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How do young people identify with online and offline peer groups? A comparison between UK, Spain and Japan

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Peer groups such as neighbourhoods and hobby circles are important sources of social identity for young people, but their viability is challenged by processes of urbanisation and labour mobility. In recent years, traditional peer groups have been joined by easily accessible computer-mediated groups, which have become an everyday part of life in many countries. In this article, we examine how young people identify with various online and offline peer groups. We compare online and offline identification experiences from the perspective of how socio-demographic position and individual sociability characteristics influence them, and examine how these identification processes differ between national contexts. Empirical analyses are conducted based on a survey of online community users from the UK, Spain and Japan ($N = 4299$). It is found that participants identify as strongly with their online communities as they do with their own families, and stronger than with offline hobby groups. In the mature online societies of the UK and Japan, the online group provides a more socio-demographically inclusive source of identification than traditional leisure-time formations. As friends and family move online, affinity towards online groups is more likely to be a reflection of high sociability than a lack of it. Games, social networking sites and other online environments should be seen as crucial contexts for today's youth's socialisation and identification experiences.

Keywords: identity; leisure; gender; media; youth culture

1. Introduction

During the last decade, computers, mobile phones and the Internet have become an integral part of everyday life for a broad range of people. In industrialised countries around the world, young people are by far the most enthusiastic users of these new communication technologies (Räsänen 2006, Willis and Tranter 2006, Howard *et al.* 2009). This observation is particularly true with regard to technology use that is not related to work (Wei 2006, Wilska and Pedrozo 2007). Multiplayer games, virtual environments, social networking sites and other online hangouts involving interaction with other users have become some of the most important reasons why young people log on (Lehdonvirta *et al.* 2009, Söderström 2009, West *et al.* 2009).

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Discussions relating to the role of online hangouts in young people's lives have raised questions about whether online activities provide benefits or disadvantages to the individuals who participate in them (e.g. Haythornthwaite and Kazmer 2002, Räsänen and Kouvo 2007). A claim that was put forward early in the discussion is that intensive online activities are associated with a decline in communication with friends and family members and with an increase in feelings of loneliness. More recently, it has been highlighted that online activities can also have the opposite effect by increasing the number of social relationships and improving opportunities for communication. Studies of online communities show that their participants can develop strong interpersonal ties (e.g. Rheingold 1993, Bruckman 1998, Williams *et al.* 2006). At the same time, processes of urbanisation and the changing job market have challenged some of the peer groups that young people have traditionally identified with, such as local communities, workplaces and even stable families (Putnam 1995, Miles 2000, Schor 2004). These processes are uniform neither between countries, nor across socio-demographic characteristics.

The purpose of this paper is to study how young people identify with various peer groups, and in particular, to compare identification with an online group to identification with traditional offline groups. Recent scholarship shows that computer-mediated interactions are now an integral part of young people's lifestyles, and understanding them is crucial to understanding changes in young people's values, attitudes and social activities (Boyd 2008, Livingstone 2008). Our study takes as an example the local branches of an online hangout called *Habbo*. It is a popular site among young people in several countries and one of the first tools of online youth work, but sparsely covered in scholarly literature. In this study, we ask how socio-demographic position and individual sociability characteristics relate to online and offline identification experiences. This way, we aim to address the important question of whether online groups accessible from anywhere can provide a substitute to disintegrating social structures in an age of globalisation and high labour mobility. The approach adopted is comparative; we assume that national context influences young people's identification processes, and seek to explain these cross-country variations by reference to discussions of national regime and information society development.

The paper is structured as follows. We start with a discussion on the traditional social and psychological benefits of peer-group identification, and consider how experiences offered by the new computer-mediated communities may differ or be similar. Next, we discuss why institutional differences between countries should be considered relevant when studying young people's identification experiences. In an empirical analysis, we then examine the role of socio-demographic position and individual sociability characteristics in online and offline identification, and compare identification experiences between three different cultural contexts: the UK, Spain and Japan. The data used in this study are derived from a multinational survey of *Habbo* users, conducted in 2008.

The outcome of our analysis suggests that there are differences in the ways in which online and offline identification are connected to socio-demographic background and sociability characteristics. The socio-demographic disparities moreover differ between national contexts. The results are interpreted against cultural and institutional differences between the societies, and against certain role expectations which may shape young people's identification processes similarly across advanced

societies. In general, we aim at addressing a lack of comparative research on the effects of the adoption of the Internet on everyday life, especially outside Europe and the USA.

