Producing Sites, Exploring Identities: Youth Online Authorship

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Millions of teens who grew up with a mouse in one hand and a remote control in the other now pour out their hearts, minds and angst in personal online diaries. And anyone with a connection—including would-be predators—can have a front-row view of this once-secretive teenage passion play. Welcome to teen America—on display at your nearest computer.[1]

So ran the lead sentences in a *USA Today* article in late 2005. Highlighting findings from a study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, the story referenced the recent rise in online youth content creation. The study showed that more than half of online teens had shared some type of original content online, including poetry, artwork, music, witticisms, essays, and everyday musings. As more and more young people detailed their lives on the Internet, the news story explained, contemporary adults who grew up without the Internet were becoming increasingly perplexed about youth online expression and how to regard it.

A curious mix of intrigue, disdain, and apprehension continues to characterize many adults' sentiments about the creations young people place into the public eye on the Internet. Indeed, it is common to see journalists, educators, and parents oscillate between promoting youth Internet expression and denouncing it in practically the same breath. For example, it can be tempting for adults to dismiss teen blogs and personal home pages as the trivial and egocentric ruminations of self-indulgent, techno-frenzied kids. Yet, since stalkers and predators can harm youths who carelessly share their personal information, such outright dismissal often feels negligent. Then there is the question of creativity: many adults are impressed by the apparent ingenuity of young people's online content. But, on second thought, they wonder, aren't teens really just reproducing what the culture industries feed them? Inevitably, the train of thought arrives back at basic issues of time and value. That is, instead of wasting time playing around with online content creation, shouldn't teens be focusing their Internet use on more "worthwhile" purposes, such as education and career training?

At least part of the general bewilderment about youth online expression stems from the fact that public attention is disproportionately paid to *what* teens disclose and produce online, such as the words, text, images, and sounds that can be observed on the screen. Yet little consideration is typically given to understanding *why* young people express themselves in these ways or how their authorial experiences are meaningful to them. Even most scholarly critiques of youth online expression have been based on adults' impressions and analyses of the websites and postings they observe. Adults look at the intimate thoughts youths

disclose and the cultural symbols they appropriate, and they decode them according to their own standards of evaluation. Although this type of textual analysis can be informative, we inevitably miss a crucial component when we allow our understanding of youth online cultural production to be shaped exclusively from this vantage point.

In this chapter, I provide a divergent perspective by exploring why young authors find value in expressing themselves online. My goal is neither to celebrate nor to critique youth online expression, but rather to illuminate the ways in which it is a meaningful form of cultural production, particularly during adolescence. Concentrating on the genres of personal home pages and blogs, in particular, I stay close to the producers themselves, asking: What do they see as the rewards of online expression? How do they make choices about the self-presentations they offer? What role do audiences play in their decision making? How is online expression valuable, and in what ways is it unfulfilling?

I draw not only from the growing body of literature exploring adolescent development, youth expression practices, and online publishing, but, centrally, from the interviews I have conducted over the past several years with hundreds of authors ranging in age from twelve to twenty-one years. Since there is no composite list of youth Internet authors or the works they publish online, it is impossible to draw a representative sample of such young people. Most of those I have interviewed have responded to a flyer at their school or in their community soliciting youth Internet authors. Many youth informants suggest that I speak to their friends as well. All of my conversations have taken place with young people who resided in the United States, chiefly in urban centers.

I begin this chapter by providing a general overview of development and identity, and then briefly describe the Internet genres under examination. Next, I use the evocative language of youth authors to ground discussions of the roles that online expression practices play in their lives. I note how authors' sentiments about their online practices reflect their engagement with important developmental tasks associated with adolescence. I conclude by discussing the ways in which personal sites provide young people with opportunities for learning about themselves and about self-presentation. My goal throughout this chapter is to illuminate how we might broaden the terrain for discussion about online youth expression practices, so that our public and popular discourse about young people is more meaningful and contextualized.

Adolescent Development and Identity

As Buckingham articulates in the introduction to this volume, identity is a concept both nebulous and contested. Adolescence, as a concept, arguably deserves the same characterization. Commonly, these concepts go hand in hand. That is to say, adolescence is often regarded (at least in technologically advanced, Western cultures) as a time when individuals are confronted with the task of defining their identity.[2] Indeed, this volume's focus on identity, youth, and digital media underscores a general acceptance of the notion that identity and adolescence are bound together in some way.

A multitude of explanations have been offered to describe the intersection between identity and adolescence. For example, some of the authors in this volume subscribe to a sociocultural approach to identity, which emphasizes the role society plays in creating the conditions that encourage young people to address the matter of identity. Through this lens, adolescence itself is viewed as a "by-product of social condition and historical circumstance," as well as of legal systems, educational institutions, economic structures, and the mass media.[3]

By contrast, this chapter is primarily informed by more developmental approaches, which interrogate transformations that occur *within* individuals as they age, although social circumstances are also thought to play a significant role. From a developmental perspective, identity generally refers to how one subjectively views oneself over time and across situations, and is typically believed to evolve throughout the life cycle as one's inner self changes. Identity is thus commonly viewed as a "process of qualitative stage reorganization rather than a mere unfolding of static personality characteristics."[4] The self can be considered as "a personal iconography of values, symbols, and identifications that answer the question, 'Who am I?'"[5] During adolescence, in particular, individuals typically begin to question and deconstruct how they think of their selves. This self-inquiry is not conducted in isolation, but rather in the context of, and through feedback from, meaningful others. As Erikson put it, "The process of identity formation depends on the interplay of what young persons at the end of childhood have come to mean to themselves and what they now appear to mean to those who become significant to them."[6]

The second decade of life is typically a time of significant physical and psychological change that has consequences for identity. Biologically, individuals experience puberty and subsequent bodily transformations. In consequence, young people start to feel different physically, and their view of themselves thus often shifts as well. Moreover, as children start to appear visually more adultlike, those around them begin to treat them differently. Social expectations often accompany these changes, as young people desire and are often encouraged to take more responsibility for their own decision making, to forge new relationships, and to practice greater autonomy.[7] Adolescents frequently begin to spend less time with families, more time with friends, and even more time alone.[8]

Cognitively, young people move through adolescence with an increasing preoccupation with how they appear to others. Trying to understand themselves and their role in a greater society (who am I?), adolescents frequently look to their social world for cues about what principles and traits to internalize, although the mixed messages they inevitably encounter can be bewildering as they figure out which to incorporate. With increasing experience and time, many of their self-doubts about beliefs and values are overcome, prompting late adolescents to focus more on their futures (who will I be?).[9]

These changes during adolescence provide a context in which online content creation can take on special meaning. In this chapter, I highlight some of the ways this occurs for the young people I have interviewed over the past several years. Indeed, listening to firsthand accounts of their online authorial experiences helps to explain why young people generate personal sites at more than twice the rate of adults.[10] Their comments and reflections demonstrate that online publications can provide important opportunities for managing the complex situations and shifting self-expectations that characterize adolescence. In descriptions of their decisions about what to reveal, exaggerate, and omit in their online communication, youth authors reveal a highly conscious process of self-inquiry. Adolescents consciously and conscientiously negotiate the boundaries of public and private spheres as they deliberate about who they are and who they want to be, within their local community and the larger culture. The Internet, young authors suggest, affords space and place for such complex identity work.

