The Influence of Online Dating on Female Adolescent Maturation

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Abstract

Young women of today are portrayed as more visually mature than in earlier generations. Decades of research have yielded important findings regarding the role of media and now mediated communication on the developmental process of young women. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the influence of online dating on this development during female adolescent maturation. Online dating has become increasingly popular, thus creating a need for further analysis into its effect on young adults, especially females. For this paper, we will be focused on the concepts of emotional layoffs directly related to the manner in which online dating superficially offers acceptance and attention based only on visuals. Beginning with a theoretical analysis of Erikson's Theory of Psychological Development through adolescence and the expectations set there in, this paper will discuss women's role through history, including the successful feminist movement. In light of Erikson's theory, the significant roles sexuality and self-actualization play in the growth of young women will also be addressed. This paper provides insight into the effect of social media on the development of young females as they move through Erikson's stages of maturation - important information for scholars hoping to better understand adaptations in development of future generations.

Keywords: Social Media, Online Dating, Adolescence, Cognitive Development, Maturation, Social Development

1. Introduction

At a time when social media use and influence is on the rise, the importance of understanding adolescent development has also become popular. This paper will explore the changes in maturation for adolescent females as result of the new online dating society. Adolescence, as defined by Erikson's (1958) Theory of Psychosocial Development, is ages 12 to 18. In this fifth stage of development, the ego identity vs. role confusion crisis occurs, where in lies the growth of her own identity in both sexual and the occupational (McLeod, 2013).For the purpose of this paper, we will take a look into the roles woman have played in society over the last several decades and how these roles have changed and individualized women through the feminist movement. In addition to the mental and emotional changes, young ladies are presented with an increasing amount of pressure to maintain an expectation set within society. Because of these pressures, young women have begun to take on a more mature lifestyle, physically, mentally and emotionally. Because online dating uses both visual stimuli and personal details to attract a possible partner, these young women are creating a persona, through adolescence; in order to prepare for the relationships they suspect will be lifelong commitments by using a variety of societal propaganda to define what is attractive to the opposite sex. Online mediums of communication pose questions to Erikson's Stage Theory that can be broken-down by considering the influence of social media on identity management, the new self-identification and cultural norms established through social influence that have now been embedded into the life of the emerging adult. This paper will also discuss necessary modifications to age extension and specific developmental progress that could take place within Erikson's fifth stage.

Moreover, this paper will discuss how such changes could help to maintain the most accurate version of the original virtue of fidelity with the additions of social media bias, accessibility and the social expectations set within peer groups in regards to the opposite sex and the ideals on which a claim is based on probable partnership.

2. Erikson's Theory

Erikson's Theory of Psychological Development was influenced heavily by Sigmund Freud. Although Erikson was also a psychoanalyst, his directive was based on the ego, not biologics. Much of his work during the post-Freudian era was centered on the pyramid theories of human growth and development but was more centrally focused on the important role society plays in the psychological evolution of one's self over the course of one's entire life. Having been mentored by Freud, Erikson's adaptation of Freud's phases guided him to dissect the human psyche into a more extensive eight stages, the first five identifying traits up to the age of 18, much like Freud, but going further into adulthood and beyond in an additional three stages(Cherry, 2015).These stages are: (1) Trust vs. Mistrust; (2) Autonomy vs. Shame, (3) Initiative vs. Guilt, (4) Industry vs. Inferiority, (5) Identity vs. Role Confusion, (6) Intimacy vs. Isolation, (7) Generativity vs. Stagnation, and (8) Ego Integrity vs. Despair (See Figure 1).

