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Digital Rite of Passage: The First Social Media Kids

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Abstract

Through a combination of academic research and creative storytelling, this thesis delves into the largely undocumented experiences of the “first social media kids,” an entire generation of tweens who grew up using social media in the 2010s before it was heavily moderated or imbued with age restrictions. While stories about this age of social media have been traded consistently in conversations between peers who are currently in their early twenties, there is a clear lack of academic work focused on early social media and the young users who explored it. Through the medium of an episodic and investigative podcast titled "Digital Rite of Passage: The First Social Media Kids," my work captures the previously neglected narratives and reflections of this age group to share with a society that constantly raises concerns about our youth being present on social media platforms. The focus of the podcast episode is identity, and how being on social media as a tween may have influenced expression and impacted the users' sense of self. To provide a foundation of knowledge for the relationship between identity and social media, the literature review begins with an in-depth outline of the functions and characteristics of social media that draw users to the platform for specific purposes. It then explores the practice of self expression through social media platforms and the technological affordances that they provide for users. Lastly, it introduces the relationship between tween users and social media platforms, specifically regarding identity development in children during their tween years and why they are drawn toward social media as a means of expression and identity management. This research, combined with the art of creative storytelling through podcasting, will allow young adults to become a bigger part of the conversation surrounding young social media users by drawing on their own experiences to provide input on the controversial topic.

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Introduction

As a student within the realm of digital communications and media studies, I have spent four years studying and debating the role of social media in society. Throughout my academic endeavors, I have explored concepts such as technological determinism, social construction of technology, the interactivity between media and consumer, and the synchronicity of digital communications (or the lack of), among many others. Through essays and projects, I have reflected on the application of these concepts to everyday life, along with observing them through a historical lens. While my education has been rich with real-world instances and given me valuable insight into the future of media in society, I discovered a well of untapped potential for qualitative research in none other than my female/non-binary peers, all of whom, along with myself, grew up during an extremely unique time for social media and the internet. In today's digital age, research surrounding the positive and negative effects of social media on young users is abundant. Yet, there is a serious lack of academic literature surrounding the social media experience during the early 2010s, specifically for users who were between the ages of 8 and 12 years old during that time. Social media platforms were still being developed and perfected, and, above all, there were very few methods of restriction and moderation in place for young users aside from parental supervision. Social media platforms were so new that my age group was learning how to use social media alongside their parents. That being said, one could argue that tween social media users in the 2010s were the first generation of "social media kids" and experienced all things beautiful and terrible through the earliest platforms. The purpose of this project is to document this specific age of social media, which is remembered only through conversations about shared experiences between users who are now in their twenties. By

reflecting on the things we discovered as the first social media kids, we can gain insight into precedents that were set by young users, digital cultures that were born, and the social phenomena that were endemic to that specific era. It will also better our understanding of today's tween users, addressing the real dangers of contemporary social media while also allaying some of the panic surrounding tweens exploring the internet. The project consists of an episodic and investigative podcast, titled *Digital Rite of Passage: The First Social Media Kids*, in which social media users who are now in their twenties recount their experiences on social media in the early 2010s. As I have already established this podcast outside of my thesis work, the thesis itself will be a continuation of the podcast. It will focus on the writing, recording, and editing of episode two, which delves into the topic of identity and how the experiences of the first social media kids influenced their sense of self, both then and now. Interview subjects will be female, non-binary and/or queer social media users.

Literature Review

The development of early social media platforms brought complex cultural phenomena and social structures to virtual spaces. Like many physical places, cyberspace consists of niches and functions that allow its inhabitants to introduce creation, beauty, danger, and controversy to the equation. The literature on early social media platforms discusses these developments, along with their potential influence over identity, relationships, interactions, and perceptions. These developments were mainly possible because early social media platforms opened doors to widespread communication by overcoming physical and social barriers, such as proximity, language, and accessibility (Arora, 2012). Overall, social media has become a digital realm blooming with its own unique culture. While my study specifically concerns the experiences of tween social media users in the early 2010s, known as an era of unmoderated and unrestricted

social media sites, it is important to understand the characteristics of these digital structures that play a role in how users engage and interact with the technology and with each other. In order to lay a foundation of knowledge for this topic, I will analyze and compare previous studies on the functions, motivations, engagement, and influences of popular social media sites among a wide demographic of users.

