



# Psychological Inquiry

An International Journal for the Advancement of Psychological Theory

ISSN: 1047-840X (Print) 1532-7965 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hpli20>

## Narrative Identity in a Digital Age: What are the Human Risks?

Jefferson A. Singer

To cite this article: Jefferson A. Singer (2020) Narrative Identity in a Digital Age: What are the Human Risks?, Psychological Inquiry, 31:3, 224-228, DOI: [10.1080/1047840X.2020.1820217](https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2020.1820217)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2020.1820217>



Published online: 05 Nov 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 171



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Narrative Identity in a Digital Age: What are the Human Risks?

Jefferson A. Singer

Faulk Foundation, Department of Psychology, Connecticut College, New London, Connecticut, USA

I am writing this article during the COVID-19 outbreak while working remotely at home. Despite my role as dean of the college and faculty member in the Psychology Department, I have not had a face-to-face interaction with someone from my institution in over two months. What an uncanny juncture to consider an article about the role of the digital world in adolescent identity development! As my “screen time” has escalated to 10–12 hours a day—Zoom meetings, emails, reading, writing, Google searches—it seems an ideal moment to contemplate what research tells us and might tell us about the degree to which adolescents are harmed or enhanced by devoting increasing amounts of their time to digital existence.

I applaud the authors of this inquiry for their willingness to bring a degree of needed objectivity as well as a theoretical framework to what is often a simplified understanding of adolescent use of digital devices. They ask researchers to look beyond the equation of “more screen time equals negative mental health.” Instead, they ask a more nuanced question about the *functions* that digital interactions serve in adolescents’ efforts to carve out an autonomous identity and navigate their peer and romantic relationships. They argue that to answer this question one must adopt a theoretical framework of adolescent identity development informed by contemporary research. As someone who has contributed to the burgeoning field of narrative identity research over the last thirty years (Adler, 2012; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004, 2019; Singer, Blagov, Berry, & Oost, 2013; Singer & Salovey, 1993), I am pleased that they have selected this framework. To look at adolescent identity through the lens of narrative identity is to ask how do individuals, as they move from their mid-teens to young adulthood, begin to construct a story of their lives—an internalized account of how their past, present, and potential selves might be knitted together into a narrative that provides unity, purpose, and coherence.

The authors draw on a tripartite structure to depict narrative identity developmental processes—*intrapersonal*; *interpersonal*; and *cultural*. Within the *intrapersonal*, they highlight adolescents’ striving to balance both agentic and communal needs. Agentic development focuses on the adolescents’ ability to define themselves as separate from their parents and then later distinctive in their peer group. Agency concerns also encompass achievement, competency, and self-direction. Communal development entails the

emerging capacity to make and sustain relationships, to give and receive nurturance, and to connect to values, whether spiritual, natural, societal, larger than oneself.

At the same time, intrapersonal development in adolescent narrative identity concerns more than a balance of one’s story’s central themes. There is also a sociocultural cognitive development that must occur in order for individuals to craft a coherent story. As Habermas and Bluck (2000) proposed, the capacity to story one’s life relies on certain cognitive advances that enable the emerging adult to internalize causal and temporal linkages that are the backbone of the kinds of narratives that define identity in our society. Adolescents have come to understand the sequence of landmark events in the life cycle from graduations to career choices to marriages to child-rearing and the process of aging. They have also incorporated timetables for these events as well as what actions are likely to cause the next set of events to occur. Similarly, they have begun to understand the major themes that have shaped their family of origin’s story and how these themes may play a role in their own lives and where they stand in relation to the larger culture.

As adolescents develop their story-telling capacity, the role of audience becomes a critical factor. Adolescent identity depends critically on peer reception and acceptance. As the authors of this article indicate, listeners offer the emerging adolescent the opportunity for elaboration of their narratives in new and tentative directions. They offer attentive listening that reflects empathy and compassion. They offer a space for “grappling with identity paradoxes” (Granic, Morita, & Scholten, this issue, p. 208–209), which means an outlet for confusion and struggle. Without an affirming peer or peers as containers for the fledging stories of self that adolescents are constructing, adolescent development is likely to be lonely and stunted in significant ways.

