Teenage Identities and Social Media

Introduction

We live in an ever and fast-changing world, and this change is seen particularly regarding technology. However, do technological advancements impinge on our human relationships and lifestyles? It makes sense to think that technological advancements influence our identities.

The information in this Factsheet is relevant to a number of exam topics:

- Media, particularly 'New Media',
- Culture & Identity,
- Stratification & Differentiation,
- Socialisation & Culture, particularly 'Acquisition of Identity', and 'Youth Culture'.

These changes in technology, are exemplified by what is referred to as *new media.* Lister et al (2003) assert that what distinguishes *new media* from traditional media are five factors:

1. **Digitality**: put simply, digitality means 'being digital'. It also explores the impact of new technologies on our lives. This could mean the use of digital devices such as computers, mobile phones, digital TV's, etc.

> **Activity**
> Try to work out how much time during a typical 24-hour period that you spend occupied with digital activities.

2. **Interactivity:** meaning the audience or consumer can engage and interact with a range of media. They can create their own media or customise media, and they can do this because of **convergence** (our technological devices combine various technologies – e.g., we can take a photograph or video on our phones and edit it, then send it via a text or email to another person). Interactivity on the internet is often referred to as Web 2.0 (Web 1.0, which preceded it, only allowed the passive viewing of content rather than interaction). With Web 2.0 consumers can interact with each other, file-share, and swap user-generated content, including on social media.

3. **Hypertextuality:** this is where links form a web of connections to other bits of information, which gives consumers/users ways of searching, interacting with, and customising media for their own use.

4. **Dispersal:** the new media has become less centralised, and it has adapted to individual choices. We use the internet for so many aspects of our lives – information, emails, entertainment, and even dating! We use laptops, tablets, digital TV, social networking, we download content onto our devices, etc.

5. **Virtuality:** we can now immerse ourselves in totally unreal interactive experiences in virtual worlds (such as computer games). We can also make imaginary identities online, e.g. on social network sites such as Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, and Second Life (which combines gaming and social networking).

> **Activity**
> Think about your own identity on-line, either your accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. Decide in what ways you adjust or change your identity and the reasons why?

Teenagers

Though the use of the term *teenager* is embedded within our contemporary culture, the status of the group did not occur until around the early 1950's. Within Western societies there is a grey area between childhood and adulthood, this period is not fixed, and the changes within our culture have increased this sense of blurring. It is important therefore to think of the teenage status as being ambiguous, it changes from situation to situation. This is then reflected in the confusion that teenagers themselves feel.

> **Activity**
> What are some of the things that you feel add to the ambiguity of being a 'teenager'? Try to reflect on your own experience.

Identity

Identity is the sense that a person has of who they are, and what is important about them.

- Personal identity is how a person thinks about themselves.
- Social identity is how they are perceived by others.

> **Activity**
> Personal and social identity do not always match.
> Why might this be? Can you think of examples?

Postmodernists argue that traditional sources of identity such as social class, gender, and ethnicity have become more fragmented within contemporary society. They argue that:

- Individuals are active in the creation of their own identity,
- Individuals have an enormous amount of choice as to what social groups to join,
- Through consumption, individuals can shape and change their identities.

Some postmodernists argue that we no longer have a stable sense of identity at all. Identity is much more fragmented.

> **Activity**
> With this postmodern perspective on identity in mind, think about your own identity as a teenager (assuming that you are 16-19), and list aspects of your identity that you think of as typically or generically teenage. Then think about the aspects of your identity that are not typically teenage, and ask yourself how many of those aspects are related to consumption.

New and Social Media

New media are starting to overtake traditional media as a means of mass communication. A Microsoft survey of 2014 concluded that internet use across Europe is now around 14 hours a week per person, this is compared to around 12 hours a week of television viewing. Internet use is likely to increase with the huge global growth of streaming websites such as Netflix.

According to the ONS (Office for National Statistics), 22 million households in the UK (84%) had internet access in 2014, up from 57% in 2006. And in 2015, 22.5 million households (or 86%) had internet access. ONS data also shows that the internet was used daily by 82% of adults (41.8 million) in GB in 2016, compared with 78% (39.3 million) in 2015 and 35% (16.2 million) in 2006. This is showing more than a doubling in 10 years.

