Coming of Age Online: The Developmental Underpinnings of Girls' Blogs

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Abstract

Adolescent girls have emerged as the largest demographic of bloggers in the United States. In this study, the author interviewed 20 girls, aged 17 to 21, who had been blogging for 3 or more years. Consistent with previous studies involving youths' online activities, the girls discussed their use of blogging for self-expression and peer interaction. They also observed that the content and style of their blog writing has changed considerably over the years. Their observations reflect key changes in self-development and peer relationships that typically occur during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Drawing on these findings, the author presents a conceptual framework that illustrates how developmental theory can illuminate our understanding of adolescents' and emerging adults' online behaviors.

Keywords

cognitive development, media, identity issues, gender, emerging adulthood, peers/friends

Introduction

Blogging has emerged in the United States as a popular way for individuals to share their reflections with others. While many well-known blogs provide

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political commentary, most Americans use their blogs for personal expression to record and reflect on their daily experiences (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Bloggers tend to be young, with 54% under the age of 30 (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). Data from the Pew Parents & Teens 2006 Survey show that the number of teen bloggers doubled between 2004 and 2006 (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin Macgill, & Smith, 2007). In total, 28% of online teens were bloggers at the end of 2006, compared to 19% at the end of 2004.[1] Adolescent girls are considerably more likely to blog than adolescent boys. Whereas 20% of online boys reported blogging in 2006, 35% of online girls said they were bloggers.

Adults seem to look on youths' blogging practices with a combination of perplexity and alarm. Those of us who recall our own teenage diaries, guarded with lock and key beneath our beds, may marvel at this new, public form of journaling. As youths' enthusiasm for blogging grows, many of the adults in their lives worry that such online self-disclosure will lead to victimization at the hands of peer bullies or adult predators (Cassell & Cramer, 2007). They worry, too, that young people's digital communications may negatively impact their psychological and social development (Wallis, 2006). These concerns reflect a stance that focuses primarily on blogging's impact on youth. In this article, I take a somewhat different approach by considering the ways in which normative developmental processes shape individuals' blogging practices during the course of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Indeed, the research to date suggests that youths' offline experiences and developmental processes influence their online behavior just as much as their online behavior influences their offline experiences and developmental outcomes (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

I report on findings from an empirical study involving 20 female bloggers between the ages of 17 and 21 who have been blogging for over 3 years in a popular online journaling community called LiveJournal. The girls in this sample described to me several ways in which their blogging practices have changed over the years. Their descriptions reflect key changes in self-development and peer relationships that typically occur during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Drawing on these findings, I present a conceptual framework that illustrates how developmental theory can illuminate our understanding of adolescents' and emerging adults' online behaviors.

Research Context

Self-Development and Peer Relationships During Adolescence

Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a period of identity formation during which individuals revisit their childhood identifications as they

become aware of the roles valued by society. In the process, they confront for the first time such questions as "Who am I? How do I fit into the world around me?" The changes to one's sense of self that take place during this time are influenced both by cognitive transformations and socialization processes. The emerging capacity for abstract thought, what Piaget (1981) called formal operations, allows adolescents to form a theory of themselves and their role in society. Opportunities to assume new and diverse social roles expand the possibilities available to them as they form their self-theory.

While the process of self-theorizing marks a cognitive advance and a step toward independence, it is often fraught with uncertainty and anxiety (Larson & Richards, 1994). Hall (1904) famously depicted adolescence as a period of storm and stress, a characterization that Arnett (1999) asserted still applies to many—but by no means all—adolescents today. Arnett identified three primary areas of storm and stress for today's adolescents: conflict with parents over the limits of their newly emerging independence; mood disruptions, such as experiencing emotional extremes and lower rates of happiness compared to childhood; and engagement in risk behaviors like substance abuse and risky sexual behavior.

While the biological processes associated with puberty likely contribute to the storm and stress of adolescence, new social experiences, such as starting high school and dating, may be even more influential (Larson & Richards, 1994). With these life transitions, adolescents take on a greater number of social roles in a broader sphere of social contexts. In the process, they face the cognitive challenge of integrating these roles into a coherent sense of self (Harter, 1999). Moreover, they must reconcile their own sense of self with others' perceptions of them. According to Erikson (1968), feelings of vulnerability emerge when adolescents observe a disjunction between who they feel themselves to be and how others respond to them.

Peers assume a central role during this time of transition and uncertainty. In contrast to childhood, adolescents spend more time interacting with their friends than they do with their parents (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). As a result of this shift, the peer group starts to replace parents as a source of identification (Brown, 1990; Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Pugh & Hart, 1999). The values and norms found within different peer groups provide adolescents with identity templates that they use to define themselves (Pugh & Hart, 1999). These identity templates provide a sense of security and belonging that can offset the self-doubt and vulnerability that many adolescents experience (Brown, 1990). At the same time, strong identification with one's peer group can itself be a source of vulnerability, since adolescents depend to a large degree on their peer group for self-validation. If they do not find such validation, self-doubt and anxiety are quick to reemerge. Moreover,

adolescents often experience challenges to the norms of the peer group as personally threatening, since their identities are interwoven with these norms (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001).

