

Comparative Impacts of Virtual and In-Person Socialization on Adolescents

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period during which a great amount of socialization and development occur concurrently. Over time, the avenues for that socialization have shifted drastically. As of 2018 95% of teens (age 13-17) reported having or having access to a smartphone, and 88% of teens reported having access to a desktop or laptop computer at home (Pew, 2018). For adolescents today, social media, online gaming, and the internet at large have been a life long presence. This presence of technology has been amplified by the conditions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. As of August 2020, the US Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey reported that nearly 93% of households with school-age children had engaged in some form of distanced learning. The pandemic compounded the impacts of long-term trends such that technology plays a significant role in the vast majority of adolescent socialization. As these technologies become increasingly prevalent it is important to understand the role they play and how they develop. This paper will utilize the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) to investigate the development of technologies used for socialization by adolescents and draw comparison between those means and more traditional socialization. The central thrust of the SCOT framework is that how technologies are developed and utilized is shaped by human activity and social factors. The SCOT framework can be applied to show how existing socialization methods and social factors around adolescent social interaction have impacted the development and usage of virtual social interaction methods. The paper will first provide an in-depth description of the SCOT framework. It will then provide a brief overview to traditional forms of adolescent socialization. Finally, the SCOT framework will be applied to the context of socialization in order to examine how technologies have developed and been used in ways that provide avenues for socialization.

Social Construction of Technology

The SCOT framework can be broken down into four main concepts that combine to describe how a technology develops (Klein & Kleinman, 2002). The first concept is interpretive flexibility which essentially states that the designs of technology are sufficiently undetermined such that multiple designs are possible depending on the surrounding social circumstances. The second part of the SCOT framework is the concept of relevant social groups. Within the SCOT framework all members of a relevant social group share a common view of a technology and a number of different groups with differing views negotiate how the technology develops. The third component of the framework is closure and stabilization. This concept describes how the development process resolves despite differing views between the relevant social groups. At a point in the development the social groups reach some level of agreement such that a technology is agreed upon. This is not to imply that the technology developed is viewed or used the same way by all groups, just that some level of stability is reached. The final component of the SCOT framework is the wider context. This includes factors such as interactions and relations between groups, power dynamics between groups, and environmental factors. In combination, these four factors give a fully faceted description of the way in which the views and actions of members of society shape the technology design process and its application.

Socialization

Socialization is the process through which children acquire the social, emotional and cognitive skills needed to participate in society (Frønes, 1995). It is a complex and varied area of study and to fully explore all aspects of socialization would be well outside the scope of this paper. However, a brief overview of four major agents in socialization of adolescents will serve to provide context for discussion of how technology interacts with socialization. The four agents

to be examined are parents, educators, peers, and the media. An overview of the historic role of these agents of socialization will provide context for how these roles are transformed by the development of modern technology. Additionally, the application of the SCOT framework will allow for exploration of the ways in which the traditional roles and values reflected by these agents of socialization impact the design and use of technologies.

The first, and in many cases most significant, agent of socialization in a child's life is the parent. Parents, along with the rest of the family unit, provide a child with their first connection to the world. It is through family that children learn values, motivations, and societal expectations. The importance of a parent's role in the socialization of children is identifiable in a number of studies in which neglectful or uninvolved parenting resulted in a greater rate of reckless behavior such as truancy, alcohol consumption, and smoking (Arnett, 1992). Another clear example of socialization from parents has been shown in how parents pass along ideas of gender roles to children. This socialization can take place through how parents act and think as well as through the indirect ways parents may encourage gender-typed activities (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). The way's parents act around children and align with traditional gender roles may enforce those gender roles in the child. The parent's role in socialization also illuminates how socialization is an interconnected process, and while the separation of agents can help to provide context the agents do not act independently. A connection has been shown in how a positive parent-child relationship leads to the child having positive relationships with peers (Frønes, 1995). Another consideration in how the various agents interact is that the specific values instilled in children by parents will be shaped by the socio-economic status, cultural background, and religious beliefs of the parent. The parent-child relationship is a very multi-

faceted and significant one in shaping how a child participates in wider society and interacts with the other socialization agents identified.

The second major agent of socialization to consider is that of the educator. Since the industrial revolution adolescents have spent an increasingly significant amount of time away from the household and at school where educators and peers become important agents of socialization. There is a clear parallel between parents and teachers as agents of socialization as both are figures of authority directly informing adolescents of specific norms. It is through these authority figures that adolescents understand the importance of following rules and directions. Additionally, through lived experience and social interactions with teachers, adolescents may gain some views through a more indirect manner.