2. From traditional peer groups to online communities

There are several reasons why young people's deepening engagement with digital media should be considered as a relevant research topic in youth studies. Perhaps the key reason is the fact that new technology is now being used to process some of the important tasks of adolescence, especially in identity formation and the evaluation of peer influences (Wilska and Pedrozo 2007, Söderström 2009). In this section, we argue that peer groups are a fundamental part of young people's lives. But these groups are now increasingly computer mediated, and as such, differ in some important ways from more traditional groups. This sets the stage for asking whether the antecedents of the identification experiences are also different.

The importance of groups and communities in ensuring the physical safety and survival of the individual has arguably waned in industrialised societies. This is particularly true for welfare states where the society no longer relies on families, companies or other ingroups to provide social safety nets for their members, but instead accepts collective responsibility for each individual. Representation and market capitalism have likewise replaced kinship ties and guilds as the formal means of distributing power and wealth in many societies. Yet sociologists have demonstrated that group memberships and social networks remain a fundamental building block in society. Jobs, business deals and political influence are brokered in ingroups, giving an advantage to individuals who are members, and leaving those who are structurally excluded from such groups at a disadvantage (e.g. Granovetter 1995, Florida 2002).

Besides a societal building block, groups and communities are also an important psychological anchoring point, providing individuals with a source of ontological security and self-esteem. According to the social-identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1979), individuals make sense of their social environment by categorising themselves and others into groups that can be contrasted with each other. In developmental psychology, particular emphasis is put on the notion of peer groups; groups of individuals sharing a similar social status, such as siblings or classmates. Interaction within peer groups has long been seen as important for children's cognitive, social and emotional development (Piaget 1983, Wertsch 1985). Peer groups influence individuals' values and behaviour through processes of socialisation and social comparison. The latter refers to the observation that individuals evaluate themselves in relation to their closest peers (Festinger 1954, Tversky and Kahneman 1981). For example, how happy one is with one's pocket money depends not on its absolute amount, but on whether it is less or more than what friends or siblings get.

In recent years, traditional peer groups have been joined by so-called computer-mediated communities or 'virtual communities'. While these terms are often used loosely to refer to any interactive website where marketers hope to attract visitors, there are many instances where genuine group identity, *Gemeinschaft*-like communality and strong interpersonal ties can be observed between the members of an online group (e.g. Rheingold 1993, Bruckman 1998, Williams *et al.* 2006). Emotional support, friendship, categorisation, social comparison and other processes that are

associated with traditional offline groups are frequently observed in studies on online groups (e.g. Steinkuehler and Williams 2006, Caplan and Turner 2007, Boyd 2008, Lehdonvirta *et al.* 2009).

In the literature on computer-mediated communities, some important differences between online and offline groups are nevertheless highlighted. One difference is that online groups are ‘communities of choice’ as opposed to communities of geographically proximate individuals who have little choice but to get along (e.g. Rheingold 1993, Steinkuehler and Williams 2006). This choice is said to afford individuals a better chance of finding groups of peers they can truly identify with (Bruckman 1998). A more pessimistic interpretation is that it allows young people to escape to online friends without putting any effort into developing social skills needed in face-to-face interaction. In any case, participation in online communities is still shaped by constraints imposed on the physical body; for example, gender-differentiated responses from parents, who may feel computers are a hobby for boys rather than for girls (Lin 2008). Language skills are another obvious but often neglected constraint (Paolillo 2001).

Another suggested difference between offline and online groups is that since all intercourse in online groups is mediated, participants have no direct way of observing each others’ body, physical appearance and consumption styles. This creates a layer of anonymity, mitigates prejudices and allows individuals more control over the way others perceive them (e.g. Turkle 1995, Porter 1997). The control is not absolute, however. For example, literacy and communication skills inevitably speak of participants’ socio-economic position (Kendall 1998). Nevertheless, online groups have offered significant respite for ostracised individuals ranging from political dissidents to members of sexual minorities, who are excluded from the conventional structures of their societies (Mehra 2004).

Finally, it has been suggested that online groups widen the scope of social comparison (Ariely 2008). Offline groups such as families and neighbourhoods are more likely to be composed of individuals of approximately similar social status. In online groups, participants may be exposed to individuals from completely different strata of the society. Ariely (2008) suggests that this exposure may cause anxiety and dissatisfaction with one’s social position.

Now, the actual implications of virtual communities for young people may vary considerably from one culture to another. Adolescents are not a homogenous population segment in any society, and there are probably considerable differences in young people’s patterns of behaviour between societies. It is thus necessary to address the basic institutional characteristics that distinguish one type of country from another.

3. Cultural foundations of online and offline group identification

According to studies conducted in various countries around the world, young people tend to be more willing to try new technologies and services than older people (e.g. Haythornthwaite and Kazmer 2002, Wei 2006, Willis and Tranter 2006). Consequently, young people also tend to be the most likely to participate in online communities and peer groups. In this point there are no clear differences between industrial societies. However, it can be argued that the national context is likely to influence identification with online and offline groups in more subtle ways. This is

because countries differ in terms of their basic social and cultural characteristics, which have been discussed in recent studies.