Finally, there is the larger cultural dimension of narrative identity development. Noting the profound influence of culture on story-making in identity processes, Hammack (2008) and others (McLean & Syed, 2015) have proposed that narrative identity is always in dialogue with the “master narratives” that dominate a particular societal milieu. Master narratives are the most pervasive and ostensibly “normative” versions of how one should be and what role one plays in society. For example, with regard to the story of relationships in American society, there is a master narrative of heterosexual attraction, dating, courtship, and matrimony,

followed by a monogamous enduring relationship over the subsequent decades. These master narratives are reinforced through cultural story-telling—myths, art, literature, film, television, and all forms of digital media. The assertion in narrative identity research, and it is one with which I agree whole-heartedly, is that these master narratives are “voices in our heads” no matter how much we may reject their standards and find them oppressive and destructive. For many individuals, the work of narrative identity development, and especially those individuals with “marginalized identities” in the society (e.g., racial minorities, queer individuals, individuals with non-confirming gender identities) is to build up alternative narratives that garner the support of an affirming subculture, while simultaneously seeking to break open and re-build master narratives that are more expansive and affirming of diverse paths to identity fulfillment.

With this theoretical framework in place, the authors suggest that one can return to an analysis of extant research on digital media’s influence on adolescent identity development, while also exploring the directions that future research, including methodology, should take. Their review places a compensatory emphasis on the positive ways that digital media can enhance these narrative identity processes—whether it is by building agency through game mastery, supporting communion through games that emphasize teamwork and the cultivation of empathy, or providing the opportunity for elaborative and quality listening through websites or chat rooms that affirm alternative narratives. For the proposed research agenda, they urge researchers to break away from the simplistic reliance on amount of screen time as the primary variable of interest. They recommend that we conduct qualitative interviews with adolescents who are deeply immersed in the digital world. They propose that we look at how constructive content on mobile phones might be correlated with non-self-report behavioral indices. They encourage the use of experimental studies that would manipulate whether posting “redemptive” versus “contaminating” stories on social media outlets might have different emotional and behavioral effects. With the advent of different Instagram formats, they wonder if the permanence or ephemeral nature of the content posted might have differential influences on adolescent identity processes.

We can now step back from the current article and give accolades for its admirable and corrective synthesis. Overall, it effectively critiques the oversimplified understanding of how screen time functions for adolescents. It then suggests that we can explore the functions that the “hybrid reality” of adolescents’ lives serve in their narrative development, highlighting how digital media has the capacity to contribute to healthy development. Finally, it lays out a research agenda for exploring these questions in a multi-method and innovative fashion.

Yet, at the beginning of this article, I mentioned that my context for writing down my thoughts is my ship-wrecked experience of living almost every moment of my workweek on a digital island. Doing so confronts one with the existential question of what it means to be human—what are the

crucial constitutive factors of human nature and human interaction—and what is missing from the authors’ picture? Relevant to the current article—is it reasonable to draw functional equivalents between identity processes that are cultivated through actual in-person interactions and interactions that happen digitally? How are they the same and how are they different? If there are many similarities or equivalences, then do the differences, perhaps smaller in number, make a difference? And finally, is the assumption of a hybrid reality even an accurate one for the majority of adolescents in the world? Before, we apply a very particular kind of adolescent development theory to our new “hybrid reality,” shouldn’t we ask how widespread that reality truly is, and secondly, how universally should we apply the theoretical tenets of narrative identity development?

