

Identity Presentation in Facebook “My 25s”

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Bio:

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Abstract:

This research discusses how individuals assess and portray their identity on the popular Internet social networking site, Facebook. Facebook contains a message post entitled “My 25,” that prompts the Facebook user to reveal 25 facts about themselves. The results of this exercise provide knowledge about how users portray their public image to their social groups. Using the assistance of four inter-raters, I have examined 100 “My 25s”. Open coding and content analysis were used in the analysis of this sample for the purpose of understanding public displays of identity. To complete the analysis, this data were compared to Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development. This project combines these elements to create a better understanding of how identity presentation can be witnessed in an online environment and provides examples of how these presentations vary throughout the lifespan.

Introduction

The seemingly concrete and inherently singular individuals that we interact with in everyday life are in fact varieties and mixtures of “multiple selves” according to William James (1997). Cooley (1964) expanded upon James’ concept of the self by including the ability to reflect on one’s own behavior. He coined this as the “reflective” or “looking-glass self.” This self-conscious process occurs when a person actively imagines themselves in the minds of others. Markus and Nurius (1986) developed a similar idea that they labeled as possible selves; various ideas individuals have about what they are, might become, and would like to become. These various ideas for possible selves are typically defined by each person’s “self-with-other experiences,” experiences that cause people to evaluate what they are like and how they feel about their various personas that emerge when they interact with other people in their lives (Ogilvie & Ashmore, 1991). In summation, the self can be defined as the entirety of a person’s experience, including their consciousness of their own identity. Identity being defined as a person’s externally defined comprehension and self-definition in this context.

The purpose of this study is to expand the scope and conceptualization of identity presentation to Internet social networking sites. Popular social networking sites were launched in the early/mid-2000s, and now host hundreds of millions of users. Facebook, the medium employed for this study, has more than 500 million active users, and these users spend over 500 billion minutes per month on Facebook (Facebook, 2010). But despite widespread use among the public there has been little research focused on this medium of communication. This project will help fill this void in the literature by contributing a unique perspective on how identity is presented on Facebook by different age groups.

Specifically on Facebook, I will be examining a message post entitled “My 25.” “My 25s” prompt the Facebook user to reveal 25 facts about themselves. The results of this exercise provide knowledge about how users portray their public image to their social groups, and, in this project, I have specifically examined how these presentations vary among three age groups. Using the assistance of four inter-raters I have examined 100 “My 25s.” Open coding and content analysis were utilized in the analysis of this sample for the purpose of understanding public displays of identity throughout the lifespan. To complete the analysis, this data was compared to and contextualized by Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development. In order to begin exploring this concept, identity must be further defined and explored, and then applied to the relevant research medium of Facebook.

Identity, a Requirement of Society

In the United States, late adolescents and young adults are expected to form a concrete identity and use that identity to lead a life with purpose and direction (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). Due to advances such as technological change and multi-cultural tendencies, identity becomes harder and harder for individuals to define (McAdams, 1997). In order to keep up with these ever changing times, it is proposed that one must embrace multiple roles and attempt to forge these roles in order to present a singular and coherent identity. Therefore this study will attempt to further define this required identity and develop a system for analyzing the statement of this identity.

The Definition and Development of Identity

Deaux (1997) defines identity as “the personal meanings people ascribe to the multiple social categories to which they claim membership” (p. 52). This definition implies that a person’s relations to other people define that person’s personal identity. In other words, how

others see you is who you are. From a social level of analysis, people define themselves in order to appropriately cater to their various social groups. Tajfel and Turner (2004) further explain this concept in their “social identity theory.” The theory states that people define themselves and are defined by others by their salient group affiliations. The theory also emphasizes that individuals strive to achieve a positively distinct social identity in order to distinguish themselves from others and portray this positive identity to other groups. A positive social identity can be defined as an identity that establishes the self and the in-groups that one associates with as positively unique and relevant for comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This process can also be described as maintaining a collective (or social) identity, or an extension of a person’s personal identity that associates belonging to a group that extends past the self (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Social identity theory illustrates the self-concept to be expandable and transformative as the groups people associate and connect with change over time. Brewer (1991) later expands upon this theory with her “model of optimal distinctiveness,” which proposes that personal identity alone can not be the best form of self-definition, but that in many cases social (rather than personal) identities can be more salient representations of the self. She posits that social identity must remain a compromise between assimilation with in-groups and distinctiveness from other groups in order to remain unique.

People use the processes described above in order to define themselves as individuals. Yet, this personal process remains externally defined according to various sources. Festinger (1954) mentioned the drive that humans have to evaluate their own opinions, abilities, and desires (their personal identity) in relation to others in his theory of “social comparison.” Social comparison, he states, causes people to see the images portrayed by others as accessible and reasonable, therefore encouraging people to acquire these images for themselves. People

participate in this comparison for numerous reasons, from self-enhancement to maintaining a positive self-evaluation of one’s self. Maintaining a positive self-image relates directly to the concept of “self-verification,” which Swann (1983) describes as a process people create in order to confirm their own self-conceptions in their social environments and even their own minds. Through these self-verification processes, people strive to receive self-confirmatory feedback. According to Swann (1983), this feedback is usually solicited by employing three strategies, including by acquiring signs and symbols of who they are, by choosing appropriate interaction partners, and by adopting certain interaction strategies.