Literature in this area suggests that certain macro factors play an important role in the comparative analysis of attitudes and behaviours related to information and communication technologies (ICT) (e.g. Peacock and Künemund 2007, Räsänen and Kouvo 2007). There is often cross-country variation in technology adoption and the use purposes of, for example, computers and the Internet (van Dijk 2005, Howard *et al.* 2009, p. 209). Observed differences may occur for a variety of reasons ranging from the level of national wealth to the most common cultural beliefs.

In our opinion, one feasible explanatory approach lies in the 'institutional characteristics' of the countries. This is a term coined by comparative social researchers and refers to the notion that there are political, economic and/or social differences between countries that can be understood by reference to certain broader normative or cultural features (Esping-Andersen 1990, pp. 26–28). The UK, for example, is a liberal country characterised by commitment to full employment, but where many social insurances and social benefits are not universal. Spain, on the other hand, is a typical Latin country. While it is in many respects similar to the British society, it also has certain unique features associated with the Catholic culture. In Latin countries, family benefits encourage motherhood and the persistence of a male 'breadwinner' culture (Esping-Andersen 1990, pp. 12–13, Ferrera 1996).

Japan provides yet another type of society for cross-cultural comparisons, featuring a mix of liberal consumerism and Asian traditionalism with rigid social structures. While the Japanese economy has been undergoing liberalisation and shifting towards post-industrial labour markets, it is still largely the families and companies who are regarded as the primary providers of social safety networks, while the role of the public sector remains comparatively small (Watanuki 1986, Takahashi 1997). However, the past decade has seen a rise of the development of new youth-inclusion policies in the public sector (Toivonen 2008, p. 41). This is in response to the ending of the era of smooth school-to-work transitions and the rise of social problems such as the *hikikomori* youth. Young people in Japan are increasingly divided between the privileged but chronically overworked career class and the 'freeters' who subsist on part-time jobs. Along these lines it is possible to identify differences in the institutional characteristics of countries such as Japan, the UK and Spain. These differences can be expected to bear on the ways in which young people identify with different peer groups.

Another common way of classifying institutional characteristics in comparative studies is to place countries on a continuum that describes their relative degree of industrialisation. A distinction is typically made between 'pre-industrial', 'industrial' and 'post-industrial' societies. Industrial manufacturing and technological development in general have led to the restructuring of many societies since the Second World War. More recently, comparative interpretations have been put forward that refer to the most highly restructured societies as 'information societies' or 'new economies' and highlight the role of ICTs in economic change (e.g. Castells 1996, pp. 18–19, Castells and Himanen 2002).

In comparative studies of information societies, the adoption and use of ICTs are itself typically included among the most important measures of information society development (e.g. Castells and Himanen 2002, van Dijk 2005). According to

statistics on the penetration of Internet access around the world, approximately 76% of the Japanese population use the Internet frequently. In the UK, the percentage is exactly the same, and in Spain, the share is almost as high, at 71%. But while there are only slight differences in today's penetration rates, the magnitude of user growth during the past few years shows dramatic differences between the three countries. In Japan, the proportion of Internet users has increased by 104% between the years 2000 and 2009. In the UK, the increase during this time period has been twice as fast, at 203%. Spain has seen a growth of 440%, which is four times as fast as the Japanese growth during this period (Internet World Stats 2009).

Based on these statistics, it is possible to argue that our countries represent a set of three different kinds of online societies. First, Japan is a mature online society; Internet use has been a normal part of life for most people for many years. A high proportion of youth have had ICTs around them since childhood. Second, Spain can be regarded as a young online society, where Internet use across different population groups has become commonplace only recently. Old divides in technology access perhaps remain in more recent memory, and linger in social expectations. Third, the UK is an old European online society that ranks in the middle between Japan and Spain. These differences can be expected to have implications for young people's participation and identification processes in online vs. offline groups.

One prominent online hangout for young people in each of the three countries is *Habbo*; a virtual environment accessible through a web browser. *Habbo* was launched in 2000 by Finnish company Sulake, and a local-language version of the hangout is offered in 31 countries. *Habbo* is arguably a particularly interesting site from a youth studies perspective. Its users are on average 14.8 years old in the UK, 16.5 in Spain and 18.3 in Japan. Both sexes frequent the service: females make up 36% of the users in Spain, 46% in the UK and 59% in Japan (Sulake 2008). As an Internet service, *Habbo* is mature and established. It has retained its young user base for years, meaning that several birth cohorts have already passed through it on their way to social networks and services aimed at more mature audiences. According to Sulake (2010), *Habbo* currently has approximately 16.5 million unique visitors in a month, which makes it one of the most popular 'virtual worlds' on the Internet – more than an order of magnitude bigger than, for example, *Second Life*. Furthermore, *Habbo* has been one of the very first sites of online youth work, where professional youth workers make themselves available for consultations in a virtual space that youth have grown accustomed to (Sihvola 2005).