Mobiles, or smartphones, are the most popular devices used by adults who access the internet – 71% of adults in Great Britain, compared to 62% laptop or notebook, 52% tablet, 40% desktop, 21% smart TV, and 18% other mobile device (Adults = 16+).

> **Exam Hint**: *The use of statistics such as those from the ONS in the exam is a good way to illustrate a point or argument, though you must do something with them, not just quote them. Explain what they show, or explain why you have used the statistics in your answer.*

ONS data gives a breakdown on what people do on the internet:

Finding information about goods and services	74%
Social networking	91%
Reading on line news or magazines	66%
Internet banking	61%
Looking for health related information	49%
Uploading content created by yourself to a website to be shared	59%
Watching internet streamed TV from TV broadcasters	59%

It is interesting that the highest percentage figure above is for social networking, and the use of the internet for social networking has continued to grow and has become part of many adult's everyday lives.

There is, however, a generation gap to be seen when looking at the use of new media. Boyle (2007) asserts that younger people who have grown up with new media have therefore learnt to use the internet at both home and school and from their peers, and so are more media savvy. Young people have the highest levels of internet access and use, and this declines among older age groups.

Within the UK (2016) social networking sites have large numbers of users:

- Pinterest – 10,300,000
- Snapchat – 10,000,000
- LinkedIn – 10,000,000
- Instagram – 14,000,000
- Facebook – 32,000,000
- Google+ – 12,600,000
- YouTube – 19,100,000
- Twitter – 15,000,000
- Tumblr – 9,000,000
- Reddit – 6,600,000
- Vimeo – 412,085

The figures above are for **all** users, and so they do not tell us what the percentage of teenagers is, however, an assumption could be made that a large percentage of these users are teenagers.

> **Activity**
> Make a list of all the social media sites that you access regularly. Once you have made the list, answer the following:
> - How did you construct your user name?
> - How do you choose your profile photos?
> - What sort of things do you post, and why?
> - What impact do the reactions you receive have on you?

http://www.underconsideration.com/bran
radically_new_f_logo.php

Identity – The 'Looking-Glass Self'

In 1902, the sociologist Charles Cooley, in his *On Self and Social Organisation*, developed the concept of the *looking-glass self* to explain the process of negotiated interaction. The looking-glass self is the idea that the image we have of ourselves is reflected like a mirror, back to us, in the views of others. Because of this reflection, we consider and then may modify, even change our view of ourselves, and our behaviour.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Looking_glass_self

If you see yourself as a friendly outgoing person, but the feedback (reflection) you receive from others suggests you are introverted and unfriendly, you may either adapt a new self-identity in-line with how others see you, or possibly change your behaviour to try to change people's opinion of you.

The degree of personal insecurity you display in social situations is determined by what you believe other people think of you. So, it can be argued that how we see ourselves does not come from who we really are, but from how we believe others see us. We form our self-image as the reflections of the response and evaluations of others. People in our close environment serve as the mirrors that reflect images of ourselves. Cooley argued that there are 3 steps:

1. We imagine how we appear to other people. Sometimes this may be correct, but may be wrong as it is based on assumptions.
2. We imagine what judgements people make of us based on our appearance.
3. We imagine how the people feel about us, based on the judgements made of us. The ultimate result is that we often change our behaviour based on how we feel people perceive us.

> **Activity**
> Summarise Cooley's 'looking-glass self' theory in your own words, then apply it to your own social media use, thinking about responses you receive and how you interpret and deal with them. Apply this to both posts and photographs of yourself.

Definition of trolling: a troll is someone who leaves an intentionally annoying/offensive message on the internet to get attention or cause trouble.

> **Activity**
> Think about 'trolling' on social media and again apply the 'looking-glass self'.

Identity and Postmodernism

As discussed earlier, within a postmodern society – identity is now a much more fragmented concept. Media images, consumption, and lifestyle are now the major sources of identity. Identity is less predictable, more fluid and fragmented. It is based now,more on choice than the constraints of social structures – class, ethnicity, education etc. We are subject to a *pick 'n' mix* approach to identity; we can change our identity at will. There is even a fragmentation of identities among people within the same social group.