Personal Home Pages and Personal Blogs Defined

Although young people participate in a variety of self-publishing genres online, this chapter focuses exclusively on their experiences with personal home pages and blogs.

Personal home pages are web sites posted by individuals that generally include an array of multimedia features, including text, images, sounds, links, and audience response mechanisms, such as guest books and counters. Blogs, short for web logs, have been defined as "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence."[11] Most popular and scholarly attention has been paid to political and journalistic blogging, but personal blogging actually appears to be the most common.[12] In the past decade, as computer prices have dropped and Internet connection times quickened, creating personal home pages and blogs has become increasingly popular. By 2005, more than one-fifth of online teens in the United States said they had kept a personal home page and nearly as many (19 percent) kept a blog or online journal.[13]

By most accounts, personal home pages and blogs are not altogether new genres for self-expression.[14] Rather, their authors appear to draw from a variety of preceding genres, including diaries, autobiographies, resumes, high school yearbook entries, personal letters, refrigerator doors, business cards, displays on bedroom walls or school lockers, and advertisements, among others.[15] Yet personal web pages and blogs differ notably from these predecessors, because they are not fixed or static, but rather allow for ongoing and alterable expression. Blogs, in particular, are expected to be unending and incomplete. Nonetheless, the fact that personal home pages and blogs can be self-published rather than filtered though a publishing company or other distributor has led to claims that they provide authors with their very own "publishing house, photo album, billboard, personnel file, sound studio, gallery, and social gathering place."[16]

Although blogs and personal home pages are distinct from one another in general appearance and composition, they share important commonalities. Both can be crafted by anyone with means (i.e., computer, Internet access, and skills to locate and employ appropriate composition software). Both are intentionally posted to a public forum. And both are explicitly and expectedly about their authors and their interests, as revealed by text, images, sounds, and links. Thus, although personal home pages and blogs may differ visually, the impetus to create them and the experience of maintaining them is presumably quite similar. Moreover, considering that both genres are much more commonly authored by online teens than online adults, it seems appropriate to proceed with a broad focus to explore what makes online expression in these genres compelling to youths, in particular. Hereafter, personal home pages and blogs are collectively referred to as "personal sites."

Social networking sites (SNS) provide what many people might consider to be the next generation of personal home pages; indeed, personal profiles on networking sites incorporate many of the expression features that traditional home pages have included, including blogs. In fact, it seems increasingly common for teens to keep social networking sites in lieu of personal home pages, because they allow for self-expression at the same time they provide opportunities for connection and relationship building. In comparison to personal home pages, social network site profiles are quite templated, although, as boyd (this volume) notes, opportunities for individuals to customize their personal SNS profiles abound. Altogether, it seems likely that many of the observations about self-expression on personal sites made in this chapter would naturally extend to self-expression on social networking sites as well. However, the unique affordances of networking sites render them a somewhat disparate genre, worthy of their own explicit analysis. boyd offers such an examination in the following chapter.

Listening to Youth Authors

Conversations with youth producers reveal that in order to understand their experiences, we must look beyond the artifacts they manufacture (e.g., the blog or home page as it is encountered on a screen), and focus as well on the practices of creating and maintaining these online works. The majority of this chapter is directed toward that end. I offer an interpretive perspective on youth online expression practices, illuminating the experiences of authors on their own terms and in their own words.

Critical scholars might fault this approach for overemphasizing youth authors' agency. For example, Willett (this volume) argues persuasively that online expression practices inevitably operate within cultural systems that influence how young people regard and express themselves. From this perspective, the belief that young people are simply free to express their emerging identities as they wish is considered illusory. Such critiques of the tensions between youth agency and external structural dynamics are necessary to consider as we seek to understand youth online expression.

However, the full story of youth online authorship is also incomplete when we fail to incorporate and respect the lived experiences of authors, despite the powers that might be operating around and upon them. When adults decide when and where expression is "pure" and how youths should engage in public address, they deny teenagers agency and neglect to consider the empowering possibilities their online expression experiences offer to them. In fact, recognizing youth authors as experts on their own experience is crucial if we hope to fully appreciate how online content creation, adolescence, and identity intersect. Accordingly, this chapter is devoted to describing young authors' perspectives and contextualizing them within adolescence. In so doing, I do not suggest that I offer the raw "truth" of youth authors' experiences. Indeed, the young authors with whom I have spoken no doubt deliberated about what to tell me based on how they wished for me to represent their authorship practices in my own research. To be sure, deliberate self-presentation occurs in offline spaces as well as online spaces. Although this practice can never be avoided, we are wise to bear it in mind as we endeavor to understand the experiences of others.

I begin by addressing why young people create personal sites, noting the variety of motivations that prompt site construction. The self-oriented benefits of personal site maintenance are then discussed, especially as they relate to self-reflection and self-inquiry. Next, the issue of audience is tackled. For whom do youth authors create their sites, and who do they imagine to be visiting them? Factors that influence their choices about self-presentation are explored next. The final section addresses the risks and rewards of audience feedback and its impact on authors' self-appraisals and online creations.

"It made my brain feel happy": Why Young People Create Personal Sites

Although much has been made of the opportunities personal sites offer for self-presentation and identity experimentation (discussed below), the reasons that young people initially choose to draft a personal site may be considered much more basic. Chiefly, young people are curious about what authorship entails, eager to take on the technological challenges presented by online authorship, and anxious to establish an online presence.

Most young authors learn about personal sites from other youths, or from accidental encounters with them online; less frequently, they hear about them in the popular media or from parents and teachers. Some young people become intrigued enough to want to learn more about them. In fact, "learning by doing" is the mantra that guides many young

people to start drafting a personal site. As one young author put it, "I wanted to see what a personal home page was all about. So I figured the best way to do that was to just build one myself." Increasingly, schools introduce students to these genres as well, and so, by necessity, many young people are required to create personal sites to fulfill a class assignment. Some adolescents also create personal sites because their friends have: they desire to participate in their peer group through personal site creation, as well as simply share a common experience with their friends.

Many young people find unexpected pleasure and value in expressing themselves on their personal sites, and they subsequently continue the practice even after their initial curiosity has been satisfied or class assignment is fulfilled. Others, of course, do not: they abandon their site once they feel they have captured the essence of the experience. "Been there, done that" is the sentiment one author expressed as a way to signal his lack of interest in sustaining his publication. Oftentimes, young authors leave their personal sites posted online, even though they choose not to return to them. This phenomenon helps to explain why so many youth sites that persist online appear incomplete, rudimentary, and lacking in intimacy or information.

While some youths are driven to start Internet authoring because of curiosity, a school assignment, or peer pressure, others are compelled by their desire to master what they perceive to be the advanced technological skills necessary to construct a personal site. This motivation corresponds developmentally with adolescents' growing capacity to set goals and increasing desire to demonstrate autonomy and competence. As one home page author put it,

Mostly I started it because I wanted to learn HTML and figuring out how to do that, like it made my brain feel happy, and I like learning new things, and I was very excited because I was like, woo, look at me, I'm the computer wiz.