Stage	Psychosocial Crisis	Basic Virtue	Age
1	Trust vs. mistrust	Hope	Infancy (o to1 ½)
2	Autonomy vs. shame	Will	Early Childhood (1 ½ to3)
3	Initiative vs. guilt	Purpose	Play Age (3 to 5)
4	Industry vs. inferiority	Competency	School Age (5 to 12)
5	Ego identity vs. Role Confusion	Fidelity	Adolescence (12 to 18)
6	Intimacy vs. isolation	Love	Young Adult (18 to 40)
7	Generativity vs. stagnation	Care	Adult hood(40 to 65)
8	Ego integrity vs. despair	Wisdom	Maturity (65+)

Figure 1.1 Erikson's Psychosocial Stages of Development
(SOURCE: McLoed, S. (2013). Retrieved from Simply Psychology: http://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html)

According to Erikson, these stages are not exact regarding the stages themselves and the time into which they are entered or exited out. Instead, he spent many years studying societal effects on children of all socio economic backgrounds, and became a leading scholar in this field. His personal experiences were a key component of study on this topic. They led him to identify these detailed stages of development and shaped to acknowledge the importance of society's influence on creating one's sense of self- what is now known as the epigamic principle (Friedman, 1999).Within these stages, Erikson reveals the presence of psychosocial crises that demand prosperous resolution in order to grow a healthy personality. As stated, these stages allow for some give and take but in the end rest on the notion that if failure of a crisis occurs, reduced ability to complete the post stage(s) will occur and therefore create an unhealthy sense of self. Although issues may go unresolved in a specific stage, Erikson does go on to say that, these blocks can be resolved at any time. Best described as psychological, "because they involve psychological needs of the individual (i.e. psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e. social)." (McLoed, 2013).

Stage one, Trust vs. Mistrust occurs in infancy, age's zero-18 months. One example of a crisis event would be child allows the mother to leave the room without becoming upset because the child understands that the mother will return. The expected resolution is that the child achieves the belief that the environment can be depended on to meet his/her basic needs. If this crisis is not overcome, the child may have feelings of mistrust and fear of being let down within their environment, with possible diagnosis of depression or withdrawal later in life.

Traveling into the second stage, toddlerhood (18 months – three years), Autonomy vs. Shame creates the need for independence through pushing boundaries. Often socially referred to as the terrible twos, the word no becomes a constant. At this stage, the child learns about control, free will, and the ability to make choices. Consequently, if these traits are not learned, the child may be left with a sense of self-doubt or lack of independence. This often happens in children with parents that are overprotective or are inconsistent in their disciplinary strategies.

Initiative vs. Guilt brings us into the third stage where we are introduced to early childhood years, ages three-five. Physically the child is getting stronger, language skills are becoming more mature, and cognitive development is increasing. Curiosity is very apparent, as well as a willingness to learn. Children begin to activate play, as opposed to mimic someone else, in order to act and sexual identity is being discovered. In addition, when made aware of a wrong, children begin to feel remorse for their actions. If this stage is left incomplete, as they get older, children may not exhibit the desire to self-start or even think pessimistically when initiating a task. Stage 4, Industry vs. Inferiority, occurs in the middle childhood years of five to 12, when children enter into to puberty. This is the time when school life starts to become more prevalent and the concept of play transitions to work. By refining social skills, children will begin to unlock the door to their sense of self. This is the period in which they make an effort to create and build things, hence the term industry and also the time when favoritism is noticed toward one parent or the other. In this phase, it is important children receive acknowledgment for a job well done as this can create an inferiority complex and resist the urge to take initiative therefore lacks productivity.

For purposes of this paper, we will conclude the explanation of stages with the fifth stage of adolescence, ages 12-18, when significant physical, mental, and emotional adjustment commence. The way young people have seen things up to this point will change and grow, including the questions in themselves of what others see in them. Ironically, at the time when they will begin to try and identify who they are as individuals, they will also be concerned with what others think and this in itself will play a role in their identity. If a sense of self is not established, role confusion may occur, which leaves them to wonder about their role in society as a whole. On the journey to discovery, adolescents experiment with a variety of current social norms, from work and school to friend groups and fashion trends, feeling pressure from all around to pick a side and make their label. This crisis of identity can lead to rebellion, depression and isolation.(Jose & Sujatha, 2012). Females during this time, have shown to mature at a faster rate than their male counterparts, as shown in a recent study on social maturity (Choudhary & Madhuri, Ph.D, 2014), to understand fully these developmental changes, we must first look back into the history of women's roles in society. As women gain their own self – identity and make a place for themselves among the young men of the same culture, but with this new independent identity, also came a new outlook on women as seen by men and the expectations set by them.

