LONELY GIRL: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON IDENTITY FORMATION FOR AN ISOLATED ADOLESCENT HOMESCHOOLER

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Abstract

When an adolescent experiences feelings of isolation, he/she will seek out ways to alleviate these feelings. Interacting with digital media allows those who are isolated, whether it's geographically or emotionally, to experience forming social connections with their peers and to construct their identity. Isolated adolescents use social media to connect with their communication partner and each informs the other's literacies. Their identities will not remain static, but will continue to evolve with each new social engagement. With every new audience in the social communication virtual world, there is the potential for changed social identities. The information in this paper pertains specifically to the ways in which one 16-year-old homeschooler uses digital media to create her social identity and reciprocate learning with her communication partners. Theories of sociocultural learning and literacy as a social practice are the perspectives through which the information in this article is viewed. It is suggested that digital media be assimilated into educational curriculum so that learning is more broadly informed by both traditional and online literacies.

Keywords: social identity, homeschool, online literacies, digital media, identity construction

1   INTRODUCTION

"I don't see a lot of people that much, so I don't text a whole lot. [When]…I text the people that I see…it doesn't feel like you're far away from them anymore, like when you leave them. It still feels like you're with them, sort of." (Claudia, personal communication, February 23, 2011; all names are pseudonyms).

As a homeschooled adolescent with several younger siblings, sixteen-year-old Claudia oftentimes finds herself inundated with familial responsibilities that leave virtually no time for face-to-face interactions with peers. Her educational schedule and responsibilities prevent her from participating in typical teenage social activities. Until the last six months, Claudia did not have access to a text messaging device. No one in her family owns a cell phone. Camille, Claudia's mother, related to me during her interview, "Sometimes she'll say, "Momma, you need to get a cell phone." We're home most of the time and...you try to manage cash flow and that kind of stuff and you just think, 'We don't really need it right now.' But, she'll sometimes kind of be a little maybe embarrassed that we don't have one if we're out somewhere I'll ask [someone] if I can use their phone. Most people are willing for you to use the phone. And I try not to do that very much, but if it comes down to...you can still navigate through life without a cell phone. It's just not convenient. (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

Claudia would like for her mother should get a cell phone of her own instead of asking other people to borrow theirs. She feels embarrassed and as though even in this small way, they do not conform to traditional standards of communication manners. Claudia wants to feel as if she belongs.

Recently, Claudia saved her money and purchased an iPod touch, a   portable media player, personal digital assistant, handheld game console, and Wi-Fi mobile device designed and marketed by Apple Inc. [1], that can be used as a telephone, complete with texting ability. She not only uses this device in the conventional manner, but also to maintain social connections to her peers so that she can stave off the sometimes overwhelming feelings of isolation brought on by circumstances beyond her control.

For many homeschooled children, their absence from an educational institution is not a hindrance to their interaction with their friends because they are afforded socialization opportunities that fulfil their need for peer engagement. The majority of parents who educate their children at home form like-minded communities with other families and do not homeschool in isolation (Collom & Mitchell, 2005) [2]. In her educational setting, Claudia is academically stimulated, but does not regularly interact face-to-face with age-mates.   She relies on electronic media, such as facebook, email, chat, and texting,

for peer communication. And it is through this communication, in part, that she is forming her identity. But she is not alone. There are also students who are educated in the traditional setting, that are isolated from peer contact, either by inclination or aversion. According to Gross, Juvonen and Gable (2002) [3], many of these adolescents are finding acceptance and a sense of community in virtual interactions, which is helping to socially construct their identities.

Growing numbers of children are electronically reaching out to virtually engage with someone. The more adolescents communicate, the more they are shaping their literacy practices. Although the focus of this paper is on one homeschooler, the implications are broad and complex. Claudia uses social media as a surrogate for face-to-face peer interactions because she is not peer-stimulated socially on a regular basis. I visited with Claudia and her parent/educator. I interviewed them both, took field notes, and collected self-selected text message samples from Claudia. I delved into information taken from interviews, field notes, and these text message samples for the response to my overarching research question: How is social media influencing the construction of this adolescent homeschooler's identity and informing her literacies?

