Impact of Social Media on Stages of Development in Teens and Young Adults

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One day, my sister and I went back home to Miami to visit family. We normally stay with my grandmother, but this time we decided to visit with my aunt and uncle. They are much closer to our age. Both work in the high-tech industry and often bring their work home. Having access to the latest gadgets made their home a preferable break from our normal routine at Grandma's. They have two boys. We'll call them Acer and Aaron. Acer is the eldest, about 12. The youngest is about 10. Both of them are brilliant children, but Acer moving into his teen years was more apt to allow his social life and extracurriculars get in the way of his schooling.

Supposedly, for Acer, his social media presence, or lack thereof was of utmost family importance and needed to be part of the agenda for every family discussion. Punctuating the conversations and quiet moments between our trips to the grocery store, Home Depot, dinner, visits to other family members' homes, was a new argument for his *need to* use Instagram. I was amazed at my aunt's calm resolve. Finally, by Sunday afternoon, he'd found a new, rather radical maneuver. Although fatally flawed, the argument wasn't a bad pass at a Hail Mary.

"Mom," he said. Aaron's getting higher grades than me because he's getting extra, extra homework help. On Instagram, they do math tutorials. Plus, the school is on Instagram. I could get better updates about homework and extra, extra help if I was on Instagram.

This added "extra" was in reference to additional assistance outside of their already expensive, intense tutoring sessions. But the real wrinkle was, neither one of them could have an Instagram account.

"Nu-uh!" my youngest cousin he protested from the back room. "It's online on the school website. See!"

Aaron came running into the room and whipped out his phone. He opened a tab that had apparently been overlooked by both his mother and his brother. This link allowed the children to see their class activity and teacher suggestions for them to reach the next highest grade. Apparently, Aaron

had been using the tool to keep his competitive edge both at school and home. In this moment, it seemed he was willing to revel his secret and let the edge go in favor of upstanding his older brother.

My aunt looked at the page, "Acer, why don't you use this? Anyway, neither one of you are allowed Instagram accounts."

"I don't have one, Mommy. Aaron said. I just use this and..."

Acer exploded, "I don't care about Aaron and his weird little geek kingdom! Everybody at school is on Instagram and I'm always left out because I don't know what's going on! At this rate, I'm going to be an outcast before I'm even out of middle school!"

"Mmmhmm. Yep. There it is. I knew it." My aunt nodded her head. "Look, nothing's going to happen to you by not being on Instagram. The world isn't going to fall apart. Your grades are already not the greatest as it is. Its too much of a distraction and I don't have time to babysit you on that thing. I told you when you're 13, you can have an account. But not right now. Waiting will keep you out of trouble and build some character."

Conversations like these happen likely all over the world every day. Children trying to express to their parents that social media is more than just about play, but it is also about work and relationships. Though my cousin's last shot at getting an account was a long one, he may have had a point. Social Media can play a positive role in helping young people maintain relationships and reach new goals. If these platforms are used properly, some of them can help adolescents reach greater capacities within Jenny Wade's Nine Stages of Consciousness. Specifically speaking, digital interaction can assist teens in reaching the Conformist, Achievement, Affiliative, and in the case of some Gen Z'ers, Authentic Consciousness states. But, as we know, social media also has some major drawbacks and can stymie the progression through these same levels. Whether the use of these platforms weighs positively or negatively on Consciousness development depends largely on the quality of relationships in the youth's life.

We will primarily examine this problem through Jenny Wade's *Changes of Mind: A Holonomic Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness.* Within this theory, the Nine Stages of Consciousness include the Reactive, Naive, Egocentric, Conformist, Achievement, Affiliative, Authentic, Transcendent, and Unity. The ones we will focus on as it relates to adolescent-social media interaction are the Conformist, Achievement, Affiliative, and Authentic stages.

Conformist Consciousness

As defined by Wade, Consciousness is the experience of being alive. [It] concerns the intersection between private "interior." "subjective" experience and the "objective" or 'outside world (Wade, 1996). Put another way, to have a sense of self, one also needs a sense of the outside world. But for the children coming of age now, that inside and outside world is split in fours. There is the inner world of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Then there is a second inner world, curated by an internal-police that gathers 'post worthy' thoughts. They ask themselves if the thought they just had should be posted. Who should be tagged or notified of the thought? Further, how might the people they notify of the thought perceive them or their inner world? Then there is the outer “reality" of the world. Next to that outer is a second reality which is a digital representation of the world. That digital representation of the world acts as a thin veil over the experiences of real life. To make things even more complicated, this digital reality is also colored and controlled by algorithms. In these ways, Consciousness becomes more meta and more complex.

Figure 1. Social media immersion turns Wade's two intersections of subjective and objective parts into four.

