Social Media Influence on Sri Lankan Young Adults' Sense of Self-Expression

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how self-expression and creativity in Sri Lankan young adults' is influenced by social media on four aspects: the types of social media chosen for expression; how the chosen types encourage self-expression; the on-line vs off-line world and how the Westernised concept of 'expressing oneself' is addressed in a collectivist culture. Using a convenient sample, 10 in-depth interviews with Sri Lankan young adults were obtained. Results of the interviews were analysed comprehensively according to Braun & Clarke's six-step guide for thematic analysis which revealed two main themes: 1) self-expression for development of self and 2) self-expression in relation to others. The first theme examines the role social media plays over identity construction and how young adults satisfy the fundamental need to belong through social media. It further explores how the relevancy of a particular social media can impact self-expression and how "storytelling" or the way in which life's moments can be captured and displayed to the wider society is done through social media. The second theme explores how social media can enhance the image that an individual is trying to portray of themselves to the outside world; and provides an avenue for young adults to create a voice for themselves. It also explores how the Sri Lankan culture affects young adults' expression, creativity and understanding of the term 'self-expression' itself. Findings from this study, which had never been explored in Sri Lanka, provides an understanding of the behaviour patterns displayed, the increasing importance of social media in defining a person's identity and lifestyle choices and looks through the scope of a collectivist culture on this issue. The study provides insights for future investigations and interventions related to practices of young adults on social media.

Keywords

Self-expression, Social media, Sri Lanka, Young adults

Introduction

The term 'self', broadly taken, is stated to be in accordance to the concept an individual has of themselves as a physical, social and moral being (Hattie, 2014). It is from this concept of 'self', that the concept of 'self-expression' extends. Self-expression is understood to mean the conveyance of an individual selfhood, through thoughts, preferences and distinct personality traits (Kim & Sherman, 2007; Kim, 2010) in is seen in a person's speech, behaviour, ideas and emotions and especially in relation to creative expressions. Self, and by default self-expression, is said to be "malleable" which causes self-expression to be fluid in nature.

1.1 Theoretical framework

With the commencement of the digital era, 'self' has changed drastically to fit the virtual frame. Today, young adults' identity construction – both physical and virtual – occurs through social interactions and the profiles that they create online. This is because self-identity is an individual's opinion of oneself and includes both personal and social identities (Stryker, 1980; Tajfel, 1981). As the digital era commenced, however, this concept of 'self' changed drastically. This is mainly through Social Networking Sites (SNS) or social media as it is generally known. SNS usage is found to cause changes to self-concept in individuals (Jones, 2015). Today, young adults' identity construction – both physical and virtual – occurs through social interactions and the profiles that they create online. Gündüz (2017) states that SNS enable identity expression, exploration and experimentation. Livingstone (2008) explains that SNS is a tool that youth use to 'self-display'.

Points of self-identity and social belongingness also come into play here; with 'belongingness' being increasingly sought after online by young adults through pursuing like-minded online communities. SNS are notoriously reputed for being 'time wasters' – major SNS such as Facebook were designed with the ability to "consume as much of [an individual's] time and conscious attention as possible" (McCarthy-Jones, 2018) by manipulating vulnerabilities in the human psychology. These vulnerabilities are two-fold: the need to belong and the desire for social status. The desire for social status has been used by businesses as a foundation for their marketing strategies as, often, individuals will purchase products which suit their self-image ("one's conception of oneself or of one's role" – Merriam Webster) and as a means to express their personal identity (Cătălin & Andreea, 2014). Products purchased (for example: branded products) are used to create, develop and maintain their identities.

Similarly, SNS are also used as platforms for mass communication. SNS is a channel for global change which not only creates noise but creates noise which provides an effect (Sharma, 2014). Claims of narcissism is also high as one key factor that is pushing young people towards the direction of narcissism is the internet (Twenge, 2009). This is because the internet, through SNS, constantly promotes young people to present the minutiae of their everyday lives.

With regards to culture, 'self-expression' is given a clear distinction. While self is paramount in Western cultures (Kim & Sherman, 2007); the same cannot be said for Eastern cultures. Individualism is rooted deep in the West whereas in Asian countries, however, collectivist cultural values have been protected and obeyed for generations.

1.2 Research objectives

With regards to Asian cultures, at present, it remains unclear how contemporary Sri Lankan young adults' sense of creativity and self-expression is impacted and in turn influenced by different types of social media. Following research questions were examined:

RQ1: What particular types of social media do young adults choose to express themselves through?