These are the questions that I would like to address in the remainder of this essay. Let me start with the last ones first, so that we can spend the majority of the time looking at the hybrid reality that does exist for many western adolescents who are the most appropriate focus of the authors’ concerns. How widespread is access to digital media and internet connectivity across the world? This question has been highly relevant to me in my current circumstances as an administrator offering a remote learning environment to a student body that includes a large number of international students and domestic students of high economic need. In some cases, we have had to supply “hotspots” to students who live in areas with unreliable internet access; in other cases we have allowed students to remain on campus since there would be no possibility of internet access in their home country. According to the World Economic Forum, worldwide only 55% of households have an internet connection and this sinks to under 20% in the least developed countries (Broom, 2020). Drawing on UNESCO data, these percentages translates to 3.7 billion people without internet access. For adolescents growing up in these circumstances the hybrid reality is perhaps an aspiration but certainly not a component of their daily experience. It would be valuable for the authors to acknowledge that the adolescent world they are describing is most applicable to what Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) call WEIRD—Western Educated Industrialized Rich and Democratic. Extrapolation about more universal psychological characteristics from this extremely small slice of the human population perpetuates the kind of “colonization” that enlightened social scientists are currently deconstructing (Bhatia, 2018).

This critique is relevant to the current article’s emphasis on agency and communion as the twin central themes of narrative identity development. Within the context of WEIRD nations there is certainly a master narrative of “Love and Work,” as Freud long ago framed the key elements of a healthy life. Yet the authors may be a little too sweeping in their assertions about adolescents’ ability to establish their agentic independence and stand up for beliefs that distinguish them from their peers. For example, McCabe and Dinh (2016), in their study of Latino and Southeast Asian immigrant youth in the United States, found that themes of ineffectiveness and alienation due to

cultural barriers played just as significant roles as expressions of autonomy. They also found that agency and communion were positively correlated, suggesting that agentic success was actually linked to familial ties and reinforcing of relationship.

In a recent study in my laboratory (Wang & Singer, 2020), we collected self-defining memories from Chinese college students versus American college students and found significant differences in the agentic content of the memories. Twenty-five percent of the Chinese students' important autobiographical memories concerned reference to their high school exams and grades, compared to only 3% of the American sample. Analysis of the content of these academic-related memories revealed a significant difference in themes of shame and familial disappointment for these Chinese students vs. the American students. The findings suggested that academic pressure and failure had a much different prominence in the Chinese students' memory landscape and that it was linked to familial obligation in a different meaning framework than American students (for the role of parental anxiety in Chinese students' academic achievement, see Zhao, Selman, & Haste, 2015). Once again, I very much advocate the adoption of the narrative identity framework to guide our understanding of social media influences on adolescents, but we must strive to be culturally nuanced and cautious in this application.

With these cross-cultural reservations registered, I now turn to my questions about the question of the functional equivalencies between the digital environment and the non-digital one. Is it possible for the digital world to fulfill many of the functions that adolescents are seeking in order to achieve the self-mastery and relational strength that will move them forward into healthy adulthood? Let us take the three domains identified by the authors—intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural—and examine this question in more depth.

Beginning with the intrapersonal, the authors suggest that the digital gaming world can help to cultivate agency and communion, and that we should not place an overemphasis on the subset of games that focus on first-person shooters or fighting/violence themes. They provide examples of games that highlight more benign themes of exploration, cooperation, and affirmation of positive mental health. Yet 15 of the top 20 selling video games in the decade from 2010 to 2019 are first person shooter games with violent themes (Forbes, January 17, 2020). Despite the more hopeful vision of the digital adolescent world the authors propose, the digital reality is still one in which mostly young males learn self-mastery in the context of the depersonalization of the most intense and violent attacks on other human beings. Is this different from generations of children playing "Cops and Robbers" or "Army" with their friends outside with toy guns? I think it is qualitatively different because of the anonymity and detachment it fosters. Chasing a friend outside and seeing his or her facial expressions if you bump them too hard or play too rough is very different from watching hundreds of digital figures dissipate in pools of blood (as

they do in the most popular of all video games, *Call of Duty*).

