Computers in Human Behavior 49 (2015) 362–374

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh

Mediating effect of self-acceptance between values and offline/online identity expressions among college students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 27 March 2015

Keywords:
Values
Self-acceptance
Offline identity
Online identity
Identity expression
College students

ABSTRACT

College-aged students face unique pressures to express a coherent identity to peers, particularly via social networking sites and other digital spaces. This study investigates how self-acceptance and values influence whether students express their identity authentically, i.e. "as they truly are", online and offline. Between November and December 2013, we surveyed 459 Turkish university students (78% female) between 18 and 38 years old (M = 21.6 years) about identity expression, self-acceptance, and values. Our pathway model hypothesized that self-acceptance mediates the effect of values upon online and offline identity expression. Results demonstrate that freedom as a value significantly influenced self-acceptance in our postsecondary student sample, and self-acceptance significantly influenced the tendency of participants to represent themselves authentically offline and online. Path analysis also yields that freedom, romantic values, human dignity, social, and career values have positive small indirect effects on authenticity in offline identity expression, whereas materialistic, spiritual, and intellectual values have small indirect negative effects. Similarly, freedom, romantic values, human dignity, social, and career values have positive small indirect effects on authenticity in online identity expression, whereas materialistic, spiritual, and intellectual values have small indirect negative effects. The study also found that sex, socioeconomic status (SES), and "wanting to be a teacher" did not have a significant effect on self-acceptance when age was controlled. Finally, the study found that "wanting to be a teacher" has a significant, but small effect on authenticity in offline and online identity expression. More research is needed that investigates the interaction between online/offline identity, self-acceptance, and values (especially freedom).

1. Introduction

The present study investigates the factors that lead postsecondary students enrolled in a university Elementary Education program to establish authentic and healthy identities both online and offline. Drawing upon diverse literature in psychology and Internet studies, we propose that an individual's degree of self-acceptance will influence the authenticity of both their online and offline identities; we further propose that self-acceptance itself may be influenced by the particular values they have acquired.

The current literature has yet to examine identity construction and expression (both online and offline), values, and self-acceptance under a single comprehensive model. In the introduction, we will connect the psychological understanding of identity with recent scholarship of online identity construction via social media and other emerging digital platforms. From there, we will show the relationships that have been drawn between values and identity, especially those that have built upon Schwartz's typology of values. Finally, we will explore the emerging literature on self-acceptance and attempts to link self-acceptance to both values and identity.

1.1. Identity and college students

As individuals seek to establish a consistent ego identity over the course of their lives, they face a number of defining crises and challenges (Erikson, 1968). The developmental perspective on psychology builds upon Erickon's psychosocial stages of development (Adams & Marshall, 1996), which postulated that, at each developmental stage, individuals must confront a psychosocial crisis and, in doing so, develop a new virtuous quality (Erikson, 1968). Adams and Marshall (1996) emphasize that identity development does not occur in the vacuum of the individual; rather, identity

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.03.025
0747-5632/

construction occurs within social-psychological processes, engaging what Adams and Marshall refer to as "person-in-context" (p. 436). Thus, the developmental struggles of individuals may follow their personal development trajectory, but take place within an embedded, relational context.

Adams and Marshall (1996, p. 433) identify five common functions of identity: it provides a structure of self-understanding; it provides meaning and directions through commitments, *values*, and goals; it provides a sense of free will; it strives for consistency, coherence, and harmony between *values*, beliefs, and commitments; and it enables the recognition of potential. They argue that identity construction takes place through *social influence* (imitation of and identification with others) and *active self-construction* (the creation of what is important to the self and others). Once in young adulthood – a period that Erikson defined as ages 18 to 40 – individuals who have successfully developed an ego identity must then confront the conflict of intimacy versus isolation (Erikson, 1968).

University students, as individuals predominately in their late adolescent or early adulthood years, belong to a cohort facing unique and unprecedented challenges with regard to identity construction in the twenty-first century. According to Erikson, young adults will have already encountered the conflict of identity confusion in adolescent and moved on to negotiating their relationships with others (or the intimacy vs isolation conflict) (Erikson, 1968). However, a new body of scholarship has focused on the adolescent and young adult social crisis and found that contemporary young adulthood in the early twenty-first century may be more complex and uncertain when compared to past generations (Arnett, 2000; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). In their research into identity and agency, Schwartz et al. (2005) note that 21st century adolescents face many societal conditions that make advancing a consistent identity difficult. *Emerging adulthood* has emerged as an addendum stage of identity development that acknowledges the protracted process of identity construction, particularly in the context of postmodern societal and economic configurations. Thus for college students, the psychosocial crisis of identity may continue and carry over into the new environment of the university, where they face unprecedented opportunities for identity construction and play.

