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## Exploring Social and Group Identity Theories in the Profitability of Online Communities Targeted Towards Older Adolescents

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# **Exploring Social and Group Identity Theories in the Profitability of Online Communities Targeted Towards Older Adolescents**

**Daniel V. Giaccio**

**Advisor: Dr. Ipshita Ray**

**161 - 08 Cryders Lane, Beechhurst NY 11357**

**Graduation Date: May 20, 2009**

**Marketing Major (Concentration: Advertising and Promotion)**

**Minor: Sociology/Anthropology**

**Lubin School of Business, Pace University**

## Précis

In a troubled economy, entrepreneurs are looking towards the online market as a lucrative source of income. Recent years have shown online community membership increase exponentially. They are quickly becoming synonymous with more traditional forms of internet usage, such as e-mail and instant messaging. However, there are major roadblocks in the path to financial success. Marketers are faced with the challenge of capitalizing on different demographics who have their own personalities and sets of likes and dislikes. They have found much success in the “tween” market, a highly profitable set of young millennials whose ages range from 11 to 14. Yet they are encountering much difficulty with older demographics, particularly the 18 to 21 set which I’ve identified as “older adolescents.”

Sociological and psychological identity theories are highly complex explanations of the human psyche. Applying these theories directly to the workings and success rates of online communities is an exciting and new concept that has just recently begun to be explored by researchers. Through 3 years of working in the digital and interactive marketing fields, I have encountered many issues in which online communities have failed to actively form their own identity, leading me to develop my research topic.

Through hours of analysis of previously conducted research and literature, and my previous knowledge of social identity theory, I began to construct an innovative study that has identified the “secret formula” that marketers are missing when trying to capitalize on the older adolescent demographic. I have developed three research questions that were answered efficiently in the course of the study.

- 1. Do older adolescents still use online communities for vehicles of social identity?**
- 2. Do older adolescents portray a certain image on social networking sites?**

### **3. Is there a certain type of site this demographic would join that would help them foster their group identity?**

Qualitative research of in depth interviews and picture tests performed on older adolescents was the backbone of my study. A questionnaire was created that explored how older adolescents create and maintain identities on online communities.

My study found that older adolescents are using the internet to maintain their positive self identity yet explore group identities in order to find out where they fit in the world. It used these findings to create innovative implications and recommendations for marketers on how to create a successful online community business model targeting the older adolescent. The answer was simple. Since older adolescents are still forming group identity, allow them to do so in niche online communities centered on highly specific interests and hobbies. The study provided in depth insight as to why this main recommendation would be successful, from both a sociological and business related standpoint.

Future research should take my recommendations and test them on a small scale business model. Additional research on identity theory should also be performed and applied to the proposed business model.

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## **Section 1 - Review of Literature**

### **Defining Social Identity Theory**

**In social identity theory, a social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg and Abrams 1988). A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. Through a social comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group. (Stets 2)**

Not to be confused with social identity theory, identity theory is simply how one individual identifies themselves. However, there is much emphasis placed on the personal self and self classification. In identity theory, the self becomes a physical object. That physical object is then placed into categories. This is called self categorization in social identity theory, and simply identification in identity theory. In-groups and out-groups are examples of these categories. The self is placed in the in-group along with others that are believed to be similar in identity to the self. The out-group consists of objects or people that are not easily classifiable or have an identity that differs from the self. For example, a person who identifies themselves as African American will include all individuals who identify as an African American in their in-group, and all other ethnicities in their out-group. However, sub-categories and more than one identification group do exist. If that same person identifies themselves as Lesbian, than a separate in-group will exist that includes not only African Americans, but other ethnicities who also identify as Lesbian. (Stets 3)

...the naming within identity theory includes all the things (including self and other) that take on meaning in relation to our plans and activities. More recently, identity theorists have drawn on this meaningful relationship between persons and things to incorporate the concept of resources (things that sustain persons and interactions) as a central component in identity processes (Freese and Burke 1994). Much of the meaningful activity within a role that is governed by an identity revolves around the control of resources (Burke 1997); this feature as much as anything, defines social structure. (Stets 5)

Resources are essentially being heralded as the driving forces behind social identity theory. Recent studies, as seen in the above quotation from a Washington State University study performed by Jan Stets and Peter Burke, are moving away from the concept of self categorization and more towards resources, or the things that sustain persons and interactions. In other words, identity theory discussion is involving more into what is making individuals identify, including the tools and triggers (resources), instead of how and why they are identifying.

Tajfel (1978) specified four underlying principles of SIT: social categorization, social comparison, social identity and self-esteem. Social categorization refers to the fact that we categorize people into groups to simplify our understanding of the world and to structure social interaction. Group categorization results in differences between categories (interclass differences) being accentuated and differences between members within the same category (intraclass differences) being underestimated or restrained.

This 'accentuation principle' is even more pronounced when the categorization is salient, important and of immediate relevance to the individual (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, 1999; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963). (Kept 5)

An individual goes through a crucial thought process when electing to join an identity group. They first must recognize the group identity. Cynthia, a 21 year old psychology student, has a hobby of taking pictures of graffiti around New York City. A recent club has started in which members meet and share this same hobby. Cynthia is intrigued by this group and yearns to learn more. Next, the individual must believe in the group's ability to succeed, or its viability. Cynthia researches the group and makes sure it is active. Its weekly meetings and strong membership base are key factors in this step of the identity group thought process. Third, the individual must believe that their joining the group would benefit it. Cynthia examines her photos of graffiti and feels confident that they would receive a positive reaction from the club members. (Dunleavy 9)