3. *History of Female Maturation in Western Culture*

During adolescence, mental, emotional, and physical changes occur. Females begin to see biological changes of their facial features and body shape as well as "an increase in the complexity of group interactions and thus social behavior" (Choudhury & Charman, 2006, p. 165). In today's society, the female figure is represented in movies, television, magazines and social media, and the level of attraction to be expected has become a way for young girls to create an idea of how they should be viewed by society in order to be considered attractive to others, both of the same sex and the opposite sex. Throughout adolescence, rates at which females develop change and differ with each individual. This in itself can begin the mental trials of desired attention. While physically a female's body may be developing rapidly, her mental development may not be at a balance and therefore her knowledge of what others expect and what is appropriate can be skewed. It isn't until late adolescence that, "emotional and social development begin to catch up with physical development." (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2015).

Life for the American female teenager has changed dramatically over the last century. In the years prior to World War II, teenage girls were focusing more on expanding their knowledge within the home. Very little attention was being paid to career preparation and education and more concentration on childcare and duties of a good house wife. As the war came to an end and the economy began to pick up, many school age girls were being encouraged to complete high school and even attend college. In this era, the beginning of motion pictures and the introduction of Hollywood starlets were covering the fronts of dime store magazines and newspapers. Figures such as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor were constant and had a large influence on the young female fashions, body image, and sexuality. The expectation of female's outward appearance, was based on the fashion of the time and silhouette of women's clothing included cinched waists and enhanced bust but still remained covered. (Vintage Fashion Guild ™ (VFG) administration, 2012). The idea of sexuality was coming to the surface and girls coming into puberty are now finding role models in voluptuous woman not because of their desire to become actresses or the philanthropic ways in which their personal time is being spent but because they see the reaction these starlets are getting from their male counterparts and the seemly passive encounters these men seem to engage in communication with them.

At the end of this post war era the introduction of society's acceptance of women scholars and career minded females becomes somewhat of a norm. Female high school graduates are increasing as well as their entrance into the college experience. Refusing to abandon their factory uniform influenced trousers, some young women of the 50's are appearing visually equal as well, although the typical high school and college females of this time, remained feminine in poodle skirts and cardigans, bobby socks and saddle shoes. Like all social classes and peer groups, females played their roles and in the act of rebellious teen, some dawned a tighter bottom half in pencil pants with heels and the accentuated waistlines. (Cox, 2015).

As sexuality awareness was becoming more prevalent, several cultural additions became highly influential on the American female teenager. One in particular was the approval and promotion of the birth control pill in 1960 and, "five years after the FDA approval, 6.5 million American women are on the pill, making it the most popular form of birth control in the U.S." (Nikolchev, 2010) This acceptance also brought with it a new outlook on the freedom of sexuality and empowered woman to take control of her own bedroom lives. Before this oral contraception, young women were lead to believe, mostly by firsthand experience in their own homes, that sex equaled pregnancy and only happened after marriage but this would no longer be the case. "The advent of the pill meant that women could choose to have sex as often as they wanted," not just after they were married, which led more women to stay single longer and increased the number of females into the workplace. (Silverman, 2015) Now, young females were taking their lives into their own hands with certain comfort ability in their decision. No longer do young girls have to fear the lack of a monogamous relationship meaning they would be alone forever and the terms for single ladies would forever be changed by societies idea of female independence. The introduction of dating, as opposed to being courted, would open the possibilities of meeting multiple partners with shared interests but no longer carry an expectation of longevity on the first encounter.