This difference in the physical reality vs. digital reality of human interaction is of equal concern when we consider the theme of communion in both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal aspects of narrative identity. What does it mean to make relationships digitally—is the hybrid reality of having individuals provide affirmation, support, and audience a reasonable approximation of relationships that are forged in actual physical space and time? I find this question in my current "social-distancing" circumstances incredibly compelling. In most cases, I have had previous face-to-face encounters with the individuals from my College with whom I am video conferencing. Having been in actual rooms with them, having known them "up close and personal" may offset to some degree the sense of distance I feel as I interact with them. However, as the months go on, I must confess that there is a subtle slippage in the reality and connection that they hold for me. Perhaps this is a failing in my own capacity to transition to the digital environment and live within in it as a fully feeling and engaged participant. On the other hand, my sense of remoteness may also be an indication of the insufficiency of the digital medium to embody what is the essence of what it means to be human.

I choose the word "embody" with full intention. There has been a movement in many branches of the social sciences to return the field to an understanding of human nature that locates us as first and foremost physical beings that live within our bodies and are strongly influenced by this fact. In psychodynamic therapy, dating back to the origins of psychoanalysis, bodily drives needed to be sublimated and controlled—we sought to subdue or re-direct our physical urges. In models of cognition, analogies to machine-based information processing (beginning with telephone switchboards and evolving to complex processing networks) guided our understanding of perception, memory, and recall. Thankfully, more recent decades have put human beings back in their bodies, whether in psychotherapy (Hauke & Kritikos, 2018), cognitive science (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 2017), or philosophy (Merleau-Ponty, Bjelland, & Burke, 2001). Even some of the most pioneering and innovative work in artificial intelligence and robotics has argued that we must begin from a theory of human beings that emphasizes bodily action rather than symbolic abstraction (Brooks, 1990).

Why does the body matter in the development of narrative identity for adolescents? The authors of the current article make several points about the ability of the internet audience to fulfill the communion needs of the developing adolescent. They argue that there is evidence of empathy and affirmation that emerges from the digital comments and dialogue that can flow through different social media outlets. They argue that the adolescent can experience the conditions of story-telling that build interpersonal strength—a sense of being attended to and having the room to elaborate and express confusions and contradictions. Although these forums provide these experiences for some adolescents, and

especially for those who are most marginalized and lacking in intimacy in their non-digital lives, we should be very clear why these digital interactions are no substitute for embodied relational interactions. As a working therapist for the past 40 years, I can attest to the difference in intimacy and trust (the foundations of relationship) between a digital connection and physical one. Listening is about much more than the typed text one receives from a sympathetic but ultimately anonymous correspondent. True intimate listening involves eye contact, facial expression, bodily gesture—the full presence of the other person. It involves the building of trust over time and the willingness not just to support but to lovingly confront. It involves the tolerance of conflict and reconciliation after moments of frustration or dispute. I cannot see this kind of depth of relationship emerging from a digital circle of relationships constructed through chat rooms or support circles. It is too easy to misinterpret or to “flame” another individual when you cannot see their face or have little common history.

I have learned about the risks to our adolescents of living too much in the digital world not only from my work as a therapist but through my work as dean of a college. A large part of a dean’s work entails meeting with students who are struggling academically and/or interpersonally in their transition to college and young adulthood. In a recent meeting with my dean of first-year students, she reported the following exchange. When learning about an ongoing roommate dispute a first-year student was having, the dean asked, “What about going out for a coffee and talking it out with each other?” The student replied, “That’s what adults do. I can’t do that.”

I see this story as a cautionary tale about the genuine impairment that a world of online life and texting may be inflicting on adolescent development. When I developed my own research program on self-defining memory nearly 30 years ago (Singer & Salovey, 1993), the prompt I created to collect these highly personal and intimate memories, which are the foundation of narrative identity, was for the individual to imagine that they were going for a walk with another person and chose to disclose an important memory that revealed something significant about who they felt they were. It is hard to picture the student that met with my dean as having the capacity to take that walk and engage in this critical dimension of story-telling and identity consolidation. And we know that this student’s experience is not an isolated incident (Twenge & Campbell, 2019).

