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It's Not Real Until It's on Facebook: A Qualitative Analysis of Social Media and Digital Communication among Emerging Adults in College

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Abstract: Emerging adults are encountering a developmental stage in a polymediated world that brings autonomy, intimacy, and identity to the forefront of their transition from adolescence to adulthood. This study focuses on traditionally-aged college students who are deeply immersed with digital technology and communication as a primary method to communicate and interact with peers, partners, teachers, and family members. To understand the relationship between digital communication and emerging adulthood, researchers facilitated a qualitative study grounded in ethnomethodological and dramaturgical perspective to uncover the unique ways in which college students make sense of their social media during this developmental time period. Data collection occurred through nine focus groups; in all, 44 undergraduate students participated. Findings illustrate four relevant patterns to the development of emerging adults: a key rationale for use among participants that is tied to both ritualized behavior and institutional constraints; the importance of autonomy with their digital communication use that is often stifled by parental access to their mediated lives; the presentation of an identity that is rooted in norms of acceptable use; and the importance of digital communication to the development and maintenance of connections to family, friends, and intimate partners. Implications for further research are discussed.

Keywords: polymediation; social media; digital technology; digital communication; emerging adulthood; college students; ethnomethodology; dramaturgy

1. Introduction

The late 1990s marked a critical moment in the history of social media and digital communication technology. Digital natives were born into homes that likely did not have a personal computer, but PCs and websites were quickly being redesigned for everyday use by the average American family (Coyne et al. 2013). Kids still hung out in the mall and movie theatres, but mobile phones were starting to surface and would quickly influence their teenage years (Boyd 2014). Even academic scholars who were focusing on teens and their consumption of TV, films, and popular magazines (Ouellette 2013) would quickly change their direction of study. By the time this millennial generation started to come of age, it became increasingly difficult to imagine a world without computers, cell phones, and social networking site (SNSs). As Dana Boyd argues in her book *It's Complicated* (Boyd 2014), whereas computer use among teens had once seemed “eccentric,” by the turn of the century, it had become not only normal, but to some degree expected. Social outings with friends would quickly be replaced by “networked publics,” which are spaces where people and technology merge on-line, and where social media sites become the place where young people now “gather and connect, hang out, and joke around” (Boyd 2014, pp. 8–9) with their peers.

The ubiquitous nature of this digital communication technology is best exemplified by recent national trend studies. In 2014, the Pew Research Center reported that 87% of all adults use the Internet or e-mail; for young adults ages 18–29, it was 97%. While on-line, 84% of adults report using social networking sites (SNS); Facebook continues to dominate, with 72% of all adults reporting engagement on that particular SNS (Duggan 2015). Again, young adults (18–29) have higher rates of usage than the general population. Ninety-percent report using social networking sites; 82% use Facebook, 55% use Instagram, and 32% use Twitter (Duggan et al. 2014).

Increase in social media activity has coincided with advancements made in cell phone technology, which is currently the most commonly owned electronic device by Americans (Anderson 2015). Roughly nine out of ten American adults (92%) own a cell phone or smartphone; 73% use it to text on a daily basis (Anderson 2015). Of course, the rates for young adults is again much higher, with 95% reporting using their phones to text (Anderson 2015), sending or receiving an average of 87 texts per day. This average even higher for 18- to 24-year-olds, who average almost 110 texts (Smith 2011). When examining smartphones alone, young adults were more likely to own one (86%) compared to the general population (68%) (Anderson 2015), often using their phones as the medium to check social networking sites; more than two-thirds report that most of their social media use occurs on their phone. The Pew Research Center (Duggan 2015) also reports that young adults are more likely than the general population to use messaging apps like WhatsApp or Kik (49% compared to 36% overall) or messaging apps that quickly delete your message, like Snapchat (41% compared to 15% overall). Of course, a small portion of emerging adults (about 10%) simply chose to “opt out” of social media (Duggan 2015). Bobkowski and Smith’s qualitative research discovered several reasons for why they stayed off-line: economic instability, fractured educational situations, or lack of meaningful social relationships (Bobkowski and Smith 2013). Despite this group of non-adopters, the overwhelming majority of emerging adults are committed to an on-line world.

This paper focuses on the way in which traditionally-aged college students use digital technology and communication to interact with their peers, partners, teachers, and family members, and analyzes the meaning of these things for their emerging sense of self and identity. The term ‘digital technology’ refers directly to the technology itself, such as a phone, a gaming device, or a personal digital assistant.¹ On the other hand, ‘digital communication’ is used to capture the varied and diverse forms of communication that people engage with to exchange meaning *across* various digital formats (Straubhaar et al. 2014)—from talking on a phone, sending an e-mail or writing a text, to posting a photo on Instagram, or leaving a comment on a video that was posted on YouTube. Digital communication encapsulates a broader focus on the way in which this technology allows people to distribute, share, and essentially communicate digital media content both locally and globally (Croteau and Hoynes 2015).

Recently, scholars have started to use the term polymediation to help express the complexity of what was once historically called “mass media” (Herbig et al. 2015) and more recently referred to as “new media” (DeAndrea et al. 2012). Polymediation refers to the “relationship between the technological artifacts or tools (smartphone, laptop, etc.), the various sites of mediation communication (Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, FaceTime, etc.) and the process of communication, which help define our relationship with each” (Herbig et al. 2015, p. xx). Polymediation includes media products that have emerged through the convergence of various media industries, as well as the processes by which people interact with these new media products (DeAndrea et al. 2012). It also captures the ubiquitous nature of these things in today’s society and explores the outcomes that this convergence and fragmentation is having on the performance of our identity and self (Calka 2015).

Young adults act as both consumers and producers of this digital content, at times simply watching media content or surveying what friends or celebrities are posting, and at other times participating

¹ Some scholars refer to this as technological artifacts, technological tools, or digital media (Herbig et al. 2015; Tyma 2015).

through the creation of text, audio, and videos that they share with individuals, groups, and the broader public. They not only use digital technology to communicate, but often their daily conversations revolve around things they did, created, found, or viewed in some digital format online. Certainly, institutional advances and structures of capitalism have afforded a certain convenience for some people when it comes to access to laptops, e-readers, and smartphones, which has undoubtedly played a role in their increased interactivity and use of digital communication among many emerging adults (Croteau and Hoynes 2015).