Knowledge of HTML is no longer required for authors who wish to publish a personal site online, due to an assortment of templates on hosting services. Nevertheless, among those who have never created a personal site, the process appears to be technologically challenging. Thus, building a personal site can lead to a sense of pride and accomplishment that accompanies the mastery of something new.[17] Moreover, for many young people, the goal is not simply to construct a personal site, but to do so with careful attention to detail, navigation, and esthetic finesse. The product created becomes a visual and verifiable marker of what they have accomplished and the skill level they have achieved. Such perceived expertise increases feelings of self-worth, not least because young people believe these skills will be valuable assets in their future careers and education.

The desire to create an online presence additionally motivates a growing number of young people to construct personal sites. The term "online presence," often bandied about by marketers and communication consultants, has historically referred to the idea that companies must have web sites in order for their business to thrive. Web sites allow companies to advertise and sell wares and services directly to consumers, the logic holds, as well as establish a sense of credibility and quality in the minds of potential consumers. Of late, this logic has trickled down to young people, some of whom suggest that establishing an online presence "proves" that they exist in a world that otherwise pays them little attention. As one youth blogger put it, "Anybody who is anybody has a web site." Indeed, for many, online presence is synonymous with authentic presence.

This sentiment is promoted, if not exploited, by companies keen on capturing the lucrative teen market. Indeed, recognizing how eager teens are to speak out and be heard, corporations

enlist them as participants in viral online marketing campaigns, and they design ad campaigns promoting the idea of consumption *as* production. Moreover, commercial software packages are available that offer "new opportunities" for youth expression as a way to reap greater profits. By making expression easier through fill-in-the-blank templates and hosting clearing houses that promise wide exposure for personal expression, such companies nurture the idea that youths are autonomous producers at the same time as they place constraints on the types of creations that youths can produce. Social networking sites, perhaps even more than personal home page and blog sites, increasingly operate in this way. For instance, young people are incited to provide specific information (e.g., name, age, relationship status, favorite musicians), although such disclosure is often experienced as self-expressive, personalized, and customized.

Some young people identify web authorship as a way to deal with these and other pressures that demand that they exploit all avenues of public address. A trend consultant recently quoted in the *New York Times* proclaimed that young people these days are "fabulous self-marketers. . . . They see celebrities expressing their self-worth and want to join the party."[18] Indeed, mainstream media (e.g. *Entertainment Tonight*, *Us*, *People*) divulge ever-more detail about the lives of pop stars, and some ordinary people are elevated to the status of celebrity simply by their apparent willingness to provide such details about themselves (as seen on, for example, *The Real World* and *Laguna Beach*). Virtually all "real" and "wanna-be" stars have web pages and blogs, not to mention that many have fan sites devoted to them as well.

In this context, some young people view personal sites as avenues to participate in, or respond to, a culture that valorizes publicity as an end in itself. Indeed, they feel that personal sites can serve as symbols to others and themselves that they belong to and in the public culture. This does not mean that young authors uncritically buy into the dominant messages about celebrity and pop culture that persist in mainstream media, but rather that many have recognized the cultural value of self-promotion and are motivated to publish online in consequence.

"Laying it all out": Online Expression for Self-Reflection, Catharsis, and Self-Documentation

Despite the various reasons that motivate young people to create a personal site, it is only after having done so that many teens deliberate whether or not online expression is particularly valuable or potentially functional for them. This sequence of events appears to be different for adults, who generally reflect on the expected utility of online expression *before* commencing to author a personal site.[19] Because the benefits that youth authors derive from their personal sites are often unanticipated, they tend to be appreciated all the more.

In particular, nearly all of those who sustain these works for any length of time identify their utility for self-reflection, releasing pent-up feelings, and witnessing personal growth. In this sense, personal sites are reminiscent of private diaries, which have frequently been considered as objects for self-examination and engagement. They appear to be particularly meaningful during adolescence, when young people consciously search for a sense of who they are and how they fit in within their social worlds. Time is often devoted to mapping out personal beliefs and values, questioning taken-for-granted truths, and navigating ever-more complex relationships. Because personal sites are made public, many critics often overlook this internal focus that such creative works can activate. Ironically, this internal focus is often the most revered aspect of online expression for adolescents.

Self-reflection is, perhaps, the most commonly cited reward of maintaining a personal site among youth authors. The site serves as an impetus to look inward, to pause amidst life's busyness to think things through. The excerpts below are typical of the ways that young people speak about their blogs and home pages:

[My home page] helped me lay out what just all of my beliefs and values and thoughts are. And a lot of nothing that I didn't even put up on the page, but just—it just helped me lay it all out.

My blog has helped me to center my feelings and realize that I need to take things one step at a time. It forces me to think about who I am, what I like, and who I want to be. I can think about one of the problems I am going to face, but writing about it allows me to work through the problem and start to look at solutions.

Remarks like these signal that despite what ends up on the site, the very process of self-inquiry provides meaning and value. As Blood puts it, "The blogger, by virtue of simply writing down whatever is on his mind, will be confronted with his own thoughts and opinions."[20] This process may be particularly valuable for young authors, since adolescence is thought to mark the arrival of formal operational skills. These skills allow individuals to "construct more abstract self-portraits, to distinguish between their real and ideal selves, and to begin the process of resolving discrepancies between multiple aspects of themselves."[21] Later in adolescence, teens become preoccupied with their futures, their religious and political beliefs, and their standards for behavior. Expressing oneself online becomes a way for them to explore their beliefs, values, and self-perceptions, and thereby to help them grapple with their sense of identity. Indeed, youth authors indicate that personal sites provide both a space and a stimulus to participate in this internal dialogue.[22]

Ownership of a personal site, for many young authors, seems to be accompanied by a sense of obligation: the blog needs to be updated, the home page must be modified. The pressure to maintain these sites demands that teen authors engage with questions about their own identities as they determine what or what not to post. Some welcome this sense of obligation: they admit that without their personal sites, they wouldn't otherwise make the time to reflect seriously on themselves and their lives. Others feel a burden to update, and enter into the self-reflection process less eagerly, sometimes even bitterly. Nonetheless, these young authors suggest, they emerge from their self-examination with greater clarity, and are thus grateful for the push their personal sites provided. One author remarked,

My blog is forcing me to sit down and think about my life and what is going to happen . . . And even though I don't like that most of the time, I know it's going to be more beneficial to me in the end.