Into the 1970's, the feminist movement was in full swing and women were fighting for recognition by not only their peers but the government as well. Over the course of this decade, the number of women enrolled in college increased 60%, surpassing male enrollment for the first time in history. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014) In 1972, the first issue of Ms. Magazine, an American liberal feminist magazine, is issued, for women, by women and about women's issues. The name alone was of major controversy because it meant the tables had turned and the titles associated with married or non-married women were no long sufficient. This new prefix would force the rest of the population to once and for all acknowledge that women no longer had to be defined by their marital status or by their age. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2011) The Roe vs. Wade decision was made by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, which secured woman the right to abortion. (Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113, 162) This was also the time that women were first allowed admittance into the military academies as well as being integrated into the U.S. Army. Even the entertainment industry jumps on the bandwagon and creates strong, independent female characters in several weekly programs. The days of the vixen, wasn't gone by any means but the variety of personalities are spreading wildly and what defines women as attractive is no longer limited to physical features. That isn't to say, the image of the female body isn't being idolized. Smack in the middle of the sexual revolution, the 1970's did its fair share of spreading the ideas of open sexuality and begins to somewhat normalize pornography, proving that sex sells as Playboy, an American men's lifestyle and entertainment magazine, hits a record high 7 million copies sold. (Kahn, 1998).

In 1980, the need to acknowledge the possible problem areas between men and women, specifically in the workplace, arises and the first public admission comes in the form of the guidelines set in place, from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, prohibiting sexual harassment. The 80's also continues with the sexual revolution and the adult entertainment industry becomes less of a stigma in society thus attributing to the introduction of more mainstream movies portraying sexual intercourse as entertainment. July 1, 1984, the PG-13 rating was introduced by the MPAA, Motion Picture Association of America, in order to indicate film content "may be inappropriate for children under 13 years old" and "may contain very strong language, nudity (non-explicit), strong, mildly bloody violence, or mild drug content." (Motion Picture Association of America, Inc, 2015) In addition, the R rating would now signify no one less than 17 years of age allowed in a film unaccompanied by a parent.

Closing out the 20th century, the hype of sexuality, in all its forms, is becoming almost non-existent as so many past scandalous ideas have been labeled as typical behavior or glazed over with a sense of neutrality. In 1990, the creation of the World Wide Web begins a new revolution and by the start of the millennium, subject matter accessibility was endless.

Our children are no longer being sheltered from crude humor, sexual innuendoes, and bare-it-all fashion trends. Movie ratings for kids 13 years of age or younger are denoted as having "more than brief nudity… but such nudity… generally will not be sexually oriented." (Motion Picture Association of America, 2005) Labeled as restricted or R-rated, children under the age of 17 must be accompanied by a parent or legal guardian due to the contents of some adult material, to include "sexually-oriented nudity." (Motion Picture Association of America, 2005) Ultimately, the viewing of these R rated films is at the discretion of the parents but this is only for viewing in the theater.

Once released for at home entertainment, the possibility of young children seeing these movies increases significantly, not to mention the similar content being allowed on network prime time. Role models are making their transitions into adulthood live on national television and censorship is slim. What once was 14-year-old, Hannah Montana, a sweet typical teen, leading a double life as a pop star, overnight becomes Miley Cyrus, 21-year-old twerk sensation. Dressed in a racy leotard depicting a stuffed bear and joined by a dance team of minimally dressed young women, she wraps up her performance, with 38-year-old Robin Thicke, in a series of moves involving hide quarter gyrations, angled at 90 degrees against Thicke's lap. In addition, all of this chaos is being aired on public television with accessibility to any young girl that can hit the power button. With the use of the web, this video replay is watched millions of times by millions of viewers and getting evens more attention from print media. At a time when young girls are the most impressionable, the once teen role model has now created a new reality for what's hot and what's not. The attention monster has reared its ugly head and logic and reasoning are no match for the new hormonal desires of the modern teenage girl.