The role of peers in the socialization process differs to that of teachers and parents because the relationship is one of equals rather than one with a clear authority figure. It is through the development of peer groups that adolescents begin to develop culture and personality separate from that of their parents. A common finding in studies of adolescent development is that adolescents tend to share attitudes and behaviors with their friends (Frønes, 1995). This is evidence not only that adolescents seek out social groups with shared beliefs, but also that these social groups are sites of rich socialization in which shared beliefs and viewpoints are developed. While a greater amount of research is available demonstrating negative socialization from peers, it is a multi-directional process and positive traits are also passed along via peer influence. One study showed that adolescents were more likely to participate in a volunteering activity after seeing an endorsement from a peer. This was true even when the adolescent was not witness to the volunteer behavior indicating that direct presence was not needed for the prosocial influence (Choukas-Bradley, Giletta, Cohen, & Prinstein, 2015). Another aspect of this study was that the

prosocial impact was greater when the endorsement came from a “high status” peer, ones considered popular or well liked. This increased impact for high status peers is also reflected in studies on negative behaviors (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006). The relationship between an adolescent and their peers is clearly an influential one in shaping identity and developing skills outside of the home.

The relationship between adolescents and the media and the impact of that relationship on development of adolescents is very complex. It is also the facet of socialization most intertwined with developing technologies. This overview will primarily focus on pre-internet media including television, movies, and music to provide context for later comparison to more modern media. One framework useful for understanding how adolescents interact with media is to consider it as means for self-socialization (Arnett, 1995). This viewpoint depends on the idea that in contrast to other forms of socialization, consumers are able to choose which media they consume. Arnett also identifies five reasons that adolescents engage with media: entertainment, identity formation, high sensation, coping and youth culture identification. Entertainment is likely the most evident of these reasons while the others warrant further explanation. Identity formation can refer to many forms of identity including political viewpoints and gender identity. Desire for high sensation refers to the consumption of high sensation media such as action films or heavy metal music. Coping refers to the use of media to manage negative emotions. Listening to music is a particularly common media used for coping, and the amount of music listened to increases in adolescence when compared to tv watching in response to an increase in stress and other negative emotions (Brown et al., 1990) Finally, youth culture identification refers to how media provides a common ground for youths separate from adult culture. As well as a wider universal youth culture, media also results in smaller specialized subcultures. One final aspect of

media consumption to consider that plays against the idea of media as a tool for self-socialization is the role of advertisements. As an element of the media not specifically chosen by consumer, advertisements may pass on values and beliefs in a way different from ordinary programming. The same thought process can be applied to lower-level messaging within programming itself such as the portrayal of gender roles in television or political viewpoints. These elements add a layer of complexity important to consider when examining the role of media as a socialization agent.

The field of socialization is a richly researched and deeply faceted one that this paper lacks the scope to fully explore. However, isolating the four agents of parents, teachers, peers, and the media provides four very impactful and distinct points of view the historical process of socialization through. An overview understanding of the socialization framework through these four agents provides a base of understanding that allows for clear comparison to modern socialization employing newly developed and widespread technologies. Through this comparison applying the SCOT framework the impact of human behaviors in shaping the development and use of technology will become clear.

Applying the SCOT Framework

The four agents of socialization identified compose the relevant social groups of the SCOT framework. Each group has distinct views on technologies and roles in the process of using said technology. Correspondingly, developments in technology have also impacted the role that each of the relevant social groups play in the socialization process. Drawing connections between the traditional role of the socialization agents with how they function and interact with technology provides insight into the development of that technology in reflection of social behavior.

The socialization agents with the closest and most obvious ties to technology are likely peer interaction and the media with internet technology allowing for different access to peers and media. Framing technologies such as the internet and social media as means for self-socialization like movies and television allow us to understand how the social values of traditional media impact the use of modern technology. A clear consistency can be seen through the application of the reasons for consuming media proposed by Arnett in showing how those values have had staying power prevalent in modern versions of media. The role of media as entertainment is once again a clear and apparent use, evident in teens watching online videos on average an hour a day (Rideout & Robb, 1990). The concept of identity formation has only increased as technology has progressed and adolescents are more able to engage with different identities. Not only is there greater access to a wider array of identities available to adolescents through the internet, but it is easier to develop a deeper engagement with said identities by “trying on” different identities (Anderson & McCabe, 2012). Rather than simply watching a movie or tv show and identifying with a character, the internet as an anonymous and interactional form of media allows adolescents to actually play a character and explore different aspects and ideas of identity. This factor demonstrates technologies have evolved to enhance the important social experience of identity development. High sensation is another aspect of engagement with media that has increased through the development of technology. Not only have high sensation media experience such as horror and action movies or metal and hyperpop music become more accessible through streaming services, but multitasking has become an extremely common method of consuming media for adolescents (Ettinger & Cohen, 2020). Coping with negative emotions also persists as a method of media engagement as well as the specific emphasis on music listening as a coping strategy with teens reporting an average music