Within the peer group, close friendships also serve an important function in adolescents' developing sense of self (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Sullivan, 1953). Adolescent friendships are marked by their intimacy, which grows throughout this period of development (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The primary pathway to intimacy during adolescence is mutual self-disclosure (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995), a process that is facilitated by adolescents' emerging ability to take others' perspectives (Selman, 1980). As they engage in reciprocal self-disclosure, adolescent friends validate each other's experiences (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Intimacy in close friendships is also achieved through the experience of shared activities (Fehr, 2004; McNelles & Connolly, 1999; Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006; Reis & Shaver, 1988). The emotional support and validation that adolescents experience in their intimate friendships provide them with a safe space for identity exploration (Elliott & Feldman, 1990; Sullivan, 1953).

Self-Development and Peer Relationships During Emerging Adulthood

Feelings of anxiety and self-doubt tend to recede as individuals reach the end of adolescence and enter emerging adulthood, a period that spans roughly the ages from 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Emerging adulthood is a relatively new life stage that arose in the United States and other industrialized societies during the late 20th century. Increases in the average age of marriage and parenthood, prolonged educational experiences, and frequent job changes have given individuals in their late teens and early 20s unprecedented freedom to explore their identities. Thus, while identity formation may begin in adolescence, Arnett (2004) argued that it is the period of emerging adulthood when individuals engage earnestly in the process of self-definition and clarification.

Identity development in emerging adulthood is distinct from adolescent identity development (Arnett, 2004). During adolescence, individuals begin to question who they are in relation to who they were as children and how they perceive people respond to them in different social contexts. As they enter emerging adulthood, individuals' attention turns outward to the broader society, and they begin to consider their "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and life purpose (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Instead of focusing on who they are at this moment, individuals in emerging adulthood begin to

think of who they might become in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Emerging adults draw on their romantic relationships and work experiences to clarify who they want to be and what contribution they want to make to society (Arnett, 2004). According to Damon et al. (2003), the articulation of a sense of purpose plays a positive role in psychological development, since it involves a future-oriented focus on specific goals that are larger than the self.

Identity development in emerging adulthood is generally conducted with more confidence and optimism than in adolescence (Arnett, 2004). The transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood is marked by an increase in social confidence and a decrease in feelings of anger and alienation (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001). Whereas peer acceptance is often a source of stress for adolescents, emerging adults tend to be less anxious about how their peers judge them. At the same time, emerging adulthood brings with it new sources of stress associated with work, relationships, and independent living. Nevertheless, emerging adults generally do not feel overwhelmed by this stress. In fact, they take satisfaction in their ability to pay the bills, meet deadlines at work, and make decisions about who to date. In addition, emerging adults are optimistic about their future, believing that they will be both professionally successful and personally fulfilled (Arnett, 2004).

While peer acceptance is less vital in emerging adulthood than it was in adolescence, friendships continue to play an important role in self-development (Kroger, 2007; Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006). In the face of their newfound roles and responsibilities, emerging adults find emotional support in the intimacy of their close friendships (Kroger, 2007). In their study of friendship among early adolescents and emerging adults, Radmacher and Azmitia (2006) found that the friendships of emerging adults are marked by greater self-disclosure and more complex conceptions of intimacy. While shared activities tend to form the basis of intimacy in early adolescents' close friendships, emerging adults are more likely to emphasize the importance of affective feelings as a source of intimacy.

The Internet as a Context for Self-Development and Peer Interactions

For more than a decade, young people have used the Internet for self-expression and exploration. Turkle (1995) was among the first scholars to look at youths' online identity expressions. Focusing primarily on multiplayer computer games, or multiuser domains (MUDs), Turkle observed the ease with which individuals could manipulate their identities online. She identified flexibility and anonymity as key features that made such "identity play" possible.

Today, the Internet provides individuals with even more options for identity experimentation. However, researchers have found that adolescents and emerging adults typically express themselves online in a manner that is consistent with their offline identity (boyd, 2007, 2008; Gross, 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Stern, 2007). According to Stern (2004), self-expression on adolescents' personal homepages typically includes personal photographs, "About Me" biographies, links to friends' homepages, poetry, quotes, and the inclusion of popular culture symbols. Likewise, boyd (2007, 2008) discussed adolescents' use of identity markers to design their user profiles on social network sites like MySpace and Facebook.[2] On their profiles, they list favorite music, books, television shows, and movies as well as personality quizzes, relationship status, and political leanings. Blogging communities like Live-Journal and Xanga provide similar opportunities for self-expression.[3] In addition, adolescents use their blogs to record and reflect on their daily experiences, personal relationships, and feelings (Bortree, 2005; Huffaker, 2006; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Scheidt, 2006).

As in offline contexts, youths' online self-expressions are influenced by the nature of their peer interactions. Mobile voice and text communication, Instant Messaging (IM), blogging, and social networking offer youth a variety of ways to connect with their friends. Typically, young people use these new media technologies to maintain existing friendships rather than to start new ones (Ito et al., 2009; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). New media multiply opportunities for reciprocal self-disclosure among friends by enabling instantaneous and constant communication that is not reliant on geographic location. Furthermore, the physical distance that typically separates peers online may reduce inhibitions surrounding self-disclosure due to the reduction of social cues (Stern, 2007).

The empirical evidence to date suggests that self-disclosure through online communication can enhance the quality of youths' friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). A 1-year longitudinal study of 884 adolescents and emerging adults in Canada found that frequent IM communication was positively associated with the quality of best friendships (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008). Valkenburg and Peter's (2007) survey of Dutch adolescents also found a positive relationship between frequent IM communication and friendship quality. In both studies, friendships had been initiated offline, and IM was used to supplement offline interactions through self-disclosure. Valkenburg and Peter (2009) proposed the internet-enhanced self-disclosure hypothesis to account for the positive association between friendship quality and online communication that such studies have identified.