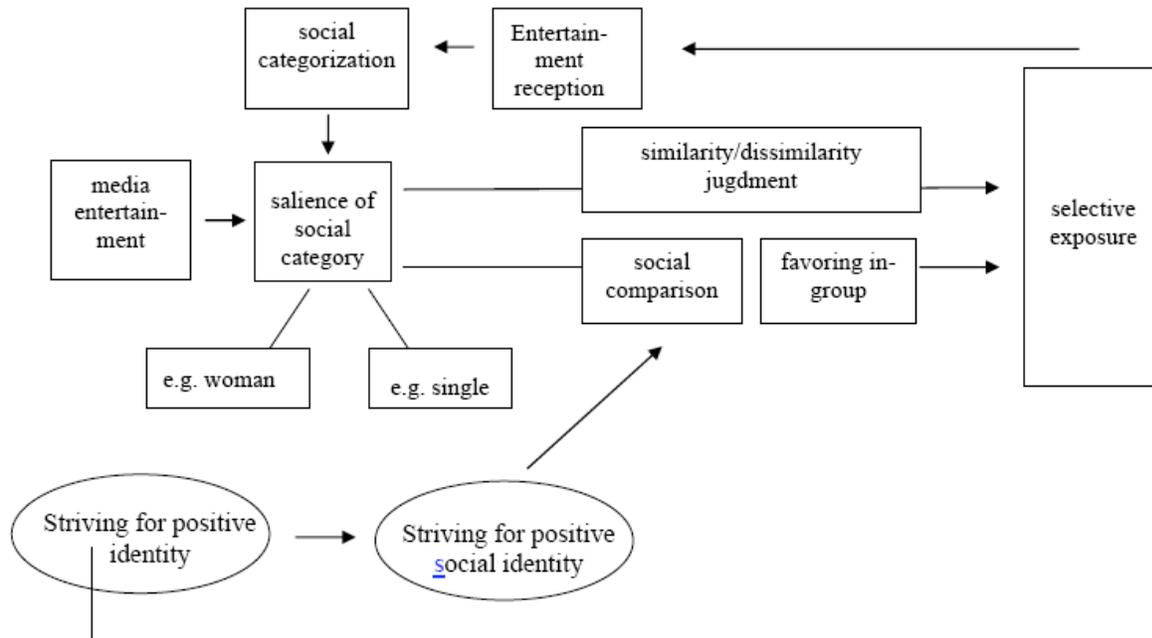
Identity groups fall under two categories, endogenous and exogenous. Endogenous groups are groups in which people come together to share a common interest. An individual is allowed to control the social situation in which they are able to join. For example, Cynthia's interest in graffiti photography is an interest in which she can control. The "motivation for joining the group is self selected." Exogenous groups are groups whose memberships are "fixed or delimited by external factors." The members of this group are defined by social situations beyond their control. Therefore, an "identity set" is defined. An identity set is all potential members who may be in the group. For example, the American Association of Retired Persons is an exogenous group because all those who are in it are above the age of 50. This requirement is beyond individual control. The identity set for the AARP is everyone in

America who is above 50 and retired. For individuals in exogenous groups, an additional step in the group thought process is added. The person must have a strong concept, fully understand, and fall within the identity set. (Dunleavy 10)

With this knowledge, it is becoming easier for researchers to apply social identity theory directly to business and media concepts. In a groundbreaking work by Sabine Kept and Nicole Kramer, entitled “Expanding social identity theory for research in media effects” social identity theory was used to explain selective exposure to certain types of media. In this study, Kept and Kramer hypothesized that national identity and gender identity would play an important role in the viewing choices of certain television series. The study concluded that:

Participants rated series that feature protagonists of their own sex higher than those that featured protagonists of the opposite sex. However, national identity did not have the effects expected. Participants from all three countries gave similar ratings to series produced in their home-country as those produced abroad. (Kept 2)

While the results were inconclusive, the study yielded an interesting diagram that relates social identity theory to media perception.



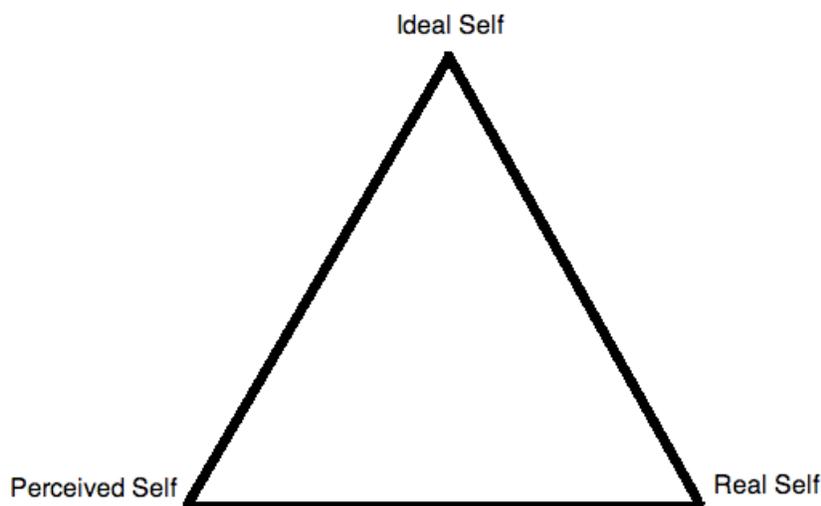
The theorists behind social identity, Henri Tajfel and John Turner, concluded that an individual's self identity is almost always positive. This is essential to understanding social identity theory. Positive identity is defined as the individual's ideal sense of self, even if that identity is deemed dubious by society. For example, an individual who identifies as a drug dealer is still expressing positive identity. This strive for positive identity leads to a striving for a positive group identity. In other words, how one person relates to themselves is how they will relate to others. As seen in the previous diagram, this strive leads to social comparisons and favoring of one group over another.

Another important aspect of the diagram, and of identity theory, is identity salience. Identity salience is defined as "...one of the ways, and a theoretically most important way, that the identities making up the self can be organized. Identities are conceived as being organized into a salience hierarchy. This hierarchical organization of identities is defined by the probabilities of each of the various identities within it being brought into play in a given situation." (Stryker 1) An individual has many different sets of identities that will be enacted

when a situation demands it. Therefore, it can be concluded that an Italian Housewife will identify with her culture when she is with family, as a woman when she is with friends, and as a homemaker when she is out shopping and taking care of her family. A career woman's "mother" identity would not be salient in her work environment because at work she first and foremost identifies as a manager.

Together, identity salience and the strive for positive identity yields a selective exposure towards certain media. Tracing back to the group identity thought process; individuals apply the same process to engaging with media. This will become crucial for marketers, especially when it comes to understanding online communities and social networks.

The last and possibly most crucial identity theory to be discussed is Carl Roger's Conception of Self.



