
Exploring the Positive Peer and Identity Experiences Occurring in Australian Adolescents' Leisure Activities

Corey J. Blomfield Neira and Bonnie L. Barber
Murdoch University, Australia

This study compared the degree to which social networking sites and structured extracurricular activities provided adolescents with positive developmental experiences. Given the relatively unique nature of social networking sites as a leisure context for adolescents, and the extremely fast rate at which this leisure activity has been adopted by the majority of youth in countries where the technology is easily accessible, it is important that research explores how this leisure context compares to more traditional extracurricular activities. Adolescents from eight high schools across the state of Western Australia were surveyed. The results showed that traditional structured leisure activities (e.g., sport, art) provided adolescents with more experiences of identity exploration and reflection and positive peer interactions than social networking site use. Further analysis compared differences within social networking site use and found that both the frequency with which an adolescent visited their social networking site, and the degree of investment they had in their social networking site, positively predicted greater experiences of identity exploration and reflection and positive peer interactions. Though social networking sites are a popular adolescent leisure activity, they do not provide the same level of positive developmental experiences that are afforded through adolescent participation in traditional structured extracurricular activities.

■ **Keywords:** social networking, extracurricular activities, positive experiences, youth, leisure time, adolescent identity

Adolescents spend more than half of their waking hours in leisure activities (Larson & Verma, 1999). The way in which youth choose to spend this time can have an impact on their development and thus it is important to identify which leisure contexts provide youth with positive developmental experiences. Participation in structured extracurricular activities, such as sporting teams, drama clubs, and service activities, is consistently shown to be a productive use of this time (Denault, Poulin, & Pedersen, 2009; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Furthermore, it appears that time spent participating in structured extracurricular activities is more beneficial for youth than time spent in unstructured leisure activities. Research has found that adolescents who spend more time in structured activities have healthier emotional adjustment and more positive peer relationships, with youth who spend their time in unstructured leisure

Address for correspondence: Corey J. Blomfield Neira, School of Psychology, Murdoch University, South Street, Murdoch WA 6150, Australia. E-mail: c.blomfield@murdoch.edu.au

pursuits reporting poorer emotional adjustment and higher levels of antisocial behaviour (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Posner & Vandell, 1999). Larson and colleagues (Larson, Hansen & Moneta, 2006; Hansen, Larson & Dworkin, 2003) have described the degree to which positive developmental experiences occur across different contexts in adolescents' lives. When structured extracurricular activities were compared to school classes, adolescents consistently reported greater experiences related to identity development and peer relations (Larson et al., 2006). However, when structured activities were compared to unstructured leisure (e.g., spending time with friends), it was found that positive peer and identity-related experiences were higher in unstructured leisure than in sports, performing arts, or academic clubs. As identity-related experiences during structured activity participation have been linked to higher adolescent subjective wellbeing (Coatsworth, Palen, Sharp, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2006), and positive peer interactions are considered developmentally beneficial, it is important to identify the contexts that provide youth with such experiences. Social networking sites, which are suggested to facilitate social interactions and personal exploration (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008), may possibly be such a context, and therefore research investigating how this specific leisure activity compares to more traditional adolescent structured leisure contexts is warranted.

Social networking sites (SNSs) are websites that allow users to create personal profiles and link their profiles to others in order to form a network in which communication and viewing of information across members of the network is possible (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007). In 2007, 41% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 61% of 14- to 17-year-olds in the United States used SNSs, with half using their SNSs at least once a day (Lenhart & Madden). In more recent Australian data, 80% of 12- to 13-year-olds and 96% of 14- to 17-year-olds reported using SNSs (Australian Communications and Media Authority [ACMA], 2009). Research is beginning to investigate how SNS use relates to development, with such use having been linked to identity exploration and relationship development (Steinfeld et al., 2008; Manago et al., 2008). Manago and colleagues identified SNSs as contexts for identity exploration, often being used by youth to display the features of themselves with which they were most satisfied. However, Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009) found that 64% of youth said that identity exploration was not a reason for using SNSs; rather, the majority of their sample used such sites to communicate with friends and to further develop relationships. No study has directly compared the experiences adolescents report during their SNSs' use to the experiences obtained during participation in traditional structured leisure activities.