This body of scholarship considers youths' online communication in light of the developmental issues they face. However, it does not focus explicitly on changes in these developmental issues as individuals move through adolescence and emerging adulthood or how such changes manifest in online contexts. Although few in number, recent studies have begun to look at differences in online behavior across various stages of youth development. Livingstone (2008) conducted a series of interviews with 16 British adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16 in which she asked them to discuss their participation in social network sites like MySpace and Facebook. Despite the relatively narrow age range of her sample, Livingstone found differences between older and younger adolescents in how they chose to represent themselves online. Whereas the younger adolescents were interested in creating elaborate layout designs that they changed frequently, the older adolescents maintained a more minimalist profile that highlighted their peer connections through links and messages to and from friends.

Schmitt, Dayanim, and Matthias (2008) looked at age differences in the online identity expressions of 8- to 17-year-olds who maintained a personal homepage. They found that preadolescents explored new identities on their homepages more often than older adolescents, who typically used their homepages to shape their existing identities. Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter (2005) identified a similar age difference in their survey of Dutch youth aged 9 to 18 who engaged in IM and online chat. The authors found that younger adolescents experimented with their identities more frequently than older adolescents and emerging adults. In addition, Schmitt et al. (2008) found that preadolescents typically wrote about their skills and accomplishments on their homepages, whereas older adolescents were more likely to write about their personality traits, values, and interpersonal relationships. The authors also observed an increase in the complexity of homepage content from age 8 to 17. They attributed this change to the cognitive advancements that take place during adolescence.

Apart from cross-sectional studies such as the ones described here, little is known about potential changes in individuals' online self-expressions and peer interactions as they progress through adolescence and into emerging adulthood. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by investigating the following research questions:

> *Research Question 1:* Do individuals' online self-expressions change as they transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood? If so, in what ways?

Research Question 2: How might developmental theory inform our understanding of adolescents' and emerging adults' changing online practices?

To answer these questions, I interviewed 20 adolescent girls who had each been blogging for at least 3 years in a popular blogging community called LiveJournal. Several of the girls had started blogging in middle school, and all had written hundreds of blog entries by the time of their interview. With this considerable blogging experience, the girls were able to reflect on the ways in which their blogging practices have changed over the years. I consider these changes in light of normative stages of cognitive and social development. In so doing, I show how developmental theory can inform our understanding of adolescents' and emerging adults' online practices.

Method

Selection Criteria and Sample

Stern (2004, 2007) observed that the dynamic and distributed nature of the Internet makes it challenging for researchers to draw representative samples. Given this limitation, I did not attempt to assemble a sample that was representative of adolescent bloggers in terms of demographic characteristics such as race and socioeconomic status. Instead, I focused on identifying a group of girls who had sufficient blogging experience to draw on in order to discuss the evolution of their blogging practices and the ways they use their blog to express themselves and connect with others. Thus, in order to be considered for the study, bloggers needed to have maintained their blog for at least 3 years and written a minimum of 100 entries.

I recruited 20 girls from a blogging community popular among adolescents and emerging adults called LiveJournal. LiveJournal describes its blogs as online journals intended for personal self-expression, making it an appropriate place to recruit individuals who use their blogs to record and reflect on their personal experiences. In addition, LiveJournal's creation in 1999 makes it one of the oldest blogging communities, so many of its users have maintained their blog for several years. I used LiveJournal's search engine to identify approximately 120 bloggers who met these criteria and were between the ages of 17 and 21 and living in the Greater Boston area. I sent an email to these potential participants describing the study generally and the confidentiality of their participation. Of the 30 girls who responded to this initial email, 20 agreed to participate in a face-to-face interview. Each girl was compensated US$25 for participating in an hour-long interview.

At the time they were recruited for the study, all participants had maintained their blog for 3 or more years and were between the ages of 17 and 21. Two girls had been blogging for 7 years, and the median number of blogging years was four. All girls enjoyed regular access to high speed Internet, both at home and at school. During the interviews, the girls' comments suggested considerable familiarity with and comfort using various forms of social media, including Facebook, mobile text messaging, and IM.

All 20 participants had either grown up or were attending school in the Greater Boston area. They represented all school years between 10th grade of high school and senior year of college. The 10 girls attending college described a variety of declared or intended majors, such as psychology, biology, electrical engineering, environmental studies, and international relations. One girl was a computer science major, and 2 girls were media studies majors. Twelve were White, 5 Asian, 1 Hispanic, 1 Pacific Islander, and 1 identified her race to be a mix of Native American, Black, and White. With respect to their socioeconomic status, 10 girls lived in homes with a combined annual income of over US$75,000, 4 lived in homes with an annual income of US$50 to US$74,999, 3 lived in homes with an annual income of US$30 to US$49,999, and 1 lived in a home with an annual income of less than US$30,000. Two girls declined to report their family's annual household income. (see Appendix B for a complete description of the study's sample).

