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Implications of frequent online social network use for adolescent and emerging adult social experiences

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Online socializing creates new social situations, and thus, new challenges, and requires new ways of thinking, interacting and behaving. Examples of this phenomenon are wide-ranging, with one end of the spectrum being the dramatic incidents that receive the attention of the national media, including serious emotional violation, loss, or harassment. At the other end of the spectrum are the common or everyday occurrences, like the experience of ending a relationship offline while continuing social contact online. The implications for relationship dissolution and termination are significant.

As someone who graduated from high school in the year 2000, I have always had easy access to my friends via electronic forms of communication. While Online Social Networks (OSNs) were just beginning to become popular when I started college, they certainly played a role in my social life, and by the time I graduated from college in 2004, they were clearly a mainstay in late adolescent socializing.

My junior year in college, a girl I knew but was not close with, died in a tragic accident. Her death was shocking and impacted the college community as a whole, in addition to her close circle of friends. Her offline community mourned her death with memorial services, social gatherings, and commemorative art. People noticed her absence in their day-to-day lives, and slowly became accustomed to not seeing her around. Her Friendster¹ profile, however, remained eerily unchanged. Though this young woman was gone, there was a piece of her that stayed frozen in time, as it had been just before she died. Over time, the rest of her social network updated their profiles, changed pictures, dated new people, decided Friendster was uncool and moved on to MySpace and then

Facebook. This dynamic put the members of her online community in uncharted social territory, and is indicative of the real impact that online socializing can have.

Because OSNs are a relatively recent phenomenon, there has been limited academic inquiry into the role of these sites in the adolescent and early adult social experience. Much of the academic and media attention to online adolescent/emerging adult socializing has focused on bullying, sexual harassment, and potential dangers of Internet use. There have been a few studies that look at the benefits of online socializing, like an increase in feelings of self-esteem and connectedness, as well as being a valuable resource for marginalized groups, such as queer youth. Because much of the media attention has been somewhat sensationalized, this study explores the less dramatic everyday issues and experiences that come up for frequent MySpace and Facebook users.

Drawing on the stories of 12 OSN users ages 17 to 24, this study explores the factors that keep adolescents and young adults engaged in OSN use and experiences regarding OSNs. The results of this study provide insight into the frequent use of OSNs and their role in the social life of the adolescent/emerging adult. The findings may provide valuable information about the contemporary adolescent/emerging adult social experience that could be useful in clinical work, as well as prompt further exploration and study of this issue.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature explores research and writing on Computer Mediated Communications (CMCs) and the adolescent and early/emerging adult experience of Online Social Networks (OSNs). I begin by looking at the history of the Internet and the World Wide Web, as well as the development of the contemporary OSNs Facebook and MySpace. Next, I give an overview of the developmental tasks of this age range as well as the types of social interactions that adolescents and young adults encounter both on-line and off-line that may impact their sense of self and well-being. I then outline both the positive and negative potential of OSN participation for youth and young adults. I conclude with a summary of contemporary adolescent and emerging adult social experiences and OSN use, and argue for increased awareness and exploration of the shifting social landscape and social mores for clinical social workers.

One very popular form of online socializing is the Online Social Network. Online Social Networking sites, or Online Social Networks (OSNs), are websites that allow people to create “profiles” (information about self), which can then be linked with those of their friends, and used to send messages or public comments, share photographs, and otherwise communicate. Once a profile has been connected to another profile, the two profiles are considered “friends” and usually have greater access to each other’s posted personal information.

In the last several years, concerns about OSN safety have made their way into the national media. Many high schools have banned MySpace and Facebook use in their on-

campus computer labs, citing online harassment as a major risk. On some college campuses, members of sports teams have been mandated to remove their Facebook and MySpace pages to avoid controversy over their activities. Recent media coverage of disturbing incidents—such as a 13-year-old girl who was repeatedly harassed online by classmates and a classmate’s parent until she committed suicide (Maag, 2007)—has contributed to growing parental concern about OSNs being unmonitored and potentially unsafe.

History of the Internet and Online Social Networks

The Internet, in its current iteration, took over half a century to develop. Much of that time was spent on the problem of networking computers in different geographic locations. Today, the term “the Internet” refers to a global network that enables the flow of information between computers separated by great physical distances. The development of the Internet (the first so-called “wide-area network”) was a combined product of military, scientific, and academic efforts (Bidgoli, 2004). For the first forty years of the Internet’s existence, the network itself was accessible only to a very small group of academic, military, and government users.

The Internet, however, should not be confused with the World Wide Web (or just “the Web”), which is a specific use of the Internet network and was developed at CERN in Switzerland in 1990. One could liken the Internet to a complex plumbing system, and the Web to the water delivered by its pipes. In addition to the Web, the “pipes” of the Internet also support the flow of information in the form of email, instant messages, and voice communications.

When Tim Berners-Lee created the framework for the Web, his intention was to create an efficient and convenient channel through which scientists could share data (www.netvalley.com). The invention of the Web introduced a new protocol for Internet language, which multiplied networking capabilities exponentially. This shared language for information exchange put Internet users on the same page, so to speak. The release of Windows 95, the first version of Windows to have Internet and Web tools built-in, thrust the Web into the mainstream by making the Web significantly more accessible.

The newly increased accessibility and growing popularity of the Web brought with it an influx of new communication opportunities. Between 1995 and 2008, there has been fast and complex growth in the world of online socializing. Perhaps a critical precursor to OSNs, blogging was popularized with the introduction of blog-hosting sites like LiveJournal in 1999. By making it easy for the average person to publish a web page, blogging services allowed users to share personal information, exercise their freedom of speech online, and have a semi-public voice. Within three years of the introduction of blog-hosting sites, the first OSNs were introduced and immediately started gaining popularity. Friendster appeared in 2002, followed by MySpace in 2003, and Facebook in 2004.

Because of the relatively recent growth (between 2003 and 2008) of the sites MySpace and Facebook, it is difficult to find a comprehensive account of their development. Additionally, there is some controversy over the history of both MySpace and Facebook. Despite the lack of a comprehensive history, it is evident from reviewing the participant statistics (specifically, the shifts in number of participants), recent media coverage, and popular culture that OSNs have experienced tremendous growth and gains

in popularity in the last five years; for example, MySpace recently crossed the 100 million-member mark (www.MySpace.com), and Facebook has over 70 million users (www.Facebook.com).

Though the credit for MySpace is given to an individual, Tom Anderson, who is introduced as a “friend” to new members of the site, MySpace is currently owned by Fox broadcasting, which in turn is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. While MySpace is a free social networking service, it is also a lucrative business.

About a year after MySpace was launched, Mark Zuckerberg, then an undergraduate at Harvard University, created Facebook. Facebook and MySpace have many similarities, but two notable differences are that Facebook uses a standardized page design (while MySpace users can customize their pages using CSS and HTML), and initially, Facebook was only available to students at certain colleges and universities. This is reminiscent of the initial limited access to the Internet in its beginning stages of development. The circle of people who were eligible to join Facebook continued to increase until 2007, when Facebook was made available to the general public.