2   PERSPECTIVE

I viewed this research with two perspectives in mind: sociocultural learning and literacy as a social practice. In his 1978 work, *Mind in Society* [4], Vygotsky wrote "Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p.90). Vygotsky believed that more complex ideas and learning stem as a direct result from interactions in the context of one's social environment. He also believed that children learn about cultural priorities when they make use of the tools of society and by inclusion in activities with others who share a cultural background (Vygotsky, 1978) [4]. These tools can be symbolic or physical and they differ with the prioritized skills and abilities of the group. In the westernized world, the societal tools of adolescent cultures most often involve technology in the form of cell phones or computers (Lantolf, 2000) [5]. As adolescents are in the social context of interacting with their peers and using the tools of their society, they are learning.

Street (2003) [6] wrote about literacy as a "social practice" (p.77) and expanded on the idea that as youth interact, they inform each other's literacy (Street & Lefstein, 2007) [7]. As adolescents communicate and exchange ideas electronically, they influence the way in which their language is acquired and used. van Manen (2010) [8] wrote, "When young people are in touch with each other through text messaging and sending multimedia images, their writing and communicative practices are simultaneously extended and constrained, freed and restricted by the media" (p.1029). The context in which the communication occurs is as important as the actual message because it is only in that context that it has any meaning (Gee, 2008) [9]. How youth socially engage, constructs their "knowledge, identity and being" (Street, 2003, p. 78) [6] and influences the information and skills learned. Consequently, as isolated adolescents use social media to make peer-to-peer connections, they are living examples that literacy is a social practice.

3   REV IEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literacy is no longer simply the ability to read and write traditional printed text. Literacy now also involves interacting with digital media (Cowan, 2010) [10]. As youths engage with technology and each other, they are allowing this medium to inform their thoughts and choices which represent their identities (Carrington, 2007; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004) [11]. According to Austin and Willard (1998) [12], a person's identity is constructed by social interactions in a specific context, but it will continue to evolve with new interactions.

3.1   Homeschoolers

A homeschooler is a person educated in the home, usually by a parent. Sometimes, parents will form co-op groups for the purposes of small group instruction in order to draw on the individual teaching strengths of the parent-educators, or engage a tutor for the group as a companion to the home education structure (Alcott, 2007; St. John & St. John, 2010) [13] [14]. But whether the delivery of the instruction is within the confines of a home or in a rented space for the small group, the idea behind this educational choice is the same: parents personally supervise their children's education in an intimate setting where focus is on the children and their specific learning needs (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Gaither, 2008; St. John & St. John, 2010) [15] [16] [14].

For each family, the decision to homeschool is motivated by beliefs and reasons that are personal (Gathercole, 2007) [17], but can be grouped into four categories, "religious, academic, dissatisfaction with public schools, and family lifestyle (includes special needs)" (Collom, 2005, p. 311) [18]. But whatever the impetus behind the break from traditional schooling, the end result is that children are separated from their non-homeschooled peer group.

Participation in social activities for many homeschoolers is a regular event that provides for their socialization needs. However, there are some youth in a homeschool environment who interact with people outside their immediate families infrequently. They are socially and geographically isolated from their age-mates and must depend on alternative methods to engage and communicate.