Habbo's virtual environment resembles a very large contemporary Western indoor space, presented in isometric 'retro style' 3D graphics, full of furniture and other objects. Participants interact with each other through avatars, stylised human figures. Communication takes place by typing lines of text, which appear in speech bubbles above the avatars' heads. There are also some social networking style features that allow participants to establish groups and connections with other *Habbo* users, but the whole experience is intended to be anonymous: revealing one's legal name or contact details is against the rules.¹ In the following sections, we describe an empirical study conducted at three local branches of the *Habbo* site.

4. Research questions and hypotheses

The aim of the empirical analysis is to examine socio-demographic differences in identification experiences pertaining to an online community and an offline hobby group. We are also interested in how socio-demographic and sociability-related disparities vary between national contexts. In order to examine these issues, we put forward the following three research questions:

RQ1: Are there differences in the strengths of identification between various online and offline groups in UK, Spain and Japan?

RQ2: Are there differences in how socio-demographic and individual sociability characteristics relate to identification with Habbo vs. identification with an offline hobby group?

RQ3: Do the observed socio-demographic and sociability-related differences vary between countries?

Preceding studies have shown that patterns of ICT use and social interaction differ considerably between population groups. The differences are affected by a number of factors. At the individual level, information indicating which demographic group or category a given person belongs to has been among the most common explanatory resources. Gender and age are the most widely used demographic background variables.

We assume that males and females report somewhat similar identification patterns with Habbo. With regard to identification with an offline hobby group, on the other hand, we expect clearer gender differences. Our assumptions are based on previous research findings indicating that boys and girls are approximately equally frequent visitors in Habbo and other online hangouts (Lin 2008, Sulake 2008, Söderström 2009). It is feasible to expect that they would also evaluate this virtual environment relatively similarly when it comes to identification. Identification with offline groups should be different for boys and girls. Research focusing on gender roles suggests that boys and girls have different expectations towards their peers. Particularly as teenagers, girls are believed to be under stronger influence from media and fashion than boys (Johnson 1993, Miles 2000, Frost 2003). Peer group pressures may thus play a more important role in boys' lives than girls'.

Gender differences in physical development may also be a factor. As we know, clinical data from around the world show that girls enter puberty about 2 years earlier than boys (Ashby *et al.* 2006, p. 376). Since developmental stages matter and because individuals often act differently at given ages, it should be obvious that age would also have a notable impact here. One consistent finding in earlier studies has been that younger children generally identify more strongly with their peer circles than older children do. This is because younger and older adolescents have different conceptions of their self-identities and social roles (Sheer and Palkovitz 1994, Lin 2008).

Since our research questions deal with identifying with social groups, information on respondents' sociability characteristics might provide useful explanatory variables. In sociological and psychological studies, various attitudinal and lifestyle variables have been used as the estimates of young people's actual behaviour (e.g. Furnham *et al.* 1994, Wei 2006, Wilska and Pedrozo 2007). In this study, responses to other

people's opinions and general estimates of sociability should be considered relevant. Our interest is in examining to what extent these attitudes or interests can explain identification experiences with Habbo and an offline group. We expect to find differences in the degree of identification that can be explained through these sociability variables between the digital community and a traditional one.

In addition, we expect to see variation in the results between the UK, Spain and Japan. In particular, there should be cross-country differences between younger and older respondents' identification experiences. Also, it has been found in comparative analyses that attitudinal variables are generally weaker predictors in Eastern countries compared to Western countries (Furnham *et al.* 1994, see also Wei 2006). This may be a result of the fact that socio-demographic differences are often greater in the East than in the West (Esping-Andersen 1990, Räsänen and Kouvo 2007).

In short, we assume that young people's identification patterns can be connected, in a multidimensional way, with various socio-demographic and attitudinal factors. In the remaining sections of this paper, we use empirical data to examine this claim further. Differences between national contexts are also examined.

5. Data, methods and variables

Our data were derived from an online survey administered in July 2008. The survey was originally prepared by the first author in English and translated into Spanish and Japanese by Sulake staff in collaboration with the author. Back translations were used to ensure consistency of meaning across languages. Respondents were recruited from three localised versions of Habbo: habbo.co.uk (intended for UK residents), habbo.es (intended for the Spanish-speaking world) and habbo.jp (intended for Japanese speakers). A link to the survey was placed by Sulake staff on these sites on the first page presented to users after they log in.