Finally, the authors highlight the cultural dimension of narrative identity and how the hybrid digital reality can provide support to adolescents who are seeking to cultivate alternate narratives in light of the oppression caused by certain master narratives. I very much agree that the support networks that the marginalized adolescent find online can offer solace and validation. In fact, for closeted youth in a homophobic home or community, they can literally mean salvation from self-hatred and self-harm. In other domains, they can encourage political activism and awareness of cultural and economic challenges across the globe.

There is substantial value in this opening up of the world to the adolescent while literally propped up on the pillow in their bedroom. There is the genuine possibility of education and consciousness-raising. Yet without actual adult mediation and without a translation into actual “real world” encounters, there are also a variety of risks. It is too easy for like-minded sites to become echo chambers that are not sufficiently self-reflective or critical of dug-in positions. Since no one can truly know who is behind the putative identities presented on the sites (the authors even speak in positive terms of how adolescents can assume different roles on the internet as part of their identity exploration), there can be a real risk of exploitation and disingenuousness. Similarly, the authors talk about the room for adolescents to explore alternative identities and role play, freed from some of the “loaded social environments” that they may find threatening and anxiety-provoking in their non-digital worlds. Yet it is these exact environments—classroom, dinner table, school yard, workplace—that they must learn to navigate in order to function effectively in the world. Once again, in my work as dean, I increasingly encounter students who tell me they are too anxious to go to class; they shelter in their rooms, losing the vital aspect of learning that comes from classroom discussion and peer interaction. Role-playing on line is not the same as taking part in an actual campus activity—whether student government, choir, belonging to a club, playing on a team, mentoring a local school kid, participating in a play.

Additionally, while there is genuine value in internet support for alternative identities, I also see the fragmentation of our culture that has been accelerating over the last two decades with the proliferation of cable stations, streaming services, and internet sites. As these self-affirming mini-networks within the internet landscape become more narrowly targeted, we increasingly lose any sense of a larger collective—a “We” to which we all belong. Perhaps that “We” was always just a cultural illusion, but it was at least an aspirational identity that is the bedrock of any civil society. We are clearly seeing the loss of this collective commitment in the acceptance of gross inequity in our society and the breakdown of any viable discourse across political differences. One should also acknowledge that activism involves genuine *action*, allegiances that are formed by affirming comments or hitting “like” buttons are very different from sustained political activity involving participating in committees, attending rallies, making calls, going door-to-door, running for elected offices. Once again, narrative identity development involves lived experience that occurs in actual physical person-society interactions.

In the end, there is an underlying fundamental question with which the authors have not fully wrestled. The implicit premise of their article is that the increasingly digital reality of our youth is inevitable. Accordingly, the role of those who advocate for healthy adolescent identity development should be to build more constructive agency, greater communion, coherence, and reflection into the video games and social media platforms with which adolescents engage. Similarly, as researchers, they want to reduce what they consider the hyper-focus in research on screen time and shift

our research questions and programs to a focus on the function of digital experience in what they consider the new hybrid reality.

Yet are the authors too willing to concede the dimensions of our lived physical experience that have been definitional to what it means to be a human being? In this time of working and communicating incessantly in a digital world, I have never felt more acutely the significance of face-to-face contact (when not obscured by a mask), and when I step outside, never relished more the smell of morning dew on the grass, the sound of robins and mourning doves, and sight of purple irises and blossoming magnolia trees, the tactile impact when I hold a handful of soil in my hand and watch an earthworm wiggle away. To me, the real question behind adolescent development in an increasingly digital world, whether framed in narrative identity theory or any other model, is how willing are we to accept a reality of a future in which young people no longer live in their bodies or connect to the physical environment in which they live? In a world in which we are increasingly condoning the slaughter of other human beings by depersonalized technology—whether drones or “precision” bombing ordered from afar—and where we escalate every day the destruction of our natural world through climate change, how willing are we to prioritize the importance of being in physical contact with each other—of making sustained and engaged *real*, not hybrid, relationships?