Functions of Social Media Platforms

Every social media platform is designed with a specific role in mind. Some social media platforms are assigned to a role by the users themselves as they develop preferences and discover possibilities based on the technological functions of the platform (Arora, 2012). Both the structure of the platform and the inhabitants that frequent the platform influence the way it is used, as dictated by the actor-network theory (Arora, 2012). The academic literature theorizes the functions of social media based on this reality, examining how roles differ between platforms and their users. Understanding the functions of social media platforms is a key to gaining insight into user behaviors, cultures, and socialization within the digital sphere. Arora (2012) explored five categories of motivations for the function of an area of cyberspace: utilitarian-driven, aesthetic-driven, context-driven, play-driven, and value-driven. Each of these categories allows academics to organize the vast cultural dimensions within digital spaces into categories that relate to the functions of physical structures (highways, homes, parks, playgrounds, and museums, respectively), making their uses easier to understand (Arora, 2012). The utilitarian-driven category mainly encompasses the internet itself being an information highway; however, this category can be applied in a broader sense to most social media sites as information is actively being exchanged, no matter what form that exchange takes (Arora, 2012). For example, early platforms like AskFM and Kik, unlike Instagram or Facebook, were primarily

messaging apps specializing in conversation and the exchange of information, lacking certain social drivers such as amassing a large following or curating creative identities. Döveling et al. (2018) also argue that today's social media technology has become an essential piece of everyday life and infrastructure due to the flow of information it facilitates. However, while Arora (2012) focuses on the utilitarian public services and connectivity spread through digital spaces, Döveling et al. (2018) observe the emotional exchanges occurring on a global scale, honing in on the cultural aspects and social practices that develop online. They study the sharing of emotions online as an indicator of communities and cultures that form through digital "affect displays," or demonstrations of emotion (Döveling et al., 2018). The argument posed by Döveling et al. (2018) that the function of social media sites mainly concerns interaction, bonding, and community building based on a shared sentiment is a common belief across the literature. Gibson (2019) perceives the function of social media to air on the side of a public forum structure, where like-minded users with shared sentiments may discuss their opinions and beliefs. However, she also argues that for some platforms, the information exchange consists of an extreme lack of shared sentiment or completely opposing views (Gibson, 2019). They argue that it functions as a democratizing force, and communities may be built on the basis of debate as well as discussion (Gibson, 2019). We can recognize this function through platforms like Reddit, which exists to facilitate conversation between many demographics concerning a vast array of topics, both mainstream and extremely niche.

Though utilitarian functionality, like information exchange, is widely recognized as a kind of foundational, basic function of social media platforms (not negating its many complexities and layers), it is not the only function posed by academics. Arora (2012) also argues that social media platforms can have an "aesthetic-driven" function which provides a

sense of ownership and personalization for the user based on their design. She claims that this utility was born because “if we were merely driven by functionality, we would never have much choice” (Arora, 2012, p. 18). This logic applies to social media sites like Pinterest, Instagram, and even Tumblr, which are considered as visual design platforms that allow for customization and creativity. Boyd and Ellison (2007), in their study of the very first social networking sites, also discuss the aesthetic functions of these platforms and how they might appeal to users. Their discussion is based on the technological affordances in the early software that allowed users to personalize their experience through profile design and multimedia features (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, this is where perceptions between the academics seem to split apart. While Arora (2012) discusses the functions of social media in a broader sense, covering many different uses and design motivations, Boyd and Ellison (2007) claim that the earliest social networking sites were primarily used to build online connections, not necessarily with strangers but with pre-established social circles. They discuss the affordances of platforms like Friendster and Facebook and how they allow the user’s social circle to become public, creating opportunities to connect with friends-of-friends, not just strangers (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). They stray from the topic of aesthetics and personalization, instead delving into the technical features of platforms that allow for visibility and access to other users, ultimately arguing that the potential to build an online network is what differentiates the functions of various platforms (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The argument that users flock to social media to connect with friends and view the social circles of other friends differs from that of Gibson (2019), who argues that the goal is not necessarily to build online circles and status but to engage with strangers in discussion and idea sharing. Overall, Arora (2012) covers the widest array of platform functions without prioritizing one objective over the other, creating categories of function that apply to the functions discussed by