History of CMCs

Examinations of Computer Mediated Communications such as early email and bulletin board systems, offered the perspective that CMCs allow people to interact socially in ways that vary from their usual patterns due to decreased accountability, invisibility of identifying factors (gender, race, etc.), and decreased channels of communication, such as body language (Cinnirella & Green, 2006). These same examinations yielded concern that CMCs were lacking realness and were in this way

invalid or incomplete forms of communication, and that people would lose the quality or intimacy of their in-person interactions.

In contrast, current research suggests that CMC can fill holes in real-life socializing and provide a sense of community that might be otherwise unavailable (Bishop, 2007). In 1997, a summary of ways of conceptualizing OSNs and CMC by Garton, Haythornthwaite, and Wellman asserted that online relationships are complex and multifaceted, much like offline relationships (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997). Further, they argued, the strength and depth of relationships should be evaluated based on frequency and quality of interaction, as well as the way individuals are positioned in their OSN (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997). These findings suggest that CMCs function similarly to any other type of communication. Garton, Haythornthwaite, and Wellman also noted that business interactions could be enhanced by CMCs, as they can be quite efficient.

CMCs have become an integral part of contemporary living in the U.S. From business deals to social networking, the majority of potential “off-line” human interactions are now available electronically as well.

Importance of Social Environment and Developmental Tasks in the Late Adolescent and Emerging Adult Social Experience

Adolescence is a time of great emotional, physical, and cognitive change. During these changes a sense of egocentrism emerges, and the relevance of an experience to the self is often at the forefront of an adolescent’s concerns. In addition to a preoccupation with self, adolescents seek to accomplish a deepening in intimate relationships, greater

autonomy, a more complete sense of self, and a clearly defined role in the social environment (Schwartz & Pantin, 2006). Even the seemingly individual processes are directly connected to the teen's experience of the social environment.

Many developmental psychologists like Piaget, Erikson, and Elkind point to the context of the child as a key factor in development. As the social landscape expands and changes to include OSNs, adolescents may experience these parts of their lives in new ways. For example, the concept of the "imaginary audience," the sense that he or she is being constantly observed by some anonymous, enthralled party, needs to be understood in a new context. In other words, when a teen uses an OSN like MySpace or Facebook, the audience may not be imaginary, but rather comprised of people with whom the teen may or may not have any offline contact and who are interested in the teen's decisions, expressions, and actions. In effect, the audience is no longer imaginary, but rather actually exists in the online experience. What complicates the matter further is that this now real unknown audience exists outside of the individual's control.

For many teens today, there is a very real experience of social feedback and interaction that occurs in response to online presentations of self. In a 2003 mixed method study of 346 adolescents on egocentrism and re-conceptualizing the imaginary audience, Bell and Bromnick (2003) found that "what people think" was a consistent concern, particularly around worries about physical appearance, gossip, friends, sex and sexuality, and bullying. All of these potentially worry-filled areas are made available for the interpretation, judgment, validation, and viewing by peers and unknown others in OSNs.

In a 2007 article on why teens “<3” (this symbol forms the shape of a heart when turned sideways and is read as “heart” or “love”) MySpace, Boyd argues that there are several properties in online socializing that do not exist in offline interactions. Among them were several properties related to the possibility that pieces of writing, photos or other material posted on a profile may be taken out of context, as well as an expectation of who makes up the imaginary audience. Boyd explains that teens are presenting themselves in accordance to who they feel *should* be part of their audience, not necessarily actually who is part of the audience (Boyd, 2007).

Emerging Adults

I feel it is important to look additionally at young adults who are no longer in their teens, but who share many of the same developmental tasks and characteristics. In 2004, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett coined the term “emerging adults” in response to the unique set of challenges, circumstances, and developmental tasks faced by middle-class post-college-aged-youth who were coming into an increasingly competitive and inaccessible work force. This group is fairly class-specific and culturally bound. The behaviors and development are contrary to historical expectations of the white, middle-class concept of upward socioeconomic mobility. Instead of getting married, finding a stable and long term job, and having children after college, today’s emerging adults seek partial independence, self-exploration, spontaneity, and a job that is fulfilling (Arnett, 2004).

This group of young adults has developed out of the phase of being dependent on parents the way one might in high school, but they are also unable to be completely independent. “Emerging adults” follow a different trajectory from the developmental

course of their parents, and even the preceding generation, in that they are delaying milestones of adulthood, like “settling down” with one romantic partner, having steady, career-driven income, and being self-supporting. In addition to having fewer responsibilities, emerging adults have greater opportunities for self-exploration than their predecessors. Not only do emerging adults have the luxury of fewer life-changing commitments (kids, mortgage, etc.) which yields more time to ponder who they are, but they also have access to more connecting technologies than ever before (Arnett, 2004). In addition to the changes in social patterns post-college, the current generation of emerging adults have grown up with communication tools like pagers, car phones, cell phones, instant messaging, online social networks, blogging, text messaging, and picture messaging, shifting how social interactions occur.

The developmental tasks faced by emerging adults have some overlap with those of late adolescence. Emerging adults continue the work of learning who they are, how they wish to connect with other people, and how to go about forming those connections. Emerging adults also continue the process of learning how to form deeper relationships with friends, family, and romantic or sexual partners. According to Arnett, emerging adulthood is the most self-focused period of an individual’s life (Arnett, 2004).

One challenge that is faced by both late adolescents and emerging adults is the experience of relationship termination. As new and increasingly deep relationships are formed, they are also ended. These endings can occur in a variety of ways and for different reasons. Learning to negotiate the dissolution phase of relationships can be a lifelong process.

Adolescents and Emerging Adults and Online Social Networks

Current adult views on teen use of sites like MySpace and Facebook are primarily negative. While the topic of OSNs is relatively new and underrepresented in the academic literature, there are several studies that have explored the topics of adolescence and OSNs. Additionally, there are many stories and issues presented by the media that disproportionately raise additional fears about MySpace and similar sites.

While much of the media attention is given to the dangers or threats of MySpace and Facebook, there are some researchers who have found benefits for young people using OSNs. Concerns about OSN use fall into the categories of overuse, exposure to sexually explicit images/sexual harassment, and bullying. Benefits include increases in self-esteem and feelings of connectedness for youth in general and for marginalized youth, the opportunity to find community.