At the base of the triangle diagram is perceived self and real self. Perceived self is how an individual views themselves. Real self involves what that individual actually is. At the tip of the triangle lies the ideal self. The ideal self is every salient individual's goal. It entails what that person would like to be. (Rogers) While the theory itself is extremely simple, it relates to

every identity principle. The strive for positive identity, as discussed initially by Tajfel and Turner, relates directly to the ideal self. One of the key aspects in forming ideal self is through finding identity, both personally and in a group setting.

### **Relating Identity Theories to Online Communities**

As defined by Alicia Iriberry and Gony Leroy in their study of online community success, online communities are:

“cyberspaces supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built” This definition reflects the complex nature of online communities and underlines the components of online community that should be subject to further study. These components are cyberspace, information and communication technology, member-driven content, members’ interactions, and relationship formation. (Iriberry 8)

Online communities are quickly becoming one of the world’s leading forms of communication. As Iriberry points out, a large amount of previous research has highlighted various reasons individuals join communities, with the main reason being social interactions. They “facilitate social bonding” and form friendships among members. These are key factors in the salient person’s quest for ideal self and positive identity. (Iriberry 9) A full outline of benefits of an online community was also provided and is reproduced in the following chart:

**Table IV.** Benefits of Online Communities for Individuals [Malooney-Krichmar and Preece 2005; Butler et al. 2005; Johnson and Ambrose 2006; Preece 1998, 1999]

Benefits for Individuals
<p><i>Information exchange</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—Access to a wide variety of members, information, and experiences with which to exchange information</li> <li>—Access to obscure or otherwise inaccessible information</li> </ul> <p><i>Social support</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—Opportunity to build and maintain social ties with people already known offline or those met online</li> <li>—Opportunity to help and provide support to the group or to the larger community</li> <li>—Opportunity to offer and receive emotional support in a climate of trust, equality, and empathy</li> <li>—Opportunity to bond socially and generate social action</li> </ul> <p><i>Social interaction</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—Opportunity to meet people and build friendships</li> <li>—Opportunity to be entertained</li> </ul> <p><i>Time and location flexibility</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—Flexible access to the community</li> <li>—Flexible time management</li> <li>—Spatial and temporal independence</li> <li>—Visibility beyond boundaries of local work or geographical community</li> </ul> <p><i>Permanency</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—The ability to think about and edit responses</li> <li>—The ability to store and retrieve messages</li> <li>—Access to research articles and hyperlinks within the community related to the focus of the community</li> <li>—The ability to establish permanent social presence through photographs, textual profiles, and archive messages, and the ability to control with ease one's level of participation in the community</li> </ul>

Important to this study are both the social support and social interaction categories. Yet one important and crucial aspect that is ignored by Iriberry are the multiple ways ideal self and positive identities are able to be achieved through an individual's use of online communities.

In "The Anthropology of Online Communities," Samuel M. Wilson regards online communities as "gender neutral, egalitarian spaces" They are blank canvases in which the individual is able to create new identities. Identity theorists themselves are intrigued by the recent popularity of online communities in the past decade. They provide a new form of identity expression.

In the real world, identity salience could only be expressed in certain conditions. With the emergence of online communities, users can create multiple identities regardless of the situation. They can truly be whoever they want to be. Online communities have become

“online interaction spaces as places where an individual can take on multiple identities in ways never before possible and indeed bring about changes in conventional notions of identity itself.” (Minkov 12) Yet these separate online identities begin to mesh with an individual’s offline identity, merging to form one collective identity with connecting multiple identities, akin to a tree branch.

Joining online communities also allows expression of positive group identities. However, the preexisting group identity must first give off the notion of being positive before an individual joins and adapts the group identity to their own personal salience. When the size of a group increases, an individual has a lessened sense of perceived influence. Patrick Dunleavy notes in his study of group identity and individual influence that “there is a symbiotic relationship between perceiving a net benefit from an interest group that is effective and recognizing a group identity.” (Dunleavy 9) This relates directly to the thought process of Cynthia, the student example who joined the Graffiti Photography Club.

## **Section 2 - Defining the Research Questions**

### **Using Social Identity Theory in the Development of Online Communities**

Recent trends have shown that online communities are becoming lucrative forms of business, and almost every brand wants to either form their own online community or partner with pre-existing ones. When online communities are successful, they reach massive levels. Facebook has become a household name. As of February 2009, Facebook reported nearly 45.3 million active users. The fastest growing demographic on the site is women over 55. Facebook defines active users as users who log into the site at least once a month. With such outstanding numbers, it is no wonder that businesses are flocking to Facebook to spread their brand message. A representative from Alloy Media & Marketing, the leading teen specific marketing agency in the country, commented that “As a brand marketer, Facebook's highly engaged audience of 45.3 million members is very attractive. It’s fantastic to be able to have the potential to reach that many people in just one place. They are not just seeing your brand message, they are actively engaging in it.”

Facebook’s 2008 revenue clocked in at an estimated \$300 million dollars. Founder Mark Zuckerberg is the world’s youngest billionaire at only 23 years old. The “get rich quick” allure of online communities is causing many tech savvy individuals to start their own social networks. In a July 2008 Wall Street Journal article, Ben Worthen wrote,

One of the hot investments for businesses these days is online communities that help customers feel connected to a brand. But most of these efforts produce fancy Web sites that few people ever visit. The problem: Businesses are focusing on the value an online community can provide to themselves, not the community. That’s according to Ed Moran, a Deloitte consultant who just

completed a study of more than 100 businesses with online communities. Not surprisingly, these sites failed to gain traction with customers. Thirty-five percent of the online communities studied have less than 100 members; less than 25% have more than 1,000 members – 6% of these businesses spent over \$1 million on their community projects. “A disturbingly high number of these sites fail,” Moran tells us. (Worthen 1)

The Deloitte consultant Ed Moran was definitely on to something, but he did not quite grasp the full picture. Online communities are failing because they are not allowing individuals to explore their own identities.



### Creating Online Identities

Online social network Kiwibox.com recently experienced a resurgence of active users when they introduced a customizable avatar feature and fully customizable profiles. The added features allowed the user to create their own identity through colorful and flashy profiles. The users were also able to create alternative identities through the use of cartoon avatars.