4. *Online Dating Influence*

Television and social media definitely play their part in the heightened occurrences of female teen maturation, teen social dates, and romantic encounters but this new fad of online dating has become an avenue for much more than just opportunity for companionship. For some, it has become a vending machine of choices based on wrapper alone and the few details that can be read to explain its contents. The titled dating pages give way to these lighthearted friendships, and social media as a whole has created a variety of communication mediums that lead to these frivolous meetings among teenage girls. Online dating as a whole has become the wave of the future and it isn't slowing down anytime soon. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015), findings and shared personal experiences, show female teens are actively seeking partnerships via these online methods of dating and even younger than their equals thought about romance half a century ago. Mostly being profiled by a series of pictures and few short details written by the subject of these social experiments. While most online daters use one site or the other to meet new people in hopes of forming a romantic relationship, some are more focused of the lazy hook-up.

As the evolution of societal acceptance has increased, so have the expectations of said society. Men and women are still seeking partnerships and in this new world, an overwhelming codependence has been place on social media and the ease of online dating. The days of passing notes in class and checking yes or no boxes is in the rearview and one must to wonder if this is effected by the sensitivity of our teens during the stage in their life when self-identity configuration is at its high. No one wants to hear critiques about themselves and although sometime necessary, constructive criticism isn't always the method of transference of this information.

This is a reason for varies studies already being conducted regarding cyber bulling and victimization. For this paper, we will be focused on the same concept of these emotional layoffs, directly relating to the manner in which online dating offers users to choose datable prospects and the ability online dating gives to bypass these awkward face to face dismissals. Tinder, a popular dating application, requires a first name, age, location from your phone's GPS and a few photos to begin a search. These pictures will begin to assemble in the account based on shared traits given by the user from their connected Facebook profile. As the pictures are displayed, a choice is made to either like or pass with a simple swipe of the finger. In the event that a co-liker is found, the app with acknowledge that match and further prompt the user to as how to continue a conversation via in app message. This is where the convenience of the application come to a halt. All future interactions are up to the parties involved via their own mediums of communication and acceptance of the match itself.

"Tinder has ballooned to 9.6 million daily active users, accounting for some 1.4 billion swipes per day." (Carr, 2016) A noticeable difference between the number of swipes and the number matches, all based on outward appearance alone.

It's no wonder that our female youths are preparing earlier in their adolescence to become attractive as possible by the time they are old enough to seek influence and assistance from these dating sites." There have even been reported escalations of teenagers using the Tinder app, 7 percent of users are between 13 and 17," (Escobar, 2014).This number is alarming with the apps content rating listed as 17 years or older, which means these young girls are not only lying about their age to participate but their photos are also representing an equally older version of themselves in order to get the swipe they are so desiring from the dating site known best as a place to find casual sexual partners. Tinder is a free application and promotes them as taking 60 seconds to set up and find your first match and in that minute, it never asks to verify or prove age within the Tinder application. All personal information, including age, is synced via Facebook, an online social networking service which provides anyone age 13 or older access.

There are dozens of dating sites online and they all vary in the ways they are used. Some provide in-depth questionnaires to aid in finding that special someone such as Match and eHarmony, and some even offer possibilities narrowed down to a specific topic like, Christian Mingle and Farmers Only but, when placing focus on the female teens engaging in online dating, the sites are narrowed down drastically and aren't carrying the creditability of lastingness these girls are seeking because they first have to make it past the first phase in order to employ a conversation leading to more in-depth criteria examination.

Adolescents females go through significant body changes and as if it wasn't' hard enough, online dating has now played an active role in physically reshaping the external female figure to visual reflect a moderately proportionate exterior to the young adult females being portrayed in society as perfection. Teen girls in the mid 1990's met boys at school or the mall. Their attire was of the latest trend but the physical features were almost always in process of being corrected one way or another. Teeth were shackled in brackets, eyes were framed in colors, and a perm was the only chemical treatment adorning the heads of middle school girls. Now, with the new inventions of the past becoming old news, invisible dental corrections and contact lenses are affordable to the whole family. Yes, this stage is still awkward but nothing like it used to be. The ability to still be found attractive even in this stage of development has become a possibility and just in time for online dating requirements of photos first.