Therefore, the current study investigated differences in the degree to which different adolescent leisure activities provided positive developmental experiences. Prior research has identified a variety of different positive developmental experiences to occur during participation in extracurricular activities; however, research has not yet investigated the range of experiences that may occur during social networking site use. Consequently, the two constructs of interest, namely *identity exploration and reflection* and *positive peer interactions*, were selected for the present study as research has suggested that social networking site use may be influential in these areas of youth development and thus SNS use could be expected to provide experiences in these domains. In addition it was considered important to include a developmental experience of both a personal and interpersonal nature. The constructs of identity exploration and reflection were combined into one overall developmental experience as previous

research has shown that despite theoretical separation of these two constructs, youth respond to and consider these two areas as largely a single domain (Larson et al., 2006; Hansen et al., 2003). The frequency of SNSs' use and the intensity with which an adolescent is invested in their SNS has been shown to affect the relationship between SNS use and developmental indicators (Steinfeld et al., 2008). Therefore, the present study also investigated whether adolescents' frequency of SNSs' use and SNS investment was associated with the degree of positive developmental experiences reported in this leisure context.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Students from eight high schools, both government and nongovernment, in the state of Western Australia, took part in the study. The initial sample consisted of 291 adolescents. In order to conduct within-person analyses, only youth who participated in all three leisure contexts ($n = 73$) were included in the present study and all findings are based on that sample. Two thirds of the sample was female (71.2%), 57.5% in Year 9 and 42.5% in Year 11. The mean age was 14.9 years ($SD = 1.05$ years) and ranged from 14 to 17 years. The ethnicity of the sample was 79.5% Caucasian, 9.6% Asian, and 1.4% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; the remaining participants were drawn from various ethnic groups (4.1% did not respond to the ethnicity question). With respect to family structure, the majority of participants (80.8%) reported their parents were married or living in a marriage-like relationship, 13.7% reported divorced or separated parents, and 1.4% indicated their parent was a widow/widower (4.1% of participants did not respond to this question).

PROCEDURE

Informed parent and student consent were required to participate. In order to facilitate interest in the study, participants who returned parent consent letters (regardless of whether they chose to participate or not), were entered into prize draws. The questionnaire took approximately 40 minutes to complete, and according to each school's preference, was administered either via laptop computers connected to a wireless intranet, or in an equivalent paper and pencil format, to groups of approximately 20 students at a time. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the university Human Research Ethics Committee, the Education Department, and the Catholic Education Office. The current study was part of a larger research project, the Youth Activity Participation Study of Western Australia, which investigates adolescent leisure time use.

MEASURES

Developmental Experiences in Leisure Contexts. Participants responded to two developmental experience measures, *identity exploration and reflection* and *positive peer interactions*. These measures are based on the Youth Experience Survey (YES) 2.0 (Hansen & Larson, 2005), with *positive peer interactions* developed based upon the YES and established and utilised in our previous work (Blomfield & Barber, 2011) and *identity exploration and reflection* drawn directly from the YES. The Youth Experience Survey was developed by Larson and colleagues through an initial exploratory qualitative study, followed by a larger quantitative investigation into the salient

developmental experiences that youth reported occurring during their participation in extracurricular activities. Further research by Larson and colleagues resulted in refinements to the original YES and subsequent YES version 2.0. The reader is directed to Hansen and Larson (2005) for further information regarding the development of the YES and specific information concerning the reliability and validity of the measure. In both the present study and our prior work (Blomfield & Barber, 2011) we have obtained good reliabilities for all YES scales utilised.