1.1. *Dramaturgy and Ethnomethodology*

Classical sociological theories are being used to understand the role of social media and digital communication in society today. Goffman's dramaturgical approach in particular has been used to explore the presentation of self in a digital world (Hogan 2010). Using the metaphor of the theatre, Goffman purports that people present the self in a kind of performance (Ritzer 1996). Such performances are vulnerable to disruption by the 'audience'; thus, 'actors' seek to acquire information about those with whom they interact for practical purpose of being able to predict and manage present and future behavior. Goffman characterizes these interactions as impression management (Ritzer 1996). Thus, he "perceived the self not as a possession of the actor but rather as the product of the dramatic interaction between actor and audience" (Ritzer 1996, p. 215).

Goffman's dramaturgical approach has been used to examine virtual worlds, social networking site activity, conflicts, and identity development (see (Hogan 2010) for a review of relevant literature). Scholars have also used Goffman's front and back stage to explain the interplay between our private and public lives (Hogan 2010). In terms of emerging adults, Agger argues that this mediated culture tends to blur what used to be distinct boundaries between public and private life (Agger 2012). For college students in particular, posting photos and videos about things as mundane as new dorm room sheets, to those which are more profane such as weekend party antics, is par for the course. Now it appears that major events and intimate details of their everyday lives—a break up, a hook up, a wedding, the birth of a child, or death of a parent—only gain significance after be shared in a public, digital form. As one student in this study put it, "It's just not real until it's on Facebook."

On-line impression management of the self and identity may indeed be a normal part of the everyday lives of millennials, as the proliferation of technology has made life before the Internet seem a distant past. Whereas Goffman's work helps expose the micro-level processes that guide these interactions, ethnomethodology provides a useful lens connecting these micro-level processes with macro-level structures. Ethnomethodology tries to uncover the taken-for-granted ways that people participate in creating and sustaining social structure through their everyday practices and interactions with social media and digital communication (Babbie 2013; Cuzzort and King 2002). In other words, it is "an examination of the methods people use to sustain some kind of consensus about the world and to solve problems characterized by highly irrational features" (Cuzzort and King 2002, pp. 185–86). Garfinkel (1967) developed this theory in an attempt to capture how everyday activities could be understood through careful observation, by disrupting people's routines, and by rendering things that are seemingly recognizable as "strange." Garfinkel proposed that people are rational actors who use reason rather than formal logic to make sense of and function in society. Social facts about the reality of the world are produced through the telling of what Garfinkel called accounts, which are the stories that people tell to describe, explain, criticize, and idealize what is going on (Ritzer 1996). He argued that in giving those accounts, people not only make meaning of their everyday lives, but also help create and sustain the broader social structure (Garfinkel 1967). Scholars are beginning to recognize how this theory lends itself well to qualitative research about social media and digital communication. As Harrison and Thomas reveal:

Ethnomethodology, then, has come to be recognized as a significant qualitative method of researching virtual online communities of the type that is increasingly becoming prominent in the context of Web 2.0 technologies. Such research can provide a 'thick description' of the

intricate personal and social behaviours that occur in these contexts, including the social and cultural mechanisms that are at work as they are manifested in the (socially constructed) linguistic signs/codes that can be observed and collected ([Harrison and Thomas 2009](#)).

This study draws on dramaturgical and ethnomethodological perspectives to uncover the ways in which one group of emerging adults—college students—discuss and explain their social media use, activities, and interactions. This includes an exploration into the processes of impression management and identity development, and the ways in which these micro-level processes help reinforce broader structures of society. The following research questions guide this study:

- How do college students manage the presentation of self in a polymediated world?
- What are the norms and routine practices of digital communication and how does that vary across different contexts?
- How do college students use digital communication to navigate emerging adulthood?
- How do these everyday practices intersect with institutional structures of society?

1.2. Theory of Emerging Adulthood

The theory of emerging adulthood posed by [Arnett \(2000\)](#) provides the foundation for this study. Emerging adulthood is defined as a distinct period of time spanning from late teens through the twenties, with a particular focus on ages 18–25 for those living in industrialized nations ([Arnett 2000](#)). The rise of this demographic coincides with many structural and demographic changes in the U.S. ([Arnett 2000](#))—the sexual revolution brought about the development of birth control, allowing for delayed childbirth; the women’s movement encouraged young girls to seek careers, advance their education, and delay marriage; the rise of an information economy requires more education. This time period is full of identity formation, yet is also very ambiguous, as emerging adults have many opportunities for both success and failure. Thus, emerging adulthood is a distinct period, one where young people do not necessarily see themselves as adolescents, nor do they completely identify as adults ([Arnett 2000](#)).

The college environment provides a particularly unique context to study emerging adults. [Arnett \(2016\)](#) describes the college setting as “a social island set off from the rest of society, a temporary safe haven where emerging adults can explore possibilities of love, work, and worldviews with many of the responsibilities of adult life kept at bay”. A college campus provides a location full of potential romantic partners, coupled with large periods of unstructured time, which allows for the exploration of relationships and love. The second domain of work is central to the college student experience, as coursework, volunteer service, and internships provide the type of anticipatory socialization needed for students to begin a career upon graduation. Finally, students come to college with the worldviews of their childhoods, but are given various opportunities to expand their worldview through exposure to new ideas, allowing identity formation to be full of both optimism and disappointment ([Arnett 2000](#); [Ellison et al. 2007](#)).