Many young online authors also appreciate how personal sites provide forums for a cathartic release of pent-up feelings.[23] When they have a lot on their minds, many say, it is helpful to express themselves, whether through writing or adding music, art, or images. "Getting it all out," as one author put it, restores a sense of calm and often helps put a problem or emotion in context (e.g., "it's often not as bad as I thought"). A surprising number of youth authors use the word "therapeutic" to describe how it feels to express themselves online after experiencing stress, grief, anger, or betrayal. Clinical psychologists have long noted the therapeutic value of writing, often encouraging people to keep journals to help them express their emotions and concerns.[24] For some young people, personal sites provide comparable spaces for such practices.[25]

Documenting emotional ups and downs, experiences, convictions, and preferences is another self-oriented role that personal sites play for adolescent authors. In this way, personal

sites may serve as a point of stability during a period of flux. "My blog keeps tabs on me," one blogger explained: it helps her to chronicle who she is, what she has done, and how she feels about it. Similarly, on personal home pages, images and music can symbolize moments in time or capture emotions and experiences. For example, photo galleries capture actual events in authors' lives, such as school dances or trips with friends. Images of celebrities, performers, and/or cultural icons symbolize connections, sometimes fleeting, with particular subcultures or lifestyles. Artwork denotes cultural preoccupations as well as current aesthetic preferences and levels of skill. In these ways and others, personal sites allow adolescents to record their current self-impressions for consumption now and reconsumption later. Like written diaries, as Kitzmann has observed, "It is reasonable to conclude that [they] are constructed around the premise that they will serve as records or artifacts of the present for the future."[26]

In large part, the interest in self-documentation reflects many young authors' desire to witness their own personal growth. Envisioning a time when they will look back at their online expression, they yearn to capture the present so that comparisons in the future will reveal how far they have advanced. Such sentiments are subtly expressed by these late adolescent authors:

I just wanted to write . . . Seeing how my year went even if only for my personal benefit I can go back and see. It'll kind of be a timeline of change, maybe in some areas. And that's all you can really hope for, some kind of change from the beginning to the end. Some kind of growth. That's all that you can hope.

I'm praying that, like, when I look at my blog at the end of the year, that I can read through it and see, like, the beginning stages of thinking about what I'm going to do. And I'm crossing my fingers that in May, like, I'll have some semblance of an idea of where I'm going . . . and so hopefully I won't be at the same level for six months, and I'll, like, move up a step or two.

Comments like these signal how adolescents frequently accept the characterization of adolescence as an in-between stage or a state of becoming: that is, they expect themselves to change. This expectation can likely be tied to a variety of sources, including the psychological tendency for middle and late adolescents, in particular, to speculate about their future and ideal selves; environmental pressures on teens to plan for their futures (e.g., as frequent recipients of questions such as "What do you plan to be when you get older?"); and cultural messages that belittle the teen experience and glorify the freedom and independence of young adulthood. Expectations of change may also be explained by Giddens' concept of the "project of the self," as briefly described by Buckingham in the introduction to this volume. Giddens argues that in modern times, people feel obligated to continuously work and rework themselves, as they seek to weave a story of their own personal identity. In this context, the self is viewed as evolving and flexible. Each of these explanations underscores why adolescents view change as both forthcoming and largely desirable. Not surprisingly, then, youth authors indicate that the satisfaction they garner from documenting their lives online is twofold: current and anticipated.

"My page is for me": Conceptualizing the Audience
Despite the inwardly focused rewards that online authorship has for adolescents, it is impossible to ignore the fact that personal sites are not exclusively self-oriented. Knowing—and hoping—that others will encounter their online expression is the fundamental appeal of publishing (literally "making public") personal sites for young authors. Of course, this is true

for anyone, not just adolescents. However, the ability to address the public is, perhaps, more momentous for adolescents than we might otherwise consider. Adolescents have historically had few opportunities for public address, and, like other disenfranchised groups, they have received little encouragement toward this end. In fact, young people recognize from an early age that adults' voices are more culturally valued than their own. This uncomfortable reality is evidenced by the paucity of widely disseminated or published works authored by young people, by the adult designation of "appropriate" youth expression venues (e.g., diaries and bedrooms), and the stigmatization of many public youth expression practices (e.g., body art, graffiti).

Of course, many young authors today have never known a time when it was not possible to address potentially vast numbers of people online. Consequently, they rarely view their personal home pages and blogs as rebellious attempts to claim space in the way that, for example, urban graffiti artists did in the 1970s.[27] Nonetheless, it is quite clear that Internet self-expression genres, like zines in the 1990s, provide young people with some of the only opportunities to voice themselves in a media environment heavily dominated by adults and corporate interests.[28] Youth authors are distinctly aware of the relative shortage of spaces for them to publicize their thoughts and lives amidst an increasingly mediated culture. Yet simultaneously, they feel entitled to engage in public address. In fact, for some youth authors, personal sites symbolize their worth as public communicators. Consider, for example, the comments of a youth author who had recently taken down her blog:

I felt like as long as I had the blog, I had an audience—and having an audience made me feel as if what I was saying was important. Without it, I don't feel anyone is listening to what I say anymore.

Youth authors' desire to address the public is not simply about actually being heard (or read) by many people, but also about feeling empowered by the mere prospect of mass reception. Much has been made of the "blurring boundaries" between conceptions of public and private in the digital age. And young authors do, in fact, seem to have reconfigured these concepts in ways that pre-Internet folk find confusing. For example, people have traditionally considered their communication to be private when it is encountered exclusively by a limited and targeted individual or individuals. But some youth authors think of their communication as private when the people they know in real life do not see, hear, or read it, regardless of who else does. This understanding of privacy is illuminated by the words of a female teen, who shared the following on her personal home page: "I totally butchered my leg . . . I don't want sympathy from it . . . that's why I'm not telling anyone."[29]

Not all young authors feel this way, of course. Many of those with whom I have spoken demonstrate a keen awareness of who can and might be in the audience, including both "known and unknown, welcome and unwelcome readers alike."[30] But knowing that their personal sites are publicly accessible does not lead most young people to envision a broad audience for their online works. And, despite their recognition that virtually anyone with Internet access can pore over their sites, most adolescents, by and large, cannot imagine why "some random stranger" would be interested in doing so (unless, of course, he is a "creeper"—a stalker or pedophile—about whom most young authors tend to demonstrate awareness and dismissal in equal measure).

Rather, the typical audience that young authors visualize as they deliberate what to post online are those people that they know actually visit their sites (based on online or offline comments) and those whom they have directed to visit their sites, despite a lack of confirmatory evidence that such visits actually occur. Thus, for many authors, the types of people

they picture are quite various: offline friends, online friends, school acquaintances, people with similar interests (e.g., skateboarding, rap) or lifestyles (e.g., homosexual, disability), parents, teachers, siblings and any combination thereof. Generally speaking, these people comprise a group of significant others, from whom adolescents conscientiously seek to learn about themselves and the appropriateness of the identities they project onto their personal sites.

Authors promote their sites not only by telling people about them in direct communication, but also by posting the address for their home page or blog in their instant message profiles, email signatures, and social networking site profiles. Of course, most authors do not tell everyone they know: many intentionally avoid telling family members, especially parents, people they don't like, and those they know would disapprove of their online expression. Meanwhile, some try to increase traffic beyond those whom they know, for example, by registering their blogs with online communities and joining web rings.

Still other young people do not deliberately tell anyone about their sites, but wait, instead, for their pages to be "found." For some, the idea of promoting their sites feels arrogant and too much like advertising. "It's so vain to think that anyone would actually care to learn more about me and my life," one author put it, preferring just to put his site "out there and see what happens." Alternatively, some authors do not tell anyone about their sites because they want the freedom to say whatever they want, without fear of repercussion. Both sentiments are interesting, considering that they are held by young authors who bother to make their works public. Authors reconcile this apparent inconsistency by acknowledging their desire for their sites to be visited by others, but not at the risk of damaging their image or inviting trouble. Moreover, they indicate, those people who do actually visit their sites can be seen as more authentically interested, because they are there of their own accord.