Online social network WeeWorld formed its entire business model off this avatar concept. Users create free avatars called WeeMees, but designing clothing, buying accessories, and decorating the user's "virtual apartment" requires a monetary fee. Tween users are shelling out hundreds of dollars of their parent's money to participate in the WeeWorld craze. The identity formed through use of these communities transfers to the user's real life identity. Avid WeeWorld user, 12 year old Amanda Ruggieri, offered a comment,

*Being on WeeWorld is tons of fun! I have a WeeMee and she's such a rocker. She has pink hair. It's kind of fun because I would never ever have pink hair in real life. You can use your parent's credit card or buy these cards they sell at Toys R Us to get cool stuff for your WeeMee. All my friends at school have one and at lunch we all talk about each other's WeeMee. Everyone wants to have the coolest looking one.*

It is clear that creating sites that foster these alternate identities is extremely lucrative. "Tweens" are satisfying many self identity needs. They are also actively seeking a positive group identity. The avatar feature is a way for them to portray their ideal sense of self, as compared to their perceived self and actual self. As Amanda pointed out, her WeeMee has pink hair and is a "rocker," something she knows she can never be in her current real life in-group identity.

While these avatar driven, "identity havens" are extremely successful, there is one major problem. The only demographic it truly "works" with, are tweens and young teens or those from the ages of 10 - 14. Older teens (14-17) and older adolescents (18 - 21) are the most fickle of online community users and are being ignored. Another brand manager

at Alloy Media & Marketing offered an important comment that was the basis of my research. He said,

*It's a real challenge to find an appropriate business model for the older demographics. For a while it was not known how to engage tweens, but they found the secret formula and it's made people millionaires. However, the most sites that are failing are targeted towards older kids. While they might generate a lot of users, advertising sales are not enough to stay afloat. They must come up with a successful business model. It's why sites like Facebook were touch and go for a minute. It wasn't until they added features that required users to spend money that they started to see substantial profits.*

After analyzing all of my research, interviews with two professionals, and a comment from a tween user, I arrived at my crucial research questions. After examining the massive success of sites such as WeeWorld, I realized that there is potential for success among the much sought after older teen and older adolescents, if vehicles for expressing identity were offered to them.

The research led to the following research questions:

- 1. Do older adolescents still use online communities for vehicles of social identity?**
- 2. Do older adolescents portray a certain image on social networking sites?**
- 3. Is there a certain type of site this demographic would join that would help them to foster their group identity?**

### **Section 3 - Methodology**

In order to truly understand the complex thought process of older adolescents, qualitative research was required for this particular study. It focused solely on older adolescents, college students in the age bracket of 18-21. This core demographic is crucial because they have “grown up” with online communities, in its early forms when they were “tweens” up until now in its maturity stage. From here on, older adolescents will be referred to as the “core demographic.”

#### **In-depth Interviews**

Seven in-depth interviews were conducted over one month during April 2009. An email blast was sent out asking respondents to participate in an interview about social networks and online communities. Respondents were required to have at least two different social networking accounts that they used regularly. The following questionnaire provided a basis for the discussion, with on the spot changes made based on the progress of the interview and the interviewee’s responses.

#### **Interview Questions**

1. State your name, age, and occupation.
2. Describe your daily internet routine.
3. How does the internet make you feel?
4. Describe yourself and your group of friends. What is the main thing that you and your group of friends has in common? Would you label your group of friends as “preppy,” “emo,” “alternative”, etc?

5. Do you have any hobbies or interests that you do not share with any friends? Example:  
“knitting”
6. Would you be happier if you had friends that shared this interest?
7. Briefly describe your social networking history. What social networks are you apart of?  
How has your experience been on them?
8. Describe how social networking makes you feel. What is your primary purpose of using a social network?
9. Do you find that you become a different person on social networking sites? A person you would want to be, for example, more confident, than in person?
10. Do you ever interact with strangers, people you do not know in person, on social networks? What is the purpose of this?
11. If a stranger contacted you with similar interests, would you ignore it? Would you accept their friend request?
12. What if the interest was something you did not have in common with any of your friends?
13. Would you join a social networking site if the site’s contents specifically centered on an interest that you had?

### **Social Networking Specific Questions**

#### **Facebook**

1. Are you a member of any “groups” on Facebook?
2. Why did you join this group? Did a friend recommend it to you, or did you actively seek it and join the group without knowledge of anyone in it?

#### **MySpace**

1. Do you use codes to customize your profile?
2. What is your opinion of profiles with a great deal of flashy colors and customization?

### **Twitter**

1. How often do you update your twitter?
2. What is the primary purpose of having a twitter?
3. What tone would you say your updates have? Nonsensical? Informative?

### **Picture Test**

Interviewees were also instructed to complete a picture test. Four photos of various older adolescents were presented and respondents were required to describe each person in the photo in their own words. They then were instructed to label each photo with an online community they thought the person would be a member of. This additional experiment was used to examine how interviewees categorized people in both their in-groups and out-groups.

\* Full interview transcripts and the picture test given to interviewees can be found in the Appendix.

## Section 4 - Results and Analysis

### Respondents Overview

All respondents were female, with ages ranging from 18 to 21. All were current students. Everyone identified has having a part time job or internship. All were members of at least two social networking sites.

### Internet Usage

Internet usage ranged from 3 hours a day to 8 hours a day, with the average being 5 hours. Respondents felt that this was simply too much time spent on the internet. Lashandra, a 21 year old research assistant noted, "I'm on and off it way too much. I'll be sitting watching TV and my computer will constantly be by my side whenever I'm home. So it's more of a constant thing (than just hours). One thing is certain, **the core demographic is spending up to half of their waking hours engaging online.**

### Daily Internet Routine

Besides using the internet for school and work, all respondents used the internet for social networking. Social networking sites were a consistent part of every respondent's daily internet routine. Cynthia, 21, stated that she checks her email for ten minutes, then her Facebook for about 25 minutes or more, then continues to use the internet for whatever school work she needs to get done. The core demographics usage of the internet does not revolve around school, work, or getting information. **It instead revolves around communicating with friends via social networking, with everything else coming after, in terms of priority.**