Concerns over adolescent use of OSNs may be somewhat sensationalized by the popular media. There are however, some important issues that may come up for young people who use OSNs. The Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) has created a list of problematic Internet-related behaviors that have been reported to psychotherapists who work with youth. This project surveyed 30,000 mental health care professionals and found that many mental health care providers were dealing with issues related to Internet use in their practices. This is significant in that the issues that were being reported by the mental health providers were not consistent with the level of media attention given to certain dangers of the Internet (Wells, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

Overuse

Worries about overuse and addiction appear in online parenting forums, PTA newsletters, and the pages of news magazines. Reports of adolescents becoming addicted to computers, and specifically sites like MySpace and Facebook, have also raised concerns. While “Internet Addiction” is not in the DSM-IV TR, it is still treated by clinicians nationwide. Some experts in the field of Internet addiction have compared its potential destructiveness with that of drug and alcohol addiction (Kershaw, 2005). Findings from the CRCC include reports that 61% of the clients of the psychotherapists surveyed suffered from overuse issues (this includes both general overuse and specific issues such as pornography and gaming).

In a 2004 letter to the editor in *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, Iftene, Napoca and Roberts presented two cases of adolescents using the Internet excessively and at the expense of their everyday functioning. In one case, note Iftene, Napoca and Roberts, the diagnostic criteria for addiction are met, while in the other, the teen employed frequent use of the Internet as an expression of underlying social and emotional issues. In both cases the urge to use the Internet for hours on-end without sleeping, eating, or attending school are clearly cause for concern, yet it would be remiss to overlook the many adolescents who are using the Internet effectively and without compulsion.

Bullying

In a 2007 study on electronic bullying, Raskauskas (2007) sampled 84 adolescents and found that 15% of them had experienced bullying over the Internet and 13% reported that they had bullied others using the Internet. It has been noted in the literature that

electronic bullying varies from in-person bullying because the bully is removed from the victim, which provides an opportunity to further dehumanize the victim without witnessing or understanding the full impact of their actions (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). This assertion is reminiscent of the early perspectives on CMCs and concerns about decreased accountability.

Additionally, in a 2007 study on prevalence and predictors of bullying, Williams and Guerra found that, while boys are more likely to perpetrate physical bullying than girls, Internet bullying comes from boys and girls with the same frequency. This shift in the patterns of bullying creates a new dynamic that parents, schools, and youth may not anticipate or be prepared to deal with.

Sexually Explicit Images and Sexual Harassment

Perhaps one of the most feared dangers of adolescent online social interaction is sexual abuse and harassment. While much media attention has prompted changes in policy and accessibility of the profiles of minors, the risks and the online culture remain the same. In the CRCC report, 56% of clients had discussed online pornography-related issues (overuse, unwanted exposure, familial conflict regarding viewing) in therapy, and 16% reported sexual exploitation or abuse.

In January of 2008, MySpace made agreements with the Attorneys General from 49 states to increase efforts to separate adult users from those under 18 years of age (Barnard, 2008). While precautions like this one may provide some peace of mind, there are flaws in the systems now in place, and minors still remain vulnerable. Because both

minors and predators can easily misrepresent themselves online, any intervention intended to block contact between the two groups can be derailed.

The actual percentage of minors who are sexually harassed or abused by adults (rather than their peers) via Internet socializing is not as high as one might assume based on the amount of media attention this issue receives. The Crimes Against Children Research Center has completed two studies on youth Internet safety. In the first study, 1500 youth ages 10-17 were interviewed over the phone about their experiences regarding sexual harassment, solicitation, and unwanted exposure to pornography. Of the 1500 youth interviewed, 25% reported that they had experienced unwanted exposure to sexual material, 19% reported an unwanted sexual solicitation, and 6% reported that they had been harassed (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2003). The CRCC conducted a second, more in depth study of youth safety online in 2004. Results from the second study were similar to the first, with reports that 4% of youth had received “aggressive” solicitations that included attempts to contact the youth offline (Wells, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

Benefits

While there is no shortage of risk associated with adolescent use of CMC, and especially OSNs, there are also important benefits. The existence of OSNs has provided a valuable opportunity for marginalized communities to network, gain access to resources, have a public voice, and both provide and receive support. OSNs have been especially important for queer youth living in geographically isolated areas (Driver, 2006). Queer youth with access to OSNs have been able to find community based on similar interests

via the Internet, as opposed to being limited in their social interaction by geographic location. These geographical groupings often result in social, economic, and political homogeneity, which can be unwelcoming to queer youth (Russell, 2002).

In addition to the community building potential and networking value of OSNs, teens have reported experiencing closeness and connectedness through use of OSNs. In a 2006 study, Valkenburg linked OSN use to increased feelings of self-esteem in adolescents, citing a correlation between the frequency with which teens used OSNs and the frequency of positive feelings about self. Valkenburg also noted that the feedback adolescents received from their online friends increased their social-self esteem and carried over into their off-line lives. Similarly, in a small scale, qualitative study on youth experiences online, Maczewski (2002) found that youth felt strongly about their online social experiences and that they were able to connect to a wide variety of people who could offer support, guidance, and social interaction which allowed the youth extended spaces in which to develop sense-of-self.

In Boyd's conceptualization of what keeps young people on sites like MySpace and Facebook, issues of easily available "social voyeurism"/entertainment, the ability to craft a personal representation of identity, and the ability to visualize social connections and networks are central (Boyd, 2007). Boyd also notes the importance of a public list of a user's friends, as this seemed to be something highly valued by users who were concerned with their position in their social networks. Boyd's research helps to discredit some of the popular fears about strangers on MySpace. Boyd draws a connection between MySpace's popularity and the site's support of pre-existing social relationships and friends groups.

Summary

The recent advances in communication technology have revolutionized how people live, work, and socialize. While there are potential gains and advantages to these new ways of interacting, there are also risks. For teens, this technology is not “new” but rather is part of how life goes, and is an integral part of their adolescent experience. Potential risks of physical and emotional safety are made more complex by the fact that teens are actively involved in the process of establishing a sense of self and are using OSNs in that process. For an adult, online presentations-of-self may include concrete elements of identity such as occupation, marital status, or hobbies. These elements of identity are connected to the autonomy and relative freedoms that come with being an adult and typically reflect choices the adult has made. A teen on the other hand, is largely at the mercy of his or her caretakers: living, working, attending school, not as he or she may choose to do in adulthood but, rather, in the ways that are negotiated with parents or guardians.

For many teens and emerging adults the desire to participate in sites like MySpace and Facebook, despite frequent media attention on issues like Internet-bullying, sexual predators, and computer addiction, seems to be a force unto itself. This desire may come from a need for validation from peers and a space in which to experiment with social interactions and presentations of self. The potential benefits of social connectedness, self-expression, and finding community that might not exist in close geographic proximity simply outweigh the potential risk. Further research is needed to understand what it is

that draws teens and emerging adults to OSNs and holds their attention once they are there.

