

# ***The Digital Teenage Landscape***

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## ***Introduction***

How much time teens spend online, and what they do when they're there, has been a topic of major interest to parents and advertisers alike in recent years. Adolescents have surpassed adults in the total amount of hours spent online and are spending increasingly more money per year on Internet purchases than ever before. Extreme usage and the fear of potential socializing with strangers has spurred parental concerns about Internet addiction and the likelihood of teens revealing too much personal information leading to an increased risk of online predation.

In the last year, the media has given much attention to the publishing of teen's personal information on their MySpace personal web pages further adding to parental fears of online harassment, or "cyber stalking". There is also an increasing frequency of media stories reporting that teens are posting photos depicting drug use, illegal drinking and sexual images and comments that point to an epidemic of rampant online dangers facing today's youth.

Pride and credibility are at stake when publicly posting photos of such behaviors. In reaction to postings found on MySpace profiles, many schools have taken disciplinary action against students, including expulsion. A closer look at this site was needed in order to validate or refute the media craze about these supposed dangers.

## ***Research Purpose***

The purpose of this research was to investigate the teen usage pattern of MySpace.com by selecting a random sample of male and female teens. A content analysis of a random selection of online teen profiles was chosen due to the sheer volume of subjects available coupled with the intense media coverage surrounding the perceived habits of these teens. According to mass media articles and news broadcasts, there was a substantial amount of publicly accessible personal information posted on each MySpace profile (e.g. full names, addresses, phone numbers, after-school jobs, etc.). This appears to be happening despite the site's warning against disclosing such information.

Another aspect of our study focused on how teens use the Internet to develop new face-to-face relationships from people they meet online. This was researched in order to explore the concerns parents have about children meeting strangers online despite the reports from the literature review stating this is not happening.

## **Summary of Literature Review**

The first half of this study's literature review sought to explore prior research on the formation of identity for adolescents in terms of their Internet use. This review investigated the opportunities and current usage of blogging, parental concerns regarding excess use, the implications of revealing private information, and the creation of personal web pages as a mode of self expression. A 2005 Press Democrat article by Guy Kovner reports the findings of a survey done by the Polly Klaas foundation which found that 42% of teens have posted information about themselves online so others could see and contact them and as many as 25% have discussed sex online with someone they have never meet.

Kovner's article also asserts that current online communities, such as MySpace.com, are frequently used by teens to advertise their full names and addresses as well as phone numbers. There is little research conducted to establish a means to stopping Internet addiction and privacy invasion before it starts instead choosing merely to study the effects of the aftermath. Most articles call for the responsibilities of the parent to monitor and talk to kids about these issues but statistics show parents are not educated about online teen activities (Rickwood, 2004).

The second part of the literature review focused on reviewing existing reports why Instant Messaging (IM) is the preferred method of online teen communication, what aspects make it appealing, what the usage patterns are and what concerns parents have about their teen's online activities. What follows is a brief synopsis of the major findings from both reviews in each category.

### **Blogging**

Internet users aged 14-17 consistently cited entertainment, information seeking and social uses as their chief reasons for using the medium (Eastin, 2005). Therefore since blogging covers all of these bases, it is not surprising that 19% of teens keep a blog and twice as many read blogs or work on similar kinds of online content for other people (Huffaker, 2005). Blogs also lead to the connection of entire online communities and gives a sense of peer connectedness, effecting the creation of their identity.

### **Appeal**

Shiu and Lenhart (2004, 11) found that 62 % of teens aged 14-18 use IM as their primary form of online communication. Research by Grinter and Palen (2002) found the strong desire among teens to increase their opportunities for socialization was the major contributor to the popularity of IM. They also determined that a teen's online social group directly mirrored that of their

offline circle of friends. Other research also showed that Internet use by teens results in many positive face-to-face relationships and that teens spend a lot of time online with already existing friends and peers from their schools and communities (Katz & Rice, 2002; Gross, 2005).

### **Usage Patterns**

Nearly 50% of teens report using IM on a daily basis, with 30% indicating using IM multiple times a day (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Although research indicates that over 1/3 of teens (36%) have less than 25 buddies, there is a substantial number (21%) who have between 100-200 buddies which would seem to conflict with the dominant theory that teen online peer groups mirror their offline groups (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005).

### **Parental Concerns**

While 61% of parents say they monitor their children's usage of the Internet, only 38% of their children stated their Internet habits were monitored (Wang, Bianchi & Raley, 2005). In spite of the research that has shown most IM connections occur with people "met off the Internet" and over 80% of teen IM communication is with friends met in school (Gross, 2004), there is still significant parental concern over teen's online communication with strangers.