In this discussion of audience, it is important to emphasize that despite, and in some cases, because of their awareness of multiple intended and anonymous external audiences, nearly all young authors adamantly identify *themselves* as their principal audience. Many consider their online presentations to be most appealing to, most beneficial for, and most frequently consumed by themselves. Accordingly, their works *feel* self-directed above all. Comments from three youth authors exemplify this perspective:

My page is for me. I don't really care who else sees it or what they think. I see it, and I'm who matters. I focus on what I want, and I don't do anything for anyone else.

I write, first and foremost, for myself. I am my own best and worst critic, my best and worst friend.

It is hard to be honest with yourself when you look at all of the different audiences. That is why I try my hardest to forget about them and pay attention to me.

At the same time, it seems that at least part of the insistence on the self-directedness of their online creations derives from young authors' desire to appear modest. They imply that constructing a blog or personal page for oneself is a much more noble enterprise than crafting one for others' consumption and pleasure. Paradoxically, such a perspective reveals a substantive concern for how others think of them. Indeed, although many young authors contend they give little thought to their audiences as they deliberate what to post online, when pressed, they generally reveal an intense awareness of how their personal sites—and by extension, they themselves—might be perceived by their online site visitors.

"A nice shiny me": Presenting Selves Online

Because the audience is never far from their minds, young authors demonstrate considerable awareness of how they project their "real," internal sense of themselves into their online self-presentations. Generally, they view their public selves not as fabrications, but as "touched-up" versions of themselves. A key task of adolescence involves bringing the actual self more in line with the ideal self, and in moving away from distinct, nonoverlapping facets of identity. The online "touching up" that youth authors reference may thus function as an "as-if" exercise—a way of trying out new ways of being and attempting to incorporate their ideal selves into their actual selves.[31]

I think my homepage is a little more wittier . . . well, not wittier, but I put more thought into what I am saying rather than just like spewing off the top of my head the way I do in real life. But other than that, it's basically the same thoughts that I have and the same take on life that I have, more or less. So I think it does an accurate job of representing me. I mean, all shined up and polished. A nice shiny me.

These words, conveyed by a teenage home page author, capture what many online users, both young and old alike, value about the Internet: the opportunity to put their best face forward. This opportunity seems especially welcome during adolescence, when individuals increasingly make decisions regarding self-presentation based on their newfound capacity to imagine the variety of responses they might receive from others.

While not addressing youth expression in particular, most literature examining blogs and personal home pages has focused on this issue of self-presentation, invoking the theories of Cooley and Goffman, among others.[32] In their own way, these theorists have each emphasized the idea that our decisions about how to present ourselves to others are rarely haphazard. On the contrary, we typically deliberate about who our audience is and how we wish to be received. More than a century ago, Cooley coined the idea of the "looking glass self," encapsulating the notion that we tend to take the role of the other toward ourselves.[33] Extending this years later, Goffman, perhaps the most recognized authority on the subject, characterized all self-presentation as performative, in the sense that we play roles in our interactions, much like actors in the theater. Such role taking allows us to take others' perspectives and thus to consider how we appear to them. Consequently, we can strategically adapt our self-presentations to best achieve our desired outcomes.[34] As Buckingham notes in the introduction to this volume, Goffman has been criticized for failing to consider the possibility that all interactions can be viewed as performances and for neglecting other forces that operate on individuals as they survey themselves and construct their self-presentations.

Despite these differences in approach, many current scholars and journalists have noted that ideas about self-presentation take on new meaning within the context of the Internet. The strategy and intentionality behind self-presentation is illuminated in online settings, because communicators must consciously *re*-present themselves online (via text, images, etc.). In the absence of audible or visual cues, they often feel less inhibited, a sensation heightened by the experience of crafting messages in front of a computer screen, frequently in the privacy of one's own room or other personal space. Moreover, the possibilities for strategic self-presentation, it is argued, are expanded online. Authors possess more control over the impressions they give than they do in offline spaces, since they make all the decisions about what to reveal, omit, embellish, or underplay,[35] although they are, of course, limited by their design skills and the software itself.

These affordances are not lost on youth authors, who candidly offer dozens of examples of tactical choices they have made about what to post online in an effort to manage others'

impressions and to gain social approval. For example, one youth author explained how she wanted people who visited her personal home page to understand how important music was in her life. Even though, in person, she identified her interest in a range of musical genres from pop to country to classical to reggae, she wished to project a counterculture, antiestablishment image on her home page, and thus strategically picked which groups and songs to reference there. Another youth author described how his blog was aimed at showing his "deeper, introspective side," and thus he intentionally avoided what he perceived to be trivial or irrelevant information in discussion of his daily life on his blog.

These examples not only demonstrate that youth authors care deeply about the image they project online, but also that their personal sites are, like all productions, informed by the larger culture. Although youth authors may see themselves as unique and their works as original, the choices they make about how they present themselves online are still informed by a society that relies heavily on acceptance and "fitting in." As they fashion themselves for self and others, what they highlight is often informed by what the media and culture industries tell them is "cool" about being young or teen-aged. Even the most "alternative" teenagers have learned the codes of their subculture through the lens of various forms of commodified popular culture. Thus, the self-presentations that youth authors offer on their personal sites must be viewed as constructions, not mirrors, of teens' emerging sense of self.

Of course, highlighting those aspects of themselves that they believe will leave the best or "right" impression with site visitors is endemic to any online self-presentation. But a relatively unique self-presentational ability that online genres offer some young authors is the chance to present the kind of identity or self-image they feel they cannot present in other spaces. For example, some female online authors address taboo or unsavory personal topics, such as depression, self-mutilation, and lesbian sexual desire. Young males sometimes share music, post images, and disclose concerns that address homosexuality, violence, fear, and rejection. Adolescents of both sexes lament their inability to broach these kinds of issues in offline conversations with friends and family for fear of social or parental reprisals, and, given their age and relatively limited ability to travel freely, they can rarely locate many physical places where encounters with strangers regarding these topics would be possible or safe. Consequently, they are grateful that the Internet provides at least one nonprivate space to explore these personal issues. Of course, these kinds of self-presentations are most common among authors who feel little threat of being linked physically to their virtual re-presentations, and hence these young authors tend to use pseudonyms and other disguises to safeguard their anonymity online.

These types of self-presentational practices might be described as "identity experimenta-tions" in the sense that young people use their personal sites to test out different versions of their current and possible identities. Youth authors are, in fact, the first to acknowledge how they use their personal sites to broadcast aspects of themselves in order to see what kind of reception they receive. For example, several young authors have described how they consider themselves to be humorous, but they rarely show their comical side to friends and peers because they fear rejection. Online, however, they have the time to craft their comedy and worry less about negative responses because they are removed from the moment of its reception. Similarly, studies of queer youth online have found that young people consider the Internet as a "space and time to safely rehearse the coming-out process."[36]

Interestingly, however, young people often reject the characterization of these types of practices as "experimentation," because, they argue, this term suggests that what they put

online is somehow not true or real. Indeed, it is worth noting that social scientists who have tried to empirically measure "identity experimentation" among online adolescents have operationalized this concept as "pretending to be someone else."[37] Rather, most young authors see themselves trying to capture who they are—albeit in a palatable fashion for the audience—rather than trying out entirely new and different identities. In nearly all cases, young authors perceive the identities they present online to be authentic, even if "shined up" and "polished." In fact, some youth authors see their online self-presentations as even more representative of their "real" selves than their offline self-presentations, a phenomenon other scholars have also noted.[38] Two youth authors described the experience this way:

I think this is a real, honest portrayal of me that I don't give in everyday life. Because I can be a very guarded person, and I like to come off as being more confident than someone who is so utterly confused about everything in their life. And so [on my blog] you see that real side of me.

