the user) and would communicate limited information about the person's identity. A social networking site like Facebook allows users to post multiple pictures, videos, and nuanced information about themselves in the form of not only background information but also the content users share and their comments on the content of others.

Self-presentation then allows youth to construct their identity by outwardly expressing the traits they find more desirable while suppressing those they find distasteful (note that a given individual can only do so to a certain extent, often limited by a person's psychological functioning). The online space is a perfect place for youth to then explore these identities and to receive feedback in measurable ways. Imagine that a student is navigating the process of exiting heterosexual identity; the student may test this new identity online either by posting relevant articles on Facebook under their true identity, by assuming a pseudonym and adopting a different identity and posting as someone who has already come out, or by anonymously discussing concerns about the coming-out process. In all of these ways, the student can garner support for the challenging intrapsychic and social processes he or she is dealing with.

The Online Disinhibition Effect

The *online disinhibition effect* occurs because people feel more comfortable saying something online than they would in a comparable offline (or face-to-face) situation. This effect is in part caused by the fact that there is much greater social distance online than there is in person. Online, there is a barrier between the communicator and the recipients—that barrier being the computer. It is certainly much easier to express a sentiment that would elicit a strong reaction when you do not see that reaction. Imagine how many times you would have loved to say exactly what was on your mind during a professional meeting but didn't for apprehension of what the reactions might be. Now imagine if there was no fear of consequences from your statement—would you have been more likely to share it? That can certainly be the case in online communications.

Almost exclusively, the online disinhibition effect is thought of as a negative process—one used by individuals who are

interested in provoking, shaming, or generally bullying others. Indeed, plenty of media reports express how online disinhibition leads only to negative consequences. While media coverage of online disinhibition can often be exaggerated and focused solely on negative aspects, there are certainly plenty of real examples of individuals being bullied or harassed because the perpetrator felt comfortable behind the perceived wall of anonymity afforded through online communications. For instance, Amanda Todd, a fifteen-year-old from Vancouver, British Columbia, committed suicide after being bullied and harassed online. A month before she died, she posted a YouTube video that clearly expressed her torment (Elam, 2012). Amanda's story is reflective of the US teen experience, with 11 percent reporting being the victims of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001); a 2011 Pew Internet Project survey found that 88 percent of social media-using teens have witnessed others being cruel or mean on social media (Lenhart et al., 2011).

What has been missing in the national dialogue about online disinhibition is the need for a more balanced approach to understanding the phenomenon and its effects. My research, for instance, has shown positive effects of online disinhibition. For example, students who are allowed to participate in ongoing class discussions on Twitter are more likely to engage on the platform and share sensitive issues and reactions that they wouldn't share in class. Interestingly enough, this effect carries over to the physical classroom, with students participating in more substantial ways in classroom discussions. In this way, online disinhibition helps students feel that they can share their true feelings about an issue and then helps them develop the ability to more freely share those feelings in front of others in class. Helping students, especially new college students, be more comfortable engaging in class discussions leads to improved academic outcomes. Certainly, this process is exactly one of the goals of higher education—to get students involved in their learning and to have them engage more fully in

the learning process. Often, professors are frustrated by the lack of participation in their courses; using an online system intended to engender engagement and communication and engage online disinhibition allows students to feel more free to participate.

It is therefore useful to understand the online disinhibition effect as a process that can result in both positive and negative outcomes. As student affairs professionals, we can take advantage of the online disinhibition effect in order to more fully support our students. Take the example of students who might be struggling with issues of coming out. Such students may not have had much support in their family or previous school. Now in college, they are feeling a little more comfortable because they are in a community that more openly embraces LGBT youth. The Internet is a relatively safe place for LGBT youth to seek information and connections in order to combat the marginalization they experience in their daily lives (Gasser, Cortesi, Malik & Lee, 2012). While LGBT youth might be comfortable exploring their LGBT identity online, they might not yet feel comfortable joining the campus LGBT group or asking questions at group meetings. Indeed, LGBT youth may hesitate even to be associated with such a group given their level of LGBT identity development and the marginalization they have already experienced. Such students benefit from joining online forums or spaces where they can share, receive information, and ask questions. There are many LGBT online forums that encourage users to adopt a pseudonym for this very reason—so that the users can feel freer to express themselves.

How Does Online Disinhibition Relate to Levels of Identification?

The more people are identifiable online, the less likely they will be to share openly. Someone who posts with his or her real name has a true identity for which the person is building a reputation.

Because the person is using his or her true identity, it is less likely that the person will take risks with what he or she posts online and engage in identity exploration. People may be concerned about the potential career and educational consequences of what they post—for instance, not getting a job because of what a potential employer finds out about them online. Many educators are often surprised to find out that college students are indeed concerned with online reputation and take active steps to manage that reputation. Even before they get to college, some students are aware that they must present themselves a certain way online in order to have the best possible college and career opportunities. Some students even go so far as to create idealized profiles—fake Facebook profiles that portray them in a way that they think adults *want* students to be, instead of showing their true identity.