### Feelings Towards the Internet

Interestingly, feelings were mixed when respondents were asked to speak on their feelings towards the internet. Rose, 21, noted that the internet feels like a friend that is always

updating her on what is going on. On the contrary, Lia, 18, noted that it makes her feel “like an idiot” because it makes her unproductive. She stated that she “feels dependent on it, like I have golden handcuffs that I’m chained to.” This notion of being dependent on the internet is not uncommon among the core demographic. To them, it’s not a luxury, it is a necessity. **The internet itself is not an enjoyable experience, but the tools it offers are valuable to their social development and identity formation.**

### **Self Identity**

All respondents had unanimously positive opinions of themselves. “Motivated,” “Nice,” “Friendly” and “Outgoing” were all common responses. **Interestingly, almost all of the core demographics' descriptions of themselves had to do with the way people see them , as well as social interactions.**

### **Interests & Hobbies**

Common hobbies represented the majority of responses. Patricia, 20, and Cynthia, both liked to knit and do arts & crafts. Lia, Jackie, and Cynthia were into photography and art. Cynthia enjoys taking photos of graffiti throughout New York City. Lia runs an art exhibit in Williamsburg, Brooklyn which consists of art she has completed and friend’s artistic works. Half of respondents admitted that “going out with friends” was their main interest and considered it a hobby. **Most respondents noted that they would be happier if friends shared their interests.**

### **Peer Identity**

When asked to describe their groups of friends, responses varied. Gabrielle, 21, described her friends as “fellow students that share the same interests as me, whether it be

school work or my sorority.” All respondents had positive outlooks on their group identity.

### **The core demographics' friends are what make them who they are.**

#### Social Networking History

Respondents were all active users of Facebook. They all signed up for Facebook when they received their college email addresses when it was open to only college students, or when it was first opened to the public. It is important to note the core demographics' attitude towards Myspace. All had been members of Myspace “when it was really popular” but have since deleted their profile or have been negligent with maintaining it. Also, the core demographic is just starting to try new social networking phenomenon, like Twitter. **The core demographics' social networking usage is constantly dynamic.** What is trendy one year is soon forgotten about the next.

### **Feelings Towards Social Networks and Online Communities**

All respondents felt positive towards social networks. It provides an efficient venue for them to connect with friends and peers. Rose agrees, stating, “I guess I like the functionality of it. You don’t need to call people. I guess it’s sort of a content happy. I like that I can manage my relationships in a nice organized setting.” Cynthia stated, “In a lot of cases social networking is really a reflection of ourselves and a documentary of our own lives...in that case for better or for worse our lives are online. It’s good for me to able to reflect in what I’ve done and what I’ve done with my friends online.” However, the core demographic is uncomfortable with the voyeuristic qualities of social networks. Words like “stalker” and “creep” were common fare throughout all interviews. This particular question generated one of the most outstanding finds of the in depth interview process. **It is that the core demographic feels that their lives on Facebook and related social networks are who they are in real life, and**

**being able to have a view into their peers personal life is both intriguing, yet uncomfortable.** Respondents unanimously identified their primary purpose of using social networks as staying in touch with existing friends, and not meeting new ones.

### **Creating an Identity on Online Communities**

**The core demographic uses online communities to maintain their identity and manage their perceived self.** Respondents either admitted to currently trying to portray a certain image on Facebook or previously having done so. Respondents felt that when they were younger, they used social networks, particularly Myspace, to portray an ideal image of who they were. Being older, they still do this in more subtle ways. All respondents agreed that users of online communities are trying to portray positive images of themselves online. One respondent noted, “When you look at someone online, it’s just fragments and your imagination fills in the rest. In person, you get the entire thing, and you know, some people lie on social networks, some people exaggerate. It’s a place for them to escape...You can use it as a form to alter your personality in a certain way...” When asked to identify her biggest lie on Facebook, Lia mentioned her music preferences.

*My music, I'm not really a music person. I say what bands I'm listening to right now. I pick the five coolest bands, they are always really alternative. Unless I'm trying to be silly, I would never write that my favorite album of all time is Jagged Little Pill by Alanis Morissette. It's just not cool enough. It's embarrassing. But I'm going to let everyone know that I've been listening to Jeff Buckley and Smashing Pumpkins so much. I think part of it is that people who haven't talked to me in a long time are people who don't know me very well. I think the main part of Facebook is people getting in*

*touch with you to get to know you. A number of times I've looked at people's profiles who I've been intrigued by and dismissed them or decided they were amazing! I do things so that people who are trying to get to know me through this limited profile can get to know me in one website. It's about a concise package. I'm creating this identity, a packaged identity, that's easy to grasp. If I threw in something in there that doesn't "define" who I am it doesn't work. Even if it's the truth.*

Lia is using Facebook as a means of "sorting" her peers. She places potential connections in either her in-group, or the group of people she would consider connecting with, or her out-group, the people she dismisses.

All respondents admitted to maintaining an image on Facebook that sheds them in the most desirable light possible, which relates directly to Iraberri's notion of individuals using online communities to form and maintain positive identity. The most common method of maintaining positive identity was through "untagging" pictures on Facebook. Cynthia noted, "Personally, I just try to manage my reputation. You hear about employers checking Facebook. My family is on it. I wouldn't say something online for the risk of offending people. I'm mostly myself online, but I try to maintain a certain image. A desirable one"

### **Making New Connections Online**

**The core demographic does not like to interact with strangers online, even if the stranger contacted them with similar interests.** Almost all respondents said that they generally feel uncomfortable making new connections using social networks. Even if the person is a stranger, they would much rather meet them briefly in person prior to

them becoming friends with them online. Facebook does not seem like the ideal social network for making new connections. Respondents agreed that Myspace was more for that purpose. However, the fact that the core demographic is “growing out” of Myspace and related sites poses a serious problem for marketers.

### **Joining New Sites Based on Interest**

Respondents were unsure if they would join a social network based on interest. However, this should not be viewed as unsatisfactory results. It is completely understandable as individuals must perform the group identity process before joining any sort of group, including online communities. Respondents, who had particular interests that they were highly involved in, such as photography, were more acceptive of joining an interest related social network. Jackie, 21, was already a member of Fotki, a photography centered online community in which users share and respond to member submitted photographs.

