Digital Identities: Social Media, Youth and Sense of Belonging

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Ψηφιακές Ταυτότητες: Μέσα Κοινωνικής Δικτύωσης, Νεολαία και η Αίσθηση του «Ανήκειν»

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ABSTRACT

The impact of social media on the formation of contemporary identities is emerging as a key issue in social sciences. Young people's self-presentation practices and selfie pictures are approached as a means of navigating their everyday lives. Utilising qualitative data collected both in Greater Athens, Greece and North West of England, UK, this study examines the role of digital media in an attempt to understand how young people negotiate their identities in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. The data were produced during focus group discussion and photo-elicitation interviews as part of a triangulated research project that tried to shed light on the construction of young people's identities. Based on the findings, it is suggested that social media provide a space in which young people try to find some sense of belonging, however, it can be argued that this process ties young people to the very logic of individualism and market-based competition.

KEY WORDS: Digital Identities,Social Media, Youth, Sense of Belonging, Greece.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η επίδραση των μέσων κοινωνικής δικτύωσης στη διαμόρφωση των σύγχρονων νεανικών ταυτοτήτων αναδύεται ως βασικό πεδίο έρευνας στις κοινωνικές επιστήμες. Στο παρόν άρθρο οι πρακτικές αυτοπροβολής των νέων, ιδιαίτερα οι φωτογραφίες τύπου "selfie", προσεγγίζονται ως μέσα που καθοδηγούν την καθημερινή τους ζωή και συμπεριφορά. Χρησιμοποιώντας ποιοτικά δεδομένα που συλλέχθηκαν στην Ελλάδα (Περιφέρεια Αττικής) και στο Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο (Βορειοδυτική Αγγλία), η έρευνα εξετάζει το ρόλο των ψηφιακών μέσων επιχειρώντας να κατανοήσει τους τρόπους με τους οποίους οι νέοι άνθρωποι διαπραγματεύονται τις ταυτότητές τους σε έναν περίπλοκο και αβέβαιο κόσμο. Τα δεδομένα που παρουσιάζονται προέκυψαν από πολυμεθοδολογική προσέγγιση (τριγωνοποίηση) μέσω ομάδων εστίασης και συνεντεύξεων με τη χρήση εικόνων σχετικά με ερωτήματα αναφερόμενα στη διαμόρφωση των νεανικών ταυτοτήτων. Με βάση τα ευρήματά μας, υποστηρίζουμε ότι τα μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης διαμορφώνουν έναν χώρο μέσα στον οποίο οι νέοι αναζητούν την αίσθηση του «ανήκειν» ερχόμενοι αναγκαστικά σε επαφή με τον ατομικισμό και τον ανταγωνισμό τους οποίους προωθούν οι επιταγές της οικονομικής αγοράς στη νέα εποχή.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Ψηφιακές Ταυτότητες, Μέσα Κοινωνικής Δικτύωσης, Νεολαία, Αίσθηση του «Ανήκειν», Ελλάδα.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the role of social media in relation to young people's experiences within a digital world. The contribution of digital media in the negotiation of young people's identities has originated as a focal point for theoretical consideration among scholars. In this sense, although there is an increasing part of literature investigating the role of social media in young people's lives and the impact of "selfies" as a cultural phenomenon (Lim, 2016), little attention has been given in the literature to the significance of social media consumption as a means of producing (and consuming) the self. A core assertion of this work is that, although young people's engagement with the selfie has been related to issues of pathology within popular culture and discourse, when exposed to a detailed empirical and theoretical examination reveals important insights about young people's strategies for self-presentation and what this means for digital identities.

In academic conversations, the role of online self-management and young people's thoughts, experiences and intentions behind such decisions have been less examined to an extent. It is perhaps because of the fragmented social media environment that we have not seen many attempts bringing together and investigating the impact of youth social media consumption to contemporary identities. It is the latest communication technologies that provide a whole new world in relation to consumer culture and shopping, new ways of self-imagination and multiple routes for identity expression (Rattle, 2014). In this sense, the effects of social media and new technological devices in young people's lives are about a transformation in their quest for reassurance and a sense of belonging. Social media and digital technology blur the boundaries between production and consumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) and it is within this socio-cultural context that we need to understand young people's negotiation of multiple anxieties and sense of security.