In my day to day interactions with people, I don't think I really show who I am. I try to hide behind triviality and a 'life is good' image. Not so on my home page.

Youth authors can therefore use their personal sites to explore ways to present in public versions of themselves that may be stifled—for various reasons—in other settings. Especially during adolescence, when the social ramifications for speech and symbolic behavior can be severe in most offline spaces, online genres provide relatively safe opportunities for youth authors to present what feels like an authentic self-presentation, even when it conflicts with or departs from their "everyday" self. Indeed, it seems that personal sites provide youth authors with somewhat protected spaces for reconfiguring actual, possible, and ideal selves in various arrangements, all of which are central to their self-image.

"Doing a freak show online?": Online Authorship and Social Validation

One of the main reasons young people concern themselves so much with authenticity in their self-presentations on their personal sites is because, ultimately, they seek social validation from their audience. Thus, they indicate, if their self-presentations are inauthentic, feedback from site visitors is irrelevant, if not meaningless. The desire for meaningful feedback is particularly acute during adolescence, when individuals increasingly crave social and self-acceptance. Social acceptance is desired as adolescents frequently view and value themselves based on how they are viewed and valued by others. They are especially hungry for social approval because they begin to focus more on peer group acceptance and conformity than ever before. In fact, peer approval becomes increasingly predictive of adolescents' sense of self-worth. Adolescents' concerns about self-acceptance also motivate them to seek feedback that reassures them that they are not alone in their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Validation thus relieves their fear about being different or abnormal.[39] In this context, it is not surprising that receiving audience feedback constitutes most youth authors' primary objective when posting a personal site on the Internet.

   In their quest for validation, youth authors are not shy about directly soliciting feedback. They pepper their blogs and personal home pages with requests for comments, through guest books, comment boxes, user surveys, and requests for email or instant messages. They also commonly insert counters on their web sites, to provide a measure of how many times their sites have been visited. Their attitudes about counters are generally negative, however: they would rather receive qualitative than quantitative feedback, and they are often suspicious of the accuracy of the numbers reflected by the counters. Nonetheless, such

feedback mechanisms do, as Kitzman says, serve to create a kind of "economy of recognition," signaling popularity not only to youth authors themselves, but also to their site visitors.[40]

Not surprisingly, the comments youth authors value most of all are those that suggest empathy and identification, as one author explained:

The most meaningful comment is when someone writes in and says that they understand what my problem is and that they can relate to it. And it just makes me feel good to know that I'm not just out there doing this freak show online, that people actually do feel the same way I do.

Yet even for those who do not share problems or issues, the sense of validation that stems from comments simply signaling a shared interest or appreciation of a talent is powerful. Indeed, the drive for connection and validation is what impels many young authors to share so much of themselves in online spaces. The potential reward of being praised by unknown others is compelling, particularly in those instances in which young people share personal information that they hide in offline, public settings. Such exposure and consequent vulnerability makes the yearning for audience feedback particularly strong, as these authors express:

I cannot imagine how much I want everyone to read it. I never would have thought so.

I didn't realize how much I would come to care about this, because I really have. I really love what I'm doing. I love being up online. I love people reading it. I love people commenting to me, and the comments that I have gotten about it have been just as genuine as I have been. The people who have written into me have completely matched what I said to them, and that just felt so good.

Comments like these illustrate youth authors' own acknowledgement that audience response is, at base, a form of validation for themselves. By contrast, they rarely suggest that they offer their comments, art, and insight on the Internet as a way to contribute to the greater social, political, or artistic world. Rather, their offerings are in large part directed at audiences so as to solicit feedback about the appropriateness or value of their own experiences, ideas, and lifestyles. Such feedback, either offline or online, is crucial for identity achievement.

Not only do youth authors try to elicit comments through direct solicitations, but they also try to compel feedback by attending to their audiences in much the same way that mainstream media producers do. They implement design elements like frames and "back" buttons to make navigation easier, they adjust color schemes to facilitate easy reading, and they use first person address (e.g., "I'd like to welcome you to my site!"). Like the broadcast networks during sweeps week, they also include images of and references to sensational topics, celebrities, and social events. Sometimes they make personal and intimate disclosures reminiscent of confessionals commonly used in reality programming, because they know this might "hook people in." By appropriating music and images and incorporating links to retail and media sites, they indicate that consumer culture provides accessible and appealing tools not only for self-presentation and subcultural affiliation, but also for entertaining their audience. And they try to keep content new and fresh in order to keep audiences coming back for more, considering frequent updates a sign of a good page or blog. They even deliberate how much content is too much, or not enough, as one author explained:

I'm always conscious of, like, what if it's too long ... will people read it? If it's not long enough, will people just think, you know, that I sat down and did it just so I could have the day marked off as having done it?

Altogether, many youth authors take innumerable steps to increase the chances that their site visitors will respond. Their earnestness in this regard testifies to the importance of validation by others in the process of forming and developing identity.

"Hey, this is who I am!": Self Realization through Online Expression

Beyond simply confirming that their voices have been heard and valued, site visitor comments can also be powerful instigators for changing how youth authors think of themselves, and in some instances, how they behave in offline spaces. For instance, positive audience reactions can prompt the integration of online self-presentations into offline self-presentations. Take the example of Lisa, a late adolescent whom I followed for a year after she decided to keep a blog. My initial conversations with Lisa revealed that she originally viewed her blog much like a newspaper column, and she saw herself as a Carrie Bradshaw–type character from the HBO series *Sex & the City*. She spent hours trying to make her entries sound witty and sarcastic, and painted a picture of herself as simultaneously stylish, neurotic, adorable, and ambitionless. However, after a few months of blogging, she declared, "I'm moving further and further away from creating a character and closer and closer towards being myself." In fact, with each subsequent interview over the course of a year, Lisa described her growing realization that she *was* the character she portrayed online—she simply hadn't admitted it before. She explained,

Right from the start I was more honest in the blog than I ever was in real life. And since it's gone on, I've kind of become more honest to catch up with it in my own life, 'cause I figured, "hey, if I can do this online, why can't I do this all the time?" So I've kind of been catching up with that and opening up a lot more. And I feel as though sometimes my blog has gotten even more honest because of that. I mean, I just don't feel like I'm hiding anything anymore.

According to Lisa, what was most fundamental to her transformation was that her audience didn't reject the person she presented online. In her blog, she had disclosed weaknesses such as her lack of direction, her desire simply to find a husband and become a "soccer mom," and her laziness about finding a job—all traits that she feared others would despise about her. She also disclosed her insecurities about friendships, growing up, and final exams. But sharing these sentiments online, she said, allowed her to accept herself as she never could before, and to show her vulnerability in "real" life, which she had previously attempted to conceal:

[My blog has] made me more comfortable with myself. . . . Instead of having to do things to please other people, to put on different masks for everyone, it's sort of made me say, "Hey!, This is who I am! And you want to write in your comments, go ahead, but read this—This is me. Either you like it or you don't . . .