While much thought, research, critique, and exploration have gone into the area of adolescent development, the area of OSNs is still relatively new and thus not thoroughly investigated. Due to the large role of the OSN in the social environment of the adolescent, it is imperative that the use of OSNs be understood and integrated into clinical work with youth. Previous research has indicated that OSNs and CMCs can be both positive sources of social interaction and potentially problematic, emotionally depleted means by which to connect to others. As the majority of these studies have focused on adult use of CMCs, there is a lack of information on the implications for adolescents. Teens rely on their peers for support and feedback in their process of identity formation, often experimenting with new ways of being in the world using their peer group as a sounding board. How does this form of social interaction impact the adolescent experience, and what is it that keeps teens focused on the use of Online Social Networks?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the question “what is the impact of frequent use of Online Social Networks (OSNs) on the social experience of the late adolescent/early adult?” Because there is a dearth of research on the topic of adolescents and OSNs, I explored these questions using a qualitative, inductive approach. I conducted semi-structured interviews in-person and included open-ended, narrative questions designed to gather information on adolescents’ experiences with the OSNs MySpace and Facebook. Much of the previous research has focused on the negative consequences and potential dangers of online socializing, so I sought information on the ways that teens might benefit from OSNs.

After conducting two interviews, I realized that it would be useful to expand my study to include Facebook as well as MySpace. My initial reason for excluding Facebook was that, at the time my proposal was written, Facebook required users to have an affiliation with an educational institution (i.e., an email address ending in .edu) in order to create an account. I worried that including Facebook would skew my data reflecting the class divide that already exists in the realm of computers and technology. During my research, this policy was changed so that, currently, anyone who has a valid email address can create a Facebook account. I then modified my inclusion criteria to include Facebook users as well.

Recruitment Procedures

I selected 12 individuals between the ages of 17 and 24 who have MySpace or Facebook accounts that they use on a regular basis (at least once daily). All participants in this study met the following criteria: a) participants had a MySpace and/or Facebook account, b) participants checked that account at least once daily, c) participants were between the ages of 17 and 24, d) participants provided consent to participate in this study, e) if under the age of 18, participants provided parental consent to participate in this study.

My recruitment process was somewhat difficult and I modified the original inclusion criteria in my sample from the age range 15-19 to 17-24. I began the recruitment process by creating a MySpace account with information on the project. I then posted ads on the MySpace forums and classified sections seeking participants. I also created a flyer (see appendix E) and posted hard copies near the local high school and university.

In addition to posting ads and flyers, I asked my friend and colleagues if they had children, friends, or siblings who would be eligible for the study. This word-of-mouth approach proved to be an effective entry into my research. By having access to a few users of OSNs, I was able to contact their friends as well.

Participants

My inclusion criterion of daily access to one's OSN account, limited the participation of individuals based on class and access to computers. All of my participants possessed some form of class privilege (either attending college or owning a

computer). Nearly all had consistent computer access in their homes (N=11), and identified as white (N=11). Three participants identified as Queer, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Gay. I interviewed four people who identified as male, and eight who identified as female. The majority of participants were not religious, with three identifying as Jewish, one identifying as a “non-practicing Jew,” and eight identifying as “not religious.” A small minority of participants identified as having a disability (N=2).

This relatively homogeneous sample may be influenced by my inclusion criterion, that is that being able to access one’s OSN account daily may have limited the participation of individuals based on class and access to computers.

Procedure

Once potential participants expressed interest in the study, I provided them with an informed consent form, and a parental consent form if they were under 18 years of age, as well as a copy of the demographic survey. We then scheduled an in-person interview. At the interview I made sure they had signed and understood the consent forms, collected the demographics sheet, asked if they had any questions, and proceeded with the tape-recorded interview. Following the interview I provided each participant with a resource list for support around computer and Internet issues, as well as made sure they had my email in case they had any questions or concerns.

Data Collection

This study, and the data collection process therein, were approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review committee. All participants provided informed consent by signing forms before beginning the interview. Participants also completed the demographic information sheet, which included two additional questions regarding the MySpace and/or Facebook experience. Interviews were conducted in person in semi-public venues, most often in coffee shops. Interviews were roughly thirty minutes in length.

The interview consisted of 17 open-ended questions regarding the participant's experience with MySpace and/or Facebook. Additionally, I would often ask clarifying questions in response to the participants' answers. The questions were designed to explore some of the challenges that late teens and young adults face in their online social lives, as well as the aspects of online socializing that teens appreciate the most. Additionally, these questions were designed to elicit the role of the OSN in the adolescent and early adult social experience. I inquired about participants' likes and dislikes of OSN use using different language, at the beginning and end of the interview. My intention was to provide a second opportunity to answer the question after the participant had been discussing her or his experience for 20 minutes.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data by reading through the transcribed interviews and observing themes in each. Once I began to identify themes, I was able to begin to compile clear groups of similar responses and statements. By using highlighting markers to color code

the themes, I found that I was able to get a sense of what themes were most prevalent and what themes were perhaps only found in a few interviews. I found that there were some pieces of data that fit into more than one category I had created. I used separate copies of the interview transcripts for each category, so I was able to highlight the same passage more than once.

I noted the language used by the participants in their responses to help guide how the categories would be determined. For example, statements that included the phrase “my ex” were highlighted as part of the relationship termination category. The words “connected,” “part of,” “know what’s going on,” and “aware of” were placed in the connection category. Additionally, anecdotes that detailed feelings of inclusion in a group, appreciation or recognition by another person, or feelings of closeness, were also highlighted as part of the connection category. Stories of emotional vulnerability, the crossing of boundaries, and violation of privacy were highlighted as part of the “increased vulnerability section.”

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This section contains the findings of my interviews with 12 adolescent and early-adults who are daily users of Facebook and/or MySpace. The major findings of my study included both beneficial and potentially detrimental effects of OSN participation. Often these opposing effects were the result of the same phenomenon.

Many of the answers had multiple implications. When asked about likes and dislikes of OSNs, many participants pointed to the same piece of their online experience as the best and worst part of it. For example, the common theme of complications in ending a romantic relationship seemed to be tied to the experience of staying in touch with people from one's past, both issues of relationship dissolution. This theme of staying in touch was experienced as a positive, alluring element of OSN participation, as well as a troubling, difficult and negative element. Similarly, the experience of having superficial contact with, or knowledge of, a wide range of people seemed to be related to the sense that already deep relationships were not growing deeper through OSN use. Both of these themes imply a social experience that does not fulfill the adolescent developmental task of forming deep and meaningful relationships. Lastly, the experience of having an OSN-based miscommunication seemed connected to the experience of having one's boundaries crossed, whether intentionally or inadvertently. In several situations, miscommunications that were the result of the OSN-format led to a boundary violation.

Feelings of Connectedness and Enhanced Sense-of-Self

The experience of OSN use increasing feelings of connectedness and enhancing sense of self through self-expression came up frequently in the interviews. Many participants spoke of feeling that they are part of a group as a member of an OSN, and that they could see and find other people who share their interests and experiences quite easily. For some, this is literally the finding of a formal group based on interest. One male participant, John, spoke of sometimes using Facebook to search for people who are interested in a TV show that he likes. John's intention was not necessarily to contact any of the people his search yielded, but rather to see who popped up. John sums up the convenience of finding others that share his interests in his statement, "you can just click on [TV show he likes] and see all the people who watch that show that might be in my area." John's search yields a sense of instant community, or at least the sense that there are other people like him who live in his area. John is able to express a piece of himself by saying he likes a T.V. show and instantly find his interests reflected in a group of peers.