Data Collection

Following other recent studies involving youths' online activities (e.g., boyd, 2007, 2008; Hodkinson, 2007; Ito et al., 2009; Livingstone, 2008; Stern, 2007), I chose to conduct in-person interviews with each of the 20 participants in this study. The interviews took place between May and December 2007. Each interview was semistructured and lasted approximately one hour. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) questioned the girls about their motivations for blogging, its role in their daily lives, and how their blogging practices have changed during the course of their teenage years.

The interview method gave participants the opportunity to describe what their online writing means to them and how blogging fits into other aspects of their lives. Stern (2007) contrasted such a process with content analyses of youths' online artifacts. She observed that content analyses require researchers to draw inferences about the motivation and intent behind youths' online productions. Shaped by the researchers' personal experiences, these inferences may not align with the experiences of the youth whose productions are being

analyzed. It was particularly important for me to speak directly with the girls in my study because I wished to know, not what their online self-expressions look like, but the motivations behind these self-expressions and the girls' experience of them. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews allowed me to address specific topics that the girls may not address on their blog, such as their initial motivations for starting a blog. This approach also made it possible for me to ask follow-up questions based on what the girls told me during the interview.

Data Analysis

The interviews for this study were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, I converted my handwritten field notes into a memo that summarized the content of the interview and sought to distill the major themes discussed. In this memo, I recorded reflective remarks about my relationship with the research participant, including my reactions to and feelings about what she said. I also sought to draw connections across participants, form initial hypotheses, and address discrepant statements within and across interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I followed a coding process that was both etic and emic. I drew on the literature on identity development, peer relationships, and online self-expression and peer interaction to create a "start list" of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This etic list of codes ensured that my analysis addressed my research questions, and it allowed me to test theories from the literature. I created emic codes by reading my memos and the interview transcripts line by line. I used this close reading to identify recurrent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this coding process, I wrote analytic memos that explored relationships and discrepancies within and across participants as well as areas of agreement and disagreement with the literature (Maxwell, 2005). To establish intercoder agreement, two members of the research team[4] with which I am affiliated used my coding scheme to code one of the transcripts. We discussed any discrepancies, and I used this discussion to guide my subsequent coding.

After this first-level analysis, I constructed a matrix of select codes in order to provide an overview of dominant themes across participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I then solicited team members' feedback on my conceptual matrices and analytic memos. I also shared my findings with the girls themselves and invited their comments. This feedback helped me to reflect on the validity of my conclusions, the potential influence of my biases and assumptions, and the possibility of unexplored themes in my data.

Results

Consistent with previous studies involving youths' online activities, the girls in this sample discussed the various ways they use their blog for self-expression

and peer interaction. They also observed that the content and style of their blog writing has changed over the years. I chart these blogging uses and transformations here as well as the changing role of friends on LiveJournal.

Friends' Role in Early Blogging Experiences

The centrality of peers in adolescents' lives is reflected in the girls' stated reasons for joining LiveJournal and the descriptions they gave of their early blogging experiences. Sixteen of the girls initially started blogging because one or more of their friends from school had a blog. Consequently, there tended to be considerable overlap between the girls' LiveJournal and "real-life" friends. The girls said they wanted to be able to read their friends' blogs and participate in a common activity with them. Maggie, 19 years old and entering her freshman year of college, started blogging in middle school at the age of 13. Her explanation is illustrative of many girls' motivations for starting a blog:

> Basically my group of friends used to hang out in the computer lab or one of the computer labs at school. And we would all—you know, there would be phases of things that we'd do, and then suddenly everybody had started getting a LiveJournal account.

Kaitlin, an 18-year-old college freshman and blogger of 4 years, echoed this sentiment, "I guess it was the sort of thing where I thought, 'Well, everyone has a blog, I guess I'll have a blog.'"

Having played an influential role in most girls' decision to start blogging, friends continued to figure prominently in their early blogging practices. Maggie said that she was originally unsure what she should write on her blog, so she took her cues from friends:

> I said [to my friends], "You know, I'm not sure I'm actually going to be posting in [LiveJournal] that much because I don't have any idea what to say." And they said, "You'll get the hang of it." But then I would just—because some of my friends had already started to develop their own styles and stuff. I'd just try to imitate whatever they said.

It is evident here that Maggie experienced her early LiveJournal experiences as a shared activity with her friends. She did not yet know what she wanted to write about, so she looked to her friends for guidance. Veronica, 19 years old and entering her sophomore year of college, said that she adopted the practice of writing end-of-year reflections in high school in part because all of her friends on LiveJournal were doing so. Like Maggie,

she observed how her friends used LiveJournal and shaped her own writing accordingly. Samantha, also 19 years old and entering her sophomore year of college, looked to her friends for affirmation of her writing. She reflected on her earlier tendency to "stress out" about the feedback that her friends left on her blog. For each entry she wrote, she hoped that her friends would respond with encouraging comments.

Content and Style of Early Blog

Veronica, Jill, Samantha, and Alicia said their early blog entries are full of surveys and personality quizzes. The girls explained that such quizzes are frequently circulated among friends online and claim to answer questions like "What kind of cookie are you?" or "Which Superhero are you?" On filling out a survey, the girls said they posted the results on their blog for their friends to see and compare with their own results. Two college freshmen, Sasha and Alicia, aged 18 and 17, respectively, said they used to spend much more time updating their profile page with new pictures and personal information. Alicia said she enjoyed changing the design and color scheme of her blog layout, as well. In addition, she used to include "Current Mood" and "Music Listening To" with each entry she wrote. These features on LiveJournal allow users to attach a specific mood and song to their entries. Another feature that users find on LiveJournal is a selection of emoticons. Both Jaime, a 17-year-old high school junior, and Veronica said they used to insert emoticons in their entries to help convey a particular tone of voice.