### **Thoughts on Particular Social Networks**

Respondents felt that groups on Facebook did not add to their collective image; however they admitted that joining nonsensical groups was part of adding to their portrayed identity. All respondents agreed that flashy profiles and music on Myspace profiles were a means for younger users to create an identity in an easy way. The most interesting part were discussions on Twitter. Respondents were both highly interested and active users of Twitter, or repulsed by it. Patricia even went as far as to say that Twitter is “the downfall of humanity, it’s useless. They took one aspect of Facebook and made it into an entire site so you can let everyone that you know 500 times a day what you’re up to. What happened to privacy? I don’t know, possibly it’s to project themselves as

having an interesting life. If you have the time to be on Twitter all the time, then you don't!"

Lia joined Twitter to impress a potential suitor. She said, "It was a different personality. I felt that my twitter updates had to be more intellectual and creative. The guy that introduced me told me he follows his favorite writer, and there were all these celebrities on twitter. It feels like since you only have a few words to say, it needs to be poetic. On Facebook, its more honest. This is how I'm feeling. On Facebook, you pass by statuses, but on Twitter it's the purpose."

### **Picture Test**

The results of the picture test proved that social networks take on personalities of their own, and individuals are able to be stereotyped based on appearance of what social networking site they would potentially belong to. An image of a girl described by respondents as a "punk rocker" was unanimously associated with Myspace. An image of a girl who users described as a "sorority girl" was unanimously assigned to Facebook. A male image was described as "a jock" and half of the respondents assigned him to Facebook, while the other half assigned him to Myspace. Lastly, respondents described an image of a young girl as a "high school portrait" and assigned her to Myspace. **The picture test proves that online communities take on a certain brand personality, which is crucial for marketers and entrepreneurs to take into consideration when they are planning on launching a social network.**

## **Section 5 - Recommendations & Implications**

### **Research Question 1: Do older adolescents still use online communities for vehicles of social identity?**

My research found that the core demographic is not using social networking sites to form a social identity. Instead, they are currently using social networking sites to maintain and foster their online identity that they previously created when they were younger using primitive forms of online communities, like AOL Instant Messenger away messages. Social networks and online communities are a venue for them to enact their identity salience. For example, they view themselves as working professionals on LinkedIn, a friend on Facebook, and as an intellectual on Twitter. As expected, online communities are also a method for the core demographic to enact their positive identity. They meticulously manage their profile pages to create the perfect image of how they want to be seen by others.

**Implications for marketers:** This research question proves that the successful tween targeted business model of avatar based online communities would not fare well with the core demographic. A new model must be explored and tested. The following research question analysis will make recommendations of what that model could consist of.

### **Research Question 2: Do older adolescents portray a certain image on social networking sites?**

This study found that the core demographic uses social networking to manage both their online and real life identity, instead of forming it. Unlike younger demographics, the core demographics' online identity is not distant from their real life identity. Younger teens are still analyzing their perceived, real, and ideal self, while older

adolescents are maturing and becoming comfortable with their identity. This also means that since they are not focusing on themselves, they will have the mental ability to be more selective with their group identity. All of the respondents admitted to having their set group of friends and being reluctant to let strangers in on their circle. This poses an additional challenge to marketers.

**Implications for marketers:** This challenge can be conquered by providing an online space where users in the core demographic can foster group identity, as opposed to self identity. What is currently being ignored by the industry is that marketers should not under any circumstances attempt to make traditional online communities that revolve around general interests, like Facebook. In recent years, entrepreneurs have been focused on making Facebook “copycats” in desperate attempts of receiving similar success. Niche social networks based on hobbies or particular interests are an important option for marketers to explore. They allow the core demographic to explore their interests with others, perform group identity processes, and maintain their positive identity. In addition, niche social networks would also prove to be more lucrative than traditional social networks in the sense that users would be more likely to pay for access to something they can’t get anywhere else for free. Charging a small fee for access to this exclusive site for such a rare hobby would fare well. Marketers must take into consideration the fact that 1,000 users who spend 20 dollars a month to become a member of the site is much more adequate than 20,000 users who spend nothing on a free site.

**Research Question 3: Is there a certain type of site the core demographic would join that would help them to foster their group identity?**

While my research shows that the core demographic was at first reluctant in their responses in joining a site based on an interest or hobby, when prompted with additional information, they started to be more accepting. This is because the additional information that was provided (specifics about what kind of website it would be, what hobby it would be centered around) aided the respondent in completing the group joining identity process as discussed by Patrick Dunleavy.

**Implications for marketers:** Since the core demographic is more focused on group identity, rather than self identity, they are more selective when it comes to what social networks they choose to be a part of. The group identity joining process is something marketers and business people must take into consideration. Recall that when joining a group, individuals first acknowledge the group, recognize it as well functioning and strong group, and then evaluate if they can make strong contributions to the group. When building a site for a very specific hobby, for example, a photography site where users share pictures of graffiti, certain features must be implemented to ensure that users complete the group identity joining process. First, an attractive, professional yet trendy layout is essential to portray the groups viability. A preview of the sites contents is also necessary. In this case, a trial membership is most effective. Users are able to explore the site for a few days and see the benefits of joining for themselves. The last, and most important part of the group identity process is not to be ignored. While conveying information about the site, marketers should not set the tone of the copy as why the potential member needs to join the site, but rather why the site needs them to join. In the graffiti photography site's case, a message should be conveyed that the trend of graffiti photography is growing rapidly, and users on the site are eagerly awaiting the potential

member's submissions and their input in discussion. End the copy with a call to action that is focused on the site's need for the member to join and start engaging.

## **Section 6: Conclusion**

**A website “should be a holistic experience channel.” - Darren Guarnaccia, Vice President of product marketing for Sitecore.**

**“The Internet is the biggest psychological and social human experience...” - Cynthia Gordon, Vice President of new media marketing for Universal Orlando Resort**

These pioneers of social media could not have said it better, yet their comments are being largely ignored by the majority of the marketing community. Entrepreneurs are hungry for a piece of social networking success and are ignoring key factors that ensure such profitability. That is, they are focusing solely on profits and monetary figures that they are missing the big picture, what the secret formula is behind the success of an online community.