The survey attracted 11,255 responses, which was reduced to 9675 responses from 64 countries after a cleaning step was applied.² Respondents aged 12–30 from the UK, Spain and Japan were selected for further analysis in this study, totaling 4,299 cases. Due to the data collection method used, it is not possible to estimate the response rate, but the respondents' gender and age distributions in each of the countries are consistent with the results of a very large survey of Habbo users (Sulake 2008), suggesting that the sample is representative of the user population (Lehdonvirta 2009, pp. 17–18).

In the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate their country, gender, use frequency, number of contacts and the length of time they had been a user by choosing from a list of responses. Respondents were also asked to indicate their birth year, gender and other background characteristics. In addition, they were asked to indicate how much they engage in various activities inside and outside Habbo. In the current analysis, we focus on items measuring experienced identification with various online and offline groups. These were elicited with the question, 'How strongly do you feel part of the following groups?' Five different groups were evaluated using five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 = 'Not at all' to 5 = 'Very much'. Information on the respondents' gender and age are used as socio-demographic background variables. In addition, subjective ratings of respondent's own opinion sensitivity and friend/family orientation are used as independent

sociability-related measures. Opinion sensitivity measures the respondent's sensitivity to other people's opinions regarding their person. Friend/family orientation indicates self-reported intensity of social activities with friends or family members. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for each of the dependent and independent variables.

To facilitate the analyses described below, some of the variables were later categorised. The categorisations were designed to yield groups that are roughly the same size, make sense in terms of interpretation and provide explanatory power as indicated by preliminary analyses. Age was categorised into preteen (<14 years), teenager (14–18) and adult (>18). Measures on opinion sensitivity and friend/family orientation were dichotomised into those who do more of the given activity ('High') and those who do less ('Low'). Answers measuring group identification strength were not modified, since they are treated as dependent variables in the analysis. The original survey items and respective categorisations are presented in the Appendix 1.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is used as the analysis technique. ANOVA is a technique for determining statistical differences between the means of two or more populations. In an ANOVA analysis, relationships between the grand mean and the variances of the groups examined provide information on whether the differences between the groups are significant (Tabachnick and Fidell 2001). Our models examine the significance of the main effects of the background variables on offline

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for independent and dependent variables used in the analysis.

Variable	UK	Spain	Japan
Dependent variables			
Identification with Habbo	3.64 (1.17)	3.83 (1.18)	3.56 (1.17)
Identification with an offline hobby group	2.64 (1.44)	2.44 (1.48)	2.61 (1.19)
Independent variables			
Gender			
Male	47.1 (999)	64.5 (1053)	39.6 (220)
Female	52.9 (1123)	35.1 (569)	61.4 (335)
Age (years)			
< 16	57.8 (1227)	40.9 (664)	65.0 (361)
16–19	37.8 (806)	41.2 (668)	18.9 (105)
20–24	2.4 (50)	9.7 (158)	7.9 (44)
25–30	1.8 (39)	8.1 (132)	8.1 (45)
Opinion sensitivity			
Low	25.4 (539)	28.4 (539)	16.0 (89)
High	74.6 (1583)	71.6 (1583)	84.0 (466)
Friend/family orientation			
Low	80.4	60.0 (973)	72.2 (434)
High	19.6	40.0 (649)	21.8 (121)
<i>N</i>	2122	1622	555

Note: Means shown for dependent variables (standard deviations in parentheses); percentages for independent variables (number of cases in parentheses).

and online identification variables in each country. In the tables, overall statistical significances are indicated by the value F . Parameter estimates (β) indicate the estimated means of the dependent variables in each group. Standard errors (Std.) are reported for each parameter estimate. The proportions of total variance explained (Adj. R^2) are given separately for each dependent variable at the bottom of the tables.

The aim of our analysis is to show the extent to which the selected socio-demographic variables explain variance in the identification variables. On this basis, results are then compared between the countries. First, however, we take a look at overall identification strengths in different peer groups and countries.

6. Identifying with peer groups in the UK, Spain and Japan

Youth of today have many groups to identify with. In Europe and Asia alike, family, residential neighbourhood, various leisure-time groups as well as online peer groups can be understood as alternative sources of identification. In our questionnaire, the respondents were asked to evaluate how much they felt part of five different groups, ranging from family and Habbo to offline hobby groups and the respondent's residential neighbourhood. Figure 1 presents average ratings for each of the items in the UK, Spain and Japan.

The responses indicate that despite concerns in literature regarding the waning of the family as a stable anchoring point for youth in post-industrial countries (Turkle 1995, Miles 2000), the family is still the respondents' primary source of social identity. What is surprising, however, is that the respondents rated the online community Habbo almost equally high, indicating that they feel nearly as much part of the Habbo community as they feel part of their own family. On average, respondents also somewhat identified with another online group, an offline hobby group and their residential neighbourhood.