Parents worry that their children may be exposed to many online dangers such as cyber-stalking and identity theft (Wang, Bianchi & Raley, 2005; Herring, 2004). These concerns about online predators are understandable when considering that there were more than 2,600 incidents of adults using the Internet to entice children last year reported by the Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

### ***Methodology***

With over thirteen million registered teen accounts and new ones created everyday, MySpace profile samples were chosen for the content analysis to determine how teens were sharing information online. MySpace is a free social networking site that allows users to create a personal webpage that is published on the World Wide Web. Users can also link to other members through a "friends" list and can communicate using direct comments, blogging features and sharing of images and videos.

The following sections explain the collection of further data collected to validate or refute these findings based on a small sample of teens from San Diego, California. This study was developed to test the assumptions of the mass media, the online

usage patterns of teens, and parental concerns.

### ***Contextual Factors***

The sample population examined in both methods of data collection was composed of residents in San Diego, California with MySpace accounts and may not be representative of the entire United States population. California is known for having a unique culture that is sometimes very different than other states. Due to time and budget restraints, the sample size for this study included approximately 100 teenagers, and results may not reflect the habits of the entire 13 million teens currently registered on MySpace.

When creating the survey instrument that was used in this study, most of the categories were completely objective. However, several items (such as what constituted a sexual picture) were not. Both team members discussed the issues and aligned their interpretations prior to individual analysis. Additionally, team members took notes during the coding that they discussed before agreeing on their final findings and coding. Differences in interpretation also may lessen the transferability of many of our findings.

### ***Participants***

Our content analysis included a sampling of 40 user profiles (20 male and 20 female) from MySpace.com, a social networking and online community site. The MySpace online community website was chosen due its increasing popularity with the teen-age group we sought to investigate. In addition to the content analysis of the MySpace profiles, an online survey was distributed to 61 San Diego based high school students who have a MySpace account.

## Instrument

A twenty item coding sheet was developed to systematically analyze the selected user profiles. Items for analysis included the last time users had used the site, their use of blogs, an examination of personal information, the use of pictures and music to further self-expression and the depiction of drug use and/or sexual pictures, author and friend comments and the stated reasons for having a MySpace account. Table 1 contains a complete listing of the data collection sections.

After performing the content analysis, a ten-question survey was distributed to 61 high school students using SurveyMonkey.com, an online survey creator (see: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=872642044315>). The survey created was used to supplement the information not apparent on the MySpace profiles (e.g. number of people frequently contacted which they had no previous off line contact).

The survey was organized into the following four sections:

- *Section 1* asked about the frequency of their use of MySpace.com was also looked at to establish a better understanding of the ages and usage patterns of the surveyed students. It also collected demographic data like age, sex, and religion to ensure we were examining students in the correct 16-18 year old age group we wish to study, and to uncover any trends about certain kinds of teenagers using the site.
- *Section 2* asked about how many friends the met online that they have had any offline contact with and whether they have been asked to meet offline. The intent of these questions was to determine if these teens merely continue their offline cohort communication online (as indicated by our literature review) or whether they engaged in developing new connections with people they previously had no contact with (as perceived by the major media and parents).
- *Section 3* examined their usage of key MySpace features. From our literature review, we determined that parents are highly concerned that their teenagers are sharing of too much information about themselves. The features of blogging and bulletin broadcasting are areas that lend themselves towards distributing high levels of personal information and

**Table 1**

### **Coding Sheet Items**

Date of Coding
School
Sex
Screen Name
Last Login
Videos?
Blogs?
Full Name
Phone Number
# of Friends
# of Pictures
Sexual Orientation (S/G/Bi)
Religion
Sexual Pics (#, Comments)
Why on MySpace?
Who do you want to meet?
Age?
Sexual Comments (by Author)
Sexual Comments (by friends)
Ref. to Party/Drugs (by Friends)
Ref. to Party/Drugs (by Author)
Relationship Status
General Comments

the bulletin board page within each personal profile on MySpace where groups of friends can post event information and invitations for free. The ability to blog, which is like an online personal diary, is also connected to every personal profile and is viewable by anyone with access to the World Wide Web.

- *Section 4* focused on their parents' knowledge of their teens' MySpace account, if they have ever been harassed, if they posted their full name and if they thought there is a reason for parents to be concerned about the teen activities online.