the other academics. While the literature tends to disagree on the primary objectives of social media use, they share common opinions of peripheral functions and how they set platforms and their users apart.

User Identity Development

Regardless of the intended functions of social media platforms, an unintended function is that users are given the freedom to engage with their identity and sense of self. Engaging with your identity is a common communication practice in everyday life; statements can be made through outfit choice, conversation techniques, hobbies, and even the people you surround yourself with. Thanks to the many technical features of digital spaces, social media users can engage with their identity online as well (Cover, 2012). Cover (2012) is the most thorough source when it comes to identity, self-expression, and selfhood on social media, shaped both by the user and the platform. He first recognizes the features that are most commonly used to cultivate user identities, including profile management, friending or following other users, “liking” posts, and responding to statuses and tagged posts, as well as receiving responses (Cover, 2012). They argue that through customizing profiles to outwardly present identifying categories (gender, sexuality, tastes, opinions, etc.) and through associating with friends and other users online, a social media user continuously builds and reforms their identity online (Cover, 2012). That being said, it is important to recognize both the commonalities and differences between cultivating identity offline and online; in both spaces, one can use aesthetics to represent their selfhood (clothing and accessory in real life, visual markers and media online). However, where one might surround themselves with a circle of fifteen or twenty friends to identify as an extrovert or social butterfly, the convenience of online socialization allows the user to amass a following of thousands, representing themselves as a person of status and popularity

(even though this may not be the case in real life). Regardless, the literature shares common findings when it comes to how identities are managed online and how this may lead to communities, cultures, niches and other social phenomena. Burgess et al. (2016) analyzed drinking culture portrayed via social media on the basis of gender. Both male and female presenting users posted photos of themselves and their friends on a night out, engaging with one of the leisurely functions of social media while also identifying with the people they tag and the activities being done in the posts (Burgess et al., 2016). This display of identity and selfhood can simultaneously represent multiple aspects of identity through the content posted: sexuality, gender, tastes and preferences. However, the study revealed that this identity display led to discovered differences between the way in which female identifying users and male identifying users post (Burgess et al., 2016). Female users labored more over the preparation of the picture, taking the picture itself, posting, uploading, and tagging friends, demonstrating a more conscious effort than male posters (Burgess et al., 2016). While Cover (2012) may discuss the technological affordances that allow female users to strategically cultivate this self-display, Burgess et al. (2016) address the difference between genders and how they develop identity, providing context by arguing that women must concern themselves with protecting their reputation from a perception of “drunken femininity,” where males do not necessarily face the same social pressure (Burgess et al., 2016 pg 6). This demonstrates that while there are many agreed upon ways to present and develop online identity, the same affordances will be used differently between demographics depending on preference and social context. Another aspect of identity-building relates back to the work of Gibson (2019) and focuses on the development and display of identity through communication between users of a platform. Gibson (2019) focuses on the linguistic aspect of user identities, specifically targeting Reddit as the platform of focus