3.2 Social Media

Adolescents, both homeschooled and institutionally educated, are communicating prolifically and they are using social media to do it. For the purposes of this article, I am defining social media as handheld and desktop online interactive electronic tools used for communication. Examples of social media are facebook, my space, blogs, IM (or chats), text messaging, virtual reality, and email. Increasingly, as adolescents are engaging in social networking, they are using the digital world to contact their peers (Brody, 2006; Frantz, 1970; van Manen, 2010) [19] [20] [8], and in doing so, constructing their identities (McLean, 2010; Merchant, 2010; Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005) [21] [22] [23]. Some adolescents feel that the digital world is their home (McLean, 2010) [21] and some struggle to have their voice "heard" (Berson & Berson, 2005) [24]. Whatever their level of involvement, adolescents will naturally gravitate towards the social media tools that best fit their personality and their needs (Berson & Berson, 2005; Lin, et al., 2007) [24] [25]. As they engage in social dialogues, adolescents are influencing each other's identity formation because the literacies they employ as they "hang out, commiserate, and gossip" (van Manen, 2010, p. 1025) [8] with each other online or via texts (boyd, 2008) [26], i.e., their "friendship driven" participation media (PBS, 2011, February 13) [27], are embedded in their social development (Street, 2003; Street & Lefstein, 2007) [6] [7]. By choosing to digitally reach out to their peers, adolescents are deciding which parts of their inner selves they display and which parts they do not, as they navigate online communication.

Digital mediums will oftentimes expand social networks, improve social skills and self-confidence, and lessen the feelings of social anxiety that adolescents may feel in non-virtual conversational situations (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Campbell, Cumming, & Hughes, 2006; Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000) [28] [29] [3] [30]. Communication exchanges are the hallmark of digital technology. And while adolescents are using social media to virtually connect with someone, somewhere on the other side of a screen, they are influencing each other's language choices, literacies, and learning in the context of online interaction with their peers. This cyberspace engagement is a way to counteract feelings of isolation they may experience in the real world because, as Claudia said, "…it doesn't feel like you're far away from them anymore" (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

4   PREVIOUS STUDIES

When an adolescent experiences feelings of isolation, he/she will seek out ways to alleviate these feelings. Interacting with digital media allows those who are isolated, whether it's geographically or emotionally, to experience forming social connections with their peers and to construct their identity. In a recent study, Bonetti, Campbell and Gilmore (2010) [31] found that children and adolescents who self-identified as lonely, were more likely to use digital media to improve their social skills to meet new people. The researchers suggested that the indications from the study were that the participants were more likely to use online communication for "social interactions, self-disclosure and identity exploration" (p.279). The indications are that these children and adolescents are seeking to self-soothe their feelings of loneliness with digital technology.

Also, in a 2005 study, Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter [23] investigated the ways in which children and adolescents who self-identified as social media users, experimented with their identity online. They discovered that girls experimented more than boys, but that could be a result of lessening self-esteem and feelings of body image unhappiness for the girls. They concluded that the "internet can play an important role in adolescents' identity exploration" (p.398). Of the youth that categorized themselves as online communicators, many of them experiment with their identities. As they changed their identity for their audience, they were creating new social identities.

Adolescents are socially aware of themselves and are beginning to look to the future of who they might someday become (Larson, 1995) [32]. They are "agents acting on their own behalf" (Austin & Willard, 1998, p. 7) [12] as they create social online identities, which can change with their audience (Hinn, Leander, & Bruce, 2001; Valkenburg, et al., 2005) [33] [23]. Youth tend to tailor their language as they engage with each group, and will differentiate their word choices with peer groups and with family (Kandell, 1998; Katz & Aspden, 1997; McLean, 2010) [34] [35] [21]. The language in the text message they send to their friends will look very different from the emails they send to their teacher. Each message is constructed to relate ideas, but to also inform the receiver about the sender. These few keystrokes tell volumes of information about the identity of the person writing it – much more than simply the words in the message.

Isolated adolescents use social media to connect with their communication partner and each informs the other's literacies. Their identities will not remain static, but will continue to evolve with each new social engagement. With every new audience in the social communication virtual world, there is the potential for changed social identities. The missing piece of information in this article pertains to the ways in which a homeschooler is engaging with social media to form her identity.

5   CONTEXT AND METHOD

Claudia was specifically chosen from among other homeschooled adolescents as my focal participant. She is the oldest child in a family with nine children. She has been exclusively homeschooled by her mother who had at one time been a high school science teacher and girls' athletic team coach. The father is a business professional and works each day at an office, while the mother runs an online home business and homeschools the children with curriculum she has designed. The younger children attend religious training one night a week. In addition, the entire family goes to religious services once a week. Claudia and her mother teach piano and guitar lessons, often together, to clients they know from church. The family lives in a rural southern town.