And from having to do that online, it's really made me fit it in to my own life. The truth is, I just never thought people would be interested in knowing the real me . . . because it sounds like a sad thing to say, but I just—I just never thought so, and that's why the blog has really helped me, and made me that much more confident. It showed me I can be myself and people like that, and they actually prefer it.

This is just one example of how some youth authors perceive the impact of their online self-presentation on their offline lives. Other young people have described the opposite situation, in which their self-presentations were so poorly received online that they decided to change some aspect of themselves in their offline lives. Naturally, one cannot simply alter many aspects of one's real-life persona, such as one's sex or race, simply in reaction to online audience feedback. Nonetheless, it seems a common experience among youth authors to

rework their self-image or self-presentation at least in part due to reactions to their online presentations.

"It's more of a Picasso": The Risks and Disappointments of Online Expression

Simply because youth authors seek validation from their audiences does not guarantee that they receive it, however. In fact, most youth authors express their biggest frustration with their personal sites as the dearth of comments, especially substantive ones. Lack of feedback is especially disheartening to those who disclose what they consider to be highly intimate information, as well as those who put considerable effort into the appearance of the personal home page or the language of the blog. The feeling that one has been heard, that one matters in a greater context, is impeded when authors receive no or little response, youth authors explain. One lamented:

I thought I'd get more feedback from who's reading it . . . I like to hear what they have to say. Because that's part of why I wanted to do it, to put my story out there to have others tell me their stories so I could learn as well. It wouldn't just be 'me me me' all the time.

Although many youth authors are disappointed that more people aren't responding to their web sites, they are also not uniformly pleased with the feedback they do receive. Some youth authors, for example, are frustrated that site visitors chastise them for the content of their personal sites. In response to a site visitor who complained that her personal home page was too depressing, one author replied on her page:

if u wanted to bitch me out with the reason that I write so damn negative on my page, then ur fuckin' lame cause that's the most dumbest fuckin' A stupidest reason in the world. its as if my page was not negative, would u compliment me on being such a wonderful person? bitch me out for being negative, compliment me for being positive. Uh huh yea ok. please seriously. Ur telling me i have problems but who's the one wasting his fucking time 'trying' to bitch out a girl who's never even done anything to u, and we'd never meet anyways.

The anger evident in this response likely stems from the tendency for most authors to view their sites as their own private spaces, even though they exist within a public forum. Although they desire feedback from others, they also desire respect. Negative comments are felt almost as invasions of privacy. In her discussion of blogging, (which could easily extend to other kinds of personal sites online), boyd explains this seeming contradiction poignantly: ". . . [E]ven in the the public world of blogging, there is an understanding of a private body. By entering a public square, we do not expect to be molested; likewise, in blogging, we do not expect to be attacked simply because we are in public. We view our bodies as private space in public, just as we view our blogs. And yet, the relationship between private and public is quite blurred, particularly considering that the public square of the blogosphere is not ephemeral, but across space and time."[41]

Other youth authors describe situations in which their self-presentations online had been interpreted too literally or narrowly. They express frustration that audience members would essentialize their entire characters as being one way, simply because they chose to relay these aspects of themselves online. For example, one author explained:

Sometimes I have thrown a crazy whim into my blog, and suddenly people assume that it must be something incredibly important. One of my online friends asked me if she should be concerned that I do so much drinking. She missed the entire point of what I was writing. I am not writing a blog about drinking; it is a blog about me and that sometimes is a part of it. Even though it is my blog, it is still not

all of myself. I think it needs to be taken on face value. Just because you read my blog does not mean you know me.

The final words of this excerpt are particularly poignant, as many youth authors are very adamant that people cannot "know" them based on their pages. This conviction is somewhat paradoxical, given that, in large part, their sites are devoted to making themselves known to others. The fear, however, is that blogs and home pages cannot fundamentally capture them as a whole person:

I mean if you read someone's poetry, you might be able to get to the deeper side of that person, but then you won't know the sense of humor in that person. I guess what I mean is that on my home page, you get sort of the surface of who I am, and the very deep part of who I am, but you don't get the middle.

In his studies of adult bloggers, Reed found similar sentiments. He explained, "While journal bloggers are happy to assert that 'my blog is me', they also insist that 'I am not my weblog'."[42] Youth authors use words like "snapshot" and "two-dimensional" to describe how their home pages and blogs, while honest, do not capture everything that they are. As one author put it, his self-portrait online is "more of a Picasso," because it is neither a fabrication nor an identical rendering of himself. What disappointed him most, he explained, was when people interpreted it as more or less than he himself did.

"I'm only a first draft": Self and Site in Process

Fortunately, however, youth authors take considerable solace in the knowledge that their personal home pages and blogs are not static entities. They appreciate their ability to update, revise, delete, or otherwise alter their sites for any reason at almost any time. Upon recognition, for example, that site visitors seem to be getting the wrong impression from their sites, they change the offending material, add new entries or content, or even post comments warning audience members to "back off" and "respect that this is a page for me, not for you." Perhaps Chandler and Roberts-Young put it best when they explained, "Homepages are unlikely to be updated as often as we "update' our internal conceptions of ourselves—in fact, this is an incentive to revise them. But they have the potential to be closer to the fluid self than any other textual form whilst also being very public."[43]

The relationships youth authors share with their living documents is thus complex and constantly in flux. The following conversation with a youth author reveals this intricacy:

Participant: My webpage is a mirror . . . I have a relationship with it . . . . I sort of see myself reflected there. You know that old adage? People know you better than you know yourself sometimes.

Interviewer: Yes, but you created this website, right?

Participant: Right, I created the page and when I lose myself, if I ever lose myself, I go back to the webpage, and I think, oh, here's something to hang onto, a foundation . . . But I can also improve myself, my good qualities, my not so good qualities . . . That's what I mean when I say that I'm only a first draft. Because I myself am incomplete, the page will always be evolving.

Views of themselves as incomplete and evolving are commonly voiced among youth authors. The opportunity to revise one's site as one revises one's self-conception is thus appealing, especially since such changes are not only anticipated, but frequently desired. Personal sites operate as visual artifacts of the self-evolution that young authors endure as they grow older. Indeed, the unfixed, malleable, and evolving nature of personal sites is not at all unlike identity itself: an enduring process, rather than a fixed state. Other scholars in this volume,

including Buckingham and Weber and Mitchell, articulate just such a vision of identity, as a project that is always under construction. Technologies like the Internet become part of the environment from which identity choices are selected and in which identity choices are projected and reprojected.

Conclusion

The predominant perceptions of youth online content creation that circulate in popular media and in academic research are based almost exclusively on analyses of and encounters with the actual artifacts themselves. It may thus be unsurprising that such works are often dismissed as superficial or exalted as transcendental. When taking into account the perspectives and the actual lived experience of the producers of these online publications, a more complicated picture emerges.

Youth authors use their personal sites to engage with their culture and to practice ways of being within it. They concern themselves simultaneously with how they appear to themselves and to their audiences. Although this process is not unique to *online* self-presentation, the deliberate nature of the construction magnifies the experience. Indeed, if, as has been argued, all presentation is performative and we constantly evaluate ourselves from the perspective of the "other," then moments of self-appraisal and self-presentation meld into one another, especially online.