The additional complication of the ever presence of peers within these quadrants of real-digital experience creates an intense environment of Conformist Consciousness. It becomes imperative that the youth both self-police and act out to maintain the credibility necessary to stay popular and fit in. Young people have always organized themselves into subcultures to mimic each other's' dress, speech, and activities. This is not a new phenomenon in teenage socialization. But contrary to the pre-social media eras, adolescents are now able to curate an image of themselves and compare themselves to others outside the reality if their day-to-day interactions. They are inundated with an unrealistic view of the world, robbing them of the opportunity to get to know themselves and others in a real way, thereby needing to fill the sense of their missing selves.

Many turn to social media to manipulate attention to increase their popularity, enticing others to do the same. This kind of recursive peer pressure can speed the pace of negative peer contagion and fuel risk-taking. There have been dangerous trends like the Tide Pod challenge where teens encouraged each other to get likes and views by daring each other to consume laundry detergent. The challenge remained viral between 2017-2018. "Within the first 11 days of 2018, there had been 40 reported exposures to liquid laundry detergent pods by 13- to 19-year-olds. That figure represents 20 percent of the total number of similar incidents in all of 2017" (Washington Post, 2017).

However, if the youth has found positive alignment with family, friends, and peers both off- and online, this may serve them well in lowering negative risk-taking behavior. In a recent study in the Journal of Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience, psychologists found that" other forms of social influence can actually attenuate adolescent risk-taking tendencies. The presence of older adults (strangers and parents) reduces adolescents' risky decisions" (Do et al, 2017). Looking more at the positive end, this same kind of risk-taking behavior can also be Prosocial which is "voluntary actions intended to benefit another" (Do et al, 2017). The Do study further posits that an "increased approach motivation in adolescence, especially in social contexts, may lend itself to a greater propensity for

committing behaviors where others stand to benefit. This raises an intriguing possibility that, although adolescents may be more likely to take risks, they could be doing so in order to help others" (Do, et al 2017). The behavior in combination with adult guidance could possibly be leveraged for the greater good and perhaps help usher teens into Affiliative Consciousness if the teen is pushed or grows out of Conformist Consciousness. An unfortunate life or social event could land the youth in a place where they yearn for more of the intimate connections that saved them in the first place. If, however, young adults find their real-life intimate connections of family and friends don't hold up to an unexpected shift in their Conformist Consciousness, they might find it more reasonable to move to Achievement Consciousness.

Achievement

Wade states that "although stages are invariant up to the Conformist level, people move from there to either Affiliative or Achievement Consciousness depending on enculturation and hemispheric dominance" (Wade, 1996). Both young men and women can find themselves in either camp. On social media, Achievement consciousness for middle and high school aged children tend to focus on both looks and academics. Arriving to school *looking* ready is just as important to *being* ready when it comes to competitive achievement on campus.

Figure 2. Getting the grades and looks matter in Achievement Stage.

For those just beyond college in the 18 to 24 range, Achievement Consciousness on Social Media either looks like the high school focus, moves in to the entrepreneurship camp, or blends the two. This stage can look much

Figure 3 Young men and women share the desire for good grades.

like it does in high school users with the exception that capitalist endeavors are added to it. In both age groups, brands and lifestyles are fused together to become representations of the rewards of achievement. The upside is that young people are moved away from negative risky behaviors such as drugs, underage sex, alcohol, and the like. The downside of this is that it can become just as dangerous as the negative Conformist stage of Social Media use. Instead of attaching their identities to popularity and social groups, they attach their identities to personal achievements.

One additional phenomenon that Wade does not mention in her book is the tendency for those in Achievement stage consciousness to dip into the Naive stage. This is most common in those with Christian or Spiritual-but-not-religious belief systems but can occur with most any religious background. This is not the inkling of an emergence of the "CosmicMind" from the Transcendent Consciousness. This God or some other means of connection with the "Other" is evoked, ritualized, and hitched to success. In many cases, it can look strikingly similar to spell casting**.** The symbolic God for the Naive set up looks more like the above in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Protection and swagger in a blender.

Though we are using teens and young adults in this example, this position can also be seen in adults of all ages. Wade describes it like this:

"Likewise, Maslow draws attention to "neurotic adults" whose inchoate desire to be protected from an imprecisely perceived, but nevertheless insecure world "finds expression in search of a protector or a stronger person upon whom [they] depend" (Wade, 1996).

With the proliferation of social media as a tool, the need to differentiate oneself from other comparable people in the same peer group can lead to overwhelming personal insecurity. Even within Achievement Consciousness where the Locus of Control is internal and the options for action are logical. Brain development at the Naive level is characterized by "the continued precedence of lower brain centers in the subjective experience of awareness ... due to life circumstances that may tend to limit opportunities for early neurological development" (Wade, 1996). An interesting study would be one in which researchers looked further to see if these instances of spell casting were indeed cross-culturally consistent, even with those who reach Achievement consciousness. Or whether circumstances of high uncertainty and intense social pressure somehow create similar neurological environments later in life.