## Collecting Data

Using ten economically diverse high schools in San Diego (Crawford, El Cajon, Granite Hills, Grossmont, Hoover, La Jolla, Madison, Morse, Patrick Henry, Scripps Ranch), we selected the 4th and 14th male and females profiles listed by Myspace for students between the ages of 16 and 19. This sample was chosen to garner a diversity of teenage demographic data from both genders in San Diego. The filtering capability of the search algorithms on MySpace.com and the time constraints involved in the project focused the decision to choose teens based on the high school they attend. The summary for the findings for the 40 MySpace profiles analysis are summarized in Table 2. For a complete listing of the profile coding results see the attached spreadsheet file titled MySpaceCoding.xls.

The online survey discussed earlier was given to students (also between ages 16 and 18) at Serra High School in San Diego. Each student had a MySpace account and was a member of a computer class on campus (i.e. web design, graphic design or yearbook). The students were told that their information was strictly confidential and their answers were not traceable directly to them. They were also informed of the overall research intent and how their responses would be used. The summary of the survey results is listed in Table 3.

**Table 2**  
**Key Statistics From Profile Coding**

Last log in last week	100%
Used full name	10%
Used blogs	54%
Phone #	0%
Video's	0%
Gay/Bi	5%
Average # of Friends	244
Avg.Age	17
Reason for Being On	Friends
Average # of Pictures	9 out of 12 slots
Sexual Pictures/Comments	50%
Avg Sexual Comment:Author	0.6
Avg Sexual Comment:Friends	1.9
Avg Drug/Prty Reference: Author	2.4
Avg Drug/Prty Reference: Friends	0.3
Religion	
N/A	33%
Christian	28%
Catholic	15%
Agnostic	13%
Buddhist	5%
Asian Christian	3%
Jewish	3%
Middle Eastern	3%

**Table 3**  
**Survey Results**

<b>1</b>	<b>How old are you?</b>		
<i>n=60</i>	14	3	5.0%
	15	10	16.7%
	16	18	30.0%
	17	19	31.7%
	18	9	15.0%
	19	1	1.7%
<b>2</b>	<b>On average, how often do you check your MySpace account?</b>		
<i>n=61</i>	More than one a day	15	24.6%
	Once a day	18	29.5%
	Once every few days	18	29.5%
	Once per week	0	0.0%
	Once per month	2	3.3%
	Other *	8	13.1%
<b>3</b>	<b>Have you met anyone on MySpace who you now see or socialize with offline (e.g. face to face)? If so, how many?</b>		
<i>n=54</i>	No	30	55.6%
	Yes	24	44.4%
	Of those that said yes:		
	1	5	20.8%
	2	4	16.7%
	3	3	12.5%
	4	1	4.2%
	5	3	12.5%
	6	1	4.2%
	10	1	4.2%
	Yes but not exact	6	25.0%
<b>4</b>	<b>Have you initiated offline contact with someone you connected with online? If so, what happened? If not, why?</b>		
<i>n=52</i>	Yes	36	69.2%
	No	16	30.8%
<b>5</b>	<b>How often have you used the blogging feature for your own account?</b>		
<i>n=60</i>	Never	31	51.7%
	1-2 Times	18	30.0%
	3-5 Times	7	11.7%
	6-9 Times	3	5.0%
	10 or more times	1	1.7%
<b>6</b>	<b>Do you use the Bulletin feature?</b>		
<i>n=59</i>	The What?!?	3	5.1%
	Yes	37	62.7%
	No	19	32.2%
<b>7</b>	<b>Do your parents know you have a MySpace account?</b>		
<i>n=59</i>	Yes	43	72.9%
	No	16	27.1%
<b>8</b>	<b>Have you ever been harassed by someone online? If so, in what way and what happened?</b>		
<i>n=55</i>	Yes	11	20.0%
	No	44	80.0%
<b>9</b>	<b>Do you post your full name on your account?</b>		
<i>n=59</i>	Yes	19	32.2%
	No	40	67.8%
<b>10</b>	<b>What concerns do you think your parents have? Do you think they should be worried? If so, why?</b> <i>(See Appendix A1 for responses to this question)</i>		

## **Data Analysis Commentary**

From the content analysis and the surveys conducted the research findings are divided into seven categories (Demographics, Frequency of Use, MySpace Features, Personal Information, Sexual Pictures and Comments, Meeting strangers and self expression). Each category starts with relevant statistics followed by a contextual analysis.

### **Demographics:**

Average age was 17  
5% admitted to being either gay or bisexual  
Extremely varied religious backgrounds,  
(Included Christian, Atheist, Buddhist, and others)

Since the teen years can be a very confusing time in terms of sexual discovery and is full of peer pressure, we did not expect to see the published admittance of alternative sexual orientations. Although it was a small percentage of profiles examined in the content analysis, it seems that at least some teens on MySpace are not afraid to be open about their orientation, even when others from their high school can easily find out. Most did not seem to have a problem posting their religious affiliation either.

