

"Identity Production in a Networked Culture: Why Youth Heart MySpace"

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*If you have feedback about this talk/essay (especially if you think i'm wrong), write me:
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Introduction:

I want to talk with you today about how teenagers are using a website called MySpace.com. I will briefly describe the site and then discuss how youth use it for identity production and socialization in contemporary American society.

I have been following MySpace since its launch in 2003. Initially, it was the home to 20-somethings interested in indie music in Los Angeles. Today, you will be hard pressed to find an American teenager who does not know about the site, regardless of whether or not they participate. Over 50 million accounts have been created and the majority of participants are what would be labeled youth - ages 14-24. MySpace has more pageviews per day than any site on the web except Yahoo! (yes, more than Google or MSN).

Many of you may have heard about MySpace, most likely due to moral panic brought on by the media's coverage of the potential predators and bullying. There is no doubt that the potential is there, but there are more articles on predators on MySpace than there have been reported predators online. Furthermore, bullying is a practice that capitalizes on any available medium. Moral panics are a common reaction to teenagers when they engage in practices not understood by adult culture. There were moral panics over rock&roll, television, jazz and even reading novels in the early 1800s [1]. The media, typically run by the parent generation, capitalizes on and spreads the fear with little regard for data or actual implications. Examples are made out of delinquent youth, showing how the object of fear ruined them in some way or other. The message is clear - if you don't protect your kids from this evil, they too will suffer great harm to their minds, bodies or morals.

There are potential risks on MySpace but it is important not to exaggerate them. The risks are not why youth are flocking to the site. To them, the benefits for socialization outweigh the potential harm. For this reason, i want to ask you to put your fears aside for the duration of this presentation and try to see the values of MySpace for youth. What they are doing is really fascinating.

What is MySpace:

So what is MySpace?

MySpace is a social network site. In structure, MySpace is not particularly unique. The site is a hodgepodge of features previously surfaced by sites like Friendster, Hot or Not, Xanga, Rate My Teacher, etc. At the

core are profiles that are connected by links to friends on the system. Profiles are personalized to express an individual's interests and tastes, thoughts of the day and values. Music, photos and video help users make their profile more appealing.

The friend network allows people to link to their friends and people can traverse the network through these profiles. An individual's "Top 8" friends are displayed on the front page of their profile; all of the rest appear on a separate page. Bands, movie stars, and other media creators have profiles within the system and fans can friend them as well. People can comment on each others' profiles or photos and these are typically displayed publicly.

Originally, the site was 18+ and all data was public. Over time, the age limit dropped to 16 and then, later, to 14. The youngest users are given the option to make their profiles visible to friends-only and they do not appear in searches.

When someone starts an account, they are given an initial friend - Tom Anderson, one of the founders of MySpace. By surfing the site, they find and add additional friends. Once on MySpace, most time is spent modifying one's own profile, uploading photos, sending messages, checking out friends' profiles and commenting on them. Checking messages and getting comments is what brings people back to MySpace every day.

When MySpace was initially introduced, skeptics thought that it would be just another fad because previous sites like Friendster had risen and crashed. Unlike the 20-somethings who invaded Friendster, the teens have more reason to participate in profile creation and public commentary. Furthermore, MySpace's messaging is better suited for youths' asynchronous messaging needs. They can send messages directly from friends' profiles and check whether or not their friends have logged in and received their email. Unlike adults, youth are not invested in email; their primary peer-to-peer communication occurs synchronously over IM. Their use of MySpace is complementing that practice.

Many teens access MySpace at least once a day or whenever computer access is possible. Teens that have a computer at home keep MySpace opened while they are doing homework or talking on instant messenger. In schools where it is not banned or blocked, teens check MySpace during passing period, lunch, study hall and before/after school. This is particularly important for teens who don't have computer access at home. For most teens, it is simply a part of everyday life - they are there because their friends are there and they are there to hang out with those friends. Of course, its ubiquitousness does not mean that everyone thinks that it is cool. Many teens complain that the site is lame, noting that they have better things to do. Yet, even those teens have an account which they check regularly because it's the only way to keep up with the Jones's.

Of course, not all teens are using the site, either because they refuse to participate in the teen fad or because they have been banned from participating. Such non-conformity is typical of all teen practices.

With this framework in mind, i want to address three issues related to MySpace: identity production, hanging out and digital publics.