due to the nature of the app being discourse heavy. Reddit allows users to engage in casual conversation, seek advice on niche subjects, vent to other users while maintaining anonymity, and debate any number of topics. Unlike platforms like Instagram or Facebook, Reddit lacks aesthetic functions and serves as a public forum. The word choices of a Reddit user are often indicative of identity in the associative sense, reflecting which groups or values an individual identifies with (Gibson, 2019). Pronoun choices, when engaging in debate or conversation with another user, can represent status, group identity, exclusion, even arrogance, depending on whether first-person singular or first-person plural pronouns are used (Gibson, 2019). Overall, simple back and forth communication can demonstrate user identity just as much as profile management or user behaviors, such as friending, liking, posting, etc. Cover (2012) determines that identity development is an ongoing process, but rather than focusing on the contents and forms of discussion between users as Gibson (2019) does, Cover (2012) claims that other forms of communication, such as friending users and liking posts, are more obvious markers of identity display and development. However, Gibson (2019), Cover (2012), and Burgess et al. (2016) all seem to agree that identity building requires a continual stream of actions, decisions, and reactions online, which all hold covert meanings based on the context and individuals involved. Friending a new user could be an attempt to send a message of intent, a request to build an online relationship. The same action, depending on the platform, could hold next to no meaning on behalf of the requester and may just be an attempt to curate their profile by associating with users who they identify with. When it comes to discussion and interaction, users are having to actively defend and reform their identities through how they communicate, the content of their comments, and with whom they choose to interact. Above all, identity is a major driver behind user behaviors, norms, and even platform preferences. Understanding how identities are

developed on social media can give us insight on the social phenomena that occur across platforms, especially when it comes to the digital cultures that may develop.

Social Media and Tween Users

With knowledge of common functions and social phenomena presented by social media use, we can now limit the scope to tween users. As the purpose of this creative project is to explore how exposure to social media during an unmoderated era of the technology affected tween users' sense of self, it is integral to explore the literature on how tweens manage their identities both online and offline in the first place. With such a wide digital landscape full of potential for users to make choices about who they are and how they interact with their peers, it comes as no surprise that tweens, or children between the age of 8 and 12, have become some of the most frequent users of social media (Pescott, 2020). Identity development in children on the cusp of being teenagers became more complex once common displays of identity transitioned to being simultaneously more nuanced and less tentative through displays on social media (Pescott, 2020). An argument posed by Terras et al. (2015) considers the span of multiple identities across platforms that a young person might experiment with. In real-world situations, like school and social gatherings, children and adolescents may have to worry about social consequences when it comes experimenting with multiple identities. It may also be more laborious to manage and experiment with multiple identities in everyday life, whether it concerns changing clothing styles, gender presentation, or even styles of communication. Terras et al. (2015) argues that through technological affordances like online avatars, profile pictures, screen names, and graphics created by users, children and adolescents can explore multiple personalities and identities at once through the barrier of a screen with limited labor. The implications of these virtual avenues of identity-exploration could explain the widespread adoption of social media by

tween users (Pescott, 2020), all of whom are entering a period of pre-adolescence that is plagued by confusion and discovery surrounding identity. Having access to online communities and creative spaces might allow young users more control over impression management than they would have in offline situations. This is especially relevant in the context of LGBTQ+ youths during the earliest years of social media. LGBTQ+ users can use the same avenues of identity management to assist in the process of coming out, allowing them more agency online than they might have face-to-face (Bates et al., 2020). However, certain features of identity disclosure (like Facebook allowing users to identify as non-binary on their profiles) were not available until recently, which means that users online during the earliest years of social media had to experiment with different features in order to self-disclose. This creative project will investigate those methods, along with the potential risks and rewards that tweens faced when experimenting with their identity.

Artist's Process

The research process began by learning about the art of making a podcast by reading guides published by well-known podcast creators, including NPR. I studied several different successful podcasts, taking note of techniques used by the creators such as narrative, tone, vocal levels, atmosphere, etc. I focused on taking inspiration from these podcasts, picking and choosing the techniques that I believed would be most successful for my own. This research period also allowed me to consider the tone and angle of the podcast I would be producing. I decided to choose the “investigative” route for my podcast’s angle. I wanted to ask important questions about that era and its influence on today’s 20-year-olds while simultaneously telling their stories to a wider audience. In the summer of 2023, I reached the decision of writing the first episode to explore the theme of “exposure” to grasp the attention of listeners immediately. Therefore, with a solid foundation from episode 1 for what 2010s social media was like, the second episode would investigate the theme of “identity.” After determining what the larger theme of the second episode would be, I moved on to the interview stage of podcast development. The script of the podcast must be developed around the interview findings, so the first step to the process was drafting a list of thought-provoking interview questions that would serve as an outline for the conversation I would have with my subjects. I chose three classmates to interview, all of whom identified as non-binary or queer, and asked them the following questions in the recording studio:

1. Looking back on your tween years, how would you describe who you were/what you were like at that age? What kind of things did you like/value?
2. What platforms did you frequent the most?