In addition to physical appearance, teen girls are also maturing in intercultural communication. As explained, the next step in the online dating game is conversation. Much of this conversing happens via text message and not just in the beginning. In a study conducted by Pew Research Center (2015), teens felt they could be a bit bolder hiding behind their phones instead of face to face but still admit it's a slippery slope when the messages are being conveyed accurately. In fact, 72% of teens spend time texting on a daily basis with a significant other, per Pew Internet. With this new filter of texting, came the wide spread problem of sexing. Sexing is defined as sending explicit or sexually suggestive messages and pictures via cell phone or instant messenger. (Matte, 2016) "A joint study by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, and Cosmo Girl suggests that 20% of teens, ages 13-19, have shared nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves either via text or by online posting. Teen girls are slightly more likely to do this than boys, and 11% of the young teen girls, ages 13-16, admitted to sending suggestive photos of themselves." (Matte, 2016)

Over half of teen girls cite pressure from boys as a reason they send suggestive messages. Feeling the need to please others by agreeing to send these types of messages is all too common at this stage of development. When a power struggle is already in existence between the sexes and role confusion is on a high, self-esteem issues can and are created and a need for admiration is one of much confusion teen girl's faces during adolescence. Because sexing is currently illegal under federal law, falling under the creation, distribution, and possession of child pornography, it is a felony offense and with girls under 18, posing as young adults on these dating websites, they are not only subjecting themselves to harm but the young men they are in communication with as well. As clarified by Erikson's stage descriptions, not all maturation happens at the same time. Just because a girl's body may be transitioning into adulthood doesn't mean she has the mental capacity to understand the extent of her decisions. Hormonal increases effect emotional, psychological and physical growth and what girls may see as a simple act to gain attention and acceptance can very quickly create the idea of sexual objectification, more specifically self-objectification.

Because women are more emotional than their male counterparts are, females at this age may not grasp the concept of this even as they are providing the ammunition to the ones they are being targeted by. Online dating also plays a role in the construction of self-esteem for young women.

At this stage, self-esteem is a slippery slope and past and present studies have been a continuing problem area at this stage. Although these online dating forums are for users 18 years and above, seems to set an expectation for younger women. When most online dating experiences begin with outward appearance as a single factor of being accepted or rejected, teen girls are being made to feel they need to look a certain way first before what they are interested in is even considered.

Much like the transition from one campus to another, as with middle school to high school. Before a word is spoken, new students will be judged on the first day school. Older boys labeling the new onset of freshman girls on campus as fresh meat with a particular idea of what they are wanting from them. Adolescent self-esteem is a widely researched topic including subtopics such as; body image, eating disorders and teen pregnancy. In a time when online dating didn't exist, these were fears and with the introduction of cyber speed dating, the statists are continuing to cause concern. The simple act of not liking a picture can create questions of self-doubt.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides an overview of the emerging research surrounding online and its effect of the maturation of female adolescence. Online dating is a new and intriguing environment to study because the convenience technology has created brings a whole new light to the relationship world and coincidently to the young women begging to be a part of it, in addition to their so-called-teenage life.

As Erikson states, that the stages of development mentioned in this paper, shape and acknowledge the importance of society's influence on creating one's sense of self and with society at our fingertips in movies, magazines and social media apps, the ideal self is in the eye of the beholder. However, just as if Erikson had a vision for the future when he created his stages of development. Stage 5 is a perfect representation of the way young women have seen things up to this point and from this point on they will change and grow. They undoubtedly question themselves and what others see when presented the same subject matter.

As females in the 21st century, they will also have a plethora of females to choose from when finding a mirror image possibility. The development of what was normal or accepted expanded within society and so the minds and outward appearances of our ladies in waiting, for puberty that is, begins to branch out earlier than usual in order to fit the idealistic female mold. This new idea of finding one's self among the cookie cutter montage of the social circuit now begins to spread into a wide-ranging hunt for the perfect fashion, hair and makeup, romantic relationships and on.

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