1.3. Social Media Use among Emerging Adults

Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard’s review of studies about media use and emerging adulthood provides a comprehensive look at two major theoretical perspectives related to media use: media effects theory, and uses and gratification theory ([Coyne et al. 2013](#)). Studies grounded in media effects theory suggests that all forms of media have an effect (both good and bad) on behaviors or attitudes. [Coyne et al. \(2013\)](#) reviewed a decade of research on how media affects real-life friendships and relationships, and discovered that this area of research has yielded somewhat mixed results, showing both positive and negative outcomes. In part, results are impacted by types of electronic communication being studied. For example, studies on video game use or viewing pornography on the Internet often find that this type of media use is negatively associated with an individual’s quality of relationships ([Padilla-Walker et al. 2009](#)). Another study found that Facebook use was associated with

obsessive or jealous behaviors for some users (Muise et al. 2009). Coyne et al. (2013) also suggested that media effects were related to amount of time of use. For example, Jacobsen and Forste (2011) found that for each hour increase in exposure to electronic communication, social interactions occurring face-to-face increased by 10–15 min, suggesting its use has been helpful in meeting new people, connecting with old friends, and in keeping in touch more generally. Overall, Coyne et al. synthesis of the literature argued that, "...it appears that for most emerging adults, use of SNSs compliments or facilitates real-world relationships, rather than replacing or harming them" (Coyne et al. 2013, p. 127).

A competing theory suggests that individuals are not merely passive receivers of media, but rather, exposure to media is self-selected as a means of self-socializing (Coyne et al. 2013). Studies grounded in uses and gratification theory "...purport that emerging adults have specific needs and they gravitate toward the media to fulfill and satiate these needs" (Coyne et al. 2013, p. 127). This includes the idea that people select media to most likely fulfill their psychological and social needs (Jacobsen and Forste 2011). Areas in which gratification theory has been applied to media selection include autonomy, intimacy, and identity—all areas of continued development in emerging adulthood. As such, each of these constructs is seen as important to this study.

A key task during emerging adulthood is developing a sense of autonomy, an undertaking that includes becoming independent with regard to individual emotions, behavior, values, responsibilities, and finances (Coyne et al. 2013). At the most basic level, emerging adults are free to choose what form of media they want to consume, which fosters a sense of autonomy. Prior to this stage, media choices were made by external entities such as parental monitoring, school restrictions, and media age constraints. Though a seemingly simple task, the ability to choose which media to engage in opens up a whole new world requiring young adults to exercise autonomy in their decisions regarding how much and which media are consistent with their value system (Coyne et al. 2013; Ellison et al. 2007).

Developing intimacy in emerging adulthood is challenged by instability of residence and the formation of new friendships and romantic partners. This task of maintaining connections is compounded by potential life changes (moving residence, completing college, changing jobs, coupling, etc.). Universities have traditionally provided social support programs to help with this transition to campus, but social networking sites like Facebook are increasingly being used to connect students on-line before they meet in person and help them socialize into academic life (DeAndrea et al. 2012; Mazzoni and Iannone 2014; Yang and Brown 2009). Some universities are also experimenting with creating more targeted student-only websites just for their incoming freshmen (rather than simply using public SNSs), as an alternative method to improve students' adjustment to college (DeAndrea et al. 2012).

Similar to the media effects theory on relationships, gratification theory indicates that media practices and interactions have the potential to both enhance and undermine intimacy. Likewise, intimacy may range from limited to bountiful, depending on the depth of the connection. Social needs may be fulfilled using SNSs where intimacy can develop from little connectivity (friending someone on SNSs), to instant messaging or texting, to connecting by phone or in person, the highest level of intimacy (Rubin 2002; Ellison et al. 2007). Much of this research uses the concept of social capital as a framework for understanding these connections (DeAndrea et al. 2012; Mazzoni and Iannone 2014). Social capital is broadly defined as resources and assets an individual gains through access to various relationships and social networks, and most research has found increased social capital to have positive social outcomes (Ellison et al. 2007). Mazzoni and Iannone's study of Italian youth examined the impact of social networking sites on different forms of social capital for high school, first-year university, and undergraduate students (Mazzoni and Iannone 2014). Their work revealed that SNSs provide different things for students at various stages of the transition to college. For example, high school students were more likely to use SNSs to get to know new people, whereas undergraduate students were more likely to use SNSs to maintain their existing social capital (e.g., old friends, family), take a break from studying, or to share music and videos with friends (Mazzoni and Iannone 2014).

As indicated earlier, exploration of identity in emerging adulthood has been most consistently tied to areas of love, work, and worldviews (Arnett 2016). However, it also extends to ethnic and sexual identity (Coyne et al. 2013). Greater research in this area exists as it relates to the influence of media on identity development on adolescence as opposed to emerging adulthood. Coyne and colleagues argued that given the extended time and process for identity development to occur, it would make sense to research how media intersects with certain aspects of identity of emerging adulthood, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and political or religious affiliation (Coyne et al. 2013).

Some research has identified media's influence on identity development, such as expressions of identity through music selection, print media (books, magazines, and newspapers), and TV and movies (Platt 1981). New and emerging research is beginning to explore how SNSs may provide another avenue for young adults to explore their identity and how identities can be expressed by what content is posted (Coyne et al. 2013). Other studies indicate media may influence individual's beliefs and attitudes. For example, television may influence perceptions of racial minorities and homosexuality, both promoting and challenging negative stereotypes. Additionally, pro-smoking media messages have been tied to future risk of smoking and exposure to political material in the media was related to increased civic engagement (Coyne et al. 2013). Given the number of different types of media and frequency of engagement in its use, the identity development of emerging adults will clearly be impacted.

Traditionally-aged college students provide a sociologically interesting population to study these issues, since as emerging adults, they are caught in between the transition from childhood into adulthood—from a somewhat restrictive educational environment to one that is more flexible. Arnett describes this as a period where “nothing is normative demographically” (Arnett 2000, p. 471). Whereas adolescence is still marked by the norms of living with your parents and not having the rights of an adult, and whereas your late 20s and 30s are culturally marked as the time when people find their first apartment, get married, start families, and become established in their careers, the period from 18–25 is less clearly defined. It's a time that is very “volitional” (Arnett 2000); emerging adults have more choices and opportunities for change than any other age cohort, yet their residential and economic status is often unstable, fluctuating between dependent and independent roles.