For others, this sense of being part of a group is more figurative, and involves less explicit searching and more information gathering. Seventeen-year-old Bethany said that using Facebook allows her to stay informed of what was going on in her social group, like "if people break up, or like, if someone like dyes their hair or gets a tattoo, there's always pictures of it. Or people put that kind of stuff on their 'status.'" By being informed about the activities of her friends, Bethany feels more able to be an active member in her group.

Bethany went on to say that Facebook is “one of the most popular forms of self expression” at her high school. She also added that “you can put whatever [on your page], and like have everything out there for people to look at, it is so easy for your friends to look at the same things as you and be connected that way.” Bethany’s description of the function of putting personal information on an OSN just begins to hint at the role of self-expression in feeling connected to peers on OSNs.

Self-expression on OSNs can happen in a variety of ways. Many participants highlighted uploading, seeing, and sharing photographs as their “favorite” part of Facebook or MySpace. There was great variation in the descriptions of the types of photographs and their intended functions. Twenty-two-year-old Anne said that she had decided not to use any pictures in which she could be identified. She has received feedback from other users on the site that this choice is unpopular.

I’ve been tagged for pictures because I don’t have any pictures where I’m the only person in the picture...it doesn’t make sense for me to have my setting be ‘private’ but I also want to have some sense of control over who can look at me.

For Anne, pictures of herself are private and while her choice is unpopular she feels strongly enough about it that she chooses to live with the disparaging comments.

Twenty-four-year-old Julie spoke of the connecting function that pictures have had for her. Julie described her picture as “me essentially pushing my boobs together while I’m wearing a Darth Vader mask...[laughing]... it’s an awesome photo.” Similar to Anne, Julie cannot be identified in her photo, but Julie’s experience has been quite different. Julie said that she hoped the picture would make people laugh, and that so far, that has been the primary reaction. Julie shared that an old acquaintance from high school had contacted her out of the blue just to comment on her picture, which made her feel

connected as a result of how she had expressed herself using a photograph. For others, the function of the photographs is to give a visual representation of the fullness of one's social life, desirability, or to act as evidence of interests. This includes using pictures of travels, parties attended, arty photographs, and sexually provocative or suggestive pictures.

While self-expression through the use of photographs can foster feelings of connectedness, it seems they can also lead to unwelcome contact. Nineteen-year-old Caitlin stated that her current photo is an artistic shot of the shadows of herself and her boyfriend on a beach. Caitlin went on to say that she chose this picture and kept her setting on 'private' with the intention of "not getting messages from random people being like, "you're cute, where do you live?" or whatever, 'cause I hate that." Caitlin said that she has had this experience of unwelcome contact in response to photographs in the past. Despite Caitlin's negative experiences with pictures on OSNs, Caitlin felt photographs were one of the most valuable aspects of her OSN experience and especially in terms of feeling connected. About her online friends, Caitlin said,

You can see pictures of them, and like the pictures they've put up, and for me it's like the best way to feel like I can understand what's going on in their life and it's like, they went on this trip and I got to see pictures of it even though I wasn't there. And I feel like I can still be part of what ever is going on with them.

Despite the emphasis placed on photographs, self-expression in OSN pages does go beyond the use of photographs. While most pages include the likes and dislikes of users, pages are also personalized. For example, pages are personalized by use of pictures, omitting or answering questions, use of Facebook "applications" (extras that allow wider creativity in page design), and the inclusion of music, videos, and personalized

backgrounds on MySpace. There was some variation across participants in terms of what they chose to include on their profiles and why. However, regardless of what items were chosen, most participants described their pages as including only information that was “not too personal.” For some this meant listing the books and movies they enjoyed, but not their religious or political beliefs. For others it meant sharing details of political orientation and career.

One participant, 19-year-old Jenna, said that her decision to remove the “status” function from her Facebook caused considerable discussion in her freshman dorm.

At one point I decided to remove my relationship status all together and I got a lot of reactions from people...[they] started coming up to me in person and asking me if I was seeing someone...it sucked, people made assumptions just because I removed the status.

Jenna’s sense that her relationship status was private did not seem to be shared by her online friends, echoing the finding that there is much variation in what people think is private in their online lives.

In addition to the choices users make about what information and extras are on a page, the choice of which OSN to use seemed to be equally important. While most participants had accounts on both MySpace and Facebook, the majority of users had a strong preference for one or the other. The participants who self-identified as queer expressed a preference for MySpace. For Marcus, who self-identifies as queer, this preference comes from the sense of security he feels in MySpace’s privacy options. “I keep my page really well regulated, so only people that I love and trust have access to it.” This ability to choose who will be viewing his page makes him feel safe in his online social world.

In contrast, however, the majority of people interviewed expressed a preference for Facebook, often citing the intensity of visual layout, the pop-ups, and the multi-media aspects of MySpace as being less appealing to them. Twenty-four-year-old Ben very candidly said that MySpace simply was “not cool anymore,” and that there were more people he was interested in talking to on Facebook. Bethany shared her belief that MySpace users are “older” and not in school which does not appeal to her.

Just as personal choices in self-presentation impact offline social experiences, choices regarding self-expression in OSN use can be determining factors in the experience of the OSN.

Relationship Dissolution

Much as OSNs allow users to feel more connected with friends by sharing pictures, updates, and information easily, they also allow users to maintain connections with people from their pasts. The experience of being able to stay in touch with friends and acquaintances from earlier phases of life was shared by all of the participants in the study. Participants indicated that their online friends were people they knew from high school, summer camp, traveling and studying abroad, extracurricular activities and sports, previously held jobs, and people they had met through other friends or at social gatherings. Very few said they had friends online who they had not met in person. Most participants stated that they were able to stay connected to people from the past and could “see what was going on for them” without having to put in the effort required for maintaining offline contact.

Participants had a range of feelings about this phenomenon. Some felt that it was great to see what was going on in the lives of people from the past, and enjoyed the noncommittal nature of the online OSN relationship. In discussing the importance of her online social life, 24-year-old Marta stated,

People are accessible, people all over the country, on MySpace they're all in one place. So if I want to send a message to somebody whose info I might have like, hidden away somewhere, I can just, ya know, look them up and they're right there. It's a really quick way to stay in contact with people who are far away from me.

Marta went on to say that this was especially important for her as a member of a small, closely-knit queer activist community in which people were scattered all over the country.

Many participants told stories of people who had gotten in touch through an OSN who they otherwise would not know anything about. Anne noted that one of her favorite aspects of Facebook is that "it makes finding people that you would never in real life still be in communication with easy." Anne mentioned hearing an update on someone she went to elementary school with: "I mean, I heard from [an elementary school friend]! How cool is that? That wouldn't have happened anywhere else." For Anne, this was exciting and pleasing.