The need to compare oneself to others and to conform to other groups is a continuous, lifelong process that occurs as situations arise which cause people to question their own attitudes and beliefs. Instead of personally evaluating opinions toward issues, people look to the social group they are currently being influenced by. This self-evaluation based on the opinions of others contributes to how a person’s identity develops over time because interaction partners change depending on the different environments and situations people are a part of throughout their lifespan.

Erik Erikson’s Contribution to Understanding the Development of Identity

Erikson argues that a person’s current identity will not be a stable constant throughout a lifetime. In fact, a person’s identity might not even be unwavering for twenty-four hours. The formation and development of identity is a tumultuous and lifelong process. Erik Erikson (1980) defines this maturation simply by stating that “all individuals are borne by mothers, that everybody was once a child; that people and peoples begin in their nurseries; and that society consists of individuals in the process of developing from children into parents” (p. 17).

The development from the child to the adult is mapped out in Erikson’s eight Stages of Psychosocial Development, which provides the framework for this study. The three stages that I will focus on are adolescence (12-18 years old), young adulthood (19-35 years old), and adulthood (36-65 years old). Within each of these stages, claims Erikson, a specific “crisis” occurs that can lead to one of two outcomes, either an adaptive or a maladaptive outcome. The three relevant crises for the age groups listed above are identity vs. identity confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, and generativity vs. stagnation (Erikson, 1997). Erikson’s stages are largely framed within the social world with a combination of conscious and unconscious mental forces. The formation of identity is encompassed in the formation of group memberships, with the changes in this identity displayed in how individuals publically define their developing identities.

The Use of Social Networking in the Study of Identity

There are many outlets through which an individual can express his/her identity. Many of these displays are relatively private (i.e., one on one) and guarded. However, the Internet, and more specifically the creation of social networking sites such as Facebook, allows individuals to define themselves publically in basically any desired fashion to a great number of people all at once. This audience varies depending on the individual, but could include various friend groups, family members, or acquaintances. Being a part of these social networking groups serves as another way to express identity within itself; by forming a Facebook culture, people make distinctions in their personal and collective identities. Hannerz (1992) discusses this use of culture in identity development by explaining how individuals manage meanings in order to express their own unique desirability through particular means of expression. Meaning in this context is a part of social life and, therefore, socially, rather than individually, defined (Lutz, 1988). Kondo (1990) also posits culture’s place in identity development by describing the

internal processes of such development as culturally conceived and mediated, and, therefore, culturally meaningful.

Since Facebook’s creation in 2004, there has been a substantial amount of research on its impact on society. One of these studies conducted by Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe (2007) focuses on the formation and maintenance of social capital on Facebook. Researchers found evidence supporting the idea that people assess relationships and maintain social capital in not only their current location, but also in previously inhabited communities as well (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These researchers have also investigated if Facebook is used for social searching, social browsing, or some combination of the two (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). They discovered that Facebook was mainly employed by people attempting to connect with other individuals they had met offline versus establishing new connections over the Internet. Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert (2009) had undergraduates complete a Facebook diary for a week and then fill out a short survey about their Facebook activities. Through this study they discovered classic identity markers of emerging adulthood and implications of identity development and peer relations. Some of these traditional identity markers included the inclusion of religion, political ideology, and work on the participant’s personal profile pages. Facebook has also been used as a tool to either negatively or positively affect a person’s trust in others, measures of self-esteem, or need for popularity (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2010). Back et al. (2010) argue that Facebook profiles reflect individuals’ actual personalities depending on the audience versus self-idealizations, a concept they labeled as the “extended real-life hypothesis.”

Research Design

This research focuses on the social networking platform entitled Facebook. This study location was selected due to its inclusion of “My 25s” and its immense popularity. The collection of data from Facebook is also beneficial to this project because subjects are presenting themselves to their various social groups in an online environment versus in a clinical setting where the research team would be the primary audience.

Procedure

One hundred “My 25” lists were examined for this study. The “My 25s” prompt the Facebook user to reveal twenty-five facts about themselves. Each list contains twenty-five statements about the self that participants independently decided to display to the public. This process is very similar to the “Who am I?” exercise often used to do an initial investigation of personal identity. The “Who am I?” exercise is also sometimes referred to as the Twenty Statements Test or the Kuhn-McPartland TST, and it prompts subjects to list twenty responses to the question: “Who am I?” (Kuhn, 1960). Kuhn attests that all of the responses to this test can be sorted into five categories: social groups and classifications (such as marital status, kin relations, socially defined physical characteristics, formal and informal group memberships, social position), ideological beliefs (religious, philosophical, cosmic, ethics, or moral references), interests (statements relating objects to the self), ambitions (success references, aspirations), or self-evaluations (evaluations of mental abilities, physical capabilities, physique and appearance, emotional balance, past achievements, self-typing statements) (Alm, Carroll, & Welty, 1972; Schwirian, 1964). The categories are also sometimes referred to as consensual responses, ideological beliefs, preferences, aspirations, or self-evaluations. These categories were used to organize the potential theme references drawn from data. Refer to Figure 1.