In a month's time, I collected data from my participant in her home as that was where she was most comfortable. Table 1 shows the kinds of data collected and explains the significance of each data sample in relation to the study.

Table 1

Date collected	02/20/2011 03/17/2011	02/23/2011 03/19/2011 05/28/2011	02/23/2011 03/19/2011	02/23/2011 03/19/2011
Data Type	Phone Call 1 Phone Call 2	Interview with Claudia; then with Camille (mom) _____ Re-interview with Claudia _____ Member-checking	Social Media Samples	Researcher Field Notes
Explanation	1-Screening Call to ascertain eligibility for study 2-Follow up for additional information	Participant interviewed for initial research; parent interviewed for additional perspective _____ Re-interview for clarification and new information _____ To verify information	I collected several participant selected social media samples for analysis	Notes were taken during interviews in order to record researcher responses to participant

Sociocultural theory holds that as people (adolescents) are in the context of using cultural tools, (social media), they collaborate in their learning [4]. So, I chose to use a sample from Claudia's social media engagement to highlight her interaction with a peer. With this, I was able to follow the conversation and observe the back-and-forth exchanges between social media users in order to see how they played off each other and adjusted their language according to social rules of engagement. I also looked at the interviews for details about her social media interactions. I then drew on Gee's (2009) [36] idea of affinity spaces, or informal learning cultures where the only criteria for participation is interest and ability, to parallel literacy as a social practice in virtual reality and then in other forms of social media for those who are isolated from face-to-face peer connections.

Those who participate in virtual worlds and those who engage in social media are similar in their social desires – they all want to belong to this affinity space and it is through admittance that they define themselves. Each one is connected to the other members by virtual conversations and group communications. It is through this online communication that Claudia is receiving her social stimulation instead of regular interaction with her age-mates. She is socially and culturally working with her virtual peers by using social media to interact.

6   FINDINGS

Line 1: Claudia: Hm well you can be thankful ya don't have to share ur popcorn at da movies....lol! Jk Thats jus what my friend told me......8)

Line 2: Friend: Haha but I could find a couple I could steal snacks from....JK!

Line 3: Claudia: Alrighty...u distract em while I grab the goods!:)

Line 4: Friend: Haha we'd prolley [sic] get kicked out of da theater :D

As Claudia exchanged text messages with her friend, their ideas played off each other. They began with a simple idea that one was glad they did not have to share movie popcorn. Claudia's texts are the bolded type ones. Once she brought up the idea of popcorn, the next idea was to steal someone else's snacks while her friend distracted the persons holding them. Then, of course, they realized as silly as this sounded, they could not steal anything because they would be removed from the theater premises.

Although it was a minor communication exchange, Claudia experienced with her friend the thought of the thrill of rebelling against societal rules. But, their sense of fair play entered into the exchange and they decided to forego the proposed thievery. This social media interaction exposed Claudia to a new idea and in doing so, she collaborated with her friend to reshape her ideas from that of an isolated first born homeschooler whose needs come second to that of a wanna-be rebel who chooses not to be bad (Weigel & Gardner, 2009) [37]. Then several days later when I visited with her, Claudia had reformed her opinion of the text message exchange with her friend. When I asked what she and her friends usually text about, she replied, "All kinds of things. I mean, it can be really random. Like, I started off telling my friend "Happy Valentine's Day" and then we ended up talking about the movies and stealing popcorn and stuff from somebody. So, I mean, it can go all over the place" (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

She then went on to say that sometimes texting was a "waste of time" because "…just some of the things we talk about...I mean, they're not anything bad, it's just seems kind of trite" (personal communication, February 23, 2011). In texting with her friend, she indicated by the use of emoticons that this was a fun topic of conversation. However, a few days later, Claudia had already cognitively reshaped the face-to-face cultural encounter and relegated this interaction to "waste of time" and "trite" status instead of fun fantasy rebellion.