3. (How) did you customize your profile on [platform]? Tell me about it, what did it look like...
4. What was new and exciting to you when it came to using [platform]?
5. How did you express yourself/present your identity through these platforms? Were there differences in this self-expression between platforms?
6. What did you enjoy about expressing yourself/seeing the way others expressed themselves on social media?
7. Tell me about a time when you felt negatively impacted by the way you and others presented themselves on social media when you were a tween
8. Tell me about a time when you saw something online that made you feel insecure or question your own identity
9. Tell me about a time when you saw something on social media that lifted your self-esteem or made you feel good about yourself?
10. Tell me about the online communities you were a part of on your main platforms (fandoms, circles, spaces, the original “stans”). What were they like? How did you engage with them?
11. What is your relationship to those communities now?
12. How do you feel being a part of those online circles impacted your identity?
13. Tell me about some online relationships you established at the time that impacted you deeply. How did they make you feel?
14. Tell me about encounters you had with adults within the digital spaces you used as a tween. How did those experiences go? How did they make you feel?

15. Tell me about things you may have been exposed to by older users that pushed you to learn about mature concepts.
16. How were you exposed to themes like gender identity or sexuality online as a tween?
How did it make you feel?
17. How did you explore your own gender identity online as a tween? Your sexuality?
18. What are some pivotal online moments you can remember from that time in your life that had a major impact on who you are?
19. How do you feel being on social media in your tween years influenced your identity during that time? How did it influence your identity now?
20. How would you describe yourself now? (or, if that is too difficult, how might your friends or family describe you?)

The open endedness of these questions allowed the subjects to reminisce without limitation and truly tell their unique stories in a comfortable environment. There was no time limit to the interview; they were able to recount memories for as long as they felt was necessary. Once I had their raw interview footage recorded, I was able to proceed to the script writing section of my creative process.

There were so many different stories offered to me by my interview subjects, all of which were incredibly significant and moving through the lens of identity. It was incredibly difficult to narrow down the raw interview content and develop an approach to storytelling that was compelling yet provided a spotlight moment for each interview subject. Eventually, I was able to write the script in a way that gave each interview subject their own section of the podcast,

allowing time to share the most crucial aspects of their stories about struggles with body image, bullying, queerness, and community. I was able to write my own narration into the script as a way to emphasize the importance of certain sections and move the story along without skewing the authenticity of the story. Once the script was completely finished, I returned to the studio to record my own narration, which concluded the recording process.

The editing process was demanding, especially when I had very little experience in using editing software. I cut the interview footage down to the specific parts I planned to include in the podcast, inserted those parts between my own recorded narration, and went through over thirty minutes of content repetitively to listen for audio imperfections and volume levels that needed editing. It took several days of normalizing volume levels, amplifying tracks that were too quiet, and changing the noise levels various times until they reached an appropriate volume for listening. I then added music to back the parts of the episode that required a sense of conclusion or an emotional catalyst. This was a major component of the creative process because, while the stories are interesting by themselves, I wanted to think about who would be listening and how to make it more interesting for them. I needed to consider my listener because my biggest objective was to give my peers a platform to tell their stories, and it was imperative to me that those stories would be heard. The full episode will be published to [Digital Rite of Passage on Spotify](#), titled “Who Are You?” to reflect the theme of the story. I hope that others in our age group who grew up with social media in the 2010s will find comfort in listening to the episode and that the stories will resonate with them, along with whoever else is curious about the unique experience of The First Social Media Kids.

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