Profiles:

Every day, we dress ourselves in a set of clothes that conveys something about our identity - what we do for a living, how we fit into the socio-economic class hierarchy, what our interests are, etc. This is identity

production. Around middle school, American teens begin actively engaging in identity production as they turn from their parents to their peers as their primary influencers and group dynamics take hold.

Youth look to older teens and the media to get cues about what to wear, how to act, and what's cool. Most teens are concerned with resolving how they perceive themselves with how they are perceived. To learn this requires trying out different performances, receiving feedback from peers and figuring out how to modify fashion, body posture and language to better give off the intended impression. These practices are critical to socialization, particularly for youth beginning to engage with the broader social world.

Because the teenage years are a liminal period between childhood and adulthood, teens are often waffling between those identities, misbehaving like kids while trying to show their maturity in order to gain rights. Participating in distinctly adult practices is part of exploring growing up. Both adults and the media remind us that vices like sexual interactions, smoking and drinking are meant for adults only, only making them more appealing. More importantly, through age restrictions, our culture signals that being associated with these vices is equal to maturity.

The dynamics of identity production play out visibly on MySpace. Profiles are digital bodies, public displays of identity where people can explore impression management [2]. Because the digital world requires people to write themselves into being [3], profiles provide an opportunity to craft the intended expression through language, imagery and media. Explicit reactions to their online presence offers valuable feedback. The goal is to look cool and receive peer validation. Of course, because imagery can be staged, it is often difficult to tell if photos are a representation of behaviors or a re-presentation of them.

On MySpace, comments provide a channel for feedback and not surprisingly, teens relish comments. Of course, getting a comment is not such a haphazard affair. Friends are expected to comment as a sign of their affection. Furthermore, a comment to a friend's profile or photo is intended to be reciprocated. It is also not uncommon to hear teens request comments from each other in other social settings or on the bulletin boards. In MySpace, comments are a form of cultural currency.

For those seeking attention, writing comments and being visible on popular people's pages is very important and this can be a motivation to comment on others' profiles. Of course, profile owners have the ability to reject comments and Tom rejects most of them. Some people literally spam their network with comments. Last week, there were "Valentine's cards" that people made and added to the profiles of all of their friends via comments. People advertise events through mass comments. Some comments are also meant to be passed on, creating virus like memes.

The rules of friending are also very important. It is important to be connected to all of your friends, your idols and the people you respect. Attention-seekers and musicians often seek to be friended by as many people as possible, but most people are concerned with only those that they know or think are cool. Of course, a link does not necessarily mean a relationship or even an interest in getting to know the person. "Thanks for the add" is a common comment that people write in reaction to being friended by interesting people.

While these dynamics may not seem particularly important, they are essential to youth because they are rooted in the ways in which youth jockey for social status and deal with popularity. Adults often dismiss the significance of popularity dynamics because, looking back, it seems unimportant. Yet, it is how we all learned the rules of social life, how we learned about status, respect, gossip and trust. Status games teach us this.

Hanging Out:

So what exactly are teens doing on MySpace? Simple: they're hanging out. Of course, ask any teen what they're doing with their friends in general; they'll most likely shrug their shoulders and respond nonchalantly with "just hanging out." Although adults often perceive hanging out to be wasted time, it is how youth get socialized into peer groups. Hanging out amongst friends allows teens to build relationships and stay connected. Much of what is shared between youth is culture - fashion, music, media. The rest is simply presence. This is important in the development of a social worldview.

For many teens, hanging out has moved online. Teens chat on IM for hours, mostly keeping each other company and sharing entertaining cultural tidbits from the web and thoughts of the day. The same is true on MySpace, only in a much more public way. MySpace is both the location of hanging out and the cultural glue itself. MySpace and IM have become critical tools for teens to maintain "full-time always-on intimate communities" [4] where they keep their friends close even when they're physically separated. Such ongoing intimacy and shared cultural context allows youth to solidify their social groups.

Digital Publics:

Adults often worry about the amount of time that youth spend online, arguing that the digital does not replace the physical. Most teens would agree. It is not the technology that encourages youth to spend time online - it's the lack of mobility and access to youth space where they can hang out uninterrupted.

In this context, there are three important classes of space: public, private and controlled. For adults, the home is the private sphere where they relax amidst family and close friends. The public sphere is the world amongst strangers and people of all statuses where one must put forward one's best face. For most adults, work is a controlled space where bosses dictate the norms and acceptable behavior.

Teenager's space segmentation is slightly different. Most of their space is controlled space. Adults with authority control the home, the school, and most activity spaces. Teens are told where to be, what to do and how to do it. Because teens feel a lack of control at home, many don't see it as their private space.