For others this felt like an incomplete way of being connected to someone at best, and at worst an impediment in their process of terminating and recovering from the loss of the relationship. This experience was frequently discussed in the context of terminating romantic relationships, and the experience of having difficulty in ending the relationship when the individual had access to intimate, day-to-day details of their ex-partner's life. Anne spoke of feeling as if she had both violated and been violated in the

context of a relationship with an ex, when she saw a photograph of the inside of her ex's new home that he shared with his new girlfriend.

I don't like that I'm seeing the inside of their house, or the art on their walls, and I don't like that his new girlfriend has a picture of us (her and me) hugging. I think it's really fucked up and I think it's a really poor substitute for a friendship. Because, at the same time I'm aware of changes in his life, I don't actually know him anymore, and I still look.

Seeing these intimate details put Anne in the position of having to hold both her own experience of the break up, as well as the public image of the break up that her ex was presenting online, which may or may not line up with Anne's experience. In this case, that Anne's ex's new girlfriend had a picture depicting a friendship between Anne and the current girlfriend felt like a misrepresentation and an invalidation of Anne's experience. Anne described effortless contact that did not foster the development of a deeper relationship. In fact, Anne stated that the superficial relationship resulted from this contact did not feel satisfactory or even livable to her.

Another participant, Ben, spoke of navigating an awkward dynamic with his ex-girlfriend when he found that he had to ask her explicitly to "be his friend" online. Though their relationship had been over for more than a year, Ben found that he was still having contact with her online, but not in a direct way.

I mean, I never communicate with her on there. If I ever communicate with her, I email her alone or talk to her on the phone. But, I've seen her page; I've definitely looked at her page...it's not that big of a deal, I guess. Um, I am her friend and I had to ask her to be my friend.

Ben's experience belies the subtle dance of indirect communication that many participants spoke of between themselves and ex-partners online. It seemed that every

participant had a story of an interaction, miscommunication, or fantasy of communication with their ex.

For some, the ex experience was painful, a violation or experience of having their personal boundaries crossed. Nineteen-year-olds Caitlin and Jenna shared stories of boundary violations by ex-boyfriends. Both stories involved the exes seeking out information on the girls' new boyfriends. In Caitlin's situation, her ex-boyfriend used her password to access her account, read personal messages, viewed information on her new boyfriend, and while he did not send messages to anyone, he made sure she knew he had accessed her account. Caitlin said that she had felt "very violated, and angry, and just generally pissed off."

Jenna's story was similar in that her ex had used Facebook to keep tabs on Jenna. Jenna said that she felt Facebook could be problematic because "it's hard when people have access to your life and your page, and not only to your page, but pages of people you correspond with." Jenna shared the story of her ex making frequent and disparaging comments on her life and romantic choices:

My ex saw that I was talking with this guy and then he was like, 'you can do so much better than this guy, I read his stuff, and he's not that good looking.' He would comment on his activities and be like, 'he's not right for you.'

Jenna said that she was not sure how to handle this, because her ex was looking at her new boyfriend's page, which was public, and she felt it would be unfair to ask her new boyfriend to make his page private, or to block her ex. This was a way that Jenna's ex was making it very difficult to end the relationship and using an OSN to gain access to her.

Nineteen-year-old Ella told a story of an ex-boyfriend engaging in stalking behavior and emotional abuse.

For eight months he was looking at my FB and hacking into my account and keeping tabs on everything that I'd been doing. And so he would ask me about something and I'd say no, that didn't happen and he'd want to talk about it and tell me I was lying. And it was really, really bad. There was a lot of fighting.

Despite these boundary violations, Ella was still concerned with what her ex thought of her. Ella found herself using her representation of herself on Facebook to communicate with her ex indirectly.

I would specifically put status or write on other people's walls, like I didn't want him to think that I was just wallowing in my room all the time and I wanted him to think that I was happy and spending time with friends and stuff. I'd put stuff on there that would make him think that I was happier than I was, and I would write on other people's walls so it would look like I was talking to more people.

Nineteen-year-old Jenna had a similar experience after ending her relationship, and would alter her status in the hopes that her ex would see it:

Um, after we broke up, he was checking mine all the time. So I would say, 'J is having fun and going out all the time with her friends,' instead of like, 'J is sad and sitting by herself.'

Ella and Jenna's experiences of hoping their exes would see their pages and make assumptions about their lives based on that information was a frequent theme in the interviews. Marta said that even she though loves MySpace, she feels that "it's really conducive to really shitty communication...it's often really indirect and manipulative communication that happens." Julie shared a fantasy about this type of indirect communication with an ex:

My ex is on Facebook, and if I were to change my picture right now to something cuter...I guess it would be like, 'ha, ha, ha, fuck you! Look how cute I look and I'm not contacting you.' I know a lot of people get really excited to switch their status from "single" to "in a relationship" with the hopes that their ex will see.

Julie went on to describe her feeling about her ex's presence in her online life by saying, "Our worlds are so far apart but there's this tiny little piece that rubs together and there's something really intriguing about that..."

Julie shared how this relationship "needed to be over," and how, for the most part it was. Julie said that Facebook was really the only way she had any contact with her ex, and that it kept him in her mind and gave her access to his life.

Twenty-two-year-old Nikki said that she had some worries about being on Facebook and how easily people she with whom she had ended relationships could access her information.

I feel as though people can just follow you. And I don't like that in terms of previous relationships, with ex boyfriends and stuff. You can just go on and it's almost like stalking...it's uncomfortable that you don't know who's actually looking at your profile and it's almost intrusive.

Nikki's worries also touch on the anonymous nature of OSN use. There is a fair amount of mystery involved, with limited accountability for one's actions.

Twenty-two-year-old Christa said that she uses Facebook to maintain a romantic relationship that started while she was traveling abroad. While Christa really cares for this man, she is also aware that he is on the other side of the world and knows that he is having romantic and/or sexual relationships with other women. Christa finds this distressing and notes that she occasionally uses Facebook to "spy on others, which is never good because then I end up making assumptions from things I see, especially messages from [his] ex-girlfriends. And then I get insecure and angry."

This way of being connected has made it possible for Christa to stay in a relationship that does not yield what she needs, and has ample room for speculation and

assumption about the actions, intentions, and desires of the other person. This relationship is maintained, but only superficially, and in ways that can and often do yield significant distress for Christa.

That many of the post-dissolution or re-connecting relationships on OSN are superficial speaks to the theme of relationships not growing deeper via OSN use.

Superficial Relationships Online and Deep Relationships Offline

Another theme that came up in the interviews was that OSN use fosters the accumulation of numerous superficial relationships, but does not deepen or enhance closeness in relationships that are preexisting offline. Seventeen-year-old Bethany stated that she while she was “on [Facebook] like, all the time,” she “hardly ever looks at her [best friend’s] page, ‘cause, we talk so much and stuff and are always hanging out offline.”