The participants were found by employing a snowball sampling technique where anyone who had a “My 25” posted in English, was between the ages of 18 and 65, and had their sex, age, and relationship status posted were collected. Any other potential members, such as minors or non-English speakers, were not able to participate in this study. Identifying information was removed from the data with the intention of maintaining anonymity. Consent was not sought because all of the information collected is available on a public medium. All of the participants posted this information out of their own free will and were in no way required to make this information available; furthermore, all of the participants were also aware that this information would be subjected to public exposure before it was posted online. Any statements that could potentially connect the participant to their “My 25” have already been removed (such as names or locations). The only people with access to these files, which have already been made anonymous, are the experimenter, advisors, and inter-raters of this research.

The analysis began by separating each note into a group based off of the collected demographic information: age, sex, and relationship status. Examples of these categories would include “male, age 18, in a relationship”, “female, age 45, married,” etc. After this initial separation, each list was analyzed individually. The inter-raters and I studied the “My 25s” by using a basic form of content analysis. I analyzed all 100 “My 25s” myself, and then four outside members who are acquainted with the study but unaware of the formulated hypotheses performed this process on approximately fifty “My 25s” each. This was done in order to evaluate inter-rater reliability, supporting that the interpretation of the data is consistently reliable. The four inter-raters consist of the following: one adolescent, age 18, female, in a relationship; one young adult, age 20, male, in a relationship; and two middle adults, ages 49 and 54, female, one single and one married. The inter-raters are stratified by age in order to have representatives from

each age group being studied represented during the analysis, and I have also provided the other demographic information for the inter-raters in order to provide context in comparison to the members of the study.

I developed a coding scheme to capture the larger themes presented in the “My 25” statements. Refer to Figure 1. The theme references were formulated by using open coding. First, an initial coding list was created by listing all of the possible themes seen in a small sample of the “My 25s” collected. From this initial list, I created a focused coding list of re-occurring trends and other themes that were inspired by Erikson’s work. When the inter-raters began the coding the process as well, other potential themes were added to the final coding list as seen fit. Refer to Figure 1. Examples of the categories include “negative self-evaluations” and “family references.”

Memo making was also employed throughout this process by the inter-raters and myself in order to mark patterns and over-arching themes witnessed during the analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). As described by Kondo (1990), it is difficult to analyze and describe the multidimensionality of experience of the members of the study with these limited resources, but this subjective view of the data from the perspective of the inter-raters and me will serve as a stepping-stone in the process of witnessing identity presentation on this medium. When this process was complete the data was analyzed using three of Erik Erikson’s age brackets as a framework for the comparison.

Study Members

One hundred “My 25s” have been collected to date. The members’ ages range from 18 to 45 years old, with 21 members within the adolescent stage (18 years old), 59 within the young adulthood stage (19 to 34 years old), and 23 within the middle adulthood stage (37 to 45 years

old). In my sample, 72 members were female and 28 members were male; 54 members were single, 24 were in a relationship, and 22 were married. All of the members’ demographic information was self-recorded by each individual. No further demographic information was collected at this time in order to access a larger population of participants. Some of the demographics of this sample remain unbalanced in this preliminary study due to time constraints and sampling restrictions.

Propositions

Based on the work of Erik Erikson, I predicted that the following trends would be seen in the analyses of the three age brackets. Refer to Table 1. In the adolescent age group, I expected to see evidence of the identity formation versus identity confusion crisis. During this stage, adolescents are confronted with the obstacle of applying their earlier cultivated roles and skills from their childhood to the ideal prototypes that they wish to be now (Erikson, 1980). Due to potential identity confusion, many people within this age bracket may tend to be less happy, with higher levels of neuroticism and negative affect, and sometimes even signs of depression or rebellion against authority (Erikson, 1980; Pennebaker & Stone, 2003). Another key characteristic of this age group are the anticipated high levels of first person singular (personal references) and social references seen (Pennebaker & Stone, 2003). Erikson (1980) provides many explanations for this trend, including the need to solidify identity among peers, associate industrially, or find unity in friends by forming cliques or stereotyping others.

As for the young adulthood group, the crisis that will predictably present itself in my analysis is intimacy versus isolation. In this age group, people presumably will strive to develop intimate relationships with others, lest they fall into formal or impersonal interactions. These changes are represented with the increase of school or student life references, leading to more

social interaction references; this concentration on romantic relationships sometimes leads to a decrease in family references. (Schler, Koppel, Argamon, & Pennebaker, 2006).

Finally, in the middle adulthood phase, the main psychosocial crisis that I predicted to be expressed is generativity versus stagnation. During this phase there may be an increase in happiness (marked by a greater use of positive emotion words and a lower use of negative emotion words), which Erikson (1980) accounts for by the sense of purpose given to this generation through the act of guiding the next generation (Pennebaker & Stone, 2003).

Although these propositions serve as a way to provide evidence for or against Erikson’s theory, this data is still analyzed from a qualitative perspective, so other themes and concepts emerged from the data that are not a part of this hypotheses list. A more inductive and emergent process of data analysis is supported by many disciplines within the social sciences, and was employed in order to provide a more subjective description of the results (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). As described above, the use of inter-raters assisted in this process by allowing the analysts to form their own perspectives of the data while not being familiar with these propositions.