Respondents from the three different cultural backgrounds reported very similar levels of identification with the different peer groups. In general, UK respondents tended to report slightly stronger levels of identification, while Japanese respondents reported slightly lower levels. It thus seems that institutional differences between the

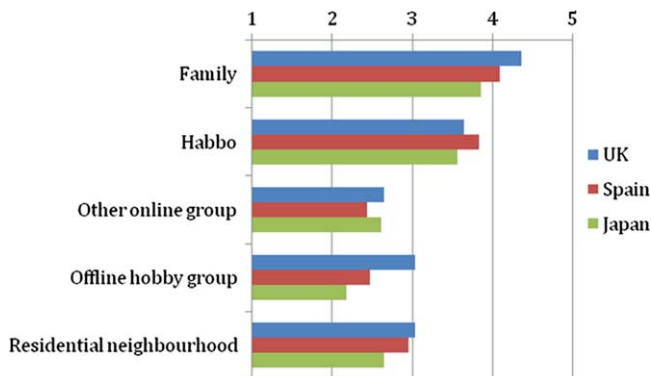


Figure 1. Identification with various offline and online groups in the UK, Spain and Japan (means, items evaluated at five-point Likert scales).

countries have little direct bearing on the identification profiles. Are we able to find differences when examining socio-demographic variations within the countries?

7. Explaining identification experiences

In the previous section, we examined differences in the reported levels of identification between peer groups and countries. In this section, we drill down to two of the groups to examine what factors can be used to explain the identification experiences. The focus is on finding out whether the factors that explain the experience of identifying with an online group are similar to or different from those that explain identification with an offline group. We also examine how the explanations differ between cultural backgrounds.

Table 2 presents the results of our analyses seeking to explain identification experiences with an offline hobby group. Three models are presented, one for each country. As expected, identification experiences differ significantly between genders and age groups. In all three countries, male respondents identify more strongly with an offline hobby group than female respondents do. In UK and Japan, young respondents tend to identify more strongly than older respondents. In Spain, statistically significant differences between age groups could not be observed. As for the influence of respondents' sociability characteristics, opinion sensitivity has no effect on offline identification in any of the countries. In contrast, friend/family orientation has a significant effect in all of the countries. The effect is relatively strong in Spain and the UK, and somewhat weaker in Japan.

Table 2. Identification with an offline hobby group in the UK, Spain and Japan by explanatory background variables. Adjusted main-effect tests.

Predictor	Model I: UK	Model II: Spain	Model III: Japan
Gender	<i>F</i> 7.6**	<i>F</i> 5.2*	<i>F</i> 6.2*
Male	2.96 (0.09)	2.54 (0.05)	2.04 (0.10)
Female	2.78 (0.09)	2.28 (0.07)	1.78 (0.10)
Age (years)	<i>F</i> 6.1**	<i>F</i> 0.9 (ns)	<i>F</i> 3.2**
< 16	3.05 (0.05)	2.40 (0.06)	2.16 (0.08)
16–19	2.78 (0.06)	2.44 (0.61)	1.93 (0.13)
20–24	2.71 (0.20)	2.43 (0.12)	1.84 (0.19)
25–30	2.93 (0.23)	2.20 (0.13)	1.69 (0.18)
Opinion sensitivity	<i>F</i> 1.0 (ns)	<i>F</i> 0.1 (ns)	<i>F</i> 3.0 (ns)
Low	2.83 (0.10)	2.36 (0.08)	1.79 (0.13)
High	2.90 (0.08)	2.37 (0.06)	2.03 (0.08)
Friend/family orientation	<i>F</i> 12.7***	<i>F</i> 28.0***	<i>F</i> 4.2*
Low	2.72 (0.10)	2.16 (0.07)	1.78 (0.12)
High	3.01 (0.08)	2.56 (0.06)	2.03 (0.09)
<i>R</i> ²	0.02	0.02	0.04
<i>N</i>	2122	1622	555

Note: Results represented as means (standard errors in parentheses); statistical significances for *F*-values: **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001; (ns), *p* > 0.05.

Table 3 presents another set of three models. Here the same background variables are used to explain identification with the Habbo online community. As in the previous models, age predicts the level of identification in the UK and Japan; younger respondents generally report stronger identification than older respondents. But the Habbo models also show some clear differences compared to the offline models. Gender is no longer a significant predictor in the UK and Japan. In Spain, males report stronger identification than females, but the difference in means is notably narrower. The significance of the two sociability characteristics has almost reversed; opinion sensitivity has become a significant predictor of identification in all of the countries, while the significance of friend/family orientation has waned in Spain and the UK.