### **Frequency of Use:**

25% surveyed check it more than once a day.  
Only 16% check it less than a couple of times per week  
100% of profiles logged in within last few days

It was not surprising to see that most all of teens in this study logged onto their MySpace account almost daily to see what emails they received, what comments had been posted and what bulletins were available or blogs there are to read. Not only do over 13 million teens belong to MySpace, they also use it extremely regularly, which amounts to lots of advertisers dollars for the makers of this site.

### **MySpace Features:**

Average of 9 out of 12 photos posted possible  
54% of profiles reviewed used the blogging feature  
48% of those surveyed used the blogging feature as well  
63% of those surveyed used the bulletin feature

A surprising majority of teens in both methods of data collections were regular users of the blogging and bulletin features. When the information in the literature review was collected in studies before ours, this was a fad gaining momentum, and seems to be a lasting phenomenon still gaining popularity.

### **Personal Information:**

10% of reviewed profiles posted their full name,  
while 32% of students surveyed listed their full name  
None of the 40 accounts listed a phone number

None of the profiles reviewed listed an address or phone number, which seemingly contradicts the majority of information found in the articles condemning MySpace however nearly 1/3 of those surveyed, indicated this information was listed on teen accounts. While the profile analysis fits our initial hypothesis that teenagers aren't sharing as much information as parents believe the survey results contradict this assumption. The significant number of profiles listing a teenager's full name could be enough for someone to track them down especially if one knew what school the account holder attended. Most of those surveyed also indicated that their parents did not approve of the release of personal information and the inappropriate images and comments regarding sex and drugs that are being posted which indicates a these teens are in fact aware of their parents concerns

### **Sexual Pictures and Comments:**

Average number of photos posted: 9 out of 12 possible  
50% of the profiles contained "inappropriately" sexual pictures/comments

Sexual graphics, pictures and comments by both the author of profiles examined, and posted publicly on the page by the author's friends, were ramped among the profiles looked at. They included chest, midriff and leg shots, barely dressed girls and bikini full body photos. Profound sexual innuendos like French kissing, sucking on popsicles, and groping of private body parts were found on a few of the profiles. These types of images could potentially feed into the parental concerns of inviting sexual predators.

### **Meeting Strangers:**

69% of students met with someone in real life that they initially meet online  
44% said they meet those people on MySpace  
20% of students surveyed indicated they had been harassed

The data gathered suggests that a majority of the teens surveyed do initiate face-to-face contact with people they meet online. This exceeded our expectations and certainly validates parental concerns that their children may be chatting with strangers and/or meeting those strangers in person. Although 20% of users surveyed indicated that they had been harassed online was higher than the 5% commonly reported in the literature, the subjective nature of the question and definition of what "harassed" means limits the validity of these conflicting results.

### **Self\_Expression:**

It takes at least some basic programming knowledge to be able to customize the look of a MySpace profile to change the background, add music, pictures and graphics. Almost every profile examined included all of these items, and informal discussions with teens have indicated that they help each other through peer support to learn these skills. For instance, 90% of the profiles have a song playing when you view the profile.

### **Conclusion:**

Having examined one of the most popular means of online teen communication, the research results offer conflicting results and uncover little evidence to calm parental fears. A need for further research is recommended with the realization that's teen's privacy, integrity, and possible physical safety, is at stake.

In the open ended response section of this survey, teens were asked what concerns their parents have about them being on MySpace. 90% reported their parents were worried about their kids being stalked, molested or raped in some way and 20% stated their parents feared they could actually be killed by being tracked down through MySpace.

Several aspects of parental concerns like sexual pictures, personal information released, and time spent online were certainly validated, at least in this small sample. However, almost every one of these teens found these parental concerns to be grossly exaggerated, invalidated, and indicated they could be trusted to make right decisions about their use of the site.

Perhaps the only short term solution is for increased parental supervision of their child's MySpace usage. This could potentially curb the fears and perceived dangers of online harassment and stalking. With nearly 1/3 of those teenagers surveyed indicating that their parents are unaware of their child's MySpace account this supervision may only realistically affect a smaller percentage of those most at risk. At the very least teenager should be continually informed and advised about the dangers of releasing personal information since they seem to realize the danger but feel invincible to such threats.

