Socializing digitally

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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". 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, in Misa Matsuda's words, "full-time always-on intimate communities", 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.

All this is not about divorcing the physical to live digitally. MySpace has more to do with offline structures of sociality than it has to do with virtuality. People are modeling their offline social network; the digital is complementing (and complicating) the physical. In an environment where anyone could socialize with anyone, they don't. They socialize with the people who validate them in meatspace. The mobile is another example of this. People don't call up anyone in the world, they call up the people that they are closest with. The mobile supports pre-existing social networks, not purely virtual ones. While social network sites and mobile phones are technology to adults, they are just part of the social infrastructure for teens. Remember what Alan Kay said? "Technology is anything that wasn't around when you were born." These technologies haven't been adopted as an alternative to meatspace; they've been adopted to complement it.

Online presence

At MySpace, individuals create profiles and link to others ("friends") within the system. The profile serves as a digital representation of one's tastes, fashion, and identity. In crafting this profile, people upload photos, indicate interests, list favorite musicians and describe themselves textually and through associated media. The social network feature allows participants to reveal their affiliations and peer group, and it also allows friends to comment on each other's profiles. Structurally, social network sites are a cross between a yearbook and a community website. They also provide numerous communication tools. MySpace has a messaging system similar to email, a bulletin board where people can post messages that all friends can read, and a blogging service where people can post entries for either friends or the public at large. While email is still used to communicate with adults and authorities, MySpace is the primary asynchronous communication tool for teens. After checking personal messages, youth check friend additions, bulletin board posts, event announcements and new blog posts by friends. They visit their friends' pages to see

new photos or check out each other's comments. The vast majority of social network site use amongst youth does not involve surfing to strangers' profiles, but engaging more locally with known friends and acquaintances.

Teens who 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 those 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 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.

With this framework in mind, I want to address two important issues related to social network sites: identity production 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.

The dynamics of identity production play out visibly on MySpace. Profiles are digital bodies, public displays of identity where people can explore impression management. Because the digital world requires people to write themselves into being, profiles provide an opportunity to craft the intended expression through language, imagery and media. Explicit reactions to their online presence offer 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. Some people literally spam their network with 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.

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.

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.

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 provides 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 creatures 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 future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they've friended. They would just prefer the adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men. Why? To most teens, MySpace is *my* space.

This text for receiver is a mashup of danah boyd's musings based broadly on "Identity Production in a Networked Culture: Why Youth Heart MySpace", her talk at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, St. Louis, MO, February 19, 2006.