Participants responded to the experience measures for the structured organised sport in which they spent the most time, the structured organised activity (non-sport) they spent the most time in, and the social networking site they used the most. Eighteen types of sports were reported; the three most frequent were hockey (17.8%), netball (16.4%), and rowing (8.2%); and 12 types of nonsport activities were reported, the most frequent being music (26%), dance (19.2%), and art (11%). Participants were presented with the instructions: 'Based on your involvement in this sport/activity/social networking site please rate whether you have had the following experiences by ticking the appropriate box.' In order to be consistent with the Youth Experience Survey (Hansen & Larson, 2005), each item was assessed on a 4-point scale (1: *Not at all*; 2: *A little*; 3: *Quite a bit*; 4: *Yes, definitely*). Experiences of *positive peer interactions* were measured with 4 items (SNSs $\alpha = .71$, sports $\alpha = .74$, nonsport activities $\alpha = .73$), including 'experienced feeling liked by others in this activity'. Experiences of *identity exploration and reflection* were measured with six items (SNSs $\alpha = .76$, sports $\alpha = .76$, non-sport activities $\alpha = .76$) including 'this activity got me thinking about who I am'.

Social Networking Site Use. Frequency of SNS use was measured with the item 'About how often do you visit your SNS?' (seven options; 1: *Never*, 2: *Less than once a month*, 3: *Every few weeks*, 4: *1–2 days a week*, 5: *3–5 days a week*, 6: *About once a day*, 7: *Several times a day*). Investment in SNSs was measured with two items ($\alpha = .80$): 'Social Networking Sites have become part of my daily routine' and 'I feel out of touch when I haven't logged on to my social networking site e.g. FaceBook'. These items were drawn and adapted from Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), and were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1: *Completely disagree*, to 5: *Completely agree*).

Results

Eight per cent of participants visited their SNS daily, 24.7% three to five days a week, 19.2% one or two days a week, 19.2% every few weeks, and 23.3% less than once a month or never. One-way repeated-measures ANOVAs were run comparing the developmental experiences of *positive peer interactions* and *identity exploration and reflection* across the three leisure contexts: SNSs, sport, and nonsport activities (Table 1). A main effect of leisure context was found for *positive peer interactions*, $F(2, 71) = 37.98$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons showed that adolescents reported more experiences of *positive peer interactions* in sports than in SNSs and nonsport activities, and more experiences of *positive peer interactions* in nonsport activities than in SNSs. A main effect of leisure context was also found for experiences of *identity exploration and reflection*, $F(2, 72) = 69.63$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that experiences of *identity exploration and reflection* were higher in sports than in SNSs, and higher in non-sport activities than in SNSs.

TABLE 1
Comparing the Developmental Experiences Within-Person Across Different Leisure Contexts

Developmental experience	SNSs	Sport	Activity (nonsport)
Positive peer interactions	2.34 _a (0.72)	3.16 _b (0.68)	2.88 _c (0.75)
Identity exploration and reflection	1.68 _a (0.51)	2.55 _b (0.58)	2.72 _b (0.66)

Note: Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
SNSs Frequency and SNS Investment Predicting Experiences of Positive Peer Interactions and Identity Exploration and Reflection in SNSs

Variable	Positive peer interactions in SNSs						Identity exploration and reflection in SNSs					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
SNSs freq.	.30	.09	.40***	.26	.09	.37**	.17	.07	.32*	.16	.07	.31*
SNSs investment	.14	.08	.23 ⁺	.19	.08	.33*	.10	.06	.23 ⁺	.12	.06	.27*
SNSs freq. x SNSs investment				-.15	.07	-.24*				-.05	.05	-.11
Adjusted R^2			.30			.34			.22			.22
F for change in R^2			15.37***			5.28*			10.51***			0.85

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. ⁺ $p < .10$.

Hierarchical regression analyses were then conducted to test the main effect of SNS frequency and SNS investment, and the interaction between these two variables, on experiences of *positive peer interactions* and *identity exploration and reflection* in SNSs (see Table 2). The regression analyses contained two steps. SNS frequency and SNS investment were entered simultaneously at step 1 of each regression model, and the interaction term was entered at step 2.