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## Appendix A-1

- 10 What concerns do you think your parents have? Do you think they should be worried? If so, why?  
n=53

The following are all of the open ended responses to the questions:

That I would post too many details about myself and get stalked.

what is it

They think there are predators out there, people trying to take advantage of kids. There are some of these people, but if you don't put everything out there and are careful there's nothing to worry about.

they probably worry that people actually look at my profile and try to track me down and molest me

Teens posting exposing photographs and giving out too much information that will allow sexual predators to stalk and/or kidnap teens  
They just want to know who it is that I'm talking to. They're just concerned that I might talk to someone that I don't know.

none

My parents might be concerned with predators and people who would want to meet me. They shouldn't be worried because im HUGE

they trust me enough to know that i can protect myself

no i dont think they should be worried because im not talking to strangers i only have the people that i know

about the people i meet, with me no, because i know i wouldnt feel comfortable except with people who have mysplaces that i know in real life  
their children being molested

they would be worried about predators

That something is going to happen. And that Myspace is going to take over my life. They dont need to worry beacuse i know better.

Only concern meeting bad people, and identity theft.

sexual predators and viruses

My parents would be worried because of the news report of people getting killed because of Myspace.

im a good kid

I'm old enough to handle myself. But my mom is worried about my younger siblings being exposed to things she doesn't want them to be. She has every reason to be, there are crazy people. I'm worried because it's SO easy to create an account. Younger and younger kids are doing it. My eleven year old brother who is a 6th grader made an account without anyone knowing and people were asking to be his friend. You can make your profile private, which is some consolation to me.

none

My safety and how much people can find out about me. Yes, they have reason to be worried, but I only add people that I know.

thats weird old men will find out where I live and where I go to school and come find me and "get me"

they told me to be careful and to not just talk to anyone. i think its reasonable that they worry but i dont think they need to because im careful about it.

No

They shouldn't. I will be 18 in 3 months and what will they do then?

they sont know what i use it for.....

my mom doesnt' really care. i don't think they shoule be worry about me.

They think i'm gong to get in trouble at school the most because of what nearly happened already. I'm a big boy so they dont fear for my safety, i mean i will KILL PEOPLE!

That I'll meet a Stalker. I dont think they should since im strong enough to protect myself.

I know that my parents worry about me talking to strangers online, but I personally think that I am a careful person when it comes to that stuff. I do know some people only online, but I intend to keep it that way and 95% of them don't even know my real FIRST name. I don't think they should be worried at all because I'm pretty conservative in my online life.

nope

Concerns that parents have are the whole "stalking" rumors that are going around all over the net. I think some parents are just scared because they dont want their kids being associated with strangers, and being exposed to the real world.

I don't think they are worried about my Myspace account. They trust me that I would not do anything wrong, dangerous, or stupid. However, the only thing my mother is concerned about is how young girls put naked pictures on their account and wonder why they are being taken my older men in public, thinking that its normal to put that up. I dont know, its stupid how that happens...

i have mixed feelings

My parents are concerned with all the media attention that has been floating around due to the MySpace craze. I think that their (and my) worries are justified in the fact that some of these people on there are just too young and doing some inappropriate things. A minimum age could be stated, but never inforced because it is just too hard to try and enforce it.

They think I might get trapped in the evil porn war, because I go to bad sites.

molesters stalking me, a little

not really

Criminals/Sexual predators getting my phone number/address/etc.

I think parents would think that we give out our addresses to meet people we meet on Myspace.

I think they are afraid I will talk to someone that wants to meet me in person. I don't think they should be worried, because I'm not going to

They should be worried because there are a lot of scary people out there, a lot of people that have pseudo-identities. And usually those kind of people tend to save everyone on their friends list. That's why I'm very selective, since I have to somewhat know who is saving me, directly or indirectly.

none my mom has one

my parents have their own Myspace accounts and they are not worried at all.

My mom was concerned that I was in danger of being stalked or that I was putting out too much information about myself, but I showed her that my profile is a "private" account which means I set my age as 14 years old so unless you are a friend that I have selected or approved, you would be unable to view my account.

That a "predator" is gonna come and find me but I am not that stupid ...so no

NO because I have only five friends on my account and all of them I see here as school. In addition I am very careful on what I give my info to

They freak out because they think I might get stalked or something!

Well, seeing as I am 18, my parents are not really concerned in my activities if it doesn't involve school or work.

If my parents KNEW I suppose they might be concerned that I'd go looking for a girlfriend?

that I'll get raped or something, no they shouldn't worry because kids will only be raped if they give out ALL of their info.

none

They don't want me giving out any of my personal info. They shouldn't be worried, I am a 15-year-old girl who can take care of herself.