

Young Adults' Sense of Belonging in the Context of SNS and Cyberspace Usage: Istanbul, Turkey

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People have become more mobile with advances in transportation technologies. This has led to higher use of cyberspace and social network sites, and people have started socializing over cyberspace instead of meeting in physical spaces. This study analyses this process from a “uses and gratification theory” perspective and addresses how people’s sense of belonging to physical places changes through gratification achieved in cyberspace. Literature was reviewed, and a two-phase field study was designed. First, samples in various age groups ($n=105$) were asked questions about their sense of belonging, cyberspace, and SNS usage; then, a questionnaire of quantitative and semi-structured qualitative questions was conducted with young people ($n=285$). As a result of this study, up-to-date data were obtained about Istanbul’s young people (18-30) and their relationship with physical space, SNS, and cyberspace. The original contribution of this study to literature is that whilst addiction to cyberspace draws young people away from a physical place, they maintain strong interaction with the world.

KEYWORDS

Cyberspace, Sense of Belonging, Social Network Sites (SNS), Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), Young Adults

INTRODUCTION

Late 20th-century technological developments led to widespread technology usage for both transportation and communication. With the development of late 20th-century transportation technologies, people compared to the past started traveling more and frequently changed their homes. In the past, it was only possible to communicate with loved ones in physical places; today’s rapid development of Internet technologies has removed this limitation and enabled long-distance communication (Douglas, 2015).

There is a strong correlation between people’s rate of mobility and life cycle stages (Dieleman, 2001). The housing mobility rate of 18-30-year-olds is quite high, directly related to their inability to develop a sense of belonging to specific places (Markoc & Sari Haksever, 2019).

SNSs had emerged as a means by which users can come together to socialize (van der Kaay & Young, 2012). Young people have built daily habits on technologic products much faster than older adults (Vaterlaus et al., 2015).

This study’s findings support previous studies regarding the senses of belonging, cyberspace, and SNS, and makes a contribution pertaining to the sense of belonging that young people develop

DOI: 10.4018/IJCBPL.2021040101

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with physical spaces and cyberspace. It suggests that 18-30-year-olds use cyberspace and SNSs most actively, this hypothesis is verified through the ($n=105$) initial pilot study conducted. The second phase hypothesis states that young people use cyberspace and SNS; to fill up their spare time, enjoy visual content, and achieve gratification. To test this, a survey was conducted with 18-30-year-olds residing in Istanbul, using qualitative and quantitative questions ($n=285$). Data obtained were assessed from the standpoint of Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), and compared existent literature.

BACKGROUND

Sense of Belonging

The concept of a sense of belonging is defined as the emotional connection that a person has with their physical surroundings, and it has positive outputs on participation in social life and health (Kitchen et al., 2012). As people develop a sense of belonging to a place, their quality of life improves through improvement in their physical and psychological well-being and increased satisfaction with social relationships and physical surroundings (Tartaglia, 2012).

According to Pinkster and Boterman (2017), the sense of belonging felt to a living space develops as part of one's relationship with neighbours. Housing evokes a sense of safety, physical and psychological comfort; it is the place to which people develop the highest sense of belonging.

Oldenburg (1991) has identified the “third place” as a place (such as coffee shops or libraries) that people regularly visit besides their houses and workplaces, where they meet and communicate with their friends, and others (Mehta & Bosson, 2010). In time people develop a sense of belonging to these third places where they feel comfortable (Dolley & Bosman, 2019).

The concept of a sense of belonging to space and socialization has taken on a different dimension in the late 20th century due to technology as people spend more time for socializing in cyberspace (Delaney & Madigan, 2017). Studies reveal that the advancement of technologies may lead to senses of belonging altering, which, in turn, may affect the experiences related to space (Strayhorn, 2018).

Cyberspace

Cyberspace is a space within a traditional physical space, which might become more important than the physical space itself (Batty, 1993). Cyberspace is a computer-generated space; however, users perceive it as real, although it is different from the actual physical world (Chalmers, 2017). Guttentag (2010) suggests that some virtual experiences have the potential to replace physical visits.

Some studies discuss the motivation kindled by Cyberspace from the perspective of “Uses and Gratification Theory.” Digital technologies enable more convenient access to Cyberspace; as a result, people are now more connected to one another and feel gratification through this form of communication (Teng et al., 2016). This new concept of place in the virtual world is one, which everyone will be able to access in the future (Guttentag, 2010).

Young people spend the most time online (Markoc & Sari Haksever, 2019). Young people feel more comfortable in Cyberspace (Bryce & Fraser, 2013), and in Cyberspace, people tend to share their real opinions and act more freely than they would in real life (Chan, 2014).

Cyberspace’s extensive use has led to the emergence of two different literary approaches. The first claim that people spending more time online than offline affects their relations in real life leads to isolation and compromises well-being (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). The second states that time spent in Cyberspace improves people’s social relations and strengthens their existing friendships reduces loneliness and generates higher satisfaction (Takahira et al., 2008). Further, people who feel lonely and depressed spend excessive amounts of time in Cyberspace (Brooks and Longstreet, 2015), whilst those who are usually shy are more outgoing in Cyberspace (Pitmann, 2015).

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