Findings & Discussion

Negative Self-Evaluations (H_{AI})

The above average inclusion of negative self-evaluations in the adolescent age group (H_{AI}) is present within the data with 3.66% of the adolescent’s “My 25” responses consisting of negative self-evaluations compared to 3.26% for young adults and 3.56% for adults. The percentages listed represent the proportion of the theme reference being discussed compared to the total amount of “My 25” responses for that age group. See Figures 2, 3, and 4 for a breakdown of these percentages for each age group. The adolescent age group was expected to display evidence of the identity formation versus identity confusion crisis according to Erikson. I

identified identity confusion within this age group because members display higher levels of neuroticism and negative affect through their negative self-evaluations. One theme that emerged from these negative self-evaluations is the inclusion of mental health issues. Some examples from the adolescent members from the Facebook “My 25s” include:

- “I’m Dyslexic, there for I can’t spell for *****.”
- “I’m severely OCD when it comes to my room, and will have panic attacks if i...can tell that someone has been in there and moved my things.”
- “I’m very ADD.”

These mental hindrances are described with words with strong negative connotations, such as “severely”, “very”, and the use of profanity. Other negative self-evaluations that emerge from the data include complaints about personal motivation, criticisms of personality traits, and statements of self-hate.

Positive Self-Evaluations (H_{C3})

The above average inclusion of positive self-evaluations in the adulthood age group (H_{C3}) is not supported by my data, with 1.34% of the adult’s “My 25” responses being positive self-evaluations compared to 1.75% for adolescents and 1.56% for young adults. This result connects to the hypothesis that the adulthood age group would have a less than average inclusion of negative self-evaluations (H_{C4}) which was only partially confirmed with 3.56% of the adult’s “My 25” responses being negative self-evaluations compared to 3.66% for adolescents, but 3.26% for young adults. The main psychosocial crisis that Erikson expressed would be present in this age group is generativity versus stagnation. Although the proportion of positive self-evaluations to negative self-evaluations is not reflected as expected, the adults still do portray

this sense of generativity in their positive self-evaluations. In many cases as well, the members describe how these industrious tasks relate to their families or significant others:

- “I have found I am way more ambitious than I ever thought possible. I credit my wife.”
- “I feel like I am a pretty handy person. My wife might think otherwise. I enjoy working with my hands, fixing things....”

Yet, even with these positive self-evaluations being present, many of the adults appear to remain self-critical. This trend remains consistent across all three age groups where there are over double as many negative self-evaluations when compared to positive self-evaluations. With the adults, many of the negative self-evaluations reference the deteriorating or insufficient nature of their cognitive processes:

- “I wish that my memory were better and that I read more quickly....”
- “I can't do math, put things together, etc....”
- “The older I get, the worse my spelling and gets dyslexia.”

One potential explanation for the lack of positive self-evaluations in the adulthood age group may be accounted for by their emphasis on family, and how they positively evaluate their families instead of spending as much time focusing on themselves like the other age groups. This trend can be seen in the analysis of the next hypothesis.

Family References (H_{C2})

The above average inclusion of family references in the adulthood group (H_{C2}) is supported with 14.70% of the adult’s “My 25” responses being family references compared to 5.41% for the adolescents and 6.18% for the young adults. As previously expressed, many of the family references in the adulthood group acknowledge the members’ families by positively evaluating them versus themselves:

- “My wife is doing an amazing job of raising our children and I am...in awe of her and don't tell her nearly enough.”
- “My kids are awesome.”
- “I think my daughter is the most amazing person. She amazes me with her kindness, thoughtfulness and her constant vision of what her goals are.... I wish I had been more like her when I was younger.”

As Erikson discussed, the members of this age group also express the sense of purpose they have through the act of guiding the next generation. In most examples this guiding is directed towards their own children:

- “My childhood was not idyllic; it was filled with lots of painful moments.... I've tried very hard to provide my daughter with a completely different childhood experience.”
- “Being a great father is the most important thing I'll ever do.”
- “I think one of the most important jobs I have as a parent is to put my kids into situations where they can grow in good directions and meet peers who are good influences. So far, so good.”

As we have discussed, it was expected for the adults to have a larger concentration of family references, but this preference went beyond our expectations when there were over double the number of family references for adults when compared to other age groups. This unexpected abundance of family references is also tied to the following hypothesis.

Interest References (H_{CI})

The above average inclusion of general interest references in the adulthood age group (H_{CI}) is not supported by the data with 26.93% of the adult's “My 25” responses being interest references compared to 33.15% for adolescents and 31.11% for young adults. One possibility

that I believe could have caused this lack of interest references is that the adults’ family commitments leave less time for hobbies and previous activities. The members’ of the study reflect this trend in their responses:

- “I adore my kids.... Wouldn't have it any other way no matter how much I vent about it. Can I just have one full day off a week please?”
- “I love to kayak, but I haven’t been in a kayak since my first daughter was born.”

Another unexpected occurrence drawn from the results is associated with family references as well.