College students in four-year universities, living on residential campuses, encompass just one type of emerging adult. According to Arnett (2016), traditional college aged students are more likely to be white and female, and represent only a fraction (20%) of the overall 18–24-year-old population. Their time in college represents a period of change and exploration, as well as great transition, much of which gets played out online. This research study will expose some of the ways in which traditionally-aged college students are navigating this cultural and social landscape as they socialize and try to make sense of who they were, who they are, and who they are becoming. Thus, the theoretical lens of emerging adulthood provides a way to understand college students in a polymediated age.

2. Methods

A well-recognized means of understanding social phenomena and processes is through the methodological approach of grounded theory. In essence, this approach constructs theory from the “ground up” through the repetition of data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This rigorous and systematic research procedure allows for the emergence of concepts that help to explain the actions of participants (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Consistent with grounded research, our study began with a selection of questions to collect preliminary data. Researchers reflected on emerging concepts and used a constant comparative approach to continue with data collection, examine emerging patterns, and formalize coding procedures. This approach continued until data saturation seemed apparent and a clear set of findings emerged (Heath and Cowley 2004).

2.1. Data Collection

The principal investigators were aware that social media has become central to the lives of young people (Boyd 2014), particularly millennials who are most likely to own technological devices and take advantage of a wider range of functions (Zickuhr 2011). Similarly, having two female professors of a different generation (Gen X) conduct the interviews could influence what and how much young adults disclose and how these disclosures are understood (Zickuhr 2011; Platt 1981). Thus, a group of undergraduate research assistants were recruited and trained to help facilitate some of these focus group interviews. Additionally, using peers as interviewers allows for a greater understanding of the same community and who is likely to have perceived characteristics relevant to the research at hand (Platt 1981). This allowed us to check the reliability of our interview guide and see whether or not the embodiment of the researcher had any influence over the candidness of student responses. Since social media and digital technology often involves interaction with peers, focus groups proved to be an appropriate avenue to solicit accounts. Participants were gathered through purposive and snowball sampling where both research assistants and principal investigators recruited initial participants willing to discuss their digital communication habits. These participants were then asked to help recruit friends and classmates for future focus groups. Nine focus groups were conducted with a total of 44 college students; 15 of the participants were men, and 29 were women. The majority of the participants at the time of the interview were upperclassmen (19 seniors and 18 juniors) with a few underclassman (6 sophomores and 1 freshman). Participants were asked to sign up for a preferred time to be interviewed, thus the makeup of each focus group resided primarily in availability. Focus groups took place from March to May of 2014.

Before the focus group began, students were asked to respond to a brief survey asking them basic demographic characteristics (e.g., race, gender, grade level, parental educational attainment), social affiliations at the university (e.g., fraternity member, sports team, student-worker), and more specific questions about daily and weekly frequency of digital communication use for phone calls and texting, as well as with popular websites and apps (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, YouTube). This included an open-ended question, allowing them to include a form of digital communication not included on the list.

All focus group interviews took place in a research lab on a college campus with an observation suite, so principal investigators and research assistants were able to monitor the focus group interviews regardless of who was conducting them. Both video and audio recordings were done in order to ensure accuracy in transcriptions.² Focus groups ran between 45 and 90 min.

Interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended, asking students to reflect on when and where they used digital technology: what norms and rituals surrounded this use; what digital communication sites they preferred and which ones they disdained and why; how their digital communication use has changed from high school to college; and how their online identity might shift depending on whether or not interactions were with family, friends, or professors. Students were not directly asked about their own deviant or illegal behavior that they may have shared online, but rather were questioned more generally about what they considered embarrassing or inappropriate posts online. This provided a way for students to discuss other people's behavior or share their own. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on what changes, if any, they would like to see with digital communication and technology.

2.2. Analysis

All focus groups were fully transcribed. Names and any identifying characteristics of the participants or the people/stories they discussed were changed in order to protect the confidentiality

² This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the university. All video and audio recordings were deleted after written transcriptions were completed.

of the participants. Drawing on the work of [Glaser and Strauss \(1967\)](#), researchers relied on grounded theory to code and re-code the data. In doing so, a constant-comparative method provided a framework for coding and developing categories, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data. Using this method allowed the investigators to develop similar and agreed upon understandings of concepts. As a method of inter-coder reliability, both investigators individually coded one focus group, compared and contrasted codes, and agreed upon conceptual and operational definitions of the codes before continuing to analyze the entire data set. AtlasTi (a computer software program for qualitative analysis) was used to upload the transcripts and code the data. Researchers alternated coding and reviewing codes, discussing discrepancies, and ensuring consistency and reliability of data. This provided a systematic way to see patterns and trends, and to ensure the validity of the results. One research assistant also took the list of codes with definitions and coded all transcripts separately; again, this was to ensure the reliability of the analysis. Although many themes emerged from the data, this paper focuses on those related to emerging adulthood.

3. Results

Several themes emerged from the data analysis. First, results reveal the ways in which college students make use of digital technology in routine and taken-for-granted ways. These patterns of use, methods, and justification for communication vary across different social contexts in which technology is being used. Second, themes unfolded around emerging adulthood, specifically surrounding autonomy, identity, and intimacy. Participants articulated an understanding of self as being distinct from family as they began to align themselves with structures of college life. They intentionally managed the impression of their identity on-line to align with their growing sense of self. Finally, they used digital communication as an important avenue for building relationships and sustaining community.