Seventeen of the girls also reflected on the emotionally charged quality of their early writings. They explained that they used their blog to "vent" and express their "high school angst." At times, these vents assumed an angry tone, whereas at others they conveyed feelings of sadness. Amanda, an 18-year-old high school senior, said that she wrote about her "boyfriend drama" when she first started blogging in ninth grade. She characterized these entries as "running words of rambling" about how angry she was with her relationship. Sasha remarked, "I'd rant about my depressing stuff [on LiveJournal]." Kaitlin, too, described her early entries as a series of "rants," although she observed that they were often rants of excitement over the release of a new video game. Other topics for rants included difficult teachers, annoying parents and siblings, arguments with friends, college applications, the excitement of a new relationship, and the trepidation of moving to a new state or neighborhood.

Friends' Role in Current Blog

All 20 girls said that interacting with friends on their blog continues to play a central role in their current blogging practices. In fact, all girls said they

spend considerably more time reading their friends' entries than they do writing their own. On LiveJournal, one need not visit friends' journals individually to check for updates; they are aggregated and posted on a "Friends List." Some girls compared the act of checking their Friends List to the habit of checking email. Indeed, 14 of the girls said they read their Friends List every day. Rachel, a 20-year-old college junior, explained, "If you don't check it every day, it piles up." The other 6 girls said they check their Friends List several times a week.

The girls' descriptions of their friendship interactions on LiveJournal illuminate its reciprocal, often intimate nature. In total, 19 of the girls talked about reading and commenting on their friends' journals and having their friends read and comment on their journal entries. Several girls echoed the characterization of LiveJournal offered by Margaret, a 19-year-old college sophomore, "It's sort of like a conversation, a dialogue, with some close friends." Natalie, an 18-year-old high school senior, reflected on the value she receives from communicating with her friends on LiveJournal:

> I mean it's great because I love being able to, I guess, empathize with stuff that [my friends are] going through, and then they get to read stuff that I'm going through and give me—like commenting—"hey, do you want to talk about this?" or something, and that's really helpful.

Natalie said that she finds it easier to share personal thoughts and feelings with friends on LiveJournal because it is often difficult to initiate such intimate conversations in person. In a similar way, Margaret explained, "[Blogging is] a really good tool for discussions just because you can talk about really deep things that you can't just broach during lunch." For Natalie and Margaret, LiveJournal appears to facilitate self-disclosure and intimacy among their friends.

Several girls indicated that LiveJournal affords them a unique perspective on their friends' lives and inner thoughts. Lisa, an 18-year-old high school senior, commented that reading her friends' journal entries gives her insight into their feelings. Denise, a 17-year-old high school sophomore, said that LiveJournal provides her with a more "in-depth" understanding of her friends than she could gain in other contexts. Carlie, 19 years old and entering her freshman year of college, believes the added insight into her friends' lives that she has gained on LiveJournal has helped her to become more sympathetic and compassionate. She explained that reading her friends' blogs allows her to view their experiences through their eyes instead of her own. Maggie noted that it is interesting for her to see different sides of her friends. For instance, she has a friend who is consistently cheerful in face-to-face

interactions, but on LiveJournal she often complains about personal experiences. Maggie observed that she would not be aware of her friend's feelings if she did not read her LiveJournal.

Once established, intimacy can also be maintained through blogging. Of the 13 girls in the sample attending or about to attend college, 12 of them said that maintaining close ties with their high school friends is one of the most important uses of LiveJournal. Margaret reflected, "My blog has sort of become a good communication tool with some of my friends because we've all separated." Indeed, Anita, a 19-year-old college senior, said that she feels closest to those high school friends who maintain a blog. Sasha was the only girl attending college who did not share this opinion, explaining that her closest high school friends do not have blogs. However, she noted that she does use LiveJournal to stay in touch with a few friends from middle and high school.

Content and Style of Current Blog

All 20 girls reflected on the changes that the content and style of their blog has undergone over the years. They characterized these changes both implicitly and explicitly as evidence of their growing maturity. After several years of blogging, the girls who had initially been unsure about how to use LiveJournal said they now feel confident about what to do and how to write. Maggie, who had originally imitated her friends' writing on LiveJournal, commented, "After a while, I found more of my own style and more of my own things to talk about . . . I guess it evolved." Veronica explained that she has learned over the years how to navigate the LiveJournal community, and this knowledge has helped her to craft her own style of writing. Likewise, Samantha said she has learned over the years how to write in an entertaining way for her audience.

The girls' comparisons between their past and present writing point to their growing stability and confidence on LiveJournal. Of the 17 girls who talked about using their blog to "vent" and express "high school angst," only Lisa said that she continues to "whine" and "bitch" on LiveJournal. Amanda said she is "less frazzled" and "more collected" on her blog. Natalie described her current writing as "less emotional," and Samantha believes she is "less whiny." Similarly, Jaime reflected that she is no longer as angry about "stupid things." Rachel observed that she uses fewer exclamation points now than she did in her earlier writing. Danielle, a 19-year-old entering her sophomore year of college, said that since she takes more time to plan out her entries, her current writing conveys a calmer, more deliberate tone. In contrast to Danielle, Shelly, a 21-year-old college senior, noted that she actually spends less time planning out her entries. As a result, she believes her writing is now

"simpler" and "more direct." Shelly's comments indicate a sense of assuredness that seems to have been lacking in her early years on LiveJournal. Anita and Kaitlin expressed a similar self-assuredness when they said their writing is now more interesting for their audience to read.