When I visited with Claudia, I asked about the language she used in social communications. She commented to me that there could be misunderstandings, and then went on to say, "Well, I mean like...when you write something, it doesn't have your facial expressions and...because my friend said that he hates texting now because he's lost too many friends over it. 'Cuz you know, when you call somebody, you can have all the sarcasm in your voice. But when you write it out, you don't know if it's sarcastic or they actually meant it unless they put a smiley face [emoticon]" (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

In this brief monologue, Claudia relates to me that social communications are much different than face-to-face ones because there are no social cues to enlighten the participants to the embedded

meanings behind the words. She is changing her language to adhere to the common group language and is metacognitively aware that misunderstandings are inherent in this type of communication. Also, since all literacy is social (Street, 2003) [6], Claudia learned from her friend's experience with texting and is more careful now with her own.

During this same visit, I questioned why she chose to use text language in her social media writing. She said others would think she was "weird" if she did not. When I asked why this was, she teared up a bit and then replied, "'Cuz then you're not like everybody else. That shouldn't bother anybody, but it does" (personal communication, February 23, 2011). Claudia felt that she had to use the same language choices others in her peer group were using or she would not be accepted – she would not be like them. This speaks to both inclusion and exclusion in the same breath. Adolescents in Claudia's peer homeschool affinity group are accepted if they adhere to the choices the group makes, and no one wants to be left out because being excluded would severely limit their social connections.

Claudia also has a facebook page and maintains contacts with her friends and family through this social networking service. On this site, Claudia feels she must conform to the standards of language usage set by the reciprocal users because "…everybody else does. Sometimes if you don't...I don't know, people might think that you're kind of you know, kind of weird" (personal communication, March 19, 2011). Therefore, in an effort to conform to group expectations, this adolescent is changing her language choices so that she can adhere to the standards of her peers that she has perceived exist on this information sharing site, which according to Burns and Darling (2002) [38], is the very nature of peer influence.

7   DISCUSSION

In his article, "Affinity spaces: From 'Age of Mythology' to today's schools", Gee (2009) [36] states that in an affinity space, the groups speaks or writes in an "acquired language" that identifies them as part of this group and separates them from others. They are bound together by common ways of doing things and this common language. He proposes that virtual reality is the very embodiment of affinity spaces. It is where users can go to engage with other users from potentially distant locations to create new identities and then problem-solve (Berson & Berson, 2005; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Myers, 1987; Walther & Bazarove, 2007) [24] [30] [39]. Virtual worlds encourage social and personal development (Beals, 2010) [40] as the users are making connections and forming relationships with others in the virtual group, working on a team and learning to compromise, but in a manner removed from a face-to-face exchange (Brody, 2006; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Walther & Bazarove, 2007) [19] [30] [39]. Although identities are fluid and participation with this media is usually confined to time alone, (Brody, 2006; Larson, 1995) [19] [32], virtual worlds are very social places (Bruckman, 1992) [41]. Players depend on each other to collaborate so that all can enhance their knowledge base (Clifford, 2005) [42] and go farther in the game. Participants choose to escape into this world, but in order to be successful both socially and virtually, they must adhere to the rules of the group for their words and deeds, or be excluded from acceptance.

Cyberspace opens up new communication possibilities for all users, but for adolescents who are socially isolated, virtual worlds are places where they can escape reality, socially connect with other users in this digital affinity group, and collaborate with peers as they use language (Suler, 2002; Turkle, 1996) [43] [44]. They are often lonely in real life and find themselves using social media to stay connected with virtual peers (Kraut et al., 1998; McLean, 2010) [45] [21], which allows them to "…feel close and in touch while they may be separated in space and time" (van Manen, 2010, p. 1025) [8]. Some newly immigrated adolescents use digital media to engage in virtual reality gaming in order to feel "safe and successful" because they can make "friends easily in the virtual world" (Hsieh, 2008, p. 175) [46]. Many attempt to gain entrance into cultural affinity groups in their adopted home, but as they reach out to the peers around them, they are often rejected in face-to-face encounters and must rely on anonymous social media exchanges to communicate (Elias & Lemish, 2009) [47]. Adolescent immigrants depend on digital technology to stay connected with the ones they left behind in their homeland and to learn the culture of the new home to form connection with their peers. As they communicate with others online, they are collaborating and learning language with each encounter.