The youth authors with whom I have spoken welcome this self-conscious intersection of public and private identities, because they are eager to complete the identity work that they understand to be part of growing up. As part of a larger society that constantly reminds them that they are no longer children but not yet adults, they tend to view themselves as drafts that can be retooled in response to both internal and external evaluations. Performing and playing with their identities in online public spaces is especially gratifying, because it is viewed as less risky but potentially more validating than experimentation in other arenas.

In these ways and others, personal sites appear to be used by young authors to engage directly with the challenges of identity formation that are common to adolescence in Western cultures. During adolescence, many young people move beyond their stable and secure sense of themselves as nurtured by their families and begin to develop their own, more personalized vision of themselves and their potential. Emotions are experienced intensely and are often more negative than earlier in life.[44] Personal sites, for some authors, provide a point of stability in this time of change, at the same time that they facilitate the very types of personal growth that constitute the identity formation process.

In some ways, maintaining personal home pages and blogs serve the same functions that traditional media consumption, especially music listening, has served for adolescents for decades. For example, it has long been established that media consumption helps adolescents identify with a youth culture and "feel connected to a larger peer network, which is united by certain youth-specific values and interests."[45] In an online context, authors work toward feelings of connection not simply by consuming youth culture (via particular websites, for example) but also by appropriating and integrating youth cultural symbols into their personal sites. Their sites thus not only broadcast their cultural affiliations to other youths, but also serve as signals to themselves. It has also been argued that young people intentionally use their private media experiences, such as music listening, "to directly engage with issues of identity." Listening to music during solitary time provides "a fantasy ground for exploring possible selves. . . . The images and emotions of popular music allow one to feel a range of

internal states and try on alternate identities, both desired and feared."[46] On their personal sites, youth authors suggest this type of identity play can be taken farther, because it can be manifested virtually on the screen for others to see and comment upon. Identities are thus not simply imagined, but reconstituted visually and publicly for self and others, even as youths sit in the private confines of their bedrooms or other personal spaces.

In these ways and others, personal sites offer a variety of informal learning experiences. Most importantly, youth authors tell us, learning about themselves and genuine introspection are the major rewards and rationale for online authorship. As they consider if and how they will draft themselves into existence online, they are forced to reflect on who they are and how they wish to be viewed by others. Despite what ends up on their personal sites, the requirement for active and deliberate self-presentation mandates that youth (and other) authors evaluate how their self-as-presented matches the self they envision to be at their own core. Identity development and self-learning thus operate in tandem, and personal sites not only archive but also propel this process forward.

Another type of learning is at work here as well: learning about effective self-presentation. Like any message producers, youth authors who produce personal sites gradually learn how to create the identities and images they want others to see. They learn how to use cultural symbols for their own purposes, while at the same time they learn the technological skills necessary to create these representations. In so doing, they make choices that will reflect on how others view them, and thus are pushed to think critically about what kind of self-statements they offer through their personal sites. In some cases, the presentations they offer are met with poor reception by site visitors (as, for example, described in the preceding section). Instances of audience rebuke push young authors to consider how the acts of encoding and decoding messages can diverge from one another, and reveal how message creators in any context must work to insert meaning into their texts strategically. By trying to appeal to audiences and solicit feedback, they learn how to negotiate an image-driven culture. This is increasingly important as the world is more and more media dominated, and fewer and fewer physical spaces exist in which to connect and explore shared cultural concerns.[47]

The Internet has certainly not pioneered youth expression, but it does manifest youth expression more abundantly, conspicuously, and collectively than ever before. Consequently, we find before us a heightened opportunity to engage with youth cultural production. As Buckingham, Herring, and Willett (this volume) implore, we should hesitate to exoticize youths' practices or products at such a moment, though this is certainly tempting when so many of us lack the drive to construct the types of creative expression we witness among youths online. But we must also pay serious attention to youth online expressions, as sites of meaning making and identity production. When young people are telling us that they find fulfillment in and even personal transformation from the experiences they have expressing themselves online, we must recognize these practices as significant, despite or perhaps in light of the contexts in which they occur. Listening to what young people have to say about their experiences of cultural production yields a valuable—and irreplaceable—perspective as we endeavor to understand the changing role of new technologies in contemporary adolescence.

Notes

1. Janet Kornblum, Teens Wear Their Hearts on Their Blog. *USA Today*/October 30, 2005. http://usatoday.com (accessed November 2, 2005).

2. Jane Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance Between Self and Other* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

3. Kroger, 1989.

4. Ibid.

5. Reed Larson, Secrets in the Bedroom: Adolescents' Private Use of Media, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24, no. 5 (1995): 535–551.

6. Erik Erikson, *Toys and Reasons: Stages in the Ritualization of Experience* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 106.

7. Peter Arnett, Adolescents' Uses of Media for Self-Socialization, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 24, no. 5 (1995): 519–534.

8. Larson, Secrets in the Bedroom, 1995.

9. Susan Harter, *The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

10. Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden, *Teen Content Creators and Consumers* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005).

11. Susan Herring, Lois Ann Scheidt, Sabrina Bonus, and Elijah Wright, Weblogs as a Bridging Genre, *Information, Technology & People* 18 (2005): 142–171.

12. Herring et al., 2005.

13. Lenhart and Madden, 2005.

14. It is worth noting here that not everyone agrees that blogs and home pages should be considered genres. boyd, for example, argues that the blog is better understood as a medium than as a genre. See danah boyd, A Blogger's Blog: Exploring the Definition of a Medium, *Reconstruction* 6, no. 4 (November 2006). http://reconstruction.eserver.org/064/boyd.shtml (accessed December 18, 2006).

15. See, e.g., Daniel Chandler and Dilwyn Roberts-Young, *The Construction of Identity in the Personal Homepages of Adolescents*. 1998. http://www.aber.ac.uk/~dgc/strasbourg.html (accessed July 21, 1999); Joseph Dominick, Who Do You Think You Are? Personal Home Pages and Self-Presentation on the World Wide Web, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 76 (1999): 646–658; John Killoran, The Gnome in the Front Yard and Other Public Figurations: Genres of Self-Presentation on Personal Home Pages. *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 26 (2003): 66–84; Hugh Miller and Russell Mather, The Presentation of Self in WWW Home Pages, Paper presented at the IRSS Conference in Bristol, U.K. (March 1998), 25–27; and Weber and Mitchell, this volume.

16. Malcolm Parks and Tonjia Archey-Ladas, *Communicating Self Through Personal Homepages: Is Identity More Than Screen Deep?* Paper presented at the International Communication Association, San Diego, CA (May 2004), 3.

17. John Suler, *Adolescents in Cyberspace: The Good, the Bad, the Ugly*. (2005). http://www.rider.edu/suler/psycyber/adoles.html (accessed July 2, 2006).

18. Alex Williams (2006, Feb. 19) "Here I am taking my own picture." *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com (accessed February 20, 2006).

19. For example, Aviva Rosenstein (1999) found that critical events spurred the authors she studied to create their personal home pages (*Contradictory Social Contexts of the World Wide Web: The Paradoxical Implications of the Personal Home Page*. Paper presented at the ICA Annual Conference [May 1999]).

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