listening rate of 2.5 hours a day. The internet, and social media in particular, is often viewed as the domain of young people, and as such has contributed to the development of a distinct youth culture through which values and beliefs are shared. Additionally, the rapid and widespread dispersal of information through the internet has allowed adolescents to acquire much greater access to a wider array of subcultures to participate in and develop shared values and beliefs. A final connection demonstrating the impacts of the values of the media social group is in the enhancement of factors complicating the viewpoint of media as an avenue of self-socialization. The desires of the media include the ingratiation of specific socializations including brand and product loyalties, political beliefs, and views on gender roles. As a social group with a large amount of power in shaping technologies, media entities greatly contribute to creating products that present information in a way such to promote this kind of socialization.

Alongside the media, peers are likely the socialization agent of adolescent's most closely intertwined with newly developing technology. The obvious example of social media represents a clear combination of social interaction with peers and media content, and other technologies such as online games and instant messaging represent additional movement of peer interactions into the digital realm. While it may seem that interaction virtually may be shallower and have less socialization than in person interactions impact there is evidence that there is still a significant impact of shared values being perpetuated virtually. The previously referenced study indicating that endorsement of volunteering behavior from peers increased the likelihood of an adolescent participating in the same behavior was actually conducted using an online interface (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015). This shows that socialization can still have impact through virtual means. In the current era in which children and adolescents are primarily limited to virtual interaction with peers due to the COVID-19 pandemic it is a positive sign that at least some level

of socialization remains effective virtually. Potential questions still persist as to how those relationships form online as opposed to existing in person relationships that persist in an online format. Another element of the virtual peer socialization experience is online gaming, which recreates the extremely significant peer socialization of play. There are many theories on the meaning and use of play in development including that it helps children learn how to relate with others and follow structured rules. Online gaming is a clear example of how those dynamics and values transfer into the virtual realm. While playing online games adolescents experience the same dynamics of interacting with other people and following set rules that they would see in more traditional in person play. Overall, it is clear that online tools have developed in a way such to reflect and play into existing peer interaction methods.

The major impacts of the wider context component of the SCOT framework can be seen in the technological responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the scope of adolescent socialization this is most evident in the role of the teacher as a socialization agent and the rapid transition to online schooling. As of August 2020, 93% of families with school aged students had reported using some form of distanced learning (Bureau, 2021), so it was vital that technologies be developed were able to handle both the technical as well as social needs of education. The primary socialization impacts of teachers are contained within their positions as authority figures introducing adolescents to following rules and functioning within the social environment of a school. While the delivery method of this social influence has changed, technologies such as Zoom have arisen in a way that teachers can still provide educational as well as social instruction. It is clear that technologies developed in response to the wider world context in order to replicate the no longer feasible in-person role of educators in an online realm.

While the reality of parenting has transformed drastically with the rise of technology, the specific position of the parent as an agent of socialization has not changed. Parents still remain the initial force in a child's life and introduction to interacting with the world. In the viewpoint of the parent social group, the use of technology draws parallels to the traditional role of the school as it represents an environment in which adolescents are first exposed to values and social interactions outside of the home environment. With 45% of teens (aged 13-17) reporting that they are online, either on a computer or a cellphone "almost constantly" (Pew, 2018) it may appear that the relevance and impact of the parent as a socialization agent may have diminished. However, it has been shown that there is an important relationship between the quality of child-parent relationships and the quality of peer relationships (Frønes, 1995). It would follow logically that a better parent-child relationship would also allow adolescents to form more positive online relationships. Elements of technology such as parental controls over screen use and content access also reflect the parental role in controlling access to specific kinds of socialization. The COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the parental role in child socialization as they are required to play a more hands-on role due to at home learning. While this does not change the essential position of parents within the socialization of a child, increased exposure may increase the relative impact of parents as adolescents spend less time at school or with peers. Overall, technology has not caused major shifts in the ways that parents socialize their children, but this socialization may play an important role in how adolescents learn to interact with the widespread technology.

Conclusion:

The socialization of adolescents is a multifaceted and important process through which young people learn how to function within society. In a world that is rapidly evolving through

ever developing technology it is more important than ever to understand the process by which adolescents learn to interact with the world. The application of the SCOT framework reveals how existing societal functions and human action of socialization transfer into the digital realm and shape the functions of technology. The social groups of parents, educators, peers, and the media each have different views and roles and socialization which are reflected in the manner through which they interact with developing technologies.

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