This study provides that secret formula. It emphasizes the importance of exploring sociological and psychological theory in the creation of online communities. In particular, it suggests a possible sociological method for capitalizing on the much sought after, yet hard to reach older adolescent. In every recommendation made, years of sociological research on identity theories were taken into consideration. The core demographic of older adolescents must be provided with innovative ways to engage online. My research has found that the core demographic is nearly complete in their self identity development, but they are still actively developing their group identities. By providing a venue for them to form new group identities through developing hobbies and interests, marketers can benefit.

Continuing research should focus on uncovering more identity theories, and directly applying them to individual social networking models. With an additional budget, the recommendations that have been given should be tested on a small scale.

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# Appendix

## Interview Transcriptions

### Lia

- State your name, age, and occupation.
  - Lia, 18, I'm a student and I work at Pace University as a student assistant.
- How often do you use the internet?
  - Way too often, I say when I'm working I spend at least 5 hours a day on the internet, when I go home I spend at least 2 hours a day. It's pathetic, without the internet I'd be much more productive. I don't have a TV but the internet has replaced my TV.
- Describe your daily internet routine.
  - I spend a lot of time on facebook, stalking. I view a craft-zine blog. I read blogs of people I have crushes on. I produce an event so I write a lot of emails. I email my family all over the world. I research artists I'm interested in. That's a basis of what I do.
- How does the internet make you feel?
  - I feel like an idiot, because most of the time I spend on the internet is really unproductive, like looking at Facebook profiles. It's weird because it makes me feel like I have a lot of freedom, but I feel dependent on it, like I have golden handcuffs that I'm chained to. The internet wasn't working at school today and I freaked out. In some ways I feel like I have access to anything, but sometimes it makes me feel like a stalker, like a creeper. I googled someone's phone number the other day, it was bizarre.
- If the internet was a friend, how would you describe it?
  - A codependent relationship, a person who is constantly poking me. Incredibly distracting. Someone I can have fun with but someone who totally messes me up. Someone I need,

but I feel like they need me. There is an attachment and I feel like we can't let go of each other.

- Describe yourself.
  - I'm goofy. I'm pretty outspoken. I'm incredibly opinionated but at the same time I make an effort to be open-minded, but in some ways I'm a bigot and an egomaniac. I'm really resourceful. I'm pretty creative. I'm a total slob. Right now, I'm trying to discover myself as an artist and what that means. Part of it is being really social, but I isolate myself sometimes. There is this weird thing that art is really isolating, sometimes its hard for me because I'm a girl who wants to have fun. I really value my relationships with people but I'm also a bitchy mean girl. I go through phases of liking people and phases of not liking people.
- Do you have any interests or hobbies? Anything out of the ordinary?
  - I'm really into baking! I've baked professionally for a while. I'm not very good but its something I love to do. When I have nothing to do it's what I do to feel productive. I love to eat and I produce an arts event. A lot of my time is spent doing that. I make art and I like watching performance art. I just started doing acrobatics and trapeze. It's so fun!
- Describe your group of friends.
  - It's weird because my group of friends in New York are different from my group of friends in Sante Fe, back home. In Sante Fe, my friends were very bohemian. My friends in New York are all people who range, but my closest friends are kind of go getters. People who are interested in being alive. All my friends have that superficial queen bee thing about them.
- If you would label your friends as a stereotypical label what would it be?

- Like the queen bee rejects, like Lindsay Lohan's character in Mean Girls.
- Do you have anything you are interested in that you don't share with your friends.
  - Well none of my friends are artists. I really like crafts and making stuff. My friends aren't adventurous. I like camping, none of them like that.
- What social networks are you apart of?
  - Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, although I joined Twitter to impress a boy and then I got over it. Couchsurfing.com. It's a network where you can find people who rent their couches out if you want to travel. It's crazy and fun, but the people have been totally cool. I've never heard any horror stories.
- How has your experience been on social networking sites?
  - I joined Myspace when it was a big thing. My Myspace was boring. I'm so technologically retarded that any of that Myspace stuff was not me. I didn't use it for anything but it was really to show off pictures. I didn't do the pouty lip pictures but I did the "I'm having so much fun" pictures. It took me awhile to get onto Facebook. At first I kind of ignored it, but it really helps me get in touch with people. I just got in touch with people who I haven't seen in years. Part of the thing is that I'm really excited to get in touch with people and we connect online but then nothing happens. Sometimes I'm very intrigued when people Facebook friend me and I never thought they would.
- How does social networking make you feel?
  - Kind of like a creep, it makes me feel a lot like most of technology makes me feel. Kind of convenient, but kind of pathetic.
- If a stranger goes on your profile, what do you want them to think of you?

- Good question. Sometimes I look to my photos to see if I was someone looking at my profile would I think I was hot. (Laughter) Quirky and Fun. There are some parts to me that aren't quirky and fun, like the fact that I spend hours a day on Facebook. That's not quirky and fun, that's mainstream and pathetic. That's when I don't want to be on Facebook.
- What would you say your biggest lie on Facebook is?
  - My music, I'm not really a music person. I say what bands I'm listening to right now. I pick the five coolest bands, they are always really alternative. Unless I'm trying to be silly, I would never write that my favorite album of all time is Jagged Little Pill by Alanis Morissette. It's just not cool enough. It's embarrassing. But I'm gonna let everyone know that I've been listening to Jeff Buckley and Smashing Pumpkins soooo much. I think part of it is that people who haven't talked to me in a long time are people who don't know me very well. I think the main part of Facebook is people get in touch with you to get to know you. A number of times I've looked at people's profiles who I've been intrigued by and dismissed them or decided they were amazing! I do things so that people who are trying to get to know me through this limited profile can get to know me in one website. It's about a concise package. I'm creating this identity, a packaged identity, that's easy to grasp. If I threw something in there that doesn't "define" who I am it doesn't work. Even if it's the truth.
- So you would say you try to maintain a certain image.
  - Yea probably, I would say so. I don't do it consciously. But, yes.
- What about with pictures?
  - I've only de-tagged one picture once because my nose looked use.