3.1. Ritualized Behavior and Rationale for Use

The ability to connect and access information every hour of the day, combined with an increase in available leisure time for this generation, certainly influences the amount of time young adults spend listening to music, sharing videos, watching television, texting, and playing video games ([Coyne et al. 2013](#); [Calka 2015](#)). Thus, our findings must first be understood in the context of how frequently young adults are using digital communication devices. All of the participants except one person said they owned a smartphone; the one without a smartphone did own a regular cellphone. The participants' ownership of smartphones reflects that of the broader U.S. population of young adults. The Pew Research Center ([Anderson 2015](#)) reported that 98% of 18–29-year-olds own a cell phone and 86% own a smartphone. Texting remained a fairly ubiquitous method of communication among the young people in this study, where female participants self-reported that they sent an average of 35 texts per day and received just as many. In contrast, male participants reported sending an average of 65 texts, but only receiving about 15 texts each day. In terms of using their cell phones to text, some of the participants in this study stated that they thought their texting habits were “less than average” when compared to other college students. This actually seems consistent with national data. The [Pew Research Center \(2011\)](#) found that young adults in the U.S. are the “most avid texters by a wide margin,” with an average exchange of 110 texts each day, which are more than 3200 texts every month. The lower number of texts of this sample, which is three years after the Pew survey, may signify that young adults may be moving away from texting in pursuit of other types of mediated communication, for example, sending a Snapchat or tweet in lieu of a text message. In terms of some of the more popular social networking sites, the majority ($N = 42$) used Facebook and most of them (86%) visited the site one or more times daily. Most ($N = 38$) used Snapchat and again the majority (70%) visited this site one or more times per day. Of the 28 participants who reported using Instagram, 71.4% reported using it daily, and out of the 25 who reported using Twitter, 64% used it one or more times per day. So, although the participants of this study report texting less than the national average,

they certainly are using other forms of digital communication on a regular basis to stay connected to their peers and family. As one student noted as her reason for keeping a Facebook account, “I feel like everyone has a Facebook account but not as many people have Twitter, so it’s a lot easier to connect with people (on Facebook).”

Students expressed engaging in digital technology for a variety of reasons. Among the most frequent responses were related to taking a break from the stress that college demands, as exemplified in the following student’s comment.

Like when I’m dealing with my readings for like the semester, I’m like “Alright once I finish this one article, I’ll take a break and just go on social media, check Facebook or Instagram.” And then it’s like, okay, back to focusing (on school work).

In addition to using digital technology as a distraction from required tasks, it was clear that the structure of a college student’s day created small pockets of time in between classes that students felt the need to fill. As one student stated, “Like I’ll go to class in the morning and it’ll be like ten minutes early and like everyone in the room is on their phone.” Other students simply noted that going online was something they did just because they were bored. When students used social media for these reasons, it often took the form of being a passive observer, rather than an active contributor.

The institution of higher education itself makes it difficult for college students to completely unplug. Although individual professors may limit the use of computers in class or have policies against cell phones being on a student’s desk, it’s more likely that a professor will post assignments online or spend a class period in a computer lab working on a project. Announcements over cancelled classes might come from an e-mail from the professor, or through a text by students who arrived to class before you. Many students organize study groups through digital communication or write group papers on a Google Doc. Almost all of the academic communication they receive from administrators, athletics, resident assistants, or social event groups is done in cyberspace. Thus, the culture of college is one that necessitates a frequent online presence.

Perhaps not surprising, embedded in the descriptions of why these college students used digital communication technology, was a clear articulation of ritualized behavior. This routine and habitual practice is exemplified by the following statements:

- I always do it in order. I always do Facebook, email, YouTube, Reddit, and then repeat every so often. It’s just a habit.
- I usually don’t start checking my stuff until after breakfast, at least. And then I’ll get on my email and I try not to get on my Facebook. Once I get on, it’s hard to get off. I then use Snapchat.
- When I wake up, I get on Instagram—no, not Instagram, just Twitter and Facebook. Like as soon as I wake up in the morning. And then, I usually check Facebook like when I go to class or when I’m there early I’m on Facebook. If I’m waiting in between classes and when I like have spare time in my room, I’m on social media. (Laughs) And then usually before I go to bed, when I’m in bed, and I’m on it before I go to sleep. So, I use it a lot!

The ritualized use of technological artifacts and various sites of digital communication are indicative of living in a polymediated world.

Such ritualized use is not disconnected from the broader corporate culture and the emergence of new digital technology; for this group of college students, the invention of the smartphone was of particular significance.

The traditional notion of “going online” often evokes images of a desktop or laptop computer with a full complement of features, such as a large screen, mouse, keyboard, wires, and a dedicated high-speed connection. But for many Americans, the reality of the online experience is substantially different. Today nearly two-thirds of Americans own a smartphone, and 19% of Americans rely to some degree on a smartphone for accessing online services and information and for staying connected to the world around

them—either because they lack broadband at home, or because they have few options for online access other than their cell phone (Pew Research Center 2015).

The rise of smartphone ownership was often cited by the students themselves as the underlying contributing factor to their frequent use of digital technology. As one student revealed, “With social media, I’m like on it all the time. Because on my smartphone, like I have all my apps so I’m on it like all day. I mean not all day, but . . . a lot.” Another simply stated, “It was almost easier when I didn’t have a smartphone because there was less to keep up with.” Students in this study often articulated an inability to disconnect from social media during the day and their phones were often given as the reason for this. As one participant describes, trying to *not* use your phone has become a competitive game between friends.

What our friends do, like a little challenge when we’re at home or if we all go out to a bar or something, we all put our phones in the middle (and) whoever has to check their phone first will have to pay.

This quote represents how difficult it is for young adults to detach themselves from their phones and there is an assumption that at least one of them won’t be able to do it, and hence will be the one who has to pay for drinks.

Finally, youth engagement with different forms of digital communication is also related to finding ways to be more efficient. This college student describes recently the transition from sending a written text message on her phone to sending Snapchats, consisting of “snaps” of photos or videos that quickly disappear shortly after sending them.

Facebook is probably like for pictures and sharing articles and links. Twitter is short things like “this is what’s happening.” Snapchat is, well it’s for me, Snapchat (pause) it kinda replaced texting for me sometimes, ‘cause it’s just easy. Like umm . . . If I’m in the library instead of texting a friend and being like “come to the library, I’m sitting in this spot,” I’ll just Snapchat them from a spot and be like “save me” or something like that. And then they’ll show up!