In an attempt to initiate and advance the existing research interest about digital identities in our contemporary societies, this paper intends to provide a basis for an academic dialogue about the role of social media consumption in young people's everyday lives. Drawing on previous work on youth identities and social networking sites, the first part of the paper explores youth identities in a detailed way taking into consideration the wider context of both digitalisation and uncertainty. In the second part of the paper, emphasis is given to the "selfie culture" as the quintessential example of self-presentation in the digital world. The next part of this contribution presents the methodological approach of the research project. Before concluding and summarising the main points of this paper, key findings of the research are presented illustrating the complexity of managing the self in digital society.

2. Youth identities, social media consumption and uncertainty

Many commentators suggest that young people are situated in a position more than ever before to engage in forms of identity experimentation beyond previously well-established considerations of fixed transitions to adulthood (Furlong, et al., 2011). In this context, Bennett (2018) argues that youth identities are based on a do-it-yourself (DIY) doctrine rather than more traditional resources of identity construction, such as class, religion, etc. Hence, there is an argument to suggest that social media consumption has a significant impact on the everyday lives of young people. While the role of traditional forms of identity construction has gradually

diminished, young people have ostensibly focused on social media platforms as a primary means of self-identification and self-actualisation. Hodkinson (2017) in his attempt to understand the challenges young people have to deal with today and their everyday realities, he focuses on the teenage bedroom metaphor as a lens to examine social networking sites as an individual and social space. Hodkinson sees social media platforms as an individual space that resembles the intimate home. Even if it is still open to consideration whether social media platforms can offer the safe environment that a home may provide, what can be suggested is that social media consumption and its potentiality for self-management provide a primary arena in which young people can proceed with identity formation and get, at least on the surface, a feeling of stability.

During the first decades of the twenty-first century, global crises have severely impacted societies and individual life trajectories. The effects of the 'Global Financial Crisis' that shocked the global economy in 2008 are still evident today. In addition, the current and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2019 and its socio-economic consequences have intensified the feeling of uncertainty in young people's everyday lives. In this context, the conceptualisation of the 'risk society' may help us to consider the enormous challenges that young people have to face in contemporary societies (see Beck, 1992). In this way, authors have tried to understand the societal processes in which youth subjectivities are being formed (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). It is argued that in our contemporary societies the subject is confronted with a decline in the role of traditional resources of identity formation (Beck and Lau, 2005). Individualised processes have gained significance in young people's attempts to form a coherent biography (Leccardi, 2005). In this sense, approaching young people's experiences through the lens of the notion of the 'project of the self' (Giddens, 1991) still remains fundamental for understanding social processes. For instance, Farrugia (2010) describes the symbolic burden for homeless youth who are considered as the embodiment of 'failure' in individualised life projects due to the perceived incompetence and recklessness. Hoolachan et al. (2017) have described the restricted housing opportunities for young people, the increasing dependency on parents' financial support and how youth can be identified today as a 'generation rent'. Young people have experienced the worst face of the financial crisis especially in Greece. In particular, youth unemployment rates in Greece reached almost 50% in 2013 (ELSTAT, 2015). The situation appears to be slightly better after the peak crisis years with unemployment for Greek young people between 15 and 29 years old reaching 28.2% in 2019 and 29.3% in 2020. However, this is still more than double the EU average (27 countries) in 2020 which was 12.5% (Eurostat, 2020). Under such conditions the youth transitions to adulthood and the school-to-work routes for the younger generation have become increasingly uncertain.