In addition to becoming more poised and self-assured on LiveJournal, many of the girls identified a concurrent movement toward writing about topics beyond their personal experience. For instance, Maggie had recently returned from a year studying in Paris, where she had served as a volunteer in the French presidential elections. She said that she blogged about the political climate in France and her experience as a volunteer in the election. Madison, an 18-year-old high school junior, also writes about issues and events that extend beyond her immediate experience. Where once she wrote about her personal problems and complaints, she now uses her blog to post information about political rallies, link to political Web sites, and reflect on her developing beliefs regarding social justice issues like feminism, gay rights, and racism.

Thirteen girls said they use their blog to reflect on their future life course, both immediate and long term. Jill, a 17-year-old high school junior, said that she writes frequently about her plans for college. She also writes an entry every January about what has changed in her life and the goals she has set for herself. Rachel, who was preparing to graduate from college, said she had written a 4-year plan at the start of her freshman year and continued to update it throughout college. Kaitlin commented that LiveJournal helps her to clarify the direction that her life is taking. In a similar manner, Alicia said, "[Blogging] makes me reflect on the day and reflect on all the things that I want to accomplish." Maggie echoed these sentiments when she commented:

> I definitely think [blogging] helps me to go back and think about, you know, whether I've actually been living up to the type of person that I want to be. And I think that—I mean that's not something that normally happens in a social experience. So that's nice to have that kind of reflection time.

Discussion

Charting a Developmental Trajectory on LiveJournal

Much like the participants in previous studies examining youths' online activities, the girls in this sample use their blog for self-expression and peer interaction. However, they noted that their self-expressions and peer interactions have changed considerably over the course of adolescence and into emerging adulthood. Their descriptions provide insight into the ways that

developmental processes shape youths' online behavior. In laying out the research context for this study, I provided an overview of the cognitive and social underpinnings of adolescents' and emerging adults' self-development and peer relationships. Here, I use that review as a lens through which to examine the girls' descriptions of their changing blog. I suggest that the changes they described in their blogging practices reflect certain developmental processes that are typical of adolescence and emerging adulthood. The relationship between blogging practices and developmental processes is depicted in Table 1.

The emergence of abstract thought during adolescence supports the critical task of identity formation by making it possible for individuals to form a theory of themselves and their role in society. The girls' descriptions of their early writing suggest that they used LiveJournal to engage in the process of self-theorizing. Several girls noted their enjoyment of online personality surveys, activities that allow users to construct different self-representations. The girls took quizzes to find out what kind of cookie, ice cream flavor, or Superhero they were and posted the results on their blog. They also reflected on the frequency with which they made changes to their personal profiles and layout design as well as their habit of including emoticons, song titles, and mood indicators as embellishments to their entries. These different forms of self-representation may be interpreted as attempts to answer the question "Who am I?" In this way, LiveJournal appears to have supported the girls' identity explorations during adolescence.

The transition to adolescence is often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Larson & Richards, 1994). The "ranting," "venting," and "angsty writing" that 17 girls said characterized their early writing may be a reflection of the storm and stress of adolescence. Girls like Madison and Danielle noted the pain and anger they expressed in their early writing. Samantha and Denise characterized their writing in adolescence as deeply personal and "angsty." Several other girls explained that they tended to write in their blog when they were experiencing emotional extremes, whether joy or sadness. Moreover, the subjects of the girls' early writing covered areas that often inspire mood disruptions among adolescents, such as parental conflict, moving to a new place of residence, and either the start or end of a relationship.

In the midst of their uncertainty, adolescents often turn to their friends for direction, validation, and a sense of security (Brown, 1990). Recall Maggie's initial trepidation in her early days of blogging. She had originally opened a LiveJournal account in response to the urging of her friends in middle school. She reflected that her hesitation about what and how to write led her to

Table 1. The Relationship Between Girls' Changing Blogs and Key Features of Cognitive and Social Development During Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Developmental stage	Cognitive processes	Social processes	Changes in writing and use of blog
Adolescence	• Emergence of abstract thought makes self-theorizing possible • Feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are common, as are mood disruptions		• Inclusion of personality surveys; frequent updates to profile and layout; inclusion of emoticons, "Current Mood," and "Music Listening To" features • Early writing is emotionally charged; use blog to "vent" and express "high school angst"
		• Turn to peers for validation, identity template • Close friendships become increasingly intimate	• Friends influence decision to start blogging • Initial uncertainty about what to write, turn to peers for guidance, and validation
Emerging Adulthood	• Well-being and social confidence rises • Attention turns outward to broader society • Contemplation of "possible selves"		• Signs of increased stability and confidence in writing • Shift in attention from personal topics to broader society • Use of blog to contemplate the future
		• No longer dependent on peer group membership for self-definition • Close friendships become even more intimate through reciprocal self-disclosure	• Friends remain central motivation for blogging, but entries no longer imitate friends' writing • Reciprocal self-disclosure supported by interactive features of blogging • Blog used to maintain intimacy with friends

imitate her friends' writing. Samantha described a similar uncertainty when she commented, "I didn't really know what to do with [my blog] at first." Like Maggie, Samantha took her lead from her friends. It is worth considering that the girls' initial insecurity is attributable not to their developmental stage but to the simple fact that they had embarked on an unfamiliar activity. Indeed, it is likely that they would have experienced some uncertainty regardless of the age at which they started blogging. Nevertheless, the manner in which girls like Maggie and Samantha described their initial self-doubt and dependence on peers suggests that part of their insecurity can be ascribed to the particular challenges experienced by adolescents.