Overall, the socio-demographic and sociability-related background variables chosen for the study only explain a relatively small part of the variation in the data. In the case of Japanese respondents, the models perform slightly better. Identification with Habbo is explained twice as well as identification with an offline group. However, our results also indicated that participants in online peer groups experienced similar levels of identification with these groups as they did with their own families and residential neighbourhoods. Insofar as one of the important psychological and developmental functions of peer groups for young people is to provide a source of identification, it thus seems that online sociability compares well with traditional intercourse – or that traditional intercourse provides relatively little identification for this sample of young online community users.

Table 3. Identification with Habbo in the UK, Spain and Japan by explanatory background variables. Adjusted main-effect test.

Predictor	Model I: UK	Model II: Spain	Model III: Japan
Gender	<i>F</i> 1.7 (ns)	<i>F</i> 5.7*	<i>F</i> 2.2 (ns)
Male	3.65 (0.07)	3.85 (0.05)	3.21 (0.10)
Female	3.58 (0.07)	3.70 (0.06)	3.06 (0.09)
Age (years)	<i>F</i> 11.4***	<i>F</i> 1.9 (ns)	<i>F</i> 10.6***
< 16	3.74 (0.04)	3.81 (0.05)	3.58 (0.08)
16–19	3.47 (0.05)	3.70 (0.05)	3.10 (0.12)
20–24	3.29 (0.16)	3.73 (0.10)	2.93 (0.18)
25–30	3.97 (0.19)	3.86 (0.11)	2.92 (0.18)
Opinion sensitivity	<i>F</i> 2.8*	<i>F</i> 4.6*	<i>F</i> 4.3*
Low	3.57 (0.08)	3.71 (0.06)	3.00 (0.13)
High	3.60 (0.07)	3.85 (0.05)	3.27 (0.08)
Friend/family orientation	<i>F</i> 0.3 (ns)	<i>F</i> 9.2*	<i>F</i> 9.0**
Low	3.62 (0.08)	3.68 (0.06)	2.95 (0.12)
High	3.61 (0.07)	3.87 (0.05)	3.31 (0.09)
<i>R</i> ²	0.02	0.02	0.08
<i>N</i>	2122	1622	555

Note: Results represented as means (standard errors in parentheses); statistical significances for *F*-values: **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001; (ns), *p* > 0.05.

These observations suggest that we need to go beyond the detected effects in order to understand the many faces of young people's identification processes. In the next section, we discuss the results and draw conclusions regarding young people's online and offline identification patterns from a broader socio-psychological perspective.

8. Conclusions: comparing offline and online identification processes

This study aimed to address the urgent question of whether digital sociability can provide a substitute to some of the traditional group structures that are disintegrating in late modern society. In the analysis, we compared online and offline identification experiences from the perspective of how socio-demographic position and individual sociability characteristics influence them. We furthermore examined how these identification processes differ between national contexts. National context was conceptualised in terms of regimes as well as how mature the country is as an online society.

Socio-demographic position was found to influence online and offline identification experiences somewhat differently. As expected, a gender difference could be observed in identification experiences pertaining to an offline hobby group. The finding is consistent with studies on gender roles (Frost 2003, Lin 2008, Williams *et al.* 2009). One mechanism that could explain the result can be traced to the fact that in each of the three cultural backgrounds, masculine hobbies are more oriented towards group activities and team sports, while hobbies considered feminine are usually more individual. Thus young males are more likely to experience team spirit and strong bonding with a peer group. It has also been argued that these early bonds serve as the foundations of 'old-boy' networks that help individuals succeed later in life (see Granovetter 1995). Gender differences in group identification experiences at a young age may thus have implications for, for instance, gender career equality later in life. Against this backdrop, it is interesting that no gender differences could be observed in identification experiences pertaining to the online youth communities in the UK and Japan. The site has an approximately equal number of male and female users, and both genders reported feeling equally part of the community. These findings suggest that the online social arena has less of a gender flavour than the traditional hobby groups the respondents participated in.

An exception to the above is Spain, where males identified more strongly than females in both the offline as well as the online groups. It is possible to understand this national difference as a reflection of the characteristics of young and old online societies. In a young online society such as Spain, where the widespread use of digital media for social intercourse is a relatively recent phenomenon, old stereotypes and norms regarding technology and computer use as a masculine activity still bear significantly on online social activities. In more mature online societies such as the UK and Japan, a general association of technology with men has waned and given way to more nuanced understandings of how different types of technology use relate to gender. This has perhaps also enabled the emergence of apparently gender-neutral online spaces, such as Habbo.