Family References (H_{B3})

The less than average inclusion of family references in the young adulthood age group (H_{B3}) is partially correct with 6.18% of the young adult’s “My 25” responses being family references compared to 14.70% for adults, but unexpectedly the adolescents have even less with 5.41% of their total “My 25” responses being family references. It was predicted that the young adults would have the lowest amount of family references because they would be focused on building and maintaining intimate relationships in the new stages of their lives. Yet the adolescents (many of whom appear still to be living at home) have the lowest amount of family references. The adolescents concentrating on their friendships instead of their families as they grapple with their own identity development could account for this finding. It can also be argued that many of the young adults have already started forming families of their own and, therefore, need to combine their family building with solidifying their other intimate relationships:

- “I have two kids, both from different dads.... I'm not proud of it but i wouldn't take them back for anything....”
- “I have always known that I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom.”

- “My greatest hope is that my son grows to love Jesus like I do and my greatest fear is outliving him.”

Another reason why the young adults were suspected to have lower amounts of family references was because they would be focused on building intimate relationships (specifically romantic relationships) during this time in their life spans. This predicted trend was also yielded unexpected results.

Romance References (H_{B1})

The above average inclusion of romance references in the young adult age group (H_{B1}) is partially supported with 3.94% of the young adult’s “My 25” responses being romance references compared to 1.92% for adolescents, but against expectations, 5.12% of the adult’s “My 25” total responses were actually romance references. The members of this age group spoke about the ups and downs of creating and maintaining their romantic relationships throughout their “My 25” responses. Many individuals expressed contentment and happiness with their relationships:

- “I call the most amazing person in the world my boyfriend.”
- “I’m going to get married in 2 years.”
- “I met my husband in High School and he took me to the Prom.”

Yet members also discussed the tribulations they are facing in making these intimate connections:

- “I have never been in a relationship. I’ve gotten close but every time I lose interest right when it gets to the point of making a commitment.”
- “The girl i love more than anything and would do anything for feels the same...about someone else. :- (“

- “I have a big problem with liking the wrong guys. If someone is absolutely wrong for me or it would never work out for me to date them, that is who I pick to like.”

In this stage of life, as Erikson suggests, young adults are faced with the crisis of intimacy versus isolation. They must form meaningful bonds with others or remain alone. This challenging and rewarding process is a focal point during this stage of life, and that is why I predicted that the young adulthood group would have the greater percentage of romantic relationships, yet the adults surpassed the young adults. Although the adults spent a larger amount of their time talking about their families, many of the members also discussed the important role their spouse plays in their life as well. The majority of the romance references expressed the members’ love and appreciation for their significant other:

- “I wish my husband didn't work so hard, but I know why he does.”
- “My wife knows how I feel about her: actions speak louder than words.”
- “I love watching my husband with the kids and fall more in love with him everyday. He's a wonderful father.”

The adults also discussed how they still have trouble expressing this affection towards their partner:

- “Sometimes I feel like I don’t deserve my husband, he does so much.”
- “I love my wife more than she knows but it's my fault for not making sure she always knows it.”

As you can see from these examples, many of the adult romance references cross into family territory as well. This progression insinuates that although the solidifying of intimate relationships begins in the young adulthood stage, it continues to be maintained throughout adulthood and the rest of the lifespan.

Friend References (H_{A2} & H_{B2})

The above average inclusion of friend references in the adolescent and young adulthood age groups (H_{A2} and H_{B2}) is also supported with 7.33% of the adolescent’s and 4.82% of the young adult’s “My 25” responses being friend references compared to 4.21% for adults. Erikson states that adolescents are striving to solidify their identity at this stage of life, and as previously discussed many individuals complete this process by comparing themselves and forming attachments with other people. Members within this age group discussed the networks and groups of friends that they associate with in their responses:

- “I have made...friends from many different networks of my life.”
- “I’m realizing...I miss hanging out with theater kids!”

Many adolescents also discussed the problems they face maintaining the friendships they have made:

- “I’m very out of practice at just hanging out with people, because I was slightly reclusive....”
- “I know that all friendships aren't going to last a lifetime, which is why I'm ok with dropping those who aren't really friends to me at all.”

The young adulthood group also expresses their difficulties in maintaining intimate relationships as they go through the phase of intimacy versus isolation. One of the key obstacles that emerged from the data is people missing and trying to stay connected with friends from previous stages of their lives:

- “I have an awesome friend who's in the Army that I miss. “
- “I truly miss my friends from....college b/c those were good times!!!”
- “I miss my old group of friends that have all moved off.”

Notably, both the adolescents and young adults specifically discuss how the “My 25” exercise itself is related to their social networks. When most of the members completed their “My 25s” they were instructed to list 25 facts about themselves and then “tag” 25 of their Facebook friends. When a person is tagged they are notified to view the note that their friend has written and their name and profile picture is posted to the right of the note. In the “My 25” instructions, if you are tagged you are expected to write a “My 25” of your own. Through this process, many members express their friend connections and motivations behind constructing their “My 25”:

- “I’m doing this because I was tagged in a couple of these and I appreciate that.”
- “I was tagged by 10 friends before finally deciding to do this 25 random facts thing.”
- “...like 6 other people tagged me in their 25 things.”