Thus, students are adapting their use of digital communication in ways that help them be more productive in achieving their goals in the quickest possible way.

3.2. *Emerging Adulthood: Autonomy*

Beyond the way in which digital communication is deeply embedded in the day-to-day routines and rituals of college students, their use of digital communication is also connected to their developing sense of self and autonomy. As Arnett describes of emerging adults, “the character qualities most important to becoming successfully self-sufficient—accepting responsibility for one’s self and making independent decisions—are being developed” (Arnett 2000, p. 473). Media in general has been an important form of socialization, in that it is generally something that is chosen (Arnett 2000) and something that individuals feel agency over, thus reinforcing a sense of autonomy. College students in this study demonstrated growing autonomy in the ways they used digital communication, and, in particular, articulated their understanding of autonomy through a developmental framework, where they saw their polymediated use changing as they transitioned from adolescence into emerging adulthood.

Participants of this study articulated a sense of ownership and agency over how they used digital communication and what they posted on social media sites. Such autonomy was demonstrated in this idealistic perspective of one student, “It’s ok to post what you feel like, you have the freedom to post what you want.” This sense of control seemed to feel greater online than perhaps in ‘real’ life. “I feel like on social media (or) like on the Internet in general you can kinda be like whoever you want to be and it’s just ‘cause you’re in control of what you’re posting. But in real life, you can’t always control everything that happens; on social media, you can.”

Part of this sense of autonomy is directly related to the shift from strict high school policies about using cell phones and laptops to a more lenient standard on college campuses, as this participant describes.

I think it's changed coming to college too because in high school, especially if you're on your phone, you get it taken away no matter what if you're on school grounds. But like here you can sit anywhere between classes or even in classes where teachers don't care when they lecture, you can just be on your phone.

Some participants described having professors who allowed them to "tweet" as a form of participation. Others would request that you use sites like 'polleverywhere.com' to get live responses to a survey question in class. Others encouraged students to download an assigned reading on their phones during class. Hence, whereas a phone being used in a high school classroom used to garner a detention, a phone in college could now be used to demonstrate your engagement in the course.

As college students develop a sense of autonomy through the apps they download or the tweets they send during class, the one area where their autonomy seems greatly restricted is within the realm of family. Part of developing a sense of autonomy means differentiating the self from your immediate family members, but this is something that digital communication has made difficult to obtain. As two students noted during one focus group, "My parents always post on my wall and they always 'like' my stuff" and "my grandparents just sent me a friend request!" Despite being "off at college", students articulated regular conversations with their parents across various technology, with many expressing communicating with their parents several times a day. Comments such as the ones expressed here were common: "The first thing I do is text my parents" and "My parents aren't here so I can put stuff online and they'll see it, you know." The frequent digital communication that these emerging adults have with their parents makes it complicated for them to fully disconnect with the identity of being their parent's child.

This inability to separate from the gaze of their parents seemed to exist whether or not their parents were actively engaged in the same social media platforms as the students. As one student noted,

My parents aren't on Facebook, which I'm totally okay with, but I have other relatives who are, so I kinda forget that those other relatives are on there. But then like I get an email from my mom one day, she's like 'Tina just sent me this pic of you, so cute. Who posted that?' and I was like 'oh'.

Another student in that same focus group followed that comment with, "My mom has googled me!" Another talked about the need to reach out to one of her father's old neighborhood friends when she was on vacation. She did this because she worried that her father's friend would be offended if she didn't. "I went to Myrtle Beach and I thought, 'cause my dad's old neighbor lives there, I felt like I had to reach out (to her) because if people posted pictures she would be like, 'You didn't come to see me!' You know what I mean. It's like the awkward line of family versus friends." Although the technology itself makes it easier for parents to keep in touch with (and surveil) their children's activities, this frequent communication may create a latent function, where the transition to adulthood for college students may become more delayed than it was in the past, and certainly may be more delayed than similarly aged youth who do not go to college.

Although students communicate frequently with their parents, one method of differentiating themselves from their parents is by articulating generational differences in norms surrounding social media. As one student puts it, texting is the preferred method of casual conversations, whereas phone calls are for "emergencies" only—yet parents are not always aware of such rules.

If somebody calls you, it must be an emergency (Laughs). My mom, cause she's a teacher, so you know she's at school all day. So, she had called me (during the day) and I was like, "Oh my gosh, why is she calling me???? She's supposed to be at school!" And I had forgotten that they had the day off or something, but I was like, "You scared me!!!! Like, you're supposed to be at school!!!!" We never call each other when she's at school.

So, although these emerging adults are in frequent contact with parents, they are able to establish some autonomy through their knowledge of social etiquette and norms surrounding the use of different digital communication platforms. Further, they use their digital native status as a way to separate themselves from their parent's generation.

3.3. *Emerging Adulthood: Identity On- and Off-Line*

The development of a sense of autonomy coincides with the identity development of emerging adults and is very much connected to their mediated worlds. As students express their identity explicitly, through comments, pictures, and videos they might post, and less overtly through simple "likes" or re-posting of other people's content, they are utilizing digital communication to publicly and privately share pieces of who they are, who they are becoming and who they want to be. This presentation of identity becomes most apparent as these students discuss what they see as "acceptable" and "unacceptable" social media use.

The constant engagement with digital communication involves persistent negotiations between what is and is not "acceptable" online activities. These norms were very much contingent on one's social status, but also guided by an understanding of what's appropriate for which site.

I only use Twitter for like elections and stuff (laugh). But it's the only way you can get in touch with these people, like Obama. I feel like Facebook is more personal; you can private message people. Like private in a virtual way. You can also do a huge group message. I feel like it pulls people together. Like Twitter is more like, "here I am, here is what I'm doing, if you like it, respond or whatever or retweet it or whatever."