RQ2: How does social media encourage self-expression in youth?

RQ3: How does social media encourage and nurture creativity on-line as well as off-line?

RQ4: What are the perspectives of young Sri Lankans, whose culture is collectivist, on social media and how it helps translate their sense of self-expression?

Methodology

A qualitative research design was employed in order to gain more expansive information than that which will be afforded with a quantitative method considering the open nature of the research topic. Ten Sri Lankan young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 were interviewed for the study. A convenience sampling method was used with an equal distribution of males and females in the sample – 5 boys and 5 girls. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, with the introduction and conclusion for each interview being standardised for all participants.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics/social media details of the participants

Participant Number*	Gender	Age	Current education level	Facebook	Instagram	Snapchat	Other
1	F	21	Masters in Marketing	■	■	■	
2	F	23	Bachelor of Arts in Fashion Design	■	■		
3	M	23	Bachelors in Air Transport Management	■	■		YouTube
4	F	21	Bachelors in Marketing and International Business	■	■	■	
5	F	19	Higher National Diploma in Psychology	■	■		
7	M	24	Ordinary Level examinations	■	■		Twitter
9	M	20	Advanced Level examinations	■	■	■	
10	M	21	Bachelors in Accounting	■	■	■	LinkedIn
11	F	22	Bachelors in Economics	■	■		
12	M	20	Bachelors in Economics and Mathematics	■	■	■	

The study protocol consisted of face-to-face interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted 15 to 50 minutes (*M=26.4*). Interviews were recorded using mobile phones and were later transcribed into written form using Microsoft Word.

A thematic-analysis approach was used to analyse the data findings. Braun & Clarke's (2006) comprehensive, six-step guide to thematic analysis was used as a framework in analysis. This consisted of a coding process (phase 1 & 2), which were then grouped into themes (phase 3). The themes were honed (phase 4), finalized with sub-themes (phase 5) and written up in the report (Phase 6).

Results and Discussion

Data analysis revealed two main themes (Figure 3): Self-expression for development of self and self-expression in relation to others. The first theme addressed how participants express themselves on SNS for purposes of self-growth through four subthemes: through *identity construction*, *satisfy(ing) need to*
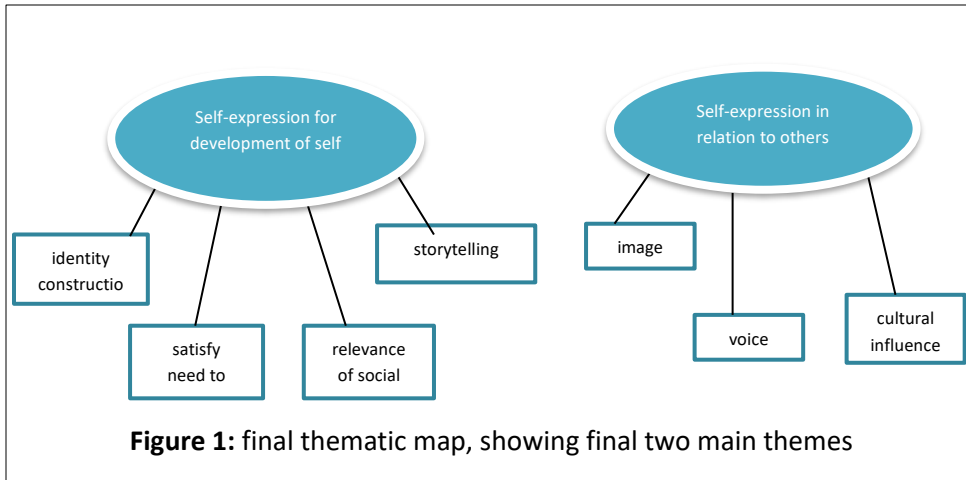
Figure 1: final thematic map, showing final two main themes

belong, *relevance of (the) social media* and *storytelling*. The second theme presented participants' expression on SNS and how it linked to their interaction with others through three sub-themes: through creating an *image*, a *voice* and regarding *cultural influences*.

Among Sri Lankan youth, self-expression is cultivated as a voice in a creative, collaborative and communicative manner. Their ability to grasp the abstract concept of the research question coincides with the cultural context: self-expression is a highly Westernized concept (Kim & Sherman, 2007); whereas, this study was conducted in the East.