1.2. Identity, consistency, and social networking sites (SNSs)

As digital natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010), twenty-first century university students also face an unprecedented array of Internet-mediated opportunities for identity construction alongside their friends and peers.

Increasingly, social networking sites serve as a mandatory experience in youth identity construction. Just as blogging and personal homepages afford unique opportunities for expression (Davis, 2010; Stern, 2008), social networking sites provide a digital environment for active identity construction with heavy peer interaction (Boyd, 2007, p. 120). As of January 2013, 89% of all young adult Internet users (18–29 year olds) use social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2014). In her study of teenage use patterns of Myspace, an extremely popular social networking site among secondary students in the United States at the time (Boyd, 2007), danah Boyd (2007) found that social networking sites served as a kind of *networked public* where youth could hang out. Networked publics are distinct from unmediated publics because of the persistence, searchability, replicability, and the invisibility of their audience (Boyd, 2007).

While social networking sites and other online resources provide opportunities for identity play via anonymity and multiplicity, there may be psychological costs to inconsistency. The advent of online profiles enabled users to play with "multiplicity and flexibility" when constructing postmodern identities (Turkle, 1999). In recent years, the intellectual excitement generated by digital postmodern identities has given way to concerns about the practical and developmental implications of digital identities (Kennedy, 2006). For instance, in an in-depth study with 24 youth aged 15–24, Davis (2012a) found that while participants acknowledged that creating and managing multiple profiles could lead to greater and more diverse opportunities for self-expression, they also expressed discomfort at a number of threats that multiplicity of identity present, such as personal injury, interpersonal betrayal, violation of online social norms, and community-level harm (Davis, 2012a, p. 645).

While "what it means to be a young person hasn't changed" in the digital native era (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010, p. 32), active identity construction for youth in digital spaces involves unique risks with regards to permanence and control. Palfrey and Gasser (2010, p. 34) describe a paradoxical element to online social identities: "Social identities are much richer, more varied, and more persistent – and far less under our control – than ever before. She appears to have more control over her identity, but in fact she has less." And while the Internet affords new opportunities for multiplicity (creating new, experimental selves through SNSs or massively multiplayer RPGs, for example), it is also increasingly likely that these identities will converge into a single traceable identity, perhaps against the desires of youth to stay anonymous (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010, p. 34–35). The concept of identity confusion, as advanced by Erikson (1968), takes on a new meaning in the light of both multiplicity and unwanted convergences in digital identity construction.

1.3. Self-acceptance: Positive evaluation of self-concept

As youth and emerging adults utilize social networking sites and other digital spaces to construct their identity, they must make decisions about authenticity, cohesion, and self-representation. Of critical importance to this process is their internal relationship to their identity – the sense of what is valuable, appropriate, and good to represent in themselves.

Emerging in prototypical form over the second half of the 20th century (e.g. Jersild, 1952; Omwake, 1954; Shepard, 1979) *self-acceptance* has become a popular focal point of both therapeutic interventions and broader understanding of well-being, especially among young people (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999).

Self-acceptance is defined as "an individual's acceptance of all his/her positive and negative sides" (Ceyhan & Ceyhan, 2011, p. 650), and it involves "realistic and subjective awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses" (Bernard, 2013, p.xiv). Self-concept is "an individual's awareness of the total set of characteristics which belong to them" (Rosenberg, 1986). Self-acceptance is an evaluative component of self-concept and refers to individual's satisfaction and happiness with herself (Shepard, 1979). Thus self-acceptance occurs if a person accepts her various traits and characteristics she sees through her self-concept.

Crucially, both self-concept and self-acceptance develop in the social ecosystem. Parental attitudes and relationships with others (especially supportive and trusting relationship with important people such as close friends, teachers, and relatives) have pivotal role on the development of healthy self (Malkoç, 2011; Needham & Austin, 2010). In particular, self-acceptance provides an important safeguard for youth, who are often presented with external evaluations of their worth, especially in the academic environment (Bernard, Vernon, Terjesen, & Kurasaki, 2013).

Teachers and professors have a crucial opportunity to de-emphasize the external valuation strategies that lead to self-evaluation, and instead foster in youth the skills of self-acceptance that