Young people are not only obliged to deal with the structural challenges that uncertainty intensifies but also with the proliferation of choices that the digital space enables at an individual level. Such options might be reflected in the increasing number of social networking sites that cultivate new ways of understanding youth social engagement. In this sense, Robards and Bennett (2011: 314) discuss new processes of tribalisation in the digital sphere as a 'temporal wandering whereby like-minded individuals eventually find each other'. This reflects the broader transformations that have impacted young people's experiences due to their daily engagement with the social media world. Young people's everyday interactions, the way they construct their lives and the approaches to express their views and preferences are increasingly digitally mediated (Mesch, 2009). The crucial moment in the way in which young people negotiate their identities can be summarised in the development of a DIY culture (Bennett and Guerra, 2018) that

influences the contemporary notion of the self. In this way, it is argued that youth experiences are increasingly fragmented and temporary; individuals can pick and choose from a vast array of options that the social media world presents and engage in forms of self-expression.

One of the problems is that social scientific approaches to social media and identity have tended to exaggerate the risks for young people and, at the same time, ignored the significance of the meanings young people ascribe to their own actions. It is important to highlight the complex ways in which social media identities are managed by young people in the digital world and the cultural effect of digital capitalism on youth experiences. In this context, theoretical and empirical considerations about identities and, in particular, the relationship between social media consumption and identities become paramount. There is thus a need for focusing on unconventional methodological approaches that practically try to deal with the impact of social media consumption upon youth experiences. For that reason, this paper will emphasise the digital aspect in young people's quest for a sense of belonging, the ways digital identities are shaped by social media consumption and to what extent the digital space enables young people to negotiate a sense of balance in a continuously precarious world. This paper actually will advance with a theoretical and empirical investigation of the multiple ways youth move to the digital realm as a means of self-management and generating their own conditions in order to experience some semblance of stability. This process is best exemplified by the examination of the so-called selfie photo and its consequences for youth identities.

3. Beyond the selfie: Producing and consuming the self in digital society

My intention is to focus on one particular aspect of digital self as a way of analysing the production and consumption processes of the self in contemporary societies and how this may inform us about the manifestation of social transformations in relation to youth identities. Therefore, I will proceed with the examination of the "selfie" as a kind of modern and fashionable way of expression that appears to flourish in the social media sphere. The selfie phenomenon has exceptionally gained significance during the last decade due to the multiple applications that it has in various social media platforms. By selfie we mean the photograph that someone may capture using a smartphone camera and usually he/she uploads it on social media. For Miltner and Baym (2015: 1704), it is a picture 'in which people hold out a camera phone and photograph themselves'. Of course, this is not something entirely new. There is a link with the history of self-portraiture practices in the arts (Warfield, 2014). The process of taking a selfie, from the preparation stage until posting, can be considered as an experience and a means of communication with various audiences. The trend of taking and posting selfie pictures is not only significant in relation to changes in social media platforms, but especially about the consuming and producing processes of selfhood and what it means for young people to grow up in a digital society.

The "selfie culture" has been at the centre of attention as an interdisciplinary phenomenon for popular commentaries and academic scholarship. It is the power of the mobile technologies and especially the smartphone that has rendered this type of photography ubiquitous. The selfie is the reflection of a personal (at least most of the times) story and a means of capitalising on the self. The practice of taking a selfie is not confined within specific boundaries, such as entertainment and funny moments. Instead, it could be argued that it is a general practice that it might

affect even the political sphere (see Miltner and Baym, 2015). It is in this context that Miltner and Baym (2015: 1706) argue that 'taking selfies is part of being human in this technologically saturated age'. In a digital society the process of taking selfies intensifies the feeling of being a digital consumer (and producer). In this sense, social networking sites, and selfies in general, contribute to producing and consuming the 'networked self'. New technologies provide a digital environment for the presentation of self both publicly and privately (Papacharissi, 2011). It is a cultural arena of interconnectedness between individuals and audiences. Of course, this reminds us, to an extent, what Goffman (1959) described as front- and backstage and the process of presenting the self. However, the digitalisation of everyday life has made this a far more complex state of affairs.