These emerging adults also expressed a certain level of self-censorship and self-regulation when posting things online. As one participant notes, "My sisters make fun of me because sometimes I'll be thinking of a status all day before I actually post it." Altering or even deleting images on social media was also a way that emerging adults tried to control the presentation of their identity on-line. "There was a picture of a social media site of me asleep on a car trip. Pictures of you asleep are rarely attractive. My head is completely back, it's just the worst picture. I deleted that from the site." In this regard, emerging adults felt the pressure to not only regulate their own posts, but to constantly be on guard for how other people were presenting their identity online.

Participants described being much more conscious of filtering and controlling their image online as a way to differentiate them from younger or more immature people, a shift in perspective that was evident with their change in status from high school to a college student. For instance, participants often equated people who "post too much information" or simply things that are "inappropriate" as being "younger," "immature," or "naive," a behavior more often associated with that perhaps a high school student or college freshman.

I have an idiot friend who um, this wasn't on Facebook, it was on Snapchat. So, he was smoking weed and drinking and decided that he needed to send that out to a few people and of the people that he sent it to was a high schooler he worked with. Like he "worked" with a high schoolers and sent it to that kid. And the kid saved it and showed it to all of his friends and next time my friend was there, I was like I don't know how you think you're not gonna get fired but you deserve to be kicked out on your ass. So that's my favorite example.

There was also an awareness that students needed to be more conscious of the possibility that their professors may be privy to what they write, solidifying their need to provide a positive presentation of their college student identity.

And then another thing, people will rant about professors on Facebook. It's like, they'll be like, "oh my gosh, my professor is so dumb," you know, like, "why does he assign this

paper.” Like, you know your professor could probably go to Facebook and see things. Like don’t risk that! Just suck it up and deal with it.

In addition to concerns about what their professors may see, emerging adults seem very aware that their status as “student” will quickly be ending and they need to become aware of their online personas and how they might be interpreted by prospective employers. “I literally just think, would I want people to see this? Is this gonna have any effect on me in the future? Like when I’m applying for a job, will they ask about this and that’s it.” Another student made a similar comment.

If I went out last night, like to the movies, like to *Frozen* (referring to an animated Disney film), that’s okay. But not, I think things that should stay off (of your social sites), um, are things like “I don’t remember what happened last night, guys” (laughs). Because I know like the Career Center always says businesses are looking at your Facebook.

As part of the anticipatory socialization process, college students articulate a very conscious shift in the creation of an online persona from a fun teenager to a serious professional, as they are aware their identity is presented not just interpersonally, but also digitally.

Similar to professors or prospective employers, many college students envision parents as part of their “imagined audience,” hence they seemed more conscious or even cautious of what they posted when they envisioned family being their audience.

I feel like Facebook is almost more censored than like Twitter. I mean my entire family has Facebook, so I’m definitely more careful about what I post on Facebook. But with Twitter it’s kinda different. It’s kinda like, I don’t feel as like as restricted about what I say. Even though I don’t like you know, post anything ridiculous, but I just don’t have to monitor what I say as closely, I think. So I kinda like that.

The idea that family was part of their “imagined audience” included not just their own family, but the parents of their friends as well.

I heard a lot of parents to like go on their kid’s Facebook and Twitter, and (look at your) friends to see other things. And like they don’t really know me that well, so they sorta tell other parents “oh this guy is like terrible with his pics like you shouldn’t have your pics out like that”.

Discussions of social media often intersected with perceptions of a particular developmental stage of life. Overall, it was not just that the participants frequently used social media in their daily interactions, but they also consumed a lot of time thinking about what they would post, editing what they posted, and deleting what others posted if it did not match a particular identity that they were attempting to communicate.

A central norm related to the self-regulation of identity includes avoiding embarrassing posts. Although there was a consensus that many youth posted embarrassing or inappropriate things online, this behavior was almost always contextualized as something that “other” people did or behavior that was intended for a humorous response. Similar to Duggen et al. research findings (2017), sharing personal information online routinely occurs, where users are conscientious and intentional about information shared, and individuals make an effort to control their reputation online by monitoring and filtering content. This included not just self-regulation, but being critical of people who failed to filter content.

(People) can post stuff that’s inappropriate, in the sense that I just don’t care or that’s too much information. Like I don’t need to know that or like I don’t care what you and your boyfriend are doing or whatever. They’re too comfortable with letting the public know.

This online filtering involves an understanding of when and how to “screen” what you posted on social media.

When people don't screen, it's like what in the world? It sticks out. So like this girl is getting divorced and it's all on Facebook and it's like, why is she posting that? Like it sticks out more as, why are they posting that? But when somebody posts something like positive, it's like, oh, good job. Like, you know. Does that make sense? I think it's more socially acceptable to post positive things than negative things.

Participants had clear ideas of what constituted "too much information"—the people that posted every single thing that they did, every single minute of the day. And they expressed not wanting to be that person who shares every mundane aspect of their life. "The one who is like 'hey, I'm eating a sandwich right now.'"

3.4. *Emerging Adulthood: Intimacy—Love, Friendship, Connection*

While students provided a range of justifications supporting their self-acknowledged excessive use, one central theme that emerged was the importance of "connectivity" to others. Social media use emerged not just as habit or availability, but also as an intentional way to create community. Dana Boyd refers to these intersections between technology, community and practice as "networked publics."

Networked publics are publics both in the spatial sense and in the sense of an imagined community. They are built on and through social media and other emergent technologies. As spaces, the networked publics that exist because of social media allow people to gather and connect, hang out, and joke around. Networked publics formed through technology serve much the same functions as publics like the mall or the park did for previous generations of teenagers (Boyd 2014, p. 9).