It could even be argued based on of these statements that there is an element of social pressure to create a “My 25” in the first place. In any scenario, it remains relevant that without these social networks created on Facebook the “My 25s” most likely would not have been as popularized or as widespread as they are today.

Aspiration/Goal References (H_{A3} & H_{B4})

The above average inclusion of aspiration/goal references in the adolescent and young adulthood age groups (H_{A3} and H_{B4}) is confirmed with 4.54% of the adolescent’s and 3.60% of the young adult’s “My 25” responses being aspiration/goal references compared to 2.67% for adults. Erikson’s theories predicted this trend because in addition to the need to solidify identity among peers, adolescents begin to associate industrially in order to further develop their identity. This same concept holds true for the young adults as they develop intimate relationships versus participating in formal or impersonal interactions. These interactions in industrious roles cause aspirations and goals to be formulated as future plans are made, and in many cases influenced by

their current interaction partners. Many themes could be seen in the responses for this theme reference, such as the inclusion of career or work focused aspirations. Both groups also expressed confidence in their goals for the future:

- “Oh and if you didn't know I want to be an actor/director/writer/producer. WHOA dream big. :D....”
- “I never really am scared about how my life will turn out. I think it will just fall into place....”
- “I believe goals can accomplish the impossible. I carry two goal lists with me everywhere....”

All of the members of the study didn't express this self-assurance however, and, conversely, they spoke of confusion and indecisiveness about their aspirations:

- “I am not fully set on what I wanna do with the rest of my life....”
- “I can't decide for sure what I want to do with my life.”
- “I honestly don't know what I want out of life right now.”

Although many of the trends I witnessed in the data remained consistent across both of these age groups, there was one trend in particular that was more prevalent in the young adult responses. I saw this theme in how the young adults contextualized their future aspirations or dreams by using the phrase “when I grow up”:

- “when I grow up I want to live and work in a major tourist destination”
- “I want to grow up and have kids one day. I want to be a mommy.”
- “When I grow up I want to have a beach house in Maryland somewhere.”

Another inclination that appeared within the data was that both of the age groups tended to be very personally focused in their responses, and this trend was also recorded on a larger plane across the members’ total responses.

Personal References (H_{A4})

The above average inclusion of personal references in the adolescent age group (H_{A4}) is partially confirmed with 32.11% of the adolescents’ “My 25” responses being personal references compared to 25.17% for the adults. Yet the young adults had even more personal references with 35.05% of their total “My 25” responses. Personal references refer to self-evaluations (negative, neutral, and positive), personal opinions, personal appearance reference, and fear references. It was predicted that the adolescent’s would have the most personal references as they attempt to solidify their identity among their peers and within themselves. The results do show evidence as to why the young adults surpassed the adolescents in personal references. When the six theme references that make up personal references are broken down certain trends can be observed. Ironically, the adolescents have the highest percentage of negative and positive self-evaluations. The adults only have the highest percentage on one personal reference, personal opinions. The young adults have the highest percentage of neutral self-evaluations, fear references, and personal appearance references. As witnessed in previous examples, young adults are attempting to form and maintain intimate relationships during this stage of life, which is why it was predicted that the adolescents would have more personal references. Yet many of the personal references made by the young adults, particularly in their fear and personal appearance references remain externally defined by the other people with whom these individuals interact. Here are a few examples from the data that display the members’ interactions with other people in their lives fueling their personal fears:

- “I cannot sing and have a phobia of singing in front of people. Even if it is just...something silly.”
- “My biggest fear on this planet is proving a certain someone right. Proving that I'm not smart enough to hack it and will never make it through my undergrad....”
- “I have paranoid thoughts about death and the future that...started once I had children.”

The young adults’ reliance on the opinions of others basing their own self-evaluations can be seen even more distinctly through their personal appearance references:

- “I have body image issues and worry alot about what others think of me.”
- “I hate it when people call me "big." The adjective is NOT a...substitute for being ‘tall’.”
- “I was voted Most Handsome Overall at my high school my senior year...”

These examples show that although the young adults have the highest number of personal references, many of their references remain directly linked to other people with whom they interact.

Limitations and Future Research

This project serves as an example for how social identity strategies are employed in an online environment. The witnessing of these themes and trends across the different age groups is an important step in understanding how people publically present themselves online. This understanding of the psychological framework of identity and its presentation provides some needed insight for future research. The analysis of identity presentation in social networking sites could be further analyzed by using an ethnographic approach, which would greatly benefit from an understanding of the mechanisms postulated in social psychological theories (Harrington, 2003). One possible avenue to explore using the ethnographic approach would be the motivations behind creating “My 25s” and how this relates to the online distribution of the “My

25” prompt. Examples from this sample suggest that there is an element of social pressure to create a “My 25” which led to the popularization of the exercise. My choice to only examine “My 25s” posted in English due to time constraints and my wish to remain actively involved in the coding and analysis processes of the research also serves as an avenue for future research. There are more than 70 translations available on Facebook and 70% of Facebook users are outside of the United States (Facebook, 2010). Therefore, studies such as this would be very beneficial in other parts of the world or on more specific demographic samples.