For Senft and Baym (2015), selfies are about much more than just narcissistic expressions and a manifestation of the self. It is the cultural meanings of selfies that put identity at the centre of the discussion. It is the multiple opportunities to produce and manage the self that enhance the sense that identity becomes malleable. The social media sphere cultivates the conditions of a competitive market for attention in which young people are obliged to engage in a continuous quest for likes, friends and followers. In this way, selfies constitute an attempt for self-affirmation that it can be approached via the ways young people engage with digital media on a daily basis. It could be argued that in the digital society the process of producing and consuming the "self as a project" is intensified. In a digital world in which the relationship between identity and consumption is subject to a continuous procedure of reinvention, the role of social media platforms is fundamental. Selfie provides the means by which young people are able to express a sense of self of their own production. As Hess (2015: 1643) puts it, 'snapping that selfie articulates a sense of self that is read to be authentic but that also displays the uncertainty and fragmentation of self in contemporary societies'. The social media world is actually more about the creation of a space in which young people's identities are perceived as authentic.

In examining the notion of the selfie and its relation to narcissism, Murray (2020: 36) argues 'the selfie is one of the powerful means by which we validate ourselves as consumers/citizens'. The digital space provides a world in which our consumer choices become the centre of attention. It makes individuals to believe they are able to affirm their consumer choices via social media posts and to get as a result a more generalised sense of approval. In this way, it can be argued that the crucial role of social media in relation to consumption has been to reiterate its focal position at the core of young people's relationship with social change. It is in this context that the social media landscape appears, on the surface, to provide the individual with unlimited options, while creating a generalised impression that an 'entrepreneurial' version of the self (Bröckling, 2016) can make individuals more successful than ever. The main point here is that the social media sphere does not create more choices but enhances the feeling of a reinvented consumer society. Individuals, and especially young people, are not restrained to what they consume, but to what they choose to present and how they are seen to consume by their audiences (Theodoridis et al., 2019).

4. Methodology

T he findings discussed in this paper are based on a qualitative study that was situated in two different countries, Greece and the UK. To be more specific, this research was located on the North West of England and Greater Athens and by gathering data in two different settings has provided an opportunity to proceed with a comparative analysis. This comparative project took place during the period 2016 and 2020 focusing on youth identities and the changing nature of consumption through the lens of social media in an age of precarity. The fieldwork was conducted with young people between sixteen and thirty years old and the sampling strategy was purposive (Patton, 2001). It is argued that youth cannot be defined by age boundaries and it is a social construction (Bourdieu, 1993). As such, there isn't a predefined age category that reflects in the correct way young people's experiences. In this way, by having participants from a wide socio-demographic group and age range, it has provided an interesting multiplicity of experiences.

A qualitative research design was considered as the most appropriate in an attempt to investigate young people's meanings. During the planning stage of this research project, I was mostly interested in the role of subjects in an attempt to understand the socio-cultural aspects of our contemporary society. In this way, this research design provided the means of understanding young participants' everyday experiences and allowing young people's ideas and views to be at the heart of the discussion (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). As a result, my young participants were able to discuss both about the anxieties and the difficulties they face on a daily basis, as well as, about their ways to negotiate their presence (and absence) on the social media terrain and what this means about their transitions to adulthood. This exploratory approach to study youth lives has provided a "beyond the surface" approach and access to their thoughts and feelings at a deeper level (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

In order to maximise and ensure an in-depth understanding of young people's navigation of everyday lives, I employed multiple methods for my empirical approach. Through proceeding with methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2009 [1970], it gave me the opportunity to validate the data. More specifically, I conducted eleven focus group discussions and twenty photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) both in Greece and the UK. After the completion of both stages, I observed young people's Instagram profiles and posts and all the material was collected during a two-month period. During the focus groups, I decided to include both respondents who had social media profiles and those who did not have. Practically, I managed to receive broader responses and also initiate a thought-provoking conversation and debates between users and non-users. The selection of focus group discussions was derived from the main goal behind this research project to shed light on issues of meaning (Morgan, 1997) in a socio-cultural context and, in this sense, it was considered as an appropriate method.