As authors Herbig, Herrmann, and Tyma suggest, technology has made us more interdependent and more likely to seek connections through digital media (Herbig et al. 2015). Several participants spoke to this idea: "I just like to tell people where I am;" "A lot of parties are set up on Facebook so I have to check it every day;" and "Organizations post things . . . so you have to check your notifications." These connections have changed with developmental age and environmental circumstances. As with most traditionally-aged college students, going away to college is the first time they are away from the comfort of their well-known childhood friendship groups—emotionally and often physically. And while in college, as they start to form new networks, it is not unusual for these new friends to leave the geographic space of campus—whether they transfer, drop out, take a semester to study abroad, or graduate. These findings are consistent with research on social capital, where emerging adults use social networking sites to acquire both bridging social capital (new acquaintances with weaker ties) and bonding social capital (stronger ties with established relationships) (Mazzoni and Iannone 2014). These connections are not bound by geography as they once were, but continue to exist in real time nonetheless. The availability of social media provides alternative avenues of staying connected with friends, both old and new.

I move around a lot, so I get to keep in touch with people who are in like Spain or even people who aren't even in the same time zone as I am. So it makes it simpler, easier to keep in touch. Kind of stay updated with them because we like see pictures of how things are with them. I think it's cool, it's kind of like you have all these people you can access. I can talk to all these different people, I don't even have to have their number, so it makes it easier, like an easy way to communicate, keep in touch.

Connection to others is vital for young adults and social media provides an avenue for this connection, particularly with those for whom they engage with in their offline lives as well. For example, researchers (Subramanyam et al. 2008) contend emerging adults' offline and online worlds are connected and social media is used to discuss real-world issues and to connect with people in their offline lives. This may be particularly true for women, where, for example, one study found college women were more likely than men to use the Internet for relational communication, such as

contacts with friends, family, and romantic partners (Subramanyam et al. 2008). These differences were exemplified in the following two responses within one focus group: a female student first responds, "If you date somebody then you have to make it public. Like you have to show that you're dating them on Facebook. So it's official . . . I think it's stupid, but that's just me." A male student follows her with this comment, "If I get in a relationship, I personally would rather not be out there. I would much rather people find out naturally. But if the girl ever says, 'Well I want this on Facebook,' at first I would be like, 'no.' But if you absolutely want to . . . then fine."

One of the strong appeals of social media is the ability to quickly facilitate reciprocal social exchange, for example the initial "friend request" on Facebook, or the giving and receiving comments, or simply "liking" a status. Similarly, forms of social media have unique ways of exchanging private messages such as Snapchat, or instant messenger in Facebook, leading some participants to report this as a more personal way of communication. Within these social contexts, specific norms about what topics are acceptable for discussion and distribution, as discussed in identity formation, mirror preexisting social relations. Thus, information shared online is driven by in-person social interactions (Nissenbaum 2011).

Although students reveal much autonomy when it comes to digital communication, they also recognize that if they want to foster relationships, connect with others, or simply know about invitations to 'real' events, they must engage online. As this student expressed, he feels he 'has to check it.' "I only use Facebook because I know that people will contact me through it . . . I rather everyone text me but a lot of parties are set up on Facebook, so I have to check it every day." In addition, media was significant in noting "big events" such as engagements, weddings, or the birth of a child. In this regard, staying connected to family and friends was identified as important, but there was also a recognition their use of digital communication should happen on their own terms.

The opportunity to gain feedback from peers and to strengthen social bonds is part of the developmental challenges of emerging adulthood. Feedback through electronic communication may be perceived as primarily coming from trusted, pre-established relationships (Pempek et al. 2009) and therefore help young adults negotiate key developmental tasks related to identity, autonomy, and intimacy.

4. Discussion

Though digital technology and communication will continue to evolve, its presence in the lives of young adults will perpetually exist. This study adds to the growing literature of the importance of understanding role of digital communication and technology in emerging adult development. Although media effects theory remains a dominant way to explain media and society, it was less useful in understanding millennials in a polymediated world. This is likely because of the nature of qualitative data collection, where correlations between media consumption and behavior are difficult to ascertain. Rather, our findings seem more consistent with uses and gratification theory, which builds on the classic sociological theories of ethnomethodology and dramaturgy.

This study uncovers the nuanced rituals and behaviors of college students and reveals how these commonplace activities work to sustain structures of society. Whereas their levels of use seem consistent with millennials across the United States, their accounts seem to reveal a perception that they must be connected all the time, whether it be to keep up with school work, check in with parents, or stay apprised of social events with friends. This is indicative of the context of college life and by participating in this ritualized behavior they help sustain these underlying norms of higher education. These practices often continue because they fulfill psychological and social needs, consistent with uses and gratification theory. Digital communication and technology provides a bridge between adolescence and adulthood. They reflected on this process as they matured throughout their college experience, using digital communication to facilitate this stage of development. This was evidenced through the intentional ways in which they tried to manage their impressions on-line, becoming more aware of the role their virtual identity would impact their real-life experiences and goals for the future.

The context of polymediation is ingrained in almost every aspect of young people's lives, making it central to understanding emerging adult development and its impact on social exchange and personal growth. While there continue to be new and developing results gained from quantitative data, there is still much to be learned from hearing the stories from young adults and allowing their voice to be heard through their own unique experiences.

This study is not without limitations. Participants were a somewhat homogenous group, drawn from one mid-sized, public liberal arts university, where the majority of the participants were female, upperclassmen, and white. Thus, it would be difficult to generalize the results to a larger population or to analyze the data from a more intersectional perspective. The focus on college students more generally misses the experiences of non-college bound emerging adults, a group that in general is vastly understudied. As with any qualitative research, interviewer bias can influence the way in which questions were asked, how participants responded to those questions, and what kind, if any kind of attention, was paid to follow-up questions. Finally, social media and digital communication are constantly changing, and certainly the sites and applications that college students used when the research was conducted may already have shifted and evolved.

Despite the limitations to this study, the patterns that emerged provide an important site for further sociological inquiry. Future research could focus more on the transition to college, with interviews of high school seniors and college freshman. A comparative analysis could be done to see how emerging adults who do not attend college use digital forms of communication in similar or different ways. Finally, research would benefit by providing a more intersectional approach that focuses on race, gender, sexuality, religion, and social class in more deliberate and complex ways, expanding the scholarship on both emerging adults and digital communication.

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