I believe Gee's definition of affinity spaces can be expanded to include social media communication of other forms. I think Claudia and her social media partners engage in the basic principles of affinity spaces: informal learning cultures where participation is based on interest and ability and those in the group can be identified by the common language they use. On social media sites, youth pick up information and language from each other, which informs their topics of conversation and their

language choices (Merchant, 2010) [22], and must meet language standards to be included in the peer group (McLean, 2010; Rogers & Winters, 2010) [21] [48]. When she uses social media, Claudia, like most of today's youth, want to engage with the digital world (Clifford, 2005) [42] because that is where she finds her friends – they are logged-on and online almost non-stop (Berson & Berson, 2005; Kandell, 1998) [24] [34]. Social media is readily available and many youth are connecting with others just like them.

It is in the context of social engagement with her peers while using the tools of her culture, in this case, digital media, she is learning, according to Vygotsky (1978) [4]. It is through language and images that technology users become familiar with each other. Claudia called her text conversation a "waste of time" and "trite". Although she did not seem to realize, it is through this kind of back-and-forth conversational triviality that people form social bonds and learn together. The everyday situations in life that peers share are the emotional glue that hold relationships together. Learning from each other, teaching each other, and pushing each other to improve are all characteristics of a healthy friendship (Graham, 2011) [49].

Like the traditionally-schooled isolated adolescent, Claudia is not receiving social stimulation from face-to-face interactions with her peers. Cyberspace and the communications that occur there are how she and other socially isolated individuals find their affinity groups. The compromises to preserve group integrity in the virtual world and the back-and-forth conversations on social media both serve to connect these adolescents to the peer group while socioculturally shaping their identities. Each one feels a need to belong to their social group because it is through belonging that they define themselves.

8   IMPLICATIONS

Adolescents, regardless of the manner in which they receive their education, are in an ever-evolving state of social and cultural shaping of their identities as they communicate and interact. Because today's youth have grown up with digital media and are inundated with visual and auditory images emanating from the global community in which we all live, much of their peer engagement is filtered through social media. When there are shared interests among peers, then a feeling of community develops and communication intensifies (Larson, 1995) [32]. The more adolescents interact socially, the more they are collaborating and learning together. Street (2003) [6] holds that "engaging with literacy is always a social act even from the outset" (p.78) and cannot help but influence those that participate. Adolescents are informing their language use, shaping their identities, and learning from each other while interacting with their friends or acquaintances online. They have a symbiotic relationship with their digital devices and enjoy using them in pursuit of their interests.

Learning is a joy for many adolescents – as long as they are not doing it in school. Literacy is not only the ability to read and write, but also to successfully navigate digital media. Students must know the basic skills of how to read and write before they can engage with digital texts. But once they have learned the basics, many students lose themselves in cyberspace and continue to improve upon these skills. For those who do not socially engage in the classroom, but live entire virtual lives online, face-to-face interactions can be socially awkward. However, the skills they use to create their identities, form a community with other virtual players, and successfully navigate the games are invaluable to classroom cooperative learning situations. If we, as educators, want to truly teach our students, and we want them to succeed in life, not just the classroom, then we must bring their out-of-school literacy skills into the classroom and include digital media in the curriculum so that all of their literacies inform their learning.

By using social media, Claudia has found a way to meet her own peer socialization needs that result from her oftentimes overpowering feelings of isolation due to her situation as an exclusively homeschooled adolescent, member of a large family, living in a rural location. As she engages with others in cyberspace, they learn from each other. Claudia collaborates with her peers and socially shapes her identity with each new online interaction as she virtually communicates in an effort to establish and maintain social bonds. In this age where adolescents are expanding their literacies exponentially by online interactions, Claudia is fitting right in.

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