For the second and third stage of the research (photo elicitation interviews and online observation), the only criterion for participation was to maintain an Instagram profile. The incorporation of creative methods that engaged with the visual element were significantly helpful and effective to initiate further meanings and interesting insights (see Rose, 2016). The photo-elicitation interview (PEI) included both verbal and image-related information and it can enrich data collection as it 'is a collaborative process whereby the researcher becomes a listener as the participant interprets the photograph of the researcher' (Loeffler, 2004: 539). During the last stage of the research, emphasis was given on my young participant's Instagram posts and social media activities. It is the social media landscape and its image-related content that necessitates to engage with visual research techniques (Pink, 2007; Hine, 2015). The total sample of the re-

search was seventy-two young people and, in particular, thirty-one were recruited from Greater Athens and forty-one in North West of England. The different educational (e.g. college students, undergraduates) and professional background (e.g. employed, unemployed) of my participants has played a great role in ensuring a level of diversity in such terms. In addition, my intention was to maintain a gender balance and have an equal number of male and female participants at all research phases. The findings that I will discuss in the next section are based on the focus groups and the photo-elicitation interviews.

5. Managing the self(ie) in the consumer capitalism

Selfie provides the means by which young people have the possibility to produce a world of their own imagination. The do-it-yourself way of thinking is enabled due to the social media platforms and the new digital technologies. The virtual world is not only constructed as a form of liberation and emancipation, but it reflects a pressure for conformity to the specific requests of the social media logic. Chris a twenty-one-year-old who lives in Athens, compared his own experiences with the past and how things have changed. He described the feeling of coercion that exists to young people to capture a selfie picture for Instagram and their social media profiles and how this process reflects exactly what is happening during a night out in clubs and bars (at least before the beginning of the pandemic). He explained how young people take snapshots and short videos in order to enrich the content of their profiles. In this sense, it is a popular form of self-narration that captures moments of entertainment and, at the same time, it is the presentation of a self-selected visual spectacle.

Individual choices are validated through the social media world. This is a more complex process than what it used to be in the past. To be more specific, it is not only the personal selection of an object or an experience that is validated, but also the choice for sharing it online and its visual representation. It is a transition from the validation of consumer choices to the validation of the representations of consumer choices. As Murray (2020) puts it, there is a sense of gratification that derives from the endorsement of people's attitudes as consumers. In the digital world of the twenty-first century, the social media offer new ways of validation through "likes", "shares", "retweets", "friends" and "followers". For instance, Adam, twenty-three years old, during the photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) described how he decided to post a selfie picture in which he had dyed his hair and he thought it was "cool" to share it. In relation to the selfie, the sense of coolness is especially crucial as it has become so essential to the reproduction of a fantasy world of consumers' own creation. This is a world in which the young consumer has to constantly reinvent himself/herself for the sake of coolness.

Digital identities are negotiated in the context of the relationship between the self and the sense of belonging. The virtual world and reactions to selfies came to add a feeling of coming together with other people and an audience. What I am explaining here can in part be supported as what one of my young participants mentioned during an interview. In our discussion about selfies, Syka, who lives in Manchester, said:

I think it's to get attention. It's an attention thing. I think you get an approval and it's like, it's showing off. (28, UK, PEI)

Within the socio-cultural conditions of neoliberalism, the culture of competition is intensified. In this context, social media platforms represent the new contemporary "marketplace" of

identities. In this way, selfies constitute the key means of self-affirmation and for the presentation of young people's personal brand. As Marwick (2015) summarises this, young people are somehow intrigued to engage in self-branding practices. Indeed, perception has become essential in how they seek attention and build relationships with their peers. The self has effectively become a brand. It is now "marketed" in the online environment, and therefore subject to a more perplexing process of presentation in comparison to what was a pre-social media world.