The embarrassment that the girls expressed over their earlier writings stood in contrast to the sense of stability and confidence they displayed when describing their current writings. Such self-assuredness is common among emerging adults, whose well-being tends to increase as their anxiety over peer acceptance and self-definition decreases (Arnett, 2004; Roberts et al., 2001). The girls spoke about their comparatively calm tone of voice and improved quality of writing. Moreover, while friends continue to play an important role in their blogging practices, girls like Maggie and Veronica explained that they have found their own style of writing. They no longer look to their friends' blogs to help them shape their own blog.

The girls may be less reliant on their friends for guidance on LiveJournal, but friends remain central to their blogging experiences. Reading and responding to their friends' blog entries is a daily activity for most girls, whereas writing on their own blog is somewhat more intermittent. This pattern of LiveJournal use can be understood by placing it in a developmental context. Friendships during emerging adulthood are marked by increased intimacy and longer interactions than adolescent friendships (Kroger, 2007). The interactive features available on LiveJournal appear to support intimacy among friends. Natalie and Margaret observed that blogging allows them to disclose certain thoughts and feelings that they otherwise would not have the opportunity or inclination to share in other contexts. Girls like Lisa, Denise, Carlie, and Maggie noted that LiveJournal gives them new insight into their friends by showing them in a different light. Blogging proved to be particularly important for the girls in college, who used their LiveJournal to maintain close ties with their friends from high school. In this way, blogging appears to satisfy emerging adults' desire for intimacy in close friendships.

In addition to gaining insight into their friends, the girls also use blogging to gain insight into themselves and their role in society. Identity development continues during emerging adulthood, although it looks somewhat different from adolescent identity development (Arnett, 2004). Emerging

adults begin to look beyond their immediate experience to the broader society and their future role in it (Damon et al., 2003; Harter, 1999). Carlie is a good example of this shift in attention. Whereas her early entries served as summaries of her day, her current entries are "on a more global, a bigger scale." Carlie noted that she may still write about her daily experiences, but she tries now to connect her experiences with larger social issues. While Carlie did not talk about using LiveJournal to contemplate her future, 13 girls in this sample did say they used their blog in this way. As Maggie commented, she turns to her blog when she is wondering about "what my future is going to be like." Writing helps her to clarify her thoughts about the path her life should follow.

I do not claim that the relationship between blogging experiences and developmental processes outlined in Table 1 fits all girls in this sample equally well. Indeed, I acknowledged in the Results section of this article a number of differences in the girls' descriptions of their blogging histories. Nevertheless, all girls in the sample did talk about some form of change in their blogging practices over the years, and several themes emerged across these descriptions. Thus, I offer Table 1 as a framework for considering the dominant changes described by this group of bloggers as they transitioned from adolescence to emerging adulthood. The purpose of this framework is to illustrate how normative developmental processes may shape adolescents' and emerging adults' online activities over time. It should be noted that the girls' increasing experience with online communication in general and Live-Journal in particular likely played some role in their changing blogging practices.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings reported here are based on retrospective accounts; thus, they are susceptible to bias. Memories shaped by time and emotion may have introduced inaccuracies in the girls' descriptions of their past and present blogging. For this reason, it would have been useful to supplement self-reports with content analyses of their blog entries. Unfortunately, several factors precluded such triangulation, including limitations in time and resources. In addition, many girls maintained "friends only" blogs that were restricted to a relatively small group of their close friends and acquaintances, making it impossible to gain access to their writing. Even in the case of unrestricted blogs, I did not feel comfortable reading personal blog entries that were not intended for a research audience. Future research could follow a group of bloggers throughout adolescence and into emerging adulthood or, alternatively,

compare the blogging experiences of girls who represent a variety of developmental stages.

Even if the girls faithfully represented the evolution of their blog, it is possible that their growing experience and comfort with blogging, rather than developmental factors, account for this change. Although this alternative hypothesis is certainly plausible, the girls' comments suggest that the changes in their writing are attributable at least in part to developmental factors. When girls like Maggie and Samantha spoke about their reasons for joining LiveJournal, for instance, they reflected on the particular social context they were experiencing at the start of adolescence. The approval of their peer group was vitally important to them, and they based their actions, both online and offline, on the quest for such approval. In a similar manner, Rachel described her earlier writing as expressions of "high school angst," suggesting that her blogging was shaped by the emotions she was experiencing during a specific developmental period rather than in the specific social context of LiveJournal. Nonetheless, future research could endeavor to disentangle developmental and experiential factors by comparing the blogging experiences of girls who are at the same developmental age but who have different levels of blogging experience.