Affiliative

For those that find loving relationships at the point of divergence from Conforming Consciousness, Affiliative Consciousness is an additional opportunity for growth. This is also an option after the promise of Achievement Consciousness goes unfulfilled. Wade includes "the desire to help others, sustain intimate relationships, and be uncritical of others' differences" as elements of Affiliative Consciousness. Depending on how it is used, social media allows those who want to be helpful and those who need help to connect quickly and easily. But within the Affiliative stage, social media has a hard, double-edged sword.

Making the jump from childhood to adulthood can be incredibly stressful. A young person may, in their time of need, find it expedient to reach out to a stranger for help. This does not always work out for the best. In the worst cases, the information may be weaponized against them and used in cyber-bullying attacks. In the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, researchers found "depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem may be both consequences of and precursors to bullying. Thus, children who are bullied may be more likely than others to develop problems with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. In other cases, these symptoms may signal to others that a child may be an “easy target” (Kowalski, 2013).

The positive side of Affiliative consciousness in social media use is getting help and maintaining the relationships that teens may have started in real life. In many cases, social media makes it easier to express certain feelings that would be far more difficult to express face-to-face. Whether the feelings are disappointment, shame, or romantic, teens find relief in sharing and being vulnerable with each other. Youth are also more apt to ease deeper into the Affiliative stage as they find ways to help each other overcome family issues, thereby deepening intimacy.

They also have the chance to make real connections with youth their same age all over the globe, which increases tolerance and decreases judgment around "otherness". However, if the balance between maintaining relationships and making new ones is thrown of in favor of random superficial relationships, the teen could be in trouble. A ten-year study in the Journal of Current Direction in Psychological Science found "these positive results are only found for adolescents who use the Internet predominantly to maintain existing friendships. When they use it primarily to from new contacts and talk with strangers, the positive effects do not hold"(Valkenburg, 2009). So, it is important for young users to maintain a higher balance of real-life relationships.

Authentic

Just as there are those like my cousin who can't wait to get on social media, there are those who can't wait to get off. It has been reported that Gen Zer's are either scaling back their social media use or they are dismounting altogether. Some take consistent month or months long sabbaticals. Others dismount and never return. For those who stay on, their motivations are largely characterized by a larger life mission. In a recent Forbes magazine article, journalist Deep Patel highlights the fact that social media is the "largest platform for social education" (Forbes, 2017). Found of The Santa Clause Affect, Jason Neubauer works with social media influencer to affect positive change.

As posted on Neubauer's site, "in every episode, two popular social media influencers effect change on two unsuspecting followers who deserve the resources to fulfill their dream career. Each influencer hand picks a loyal follower with a big heart, big drive, or an extraordinary talent to transform their lives and make their dreams come true" (santaclausaffect.com). In seeing work like this, teens across social platforms have been finding new ways to do their own bit of good whether it is brightening an elder's day by teaching them the latest dance moves or helping their younger siblings with science experiments.

The downside to this is that for as much as it makes people feel good, there are peers who may miss the authenticity in these moments. They see how popular it is to do good and find ways to do so, even though the moment may be more self-serving and about them. For instance, recently a video went viral about an authentic relationship between a young boy and his autistic classmate. The High school junior was unwittingly caught on tape by fellow classmate giving his disabled schoolmate a birthday gift. The moment was genuine and heartfelt. But it wasn't long before copycats set up similar scenarios to be logged live, just to get the likes.

Aside from those doing good, the ones looking for the deepest connections are unplugging altogether. On the Reddit feed entitled, DividedBy_Zero, a young commenter posts: "I'm definitely a much happier guy overall when I'm not browsing through my friends' pages or reading their latest posts on my feed" (i-D Magazine, 2015). Time Magazine reports about 11 million young people have left Facebook since 2011 to try untraceable feed platforms like Whisper, BurnNote and Blink. In the same article, it is referenced that 'The younger [users] are, the more aware they are of the value of their information'. And that self-consciousness seems to be growing as the kids get older. The 2013 Cassandra report found that 18% of teens say the share a lot about themselves online, down from 24% in 2012 report" (Time, 2014).

Conclusion

Finishing the research, my aunt had the right idea. A paced, curated approach to social media is best for the long haul of an adolescent's consciousness development. While social media can do some real damage to development, it can also help teens navigate their way through difficult times. Whether a young person uses social media or not, the real indicator of positive progress through Wade's stages is safe, intimate, and consistent real-life relationships. As author Jane Halpern of i-D magazine put it:

Sure, many of us still scroll through our feeds on auto-pilot, mindlessly double tapping photos of cacti, skimming heartful captions while feeling nothing. But, overall, we're withdrawing from social media in favor of decluttering and clearing our heads, seeking out meaningful and authentic connections, and forgoing the dime-a-dozen opinions of others in favor of experts. Enough of "pics or it didn't happen."

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