To them, private space is youth space and it is primarily found in the interstices of controlled space. These are the places where youth gather to hang out amongst friends and make public or controlled spaces their own. Bedrooms with closed doors, for example.

Adult public spaces are typically controlled spaces for teens. Their public space is where peers gather en masse; this is where presentation of self really matters. It may be viewable to adults, but it is really peers that matter.

Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang out locations like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7/11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents. Hanging out around the neighborhood or in the woods has been deemed unsafe for fear of predators, drug dealers and abductors. Teens who go home after school while their parents are still working are expected to stay home and teens are mostly allowed to only gather at friends' homes when their parents are present.

Additionally, structured activities in controlled spaces are on the rise. After school activities, sports, and jobs are typical across all socio-economic classes and many teens are in controlled spaces from dawn till dusk. They are running ragged without any time to simply chill amongst friends.

By going virtual, digital technologies allow youth to (re)create private and public youth space while physically in controlled spaces. IM serves as a private space while MySpace provide a public component. Online, youth can build the environments that support youth socialization.

Of course, digital publics are fundamentally different than physical ones. First, they introduce a much broader group of peers. While radio and mass media did this decades ago, MySpace allows youth to interact with this broader peer group rather than simply being fed information about them from the media. This is highly beneficial for marginalized youth, but its effect on mainstream youth is unknown.

The bigger challenge is that, online, youth publics mix with adult publics. While youth are influenced by the media's version of 20somethings, they rarely have an opportunity to engage with them directly. Just as teens are hanging out on MySpace, scenesters, porn divas and creature of the night are using MySpace to gather and socialize in the way that 20somethings do. They see the space as theirs and are not imagining that their acts are consumed by teens; they are certainly not targeted at youth. Of course, there are adults who want to approach teens and MySpace allows them to access youth communities without being visible, much to the chagrin of parents. Likewise, there are teens who seek the attentions of adults, for both positive and problematic reasons.

That said, the majority of adults and teens have no desire to mix and mingle outside of their generation, but digital publics slam both together. In response, most teens just ignore the adults, focusing only on the people they know or who they think are cool. When i asked one teen about requests from strange men, she just shrugged. "We just delete them," she said without much concern. "Some people are just creepy." The scantily clad performances intended to attract fellow 16-year-olds are not meant for the older men. Likewise, the drunken representations meant to look "cool" are not meant for the principal. Yet, both of these exist in high numbers online because youth are exploring identity formation. Having to simultaneously negotiate youth culture and adult surveillance is not desirable to most youth, but their response is typically to ignore the issue.

Parents also worry about the persistence of digital publics. Most adults have learned that the mistakes of one's past may reappear in the present, but this is culturally acquired knowledge that often comes through mistakes. Most youth do not envision potential future interactions.

Without impetus, teens rarely choose to go private on MySpace and certainly not for fear of predators or future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they they've friended. They would just prefer the adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men.

While the potential predator or future employer don't concern most teens, parents and teachers do. Reacting to increasing adult surveillance, many teens are turning their profiles private or creating separate accounts under fake names. In response, many parents are demanded complete control over teens' digital behaviors. This dynamic often destroys the most important value in the child/parent relationship: trust.

Conclusion:

Youth are not creating digital publics to scare parents - they are doing so because they need youth space, a place to gather and see and be seen by peers. Publics are critical to the coming-of-age narrative because they provide the framework for building cultural knowledge. Restricting youth to controlled spaces typically results in rebellion and the destruction of trust. Of course, for a parent, letting go and allowing youth to

navigate risks is terrifying. Unfortunately, it's necessary for youth to mature.

What we're seeing right now is a cultural shift due to the introduction of a new medium and the emergence of greater restrictions on youth mobility and access. The long-term implications of this are unclear. Regardless of what will come, youth are doing what they've always done - repurposing new mediums in order to learn about social culture.

Technology will have an effect because the underlying architecture and the opportunities afforded are fundamentally different. But youth will continue to work out identity issues, hang out and create spaces that are their own, regardless of what technologies are available.

Phrase Bibliography:

- [1] Thomas Hine's "Rise and Fall of American Teenager" p. 104-105
- [2] Erving Goffman's "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"
- [3] Jenny Sunden's "Material Virtualities."
- [4] Misa Matsuda in "Personal, Portable, Pedestrian"

Note: A great deal of other literature informed this talk even if not explicitly cited. Citations are used to explicitly reference people's turn of phrases.