SOCIAL MEDIA, IDENTIFICATION, DISINHIBITION, AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

College students are in the process of developing an identity, a stable sense of self that is both internally consistent and externally validated (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1968). Participating in social media allows students to test out or “try on” different facets of their identity through their online self-presentation. Because of online disinhibition, social media give youth the impression that these sites and services are safer places to understand who one is in the context of a social environment. Youth can receive almost-instant feedback about how they are presenting themselves and make just as instant adjustments. Social media help youth move toward consistency in their identity across situations and help them express this consistency publicly and have it recognized by others. Over time, young people begin to settle

into a stable sense of online identity expression, as evidenced by the consistency of what they post, how they behave, and their reactions toward others. There are three main affordances of doing such identity work online: first, youth are able to have more experiences to test (or “try on”) their developing identities than they can in offline interactions, which happen with less frequency; second, because of the online disinhibition effect, youth are more comfortable taking creative risks and exploring aspects of their identity that they would not wish to or be able to risk or explore offline; and third, exploration of identity online not only seems safer, it is safer, because there is less ego investment by students and their audience.

The extent to which entering college students can develop their identity is directly related to their academic and interpersonal success. Youth who don’t successfully pass through the stage of identity formation have much more difficulty in college environments. They don’t have strong interpersonal connections, which are necessary for feeling a sense of connection to the college environment and for developing academic and social integration, which in turn are related to their motivation to be successful (Tinto, 1993). Furthermore, building strong connections on social media help students develop greater social capital and have a supportive network of peers when they need assistance (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; 2011; Ellison, Vitak, Gray & Lampe, 2014). In these ways, students who have not successfully engaged in the process of identity formation have more difficulty adapting to college environments (Kroger, 2008). Learning about oneself but also about other’s reactions to that constructed self on social media is a skill that transfers to the offline environment. While the content and environments are different, the *process* remains the same—youth test out and learn who they are, learn about how others react to facets of their identity, and build significant interpersonal bonds. Indeed, the process of identity formation

online helps students build true intimacy in the offline world (Erikson, 1968).

Racial and ethnic identity development is an important part of the development of a sense of self. The development of racial and ethnic identity happens through an awareness of and interaction with the cultural environment in which an individual is situated. Minority youth in the *conformity* stage may prefer to interact with those in the majority group culture on social media; they may also post content (such as status updates, memes, and jokes) that express negative attitudes toward people of their own race or ethnicity. By interacting on these sites, minority youth may experience an event that precipitates their movement into the *dissonance* stage. They might be the target of racial epithets or witness a conversation that challenges their notion of their identification with the majority culture. For example, a young African American at the conformity stage might have witnessed the racist tweets in reaction to Barack Obama's reelection (for examples, see Morrissey, 2012); such a young person might have been shocked by how majority group members were reacting to African Americans, which might have led to dissonance about identifying with the tweeters and majority culture. If the dissonance was powerful enough, the young person would enter the *resistance and immersion* stage by engaging almost exclusively with African Americans online and participating in forums, groups, and pages supporting Afro-centric world views. After a period of time in this polarity, the young person might realize these views are too extreme, in the *introspection* stage. The young person might develop a more balanced view of the good and bad things about majority and minority cultures and ultimately move to the *synergistic articulation and awareness* stage, in which the young person can interact more fully online with members of all groups and have a more objective and balanced viewpoint about them.

Social media are relatively safe spaces for youth to examine their LGBT identities, especially when using a pseudonym. Youth may explore the differences in their attractions on social media and reach out to others who have self-identified as LGBT for more information. They may *lurk*, read postings about the coming-out process, and eventually use social media for *exiting heterosexual identity*. Again, through their interactions and information seeking online, they begin to *develop their LGBT identity status* by *entering (and participating in) an LGBT online community*. The affordances of the online space allow youth to develop these community connections first and to build social capital within, for instance, a forum dedicated to teens that are going through the coming-out process. Through these affordances, youth can build a community in relative privacy and explore healthy ways of coming out and engaging an LGBT identity. Before social media, it was very difficult if not impossible to join an LGBT community and still maintain a sense of anonymity; however, with social media and the ability to participate online via pseudonyms, as well as the inclination to share more because of the online disinhibition effect, youth are more likely to form connections that can help guide them through a difficult transition time. This holds especially true for youth from families and communities that discriminate against those from LGBT backgrounds. In this sense, the online space is a safe environment for the often-private identity work that comes along with being LGBT.