Ella, a 19-year-old college freshman spoke of feeling conflicted about the friends she has on Facebook, because it feels good when they remember her birthday, but she also believes that the only reason that they remember is that Facebook sends reminders of that type of information. Ella also feels that these friends who email her on her birthday do not really care about her, but she likes the feeling that these friends exist in large numbers. As she says,

It's the best and worst at the same time. You feel like people care about you and want to talk to you, but it's kind of like a surface thing, because at the same time of feeling really wanted and cared about, people write on your walls and say nice things, but it's like you know underneath, they're really only socially networking themselves. So it's like a double-edged sword.

Twenty-four-year-old Anne discussed the sense that she could contact people via OSNs and let them know she noticed them and cared how they were doing in a way that felt safe and had a relatively low risk of rejection. Anne mentioned that she likes the networking aspect and that she can have greater control over the depth or intensity of conversations:

There's an advantage to it being somewhat one-sided. I can write my sister a note telling her I'm glad she got a job without listening to her go on and on about her new fucking pair of shoes... and at school, even though there's a lot of competition, we're also really supportive, but it could be really weird to call and say, 'I notice you're having a really shitty day, are you ok?' but using Facebook, it's like fine.

Anne's use of Facebook allows her to connect with a greater range of people, but not engage in the parts of the relationship that she does not enjoy. As for her closer, offline friends, Anne said that she might use OSNs to share photos with them, but that the majority of their interactions take place offline.

Marta occasionally uses MySpace to share very personal information, especially when she blogs, but has noticed that people will comment on her pictures, likes/dislikes, etc., but that "people don't really comment on the stuff I write about myself or my personal information." Marta has been very intentional about who has access to her page, and feels strongly that "MySpace is not a great representation of what people's lives look like," but rather a way of connecting with people and maintaining contact that has the potential for "creepy and awful" communication about anything of depth. Marta stated her belief that "emotional safety and MySpace are bad news together."

Many participants spoke of having the greatest level of interest in the page updates of people they were not in close contact or relationship with. Frequently, this

interest was focused on the activities of an ex-partner, but also, this interest appeared in old friends and acquaintances as well.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

As the social landscape shifts and fills with ever-expanding options in technological communication, unknown and unseen participants, and plenty of room for misinterpretation, how are young people adapting their social experiences? The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the inclusion of Online Social Networks (OSNs) into the adolescent/emerging adult social experience. Key findings of this study included issues related to relationship termination and feelings of connectedness. Additionally, the results included themes related to emotional safety and boundary violations.

The feelings of connectedness that many participants described are consistent with several articles that assert that use of OSNs can bolster feelings of well-being and connectedness. In the studies of Valkenburg, Maczewski, and Boyd, both self-expression and connection with peers were named as beneficial results of OSN participation. Many participants in this study spoke of feeling connected, often as a result of how they were able to express themselves, while on an OSN. This beneficial experience of connectedness was true for the participants who identify as members of the queer community, in my study as well. The majority of participants who identify as queer noted that they used their OSNs in part to stay in touch with other members of the queer community who they no longer lived close to geographically. These results are consistent with those of both Russell and Driver.

An area of inconsistency with the literature, as well as the media hype, is that of boundary violations and computer addiction/overuse. While bullying, sexual assault and

harassment, and overuse are among the main parental concerns for young people using OSNs, the results of my research indicate that the predominant risks of online socializing appear to be closer to those of being an adolescent/emerging adult offline. Issues of emotional safety and the challenges of navigating peer pressure, new intensity and intimacy in friendships, and development of sense of self were central in the concerns of participants in this study. Though many of the participants made disparaging or joking comments about the amount of time they were spending on their OSN, they were still functioning in their offline lives. Addiction to OSNs, it seems, was not a problem for the participants of this study.

The main concerns described by the participants were social and mostly centered around romantic relationships. This discrepancy in the perceived risks of adults and the experienced risks of adolescents is a point for further examination. If adolescents and late adults are finding that they have similar concerns about their online and offline social experiences, then there is a very real and impacting type of communication happening online, and it is just as important to understand and examine as socializing that occurs offline.

Many of the participants responded to questions about safety by addressing physical safety issues; primarily that they felt they knew how to keep their personal information safe and that there was very limited risk involved in their OSN participation. Those who did address emotional safety explicitly responded quite differently. Several spoke of feelings of vulnerability, or a sense that the kinds of communication that occur on MySpace and Facebook are indirect, manipulative, and potentially harmful. This is another area for further examination. This is significant because of the relative newness

of OSNs, and the lack of research on how this kind of socializing might impact the quality of young people's relationships in the long term.

There have been media efforts to raise awareness about emotional safety issues online (bullying, harassment, etc), but the results of my study indicate that there is a common experience of a more subtle experience of emotional danger. The results of this study indicate that the emotional risk involved in OSN use has more to do with communicating indirectly and tailoring a presentation-of-self to elicit a particular response.

One of the strengths of this study was the use of in-person, semi-structured interviews. I believe that participants became more comfortable as the interview progressed and were willing to share highly personal information with me, at least in part due to a feeling of safety and rapport. Additionally, I believe the order in which I asked questions fit well with the easing-in process. My choice to ask a similar question at the beginning and end of the interview seems to have been valuable in that in each interview the answer given to the question at the beginning of the interview was different from the answer given at the end of the interview. I think that this may be useful in future research because of the power dynamic of an adult asking a younger person about their online social experiences and the importance of rapport in this situation. I believe it is important to be aware of the context of the adolescent/early adult online experience, which is that there has been much parental/caring adult concern about what exactly happens on OSNs.

Some limitations of this study were the sample. The sample was primarily white and upper middle class. Only one participant in this study did not have a computer in their home, which may have skewed the results with regards to how participants used

their OSNs.² As a result of the sample diversity, the ability to generalize from this study is limited.

This study has yielded important results for clinicians who work with young people. From the data it is clear that online interactions have the potential to produce emotions similar to those experienced from offline interactions, and that there is increased potential for boundary violations and miscommunications. The results of this study also indicate that OSN use can complicate the processes of relationship dissolution and grief.

It would be useful for clinicians to have a sense of the language and mores of OSNs if they want to be able to communicate easily and effectively with clients who are OSN users. For example, if a client says that something that was in an ex's status was upsetting, it is important to know what that means.

Additionally, clinicians need to have a sense of the ways that participating in an OSN can shift the developmental process. Because forming deep, intimate, and meaningful relationships is a developmental task of adolescents and emerging adults, and using OSNs for social connection in some ways stymies this process, it is important to understand the context.

NOTES

¹ Friendster is an OSN once popular in the U.S. and now popular in Asia. Friendster is similar to MySpace and Facebook, but offers fewer options for profile personalizing. The declining use of Friendster in the U.S. has been attributed to their policy of deleting profiles that are not representative of actual people, especially those of bands (Boyd, 2007).

² Youth who have in-home access to computers use OSNs for different types of social interactions than youth who only have access in public places like libraries.