A link between age and identification experiences was observed as expected. The finding is consistent with earlier literature concerning the formation of self-identity and social roles throughout adolescence. As a young person begins to assert their

independence and individuality, dependence on and identification with peer groups lessens. In this study, it was found that the same pattern also applied to identification with an online community. This suggests a degree of similarity between offline and online identification experiences. No statistically significant links between age and identification could be observed in Spain, however. This may reflect insufficient data quality rather than a complete absence of the phenomenon in Spain.

Individual sociability characteristics were also found to have a different influence on online and offline identification. In all three national contexts, the analysis revealed a link between stronger online identification and high opinion sensitivity. How should this observation be interpreted? Is Habbo a place that youth with low self-esteem can escape to, an alternative to offline peer groups where acceptance is harder to win? The findings do not support this view, because no negative relationship between high opinion sensitivity and offline identification was observed. Instead, the results suggest that the online group is an additional source of identification that complements offline identification experiences for highly social individuals (that is, those who desire high levels of peer confirmation). This interpretation of the observation is in line with findings from some earlier studies concerning sociability and the Internet (Räsänen and Kouvo 2007, Söderström 2009).

The friend/family orientation measure was likewise found to be significantly linked to identification experiences, but its influence differs considerably between national contexts. In Spain and the UK, the measure has a significant influence on offline identification and little or no impact on identification with the online community. This result is intuitive if it is assumed that offline activities frequently involve family and friends, whereas online groups are more likely to consist of strangers. In Japan, however, the finding is the opposite; the friend/family orientation measure has a significant influence on online identification, and less influence on identification with an offline hobby group. An interpretation that could be offered is that in Japan, one of the oldest online societies in the world, friend and family relationships are increasingly played out through digital channels. This digitalisation of intimate relationships has been necessary to overcome challenges of time and place presented by the extremely urban and hard-working Japanese lifestyle. Orientation towards friends and family therefore manifests as affinity with online groups, as opposed to affinity with offline leisure-time groups. For the career-track youth, there might simply not be enough time to meet friends in offline leisure-time groups. If this interpretation is correct, online groups have indeed to some extent stood in for waning offline sociability.

Overall, the results of the study confirm that online activities have significant consequences for today's young people in almost any developed country. In the past, individuals learnt to experiment with their identities in only a handful of social contexts: at home, at school and in the company of close friends. This is no longer the case, since almost every young person now connects to digital networks. Games, social networking sites and other online environments should be seen as crucial contexts for today's youths' socialisation and identification experiences – across old as well as newer information societies.

Some limitations must be acknowledged in the design of the empirical study. The data pertain to youth who are already online community users, which certainly enhances the observed effects. In addition, our analysis relies on a cross-sectional

design; results were drawn from a single point in time from three societies, which were at different stages of ‘information society development’. Possible qualitative differences in the subjective experiences of online and offline identification were not addressed. Given these limitations, it must be acknowledged that further research is necessary in order to provide more conclusive answers concerning the role of digital sociability as a substitute to traditional peer groups. In particular, studies utilising longitudinal data sets and interpretative data focusing on subjective aspects across different online and offline groups should be encouraged.

Notes

1. Habbo’s participants converse about a wide range of topics ranging from popular music to problems in one’s love life, and engage in activities such as re-enacting popular television formats and building sets for said activities from pieces of virtual furniture. In fact, Sulake makes money from the hangout by selling virtual goods and services to the users, as well as from advertising.
2. A decision was made to exclude cases in which 30 or more of a set of 33 five-point Likert scale items (not used in this study) had been given the same response, strongly suggesting that the survey had not been completed in earnest. For the analysis reported in this paper, the respondents who reported their birth year as being before 1977 ($N = 116$) were also excluded. More detailed information on the data is available on request.

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Appendix 1. Original survey questions and the coding of variables

Variable	Original question	Original measurement	Coding
I. Independent variables			
Identification with Habbo	[How strongly do you feel part of the following group?]: Habbo	Ordinal	1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much
Identification with an offline hobby group	[How strongly do you feel part of the following group?]: offline hobby group or voluntary organisation	Ordinal	1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much
II. Socio-demographic variables			
Age	What is your year of birth?	Continuous	Calculated from the year of birth and categorised: 1 = Under 16 years, 2 = 16–19 years, 3 = 20–24 years, 4 = 25–30 years
Gender	Are you [male/female]?	Dichotomous	1 = Male, 2 = Female
III. Sociability variables			
Opinion sensitivity	[What is your opinion on the following statement?]: What other people think about me is important to me	Dichotomous	1 = Disagree, 2 = Agree
Friend/family orientation	[What is your opinion on the following statement?]: I often spend time with my friends or family	Dichotomous	1 = Disagree, 2 = Agree