In Camus’s *The Plague*, toward the end of the novel, he writes about the exhaustion that the community feels from what they have endured during the plague quarantine period—the repetitive loss, the social isolation, the debilitating uncertainty of the future—“...and always there comes an hour when one is weary of prisons, of one’s work, and of devotion to duty, and all one craves is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart” (Camus, 1948, p. 237). As a social science researchers, and as a society, we still can make choices about what is paramount about human nature, and we can communicate this choice to our youth. As a researcher in narrative identity, a therapist, an educator, and a simple member of our shared society, I urge us to prioritize our embodied experience and natural environment, and to offer our youth the *physical* presence of loving faces in their lives. Although I very much respect the conciliatory agenda that the authors of this article have put forward, I am not ready to concede the real reality of human life to the hybrid one they see as the inevitable future of our subsequent generations.

## References

- Adler, J. M. (2012). Living into the story: Agency and coherence in a longitudinal study of narrative identity development and mental health over the course of psychotherapy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(2), 367–389. doi:10.1037/a0025289
- Bhatia, S. (2018). *Explorations in narrative psychology. Decolonizing psychology: Globalization, social justice, and Indian youth identities*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, R. A. (1990). Elephants don’t play chess. *Robotics and Autonomous Systems*, 6(1–2), 3–15. doi:10.1016/S0921-8890(05)80025-9
- Broom, D. (2020, April, 22). Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before. *World Economic Forum*, Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobile/>.
- Camus, A. (1948). *The plague*. New York: Modern Library. (trans. by Stuart Gilbert).
- Forbes. (2020, January 17). Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2020/01/17/the-20-best-selling-video-games-of-the-decade/#1cb92a87f6db>.
- Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a life: The emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(5), 748–769. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.126.5.748
- Hammack, P. L. (2008). Narrative and the cultural psychology of identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review: An Official Journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc*, 12(3), 222–247. doi:10.1177/1088868308316892
- Hauke, G. & Kritikos, A. (Eds.) (2018). *Embodiment in psychotherapy: A practitioner’s guide*. New York: Springer.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010, May 7). The weirdest people in the world? *RatSWD Working Paper No. 139*. Retrieved from <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1601785> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1601785>.
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238. doi:10.1177/0963721413475622
- McCabe, A., & Dinh, K. T. (2016). Agency and communion, ineffectiveness and alienation: Themes in the life stories of Latino and Southeast Asian adolescents. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, 36(2), 150–171. doi:10.1177/0276236616648648
- McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (2015). Personal, master, and alternative narratives: An integrative framework for understanding identity development in context. *Human Development*, 58(6), 318–349. doi:10.1159/000445817
- Merleau-Ponty, M., Bjelland, A.G., & Burke, P. (2001). *The incarnate subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the union of body and soul*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Singer, J. A. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: An introduction. *Journal of Personality*, 72(3), 437–459. doi:10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00268.x
- Singer, J. A. (2019). Repetition is the scent of the hunt: A clinician’s application of narrative identity to a longitudinal life study. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(2), 194–205. doi:10.1037/qap0000149
- Singer, J. A., Blagov, P., Berry, M., & Oost, K. M. (2013). Self-defining memories, scripts, and the life story: Narrative identity in personality and psychotherapy. *Journal of Personality*, 81(6), 569–582. doi:10.1111/jopy.12005
- Singer, J. A., & Salovey, P. (1993). *The remembered self: Emotion and memory in personality*. New York: The Free Press.
- Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2019). Media use is linked to lower psychological well-being: Evidence from three datasets. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 90(2), 311–331. doi:10.1007/s1126-019-09630-7
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (2017). *The embodied mind*. Revised edition. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.
- Wang, Y., & Singer, J. A. (October, 2020). Comparing self-defining memories of Chinese vs. American college students: Differences in academic stress and themes of shame/guilt. Poster presented at Annual Meeting of the New England Psychological Association, Worcester, MA.
- Zhao, X., Selman, R. L., & Haste, H. (2015). Academic stress in Chinese schools and a proposed intervention program. *Cogent Education*, 2(1), 1–14. doi:10.1080/2331186X.2014.1000477