Experiences of *positive peer interactions* were significantly predicted by both SNS frequency and SNS investment. Greater frequency of SNS use and more investment in SNSs predicted higher experiences of *positive peer interactions*. SNS frequency also significantly interacted with SNS investment in predicting experiences of *positive peer interactions*. This interaction was explored using simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) and showed that there was a positive association between frequency of SNSs and experiences of *positive peer interactions* for adolescents with low SNS investment (slope = 0.43; $t = 4.13$, $p < .001$) and medium SNS investment (slope = 0.26; $t = 2.91$, $p < .01$), but not for adolescents' with high SNS investment (slope = 0.09; $t = 0.68$, $p > .05$). Both SNS frequency and SNS investment were significant predictors of experiences of *identity exploration and reflection* in SNSs. Greater frequency of SNS use and more investment in SNSs predicted higher experiences of *identity exploration and reflection*. There was no significant interaction between SNS frequency and SNS investment in predicting experiences of *identity exploration and reflection*.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the degree to which adolescents reported positive peer and identity experiences across three popular leisure contexts. Adolescents reported more positive peer and identity experiences during participation in structured leisure,

namely organised sports and nonsport activities, than during participation in social networking sites, an unstructured leisure activity. Although SNSs were regularly used leisure contexts, with a third of the sample visiting their SNS at least 3 to 5 days a week, a rate consistent with previous research (Lenhart & Madden, 2007), the sites may not be as important to an adolescent's identity as more traditional structured leisure contexts. It may be that SNSs simply provide a forum in which adolescents are able to express their identity and maintain peer relationships, rather than develop their identity and form friendships. In fact, some research seems to indicate that SNSs are often simply used as another medium in which to contact friends youth often see in person (Pempek et al., 2009).

One of the theorised benefits of participation in structured extracurricular activities is that such leisure choices provide adolescents with opportunities to 'try on' different identities. In fact, research has shown that adolescents often describe themselves partly on the basis of what they do, such as being a 'sporty' person, a 'music' person, or a 'brainy' person (Eccles & Barber, 1999). In contrast, unlike structured activities, which allow adolescents to differentiate themselves from their peers, social networking sites are a leisure context in which the large majority of youth participate. It is likely that the widespread use of these sites among adolescents has resulted in the awareness that such participation is normative, and therefore youth may not feel that their involvement in SNSs is particularly reflective of their identity.

However, the benefits afforded by SNSs do appear to vary for different groups of adolescents (Steinfeld et al., 2008). In the present study, adolescents who used their SNS more frequently, and who were more invested in their SNS, reported more positive peer and identity experiences than those who used their sites less often and were less invested in them. Hence it appears that SNSs are possibly contexts that afford youth beneficial developmental experiences, with the requirement that a certain degree of use and investment in these sites is necessary. This finding is of particular importance as parents are often concerned with the amount of time their adolescent son or daughter spends using the internet (ACMA, 2009), and though more in-depth research on a larger sample is necessary before any recommendations are made, it appears that time spent using SNSs could be considered an appropriate leisure activity, with the caveat that such time is not in lieu of participating in structured leisure activities.

Generalisability of the current study is limited by including only those adolescents who participated in all three leisure contexts, and therefore cannot be considered representative of Australian youth. It is possible that SNSs have a different meaning and impact for youth who do not also simultaneously participate in a number of different extracurricular activities. Future research could investigate whether SNS site use provides unique positive experiences, additional to those experienced during participation in extracurricular activities, or if SNS use acts more as a complementary leisure activity, supporting the positive experiences provided during participation in traditional structured leisure activities. The within-person design of the present research allows a direct comparison, reducing selection issues common in between-person comparisons, and is a prominent strength of the study. As the present study used a survey design which required adolescents to report on their experiences during the different leisure activities, the findings may be limited by the youths' abilities to accurately recall their experiences. Future research could address this limitation by using the experience sampling method, allowing adolescents to report their

experiences as they occur in different contexts. However, it could be argued that the degree to which adolescents consciously recall experiences from different contexts is of more developmental importance than the actual rate at which the experiences occur in the moment. The present research makes a valuable contribution to the emerging literature on adolescent SNSs use. Our study indicates that although participation in SNSs does not provide the same level of developmental experiences that are afforded through participation in structured activities; time and investment in SNSs may provide greater positive experiences for youth.

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