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APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW APPROVAL LETTER

November 28, 2007

Nora Heins

Dear Nora,

Your second set of revisions has been reviewed and all is now in order. We are therefore able to give final approval to your study. I do have one minor suggestion. After you insert in the Participant Consent that you will destroy their materials should they withdraw, you immediately say you will use the findings in publication etc. It sounds strange. Please move the sentence about publishing or presenting up to paragraph one right after you speak about the thesis. Just send Laurie the corrected Consent for the permanent file.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

Parental Consent

February, 2008

Dear Parent or Guardian of a Potential Research Participant,

My name is Nora Heins and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study on the role of MySpace in the adolescent experience. This study will be used for my master's thesis. I may use the results of this study for publication or presentation. Additional information about my project is available on-line at www.MySpace.com/MySpace_thesis.

Your child's participation is requested because s/he is between the ages of 15 and 19 and uses MySpace at least once daily. If s/he chooses to participate, I will interview her/him about her/his experience with, and thoughts and feelings about, using MySpace. In addition, I will ask your child to provide some personal and demographic information. The interview will be conducted in person, will be tape-recorded, and will last about one hour.

The benefits of participating in this study are that your child will have the opportunity to contribute to an increased clinical understanding of why MySpace is important to teens, and to help inform a greater understanding of the role and function MySpace plays in the adolescent experience. Your child will also have the opportunity to discuss his/her experiences in an open and accepting environment. Unfortunately, I am not able to offer financial compensation for his/her participation.

There are no serious risks involved with this study. However, it is possible that some interview questions that seek personal information about self and social life may feel uncomfortable. If your child has experienced any painful events, like bullying, while using MySpace, the interview may raise some negative feelings. I will also ask your child about her/his sexual orientation and how s/he identifies racially as part of the demographic information sheet. I am a mandated reporter, which means that I am legally required to report any child abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), self-harm or harm to others, or elder abuse to the Department of Social Services (DSS). As an added precaution, a list of mental health resources will be provided to all participants.

Your child's participation in this study is confidential. I will label audio recordings and interview notes with a code instead of your child's real name. In addition, I will keep all study materials, including those with your child's name, in a locked file drawer during the thesis process and for three years thereafter. In the written thesis, I will not use demographic information that will identify your child.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your child may refuse to answer any interview or demographic question(s), and may withdraw from the study at any time until March 15, 2008; after this date, I will begin writing the Results and Discussion sections of my thesis. If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, all materials related to him or her will be destroyed immediately.

Please return this consent form to me, using the enclosed stamped envelope, as soon as possible to indicate that you are allowing your child to participate in the study (I have included an additional copy of this consent form for your records). If I do not hear from you by then, I will follow up with a telephone call.

If you have any further questions about this study, participation, rights of participants, or this consent form, please feel free to contact me via email at nheins@smith.edu or at Two Brattle Center, 617-441-7500 x362.

You may also contact the Smith School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you for your time, and I greatly look forward to the possibility of having your child as a participant in my study.

Sincerely,

Nora Heins
nheins@smith.edu

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Informed Consent Form

February, 2008

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Nora Heins and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study on the role of MySpace in the adolescent experience. This study will be used for my master's thesis, which is a requirement for me to graduate. I may use the results of this study for publication or presentation. You can check out more information about the study on MySpace at www.MySpace.com/MySpace_thesis.

I'm asking for your participation because you are between the ages of 15 and 19 and you use MySpace at least once daily. As part of the study, I will ask you to fill out a demographic questionnaire about yourself (this includes information about age, race, sexual orientation, etc), and to answer some questions in a one-on-one interview. The interview will be conducted in person, will be tape-recorded, and will last about one hour.

From participating in this study, you will have a chance to contribute information about why MySpace is important to people your age. This information could help teachers, counselors, and parents understand how MySpace can be helpful for people your age.

A few of the questions in the interview will be pretty personal and it is possible that you might feel uncomfortable with some of them. For example, I will ask about your social life and how you connect with friends. If you've had any bad experiences while using MySpace, like being bullied or harassed, the interview may be upsetting and really hard. I will also ask you about your sexual orientation and how you identify racially in the demographic information section that you fill out before the interview. Just so you know, I am a mandated reporter, which means that I am legally required to report any child abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), self-harm or harm to others, or elder abuse to the Department of Social Services (DSS). You may choose to not answer any questions in the interview or demographic section.

Your participation in this study is confidential. I will label interview tapes and interview notes with a code instead of your real name. In addition, I will keep all information with your name on it in a locked file drawer during the thesis process. I will be keeping all of the study materials for three years after the study, also in a locked container. In the written thesis, I will not use any information that would identify you.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any interview question(s), and you may pull out of the study at any time by writing me a note that says you don't want to participate. You can also decide during the interview that you don't want to do it. You have until March 15, 2008 to withdraw from the study; after this date, I will begin writing the Results and Discussion sections of my thesis. If you do choose to pull out of the study, I will destroy any of the study materials that have anything to do with you, right away.

If you have any further questions about this study, your participation, your rights as a participant, or this consent form, please feel free to contact me at nheins@gmail.com or at Two Brattle Center, 617-441-7500 x362. You can also talk to someone at the Smith School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (they make sure your rights are being taken care of in this study) at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you for your time, and I am really looking forward to having you as a participant in my study!

Sincerely,

Nora Heins
nheins@smith.edu

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How often do you check your MySpace/Facebook?
2. How long have you been on MySpace/Facebook?
3. What do you like about MySpace/Facebook?
4. What do you not like about MySpace/Facebook?
5. What do you do when you're on MySpace/Facebook?
6. What is your page like? (Pictures? Music? Art? Video clips?)
7. Who are your friends on MySpace/Facebook? What are your relationships with your online friends like outside of MySpace/Facebook?
8. When you add information or make changes to your page, is there anyone in particular that you hope will see it?
10. Do you notice when your friends (or anyone who's page you view regularly) make changes on their pages? Are there particular changes that you notice more than others?
9. Who views your page? Do you view their page(s), too?
11. What kind of reactions have you had when you notice changes on other people's pages?
12. What kind of responses have you gotten about stuff you've put on your MySpace/Facebook?
13. What is the best thing about MySpace/Facebook?

14. What is the worst thing about MySpace/Facebook?

15. Have you ever felt worried about your safety on MySpace/Facebook? If so, in what way?

16. Have you ever had a miscommunication on MySpace/Facebook?

17. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your experience using MySpace/Facebook?

APPENDIX D

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

What is your current grade in school? (high school, college, not in school)

How old are you?

How do you identify yourself racially?

Do you have a computer in your home?

Do you identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, or Queer? (y/n)

Do you identify yourself as someone who has a disability? (y/n)

Are you part of a religious community? (y/n)

If so, what community?

1. Something I would really like people who don't use MySpace/Facebook, and are critical of it, to know about MySpace/Facebook is:

2. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all important and 10 being extremely important, how would you rate the role of MySpace/Facebook in your life?

APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT FLYER