Online communities such as Facebook have grown at unprecedented rates, yet the corresponding research about the subject is not matching this influx. In order to continue our study of humanity we must include this portion of the population’s life. The subject of identity has been discussed for over 100 years, but in order to further understand its complexity and implications it must be examined in these new spheres of communication as well.

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Table 1: Hypotheses Summary Table

Adolescence Age Group	Young Adulthood Age Group	Adulthood Age Group
Above average inclusion of negative self-evaluations. (H _{A1})	Above average inclusion of romance references. (H _{B1})	Above average inclusion of interest references. (H _{C1})
Above average inclusion of friend references. (H _{A2})	Above average inclusion of friend references. (H _{B2})	Above average inclusion of family references. (H _{C2})
Above average inclusion of aspiration/goal references. (H _{A3})	Less than average inclusion of family references. (H _{B3})	Above average inclusion of positive self-evaluations. (H _{C3})
Above average inclusion of personal references. (H _{A4})	Above average inclusion of aspiration/goal references. (H _{B4})	Less than average inclusion of negative self-evaluations. (H _{C4})

Figure 1. Potential Theme References

Social Groups and Classifications:

- 1.1- Comments on Material Possessions
- 1.2- Comments on the Physical Appearance of Others
- 1.3- Family References
- 1.4- Financial References
- 1.5- Friend References
- 1.6- Housing/Current Residence References
- 1.7- Medical References
- 1.8- Romantic Relationship References

Ideological Beliefs:

- 2.1- Life Advice*
- 2.2- Political References*
- 2.3- Race Reference
- 2.4- Religious References

Interests:

- 3.1- Animal References
- 3.2- Athletic/Sports References
- 3.3- Entertainment References:

- 3.4- Environment/Nature References
- 3.5- Fashion/Shopping References
- 3.6- Fine Arts References
- 3.7- Food/Cooking References
- 3.8- Music References
- 3.9- Physical Fitness References
- 3.10- Travel References

Ambitions:

- 4.1- Academic References
- 4.2- Future Aspirations/Goals*
- 4.3- Work References

Self Evaluations:

- 5.1- Fear References
- 5.2- Negative Self Evaluations
- 5.3- Neutral Self Evaluations
- 5.4- Personal Appearance References
- 5.5- Personal Opinion
- 5.6- Positive Self Evaluation

*Theme references incorporated during the analysis of the data versus after initial and focused coding.