Examining identity development through the lens of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors, we see that the online space can be a very healthy and productive medium by which to support student development through these stages. Students *develop interpersonal competence*, in part, through the act of interacting with their peers online. Facebook is as important a social space for college students as is the student union (and perhaps even more

important than the student union, for more students use Facebook every day than pass through the doors of the student union). Well before their first day of college, students have started the process of *managing emotions*, by testing out their emotional communication online. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways they are able to express their frustrations, concerns, and elations online on sites like Facebook. The online disinhibition effect contributes to the facility with which students can express emotions online, because the expression of strong emotions in offline social interactions is almost regarded as a taboo in North American culture. Therefore, students are freer to explore their emotions and the impact of these expressions and begin to figure out how to regulate these feelings.

Students *move through autonomy toward interdependence* by first realizing their freedom from dependent relationships of their past and engaging in more self-sufficient behaviors. Eventually, they realize that, while they are perfectly comfortable being independent, dependence on others as equals is essential to success. The move from dependence may be expressed online as limiting content shared with parents who may be online friends or followers. Once students become independent, they use social spaces to build social capital but also to seek valuable information about their new college environment. The more students do so, the more they begin to realize that their social network plays an essential role in their continued success in college and beyond. The interaction between the online and offline is much tighter as students begin *developing mature interpersonal relationships*. On Facebook, students begin to realize individual differences in their peer group and begin to see an appreciation for these differences. Students test out forms of relating that go beyond the primary narcissism of earlier stages and reach to the more mature interpersonal processes.

Through the culmination of moving through and resolving the aforementioned vectors, students *establish identity*. They have

interacted with their peers in the offline and online worlds and taken advantage of the affordances of social media like Facebook. Because of online disinhibition, they are more likely to take creative risks and explore their identity online than they are in person, leading to more rapid movement through these stages. Furthermore, if students are exploring their identity by adopting a pseudonym or interacting anonymously, they may reap additional affordances of such processes—namely, they are freer to explore facets of their identity that they fear may be found “distasteful” by their peer group or by society at large. In these circumstances, the exploration of racial and cultural and LGBT identities shifts from being a potentially hazardous experience to one that is shrouded in safety and privacy. In some ways, interacting anonymously or with a pseudonym when testing out these minority identities is the equivalent of testing them in the safety of a social vacuum but actually being able to engage in social interactions. In this sense, interacting online becomes the “best of both worlds.”

A great example of students constructing identities online is through the creation and presentation of *idealized-self profiles*, which are often developed by high school students to dupe admissions officers and potential employers. Even before Kaplan released survey results showing that 26 percent of admissions officers check applicant Facebook profiles and that 35 percent of those said that they had discovered something online that negatively impacted an application, youth knew about these practices (Kaplan, 2012). Students who have stronger Internet skills engage in a wide variety of techniques to hide their real identity Facebook profiles. For instance, they might use their middle name as their last name, activate privacy preferences to the strictest degree, or delete their real identity Facebook profile every time they log off (which can then be easily reactivated the next time they log on). In addition to hiding their real identity profiles, they create an *idealized-self profile*, which is an extremely sanitized version of their

identity. Such profiles include only positive attributes, “safe for work” pictures and posts, and even status updates about nonexistent volunteer activities (“I just visited the nursing home for the fourth time this week and this feels great”). Unfortunately, it is those students with greater skill and perhaps even more parental input into their online behaviors that are savvy enough to engage in these practices, leaving those from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds and those of lower socioeconomic status at a disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

Youth engage in the process of identity development before, in their transition to, and throughout their college careers. Understanding that youth are exploring their identities in online social spaces allows student affairs professionals and other educators to move away from the adult normative perspective and see the benefits of using these technologies for positive psychological growth. Indeed, there are vast affordances for exploring identity through social media, especially for students from disenfranchised backgrounds. Specifically, youth can explore and “try on” new facets of their identities and engage in interpersonal interactions that either solidify or modify their perceptions of self. The online disinhibition effect allows students to take creative risks with identity play that they otherwise wouldn’t do in offline situations. Indeed, identity formation is enhanced through online interactions on social media, and such identity development is essential for student success. If a student does not form a solid identity, the student will not have strong connections to the institution and peer group and will be less likely to persist. Exploring identity online is especially powerful for students who are from minority racial or ethnic backgrounds or who are LGBT as they need to develop a sense of identity that is often separate from the majority

culture that dominates most college campuses. For some, it is only in online social spaces that they can find a critical mass of individuals with similar identities who can support their transition through these important developmental stages. Student affairs professionals are encouraged to support students in their engagement on these sites and to validate their exploration of their identities online. For without these safer online social spaces, identity aspects essential to healthy student growth might not ever be achieved.

Practical Tips

1. Consider your perspective when working with students and whether a shift to a youth normative perspective might be warranted.
2. Ask your students to teach you about how they use social media and how these technologies affect their lives.
3. Understand how students use social media to develop their identity.
4. Support freedom in online expression and encourage students to explore the benefits of the different levels of online identification.
5. Leverage online disinhibition to promote creative risk taking and exploration of identity.

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