Due to the small size and purposive selection of my sample, I cannot claim that the findings reported here are representative of all female adolescent bloggers in the United States. Indeed, I have noted considerable variability within this particular group of bloggers. The primary purpose of the conceptual framework presented in Table 1 is to show how developmental theory can provide insight into adolescents' changing online self-expressions. Future research can test the validity and usefulness of this model with a larger and more diverse sample, including adolescents living in different parts of the United States and in different countries. In addition, the girls' descriptions of LiveJournal indicate that it is a distinct blogging community that may shape users' blogging practices in ways that differ from other blogging services. Thus, it would be worthwhile to investigate the experiences of adolescents whose blogs are not on LiveJournal. It would also be interesting to know whether adolescent boys follow a similar or different developmental trajectory on their blogs.

Conclusion

Many of the findings presented here are consistent with previous studies that explore youths' online activities. Like those studies, the girls in this sample said they use their blogs to engage in the important developmental tasks of identity expression and social interaction. However, because they had been

blogging consistently throughout adolescence and into emerging adulthood, the girls also described several ways that their blogging practices have changed over the years. When they first started blogging, the girls were unsure what to write and looked to their friends' blogs for guidance. Over time, they became more self-assured and developed their own style of writing. Although they no longer rely on their friends for guidance, friends continue to function as a primary motivation for blogging. By considering this evolution in light of developmental theory, I found that the girls' changing blogging practices parallel normative milestones in adolescents' and emerging adults' developing sense of self and peer relationships.

Thus, although youths' enthusiasm for blogging may confound and disturb many adults, it seems their engagement in blogging communities like LiveJournal reflects typical developmental imperatives of adolescence and emerging adulthood. To be sure, the Internet is still a relatively new social space that supports many different forms of communication. It is appropriate for adults to question the possible effects of networked communication on youths' cognitive and social development. However, the findings presented here suggest that it would be wise to consider first how normative developmental processes direct young people's behavior in online spaces. In so doing, we may be better positioned to detect the extent to which online activities like blogging may be shaping youth development in new ways.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Besides blogging, how do you spend your time?
2. What matters to you? What are some of the things that you care about?
3. What kind of person are you? What kind of person would you like to become?
4. How did you find out about blogging and LiveJournal (LJ)?
5. When did you start your blog? What was going on in your life at the time?
6. Why did you decide to create a blog?
7. Have your entries changed since you started your blog?
8. Has your profile page changed since you started your blog?
9. How does your blog writing fit into the rest of your life?
10. Do you see your blog as being related in any way to what you told me about the things that matter most to you?

(continued)

Appendix A (continued)

11. Besides writing journal entries, how else do you use LJ?
12. Are your LJ friends also your real-life (RL) friends? Have you met new people on LJ?
13. Do you ever go back and reread old entries?
14. If someone were to go back and read your blog entries from the very beginning until now, would they tell a story or multiple stories about you?
15. Are there things about yourself and your life that you leave out of your blog on purpose?
16. Who reads your blog? Do you think about your audience while you write?
17. What is the main purpose of your audience—seek support/advice, keep them up-to-date, entertain, educate, engage in debate?
18. What made you decide to make your blog public?
19. What kind of feedback do you usually get?
20. Are there things that your family and friends know about you that the readers of your blog don't know?
21. Can you express things (about yourself) online that you can't offline? Are there things that the readers of your blog know about you that your family and friends don't know?
22. Let's say that one of your friends from school, who has never read or seen your LJ blog, met one of your LJ friends, who has never seen or spoken with you offline. If they started to talk about what you're like, how would their descriptions be the same and how would they be different? How would you feel about them meeting?
23. In general, what are the ways that you express yourself (i.e., your personality, who you are) offline? What are the ways that you express yourself online?
24. Lots of people compare LJ with diary writing. Do you see your LJ blog as a diary?
25. Does blogging help you to think about what kind of person you are now and/or what kind of person you would like to become?
26. Do you think that your blog has influenced the type of person you are in real life?
27. Does your blog ever have an effect on what goes on in your real life?
28. Do you see your blog as a life commitment? How do you think it will change over time?
29. Under what circumstances do you think you might stop blogging?
30. Is there anything else about your blog that you'd like to talk about that we haven't discussed?

Appendix B

The Study's Sample

School year of girls	Number of girls
10th grade	1
11th grade	3
12th grade	3
Gap year[a]	2
College freshman	6
College sophomore	1
College junior	2
College senior	2

Race/ethnicity of girls	Number of girls
White	12
Asian	5
Hispanic	1
Pacific Islander	1
Mix of Native American, Black, and White	1

Years blogging	Number of girls
3	3
4	8
5	4
6	3
7	2

Family's annual household income	Number of girls[b]
Over US$75,000	10
US$50,000–US$74,999	4
US$30,000–US$49,999	3
Less than US$30,000	1

a. Two girls took a year off between high school and college.
b. Two girls declined to report their family's annual household income.

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Notes

1. Over 9 in 10 Americans between the ages of 12 and 17 were Internet users in 2006, and 87% were Internet users in 2004 (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin Macgill, & Smith, 2007).
2. MySpace and Facebook are social network sites where individuals create personal profiles and link them to the profiles of other users. Once their profiles are linked, users can communicate with each other through public or private messages.
3. Blogging communities like LiveJournal and Xanga are similar to social network sites like MySpace and Facebook. Individuals create personal profiles that they link to the profiles of other users. In addition, each user has a blog associated with his or her profile. Often, the blog takes on a more central role than the user profile.

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Bio

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