It is in the above discussion that the management of the self has been intensified. This process necessitates more effort and time from young people in order to belong in this networked society. Jeremy was explicit about the mentality of managing the self, and related this to how young people pick and choose what they prefer to include (and to exclude) from their social media profiles:

I guess it's like a status thing. I suppose it's an easy way of dictating what your status is to other people. Because you can just pick and choose the good bits. So, if I want representations, I guess it's like when people buy a really, really big fancy car, but then they live in a tiny, tiny flat. They're trying to outwardly represent that they're doing really well, but…it might not be the whole story. (28, UK, PEI)

The above process involves young people's strategies to negotiate their identities through the representation of their everyday lives. In this way, they seek to curate their online personas and they put emphasis on how others perceive their social status. In this context, what has become fundamental is not who they really are, but what they do and share on their profiles. This "pick and choose" culture can be better understood through the lens of the do-it-yourself (DIY) approach that Bennett (2018) has discussed in the context of youth and music industry. Thus, social media profiles represent a virtual arena in which everything is about the stylisation and the success of the individual.

Young people engage with social media as a means of creating their online "brand" and managing their strategies in their quest for attention in the competitive social media "marketplace". In this way, young people are obliged to be seen as perfect and with something new to their audiences. In so doing, young people seek some semblance of belonging through what can be described as a virtual connection. The point here is that through social media young people can receive a reassurance about their choices at times of uncertainty. As Charles said:

I think generally in terms of status and whether posting certain things improves your social status. I think it feels like it does and I think if you get a like or a little love heart or so I guess you feel like a person is really invested something in you. (27, UK, focus group)

Of course, one thing to consider in this context is that even though young people's interaction with others on social media can offer a sense of stability on the surface, it is not so difficult to understand that the need of being successful reproduces and intensifies the very instability that young people try so hard to deal with. As Belk (2013) suggests, the digital transformation impact human interactions and the notion of the self. More specifically, the digital society propels young people to consider themselves as liberated from the boundaries of physical space and limited financial (and other) resources, but also it ties them in a perpetual quest for authenticity that is essentially impossible to achieve.

This discussion about the social media landscape describes how the ability of digital media to define how young people produce and consume the self is becoming more and more complicated. Social media platforms intensify not only communication, but also the management of the self. Perhaps this is best explained by the way my young participants described how the social media posts can considered staged:

If you check someone's profile and check the posts, you will see how all of them have a good feeling and an ideal image, staged. (Dimitris, 29, Greece, PEI)

What Dimitris describes is the core idea of self-management and the processes how young people negotiate their digital identities in the contemporary society. This enormous effort to manage the self is a continuous attempt to satisfy the imagined audience. In our conversation about the details and what is especially important in the process of posting a selfie, Dimitris said:

Let's say the moment, that it is in the ideal place, with the ideal person, the ideal time, with the suitable background that it might not be in reality.

It could be argued that this is the expansion of the presentation of the mundane moments of everyday life so that the audience embrace this feeling of perfection. Self-management and self-branding practices provide the means to young people to negotiate their identities in the digital space. However, this comes with a price. The production and consumption of the digital self asks from young people both time and effort.

6. Conclusion

In order to understand the implications of the above, we need to contextualise this discussion in the wider context of the neoliberalism and its relation to the construction of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling). This reflects an approach that necessitates the individual to be always flexible and ready to adjust to requests of the market economy. Thus, as it was evident in the discussion of the findings, the onus is on young people to be somehow "managers" of themselves due to the competitive conditions within the social media "marketplace". The discussion of selfies in this paper has put emphasis on the complex ways social media and new technologies have generated a reimagination of youth identities through a digital lens.

The main point here is that the production and consumption of youth identities are increasingly digitally mediated in multiple ways. It is interesting how the digital element is becoming the means in identity formation in our contemporary societies. On the one hand, this can be understood as a process that emancipates the individual and opens up new horizons and opportunities for self-expression. On the other hand, this apparently liberating process reproduces the very neoliberal principles that oblige young people to participate in a continuous contest for affirmation. To put it differently, young people have to engage in a digital experience that is not delivering its promises for providing a sense of stability. Instead, the world of social media demands from young people to reinvent themselves in a search for approval, and in this way, it enhances the very instability that young people try so hard to dismantle.

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