> **Activity**
> Apply this pick 'n' mix approach to yourself and other members of your peer group, thinking particularly about the transmission of ideas through social media. Is this a concept you can relate to?

Bauman (1996) argues that we now gain meaning through consumption choices, influenced by designer labels, lifestyles, and images gained from the global media in a media-saturated society.

> **Exam Hint:** *Theory is extremely important when answering exam questions, postmodernism particularly relevant with topics such as this, as it helps explain so much about our contemporary society.*

Identity and Instagram

Instagram is an online mobile photo and video sharing and social networking service. Users can share their pictures and videos publicly and privately, on the app as well as through other social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr. It was launched in 2010 and by 2014 had 300 million users.

> **Activity**
> From what you know of Instagram, through either personal use or through peer experience, write a paragraph linking Instagram to both postmodernism and thr looking-glass self.

A group of researchers at Penn State's College of Information Science and Technology conducted some research in 2015 into the different ways teenagers and adults use Instagram. The researchers chose Instagram for their research because more than 90% of Instagram users are younger than 35. They defined teenagers as being between 13 and 19, and adults as being between 25 and 39. They found:

- Teenagers are using social media generally as a conversation space and an outlet for self-expression more so than adults, and are more focused on posting photographs that attract attention.
- Teenagers have much higher levels of self-disclosure on the internet.
- Teenagers were found to post fewer photos on Instagram than adults although they do post more selfies than adults do. In addition, teenagers tend to manipulate their photograph content to receive as many "likes" as possible, and remove photographs with too few likes.
- More than half of the photographs posted by teenagers fall under the "mood/emotion" and "follow/like" topics. Those topics are not necessarily tied to the content of photos but rather describe one's emotional status or the intention to have more followers.
- Adults show a higher ratio of posts falling under more diverse topics, including "arts/photos/design", "locations", "nature", and "social/people."

- Teenagers tend to be more verbose in their biographies, and actively advertise for others to follow them. They tend to have more likes, tags, comments, and be more expressive about themselves and their photographs.

All of these findings helped the researchers to conclude that teenagers see social media as a place for self-expression and amassing a following.

> **Activity**
> Do the findings of the researchers above coincide with your experience of using Instagram or social media generally? If so, in what ways?

> **Activity**
> Do some of your own research into famous teenagers and their identity on social media, you can choose one of the following or your own example. Try to determine how they construct their identity through social media and then apply some theory, whichever theory you think is appropriate.
> Kylie Jenner – 19 – reality TV personality and model
> Lottie Tomlinson – 17 – make-up artist
> Luka Sabbat – 18 – model and stylist
> Pyper America Smith – 18 – model and musician
> Jazz Jennings – 15 – transgender activist
> Malia Obama – 17 – eldest daughter of President Barack Obama
> http://uk.businessinsider.com/where-will-malia-obama-go-to-college-2015-10?r=US&IR=T

Baudrillard

Baudrillard (2001) argues that within postmodern society individuals search for satisfaction via media-created desires and pressure to consume. As a consequence, individual identity, and behaviour is no longer formed primarily through class, gender, or ethnicity, but by information, images, and signs (e.g. designer labels) gained from the media. In a globalized society, the media offers us a massive choice of lifestyles, images, and identities from all over the world.

> **Activity**
> Using just images and no words, put together a wall chart of teenagers 'then' and 'now'. On one side of the chart put images of teenagers from the 1950's to 1970's and on the other side put images of contemporary teenagers. Concentrate on aspects of teenage identity on both sides. When it is finished, write a paragraph on the images of each side, by summing up aspects of teenage identity. What are the differences? How much of a role does social media play do you think?

> **Exam Hint:** *The information within this Factsheet could be put to good use in an exam question, such as:*
> *'Discuss factors that could influence teenage (youth) identity'*
> *You would write about how social media plays its part in influencing youth identity, possibly referring to:*
> - *A general discussion of what teenagers are and how identity is formed.*
> - *How social media feeds into this.*
> - *Theoretical perspectives, e.g. Cooley's 'Looking-glass self', Postmodernism – 'pick n' mix', Bauman, and Baudrillard.*
> - *Research such as the Penn State's College's findings on Instagram.*
> - *Illustration by way of examples, including your own experience.*