There is a positive relationship between an individual's popularity on SNS and the pressure they experience to maintain a certain image is found. An extensive process is undergone in uploading a single picture online:

> "From the very simple fact that you know a picture doesn't just go up on social media without their being an extensive process of editing or filtering or I don't know. I've seen apps on my f- on like people's phones like to make yourself look thinner or make your teeth look whiter and like stuff like that…" – Participant #11

This creates a false "back into high school" environment (Colier, 2014). This further encapsulates the idea that they portray a "mask" (Participant #12) of themselves online created for purposes of a) protecting their true selves, b) experimenting with their identity and c) as a form of escapism. Social image (Tajfel, 1981) is equally important as the means of their interactions online differs from that of offline; but interactions vary depending on their audience as well.

> "It's like this, err imagine a guy's poor right? But he can take a selfie with a like expensive car or luxury apartment or something and he can post (…) That's his online life and no one (…) knows his offline life." – Participant #7

Three perspectives in young adults' comparison of the East and West is found: a) those who favour the values of the collectivist culture, b) those who reject Sri Lankan culture and prefer Western ideologies, and c) those who are comfortable with the Sri Lankan culture but wish to implement certain Western concepts (such as creating more avenues for self-exploration) to help the progression of Sri Lankan culture. Young adults also observe how SNS has brought awareness on taboo topics, such as homosexuality, to a closeted culture with strict cultural norms, which is, in their eyes, a "rebellion" (Participant #2) of such norms. However, they were not blind to the negative aspects of social media including self-comparison and jealousy in both the real and virtual world (Boyd, 2014):

> "Even when you're at a concert, you're obsessed with taking the picture, recording it and showing the world that you're at the concert, so maybe it's not always healthy and… maybe there's some sort of security issue by being so open on social media" - (Participant #)

Social media creates a safe space for young adult's to experiment with their identity. Experimentation, which allowed for trust-worthy peer relationships to grow (Buckingham, 2008), leads to escapism which comes in the form of freeing themselves of the mundanities of daily life by adopting an image of themselves fashioned to their liking.

> "(…) I think it sort helped me to mould my personality? In some sort of way? Like you get all these… what do you call… not clichés but personality types? Like the fun guy or the quiet brooding guy something like that? So it helped me choose what I can be, who I can be." - Participant #9

Similarly, due to a lack of opportunity in real life, unexplored facets of their identity are expressed across SNS in creative experimental forms such as sketching portfolios, photography blogs and even social messages through photo-shoots.

Echoing Skinner's theory of operant conditioning (1972), young adults tailor their posts on social media according to the type of feedback they get. However, this has become a double-edged sword as SNS forces uniformity and conformity to go with the "trend" or be left behind:

> "They're [people on social media] telling you what to do and then you do it. And it's not their fault, it's not our fault; I feel like people need to spend more time thinking about what they do why they do it instead of just following trends…" – Participant #2

> "If you look around, everyone's just on their phones constantly and you, and you know they're on some type of social media. Or you know before you eat something you take a picture or you know, before you do anything there's always you know recording it on social media." – Participant #2

> "Social media culture, it's like a … it's like a *cult* I feel?" – Participant #12

A deep-seated fear of rejection is a common theme, higher rates of social anxiety in compliance with cultural norms having been found in collectivist cultures (Schreier et al., 2010). Despite the intense fear of rejection, most young adults' criticised the use of social media by others while exhibiting a clear need to distance themselves from this negativity by drawing boundaries as to what should and should not be expressed online:

> "They're always on Instagram, always on Facebook and all that – so, they shouldn't make it their life and all that? And they post everything (…) even if they go in a three-wheeler even, they post that. (…) Why would we wanna see a three-wheeler?" - Participant #5

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study reveals how young adults use self-expression as a means of developing self and also interrelationships with others. The study provides a deeper understanding on how the use of SNS can impact character development and creative self-expression, combined with rich insights into Sri Lankan cultural contexts. It adds to the existing literature by exploring the implications of satisfying the basic psychological need to belong, how an image is built and how a voice is created through SNS. The insights from this study, which had never previously been explored in Sri Lanka, are useful in understanding the underlying meanings behind young adults' behaviour across social networking platforms and can be used as a reference or guiding tool for further research investigating practices of young adults on social media.

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