Figure 2: Adolescence Theme References

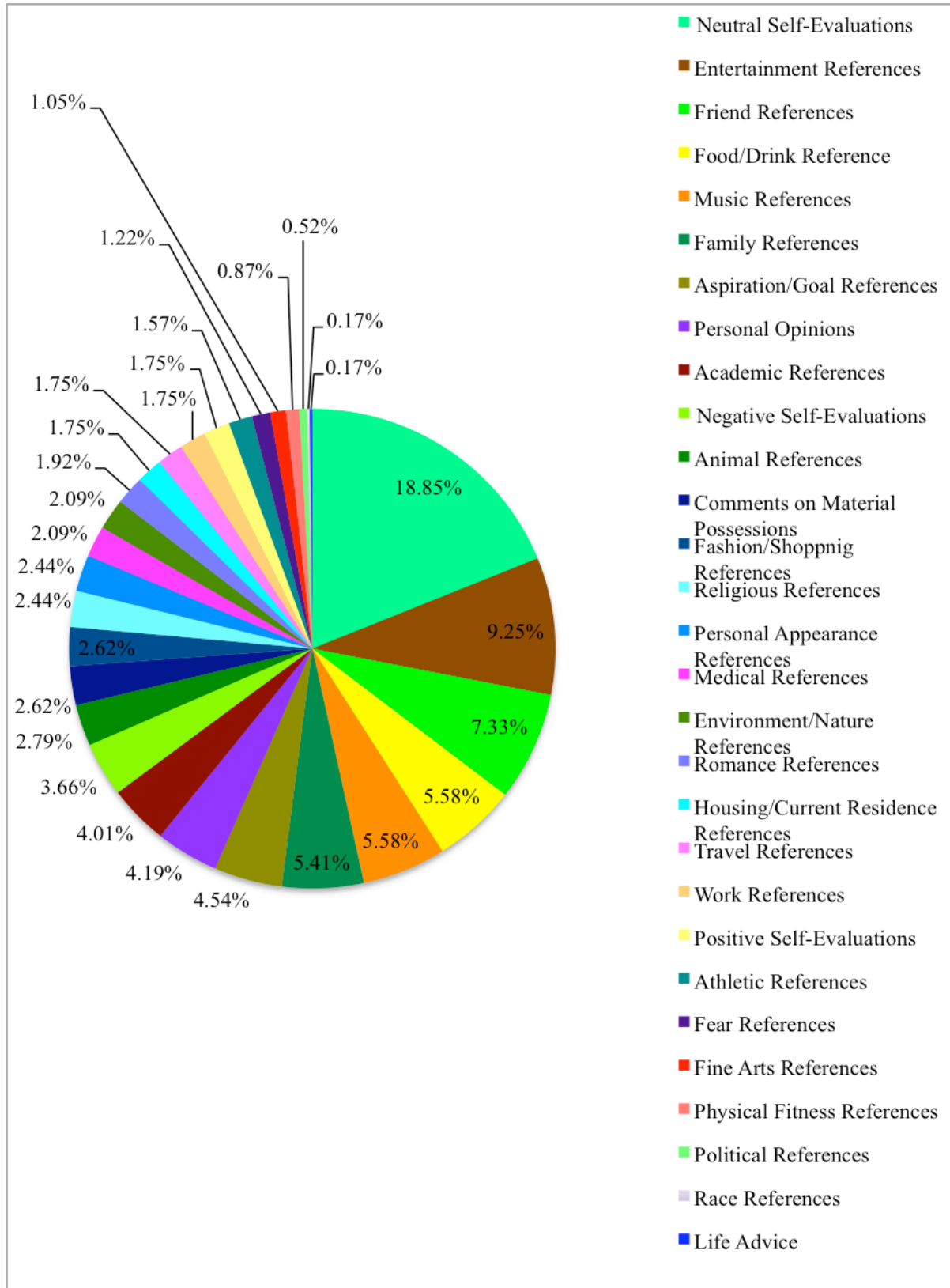


Figure 3: Young Adulthood Theme References

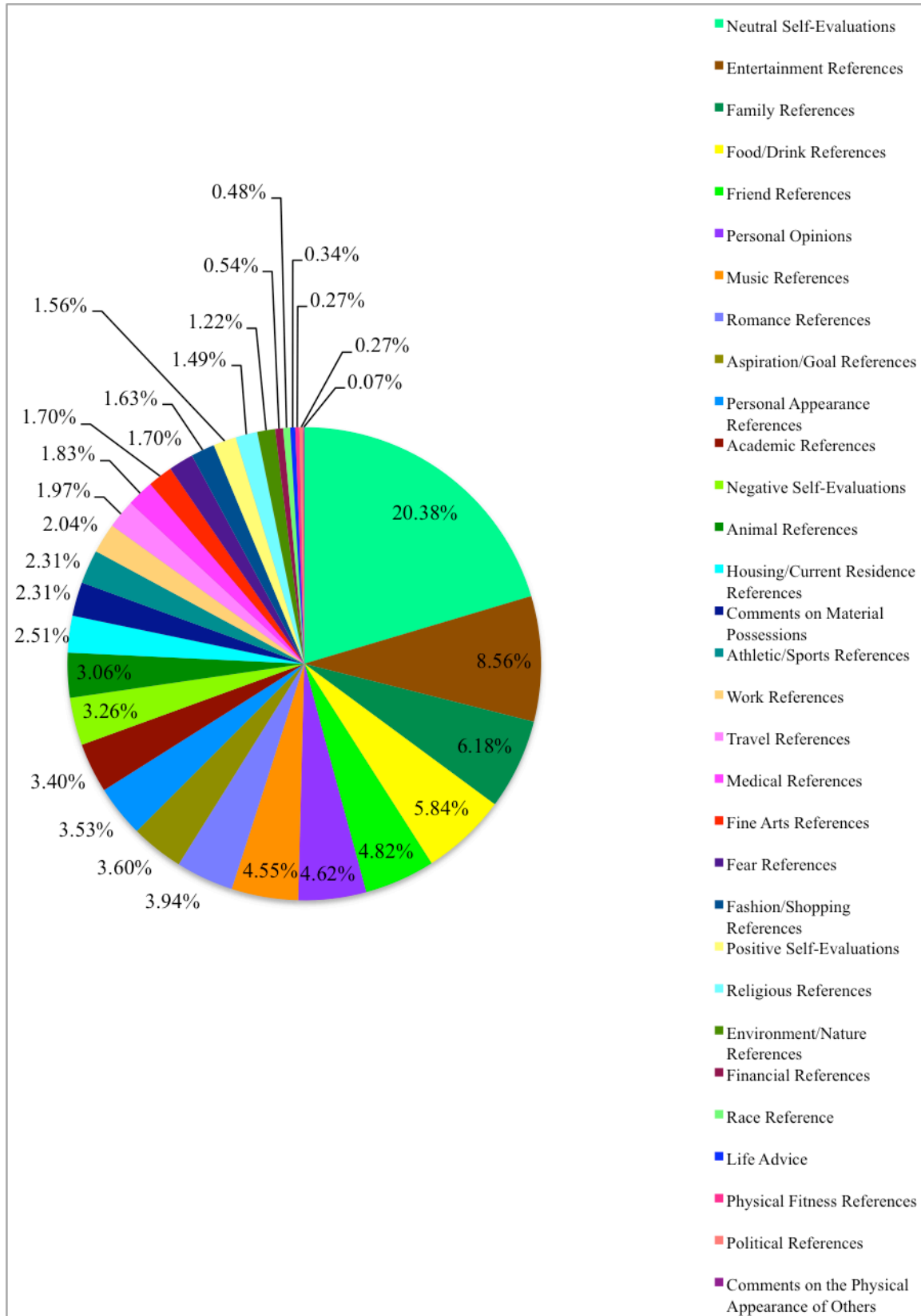


Figure 4: Adulthood Theme References