- But what about if you were drunk?
  - No, that adds to my quiriness. I don't really look pretty in pictures. It upsets me but I try not to de-tag. Part of my image is that I'm not a de-tagger. I'm being honest! I'm not lying, but I'm not telling the whole truth.
- Do you ever interact with strangers?
  - I did on Myspace years ago. There were always guys who had like 300 friends. But I haven't in years. But I don't usually reject people.
- What about if there was a guy in class, or someone you met out?
  - I've never done the bar thing. I would never really friend someone I don't know.
- If a stranger contacts you with similar interests, like baking what do you do?
  - I mean if someone contacts me and was like "Let's start a baking club" I would probably say yes but its something I would never really do.
  - If there was a baking social network, I would probably never join, unless it was centered on real life meetings. Like going to someone's house and sharing recipes. But there's no point in doing that over the internet.
- On Facebook, are you a member of any groups?
  - Yea, I'm part of a group that is like a group I started that's a performance arts collective. I'm part of a few friend's band's groups.
- Would you join groups to add to that whole package you talked about?
  - No not really, I don't really think about groups. I don't look at any groups my friends are in. People create groups to show off.
- With MySpace what do you think about all the flashy color profiles?

- It's a different culture. The kids I know on Myspace are part of a different culture. They tend to be party kids and Hip Hop kids. Their profiles play obnoxious music. I'm not interested in it, it's kind of gratuitous.
- But you said you portray a whole image on Facebook, so how is that different?
  - (Laughs) Because I think it's more subconscious. You can't read Myspace things, it's more in your face. Someone can look at a Facebook profile and not really get the image your trying to portray. Myspace is in your face. It's annoying and hard to read.
- Let's talk about Twitter. Why did you join Twitter to impress a guy?
  - This guy I was in class with (Laughs) told me to join. He told me I would like it because I showed him an art project I did on little random phrases. I went on it and I wrote something really angsty. I wrote like "Politician Uncle and Drunk Wife, why is it so pathetic" I was having dinner with my family. The thing that confused me was I had my Facebook status, and then I had Twitter. So I felt like I had to write different things. What's the point in writing the same thing? I would write something about the art I was making, something funny. He was my only follower, so he was the only one reading my messages! So it was all for him!
- How did your Facebook status updates and your Twitter updates differ?
  - It was a different personality. I felt that my Twitter updates had to be more intellectual and creative. The guy that introduced me told me he follows his favorite writer, and there were all these celebrities on twitter. It feels like since you only have a few words to say, it needs to be poetic. On Facebook, its more honest. This is how I'm feeling. On Facebook you pass by statuses, but on Twitter it's the purpose.

## **Lashandra**

- State your name, age, and occupation.
  - My name is Lashandra, I'm 22 and I'm a student and research assistant at Baruch College.
- How often do you use the internet.
  - All the time, way too much. I'm on and off it way too much. I'll be sitting watching TV and my computer will constantly be by my side whenever I'm home. So it's more of a constant thing.
- Describe your daily internet routine.
  - I wake up and check my mail on all three accounts I have. I'll go and eat breakfast and then come back and play around on it. I'll surf the web, go on Facebook.
- How does it make you feel?
  - Like a bum, I feel like I don't get anything done on the internet. The stuff I need it for takes about 5 minutes, the rest is a waste and random.
- What would you say is your primary reason for using the internet?
  - Definitely entertainment, some research now because my job right now makes me do research.
- Describe yourself. Do you have any hobbies or interests?
  - I don't know. Five words? I don't know.
- If someone looks at your Facebook profile what would they think about you?
  - I like to hang out with my friends. I don't take life too seriously. I'm serious about school and I'm serious about work, but at the same time I know I need to make myself happy or else nothing else is worth it.

- Do you have any interests or hobbies?
  - Not really any hobbies, I don't play any sports. I don't shop because I don't have money or anything. Just generally being around people, whatever we are doing.
- Describe your group of friends.
  - Um, Well they are all business students so they are all generally really stressed out. When we get together they like to have a really good time and act pretty crazy. They're great. They are all very diverse and fun.
- What would you say is the main thing you and your friends have in common?
  - We all like to go out and party.
- Would you label your group of friends as something like preppy, emo, alternative?
  - I would say very preppy.
- Do you have any hobbies or interests you do not share with any friends?
  - I did start knitting this winter, so I guess no one else knits.
- Would you be happier if your friends liked to knit?
  - No, because then I would describe us all as dorks. I describe myself as a dork when I'm knitting. (Laughs)
- We are now going to talk about your social networking history. Describe your social networking history. What social networks are you a part of? What social networks have you been a part of?
  - I've been on Facebook since my school got it in 2005. I got MySpace and I was on it pretty regularly for about two years. I just got a LinkedIn because I'm graduating and I feel that's what people do. That's pretty much it.
- How has your experience been on them?

- Um, pretty much like everybody else. You think it's kind of stalker-ish and then you get sucked in yourself. I'm not as sucked in as everyone else. I don't do all those applications and stuff.
- Describe how social networking makes you feel.
  - Um, pretty much like I'm prying into people's lives more than they probably want me to. But they put they're stuff out there so they are asking for it.
- What is your primary purpose of using a social network?
  - To get in touch with people who I probably wouldn't be talking to.
- Do you find you become a different person on a social networking site? Is your Facebook an exaggerated sense of self?
  - No, probably when I first came to college it was but in the past few years I definitely gone back to it a lot and looked at every single thing I put on there. I had stuff on there that was not necessarily descriptive of me, stuff I put on there to make it look cooler. My MySpace page had a lot of colors on it and flashy things. On Facebook, the favorite movie thing... I put like 20,000 movies that obviously aren't my favorite. I put a lot of activities I don't know.
- If someone looks at your profile, a stranger, what do you want them to think of you?
  - I don't really care what they think of me...
- Do you think some people do?
  - Definitely
- Do you think people put on a fake face on Facebook?
  - I think those people are definitely insecure. They want people to like them on Facebook because they might not have a lot of real or sincere relationships in real life.

- What are some of the things they do?
  - Sexy pictures. Things they would never show to people in real life but they would put on the internet! Or some people just want people to think they are so fantastic. Like I saw someone who had favorite activities as “wine tasting” Come on! We’re 20 years old!
- Do you ever try to maintain a certain image on Facebook?
  - Um, I did go back recently and delete pictures that I just didn’t think were appropriate. They didn’t make me look good. They made me look immature.
- Do you ever interact with strangers on a social network?
  - No.
- If someone ever contacted you with similar interests would you ignore it?
  - Yes, I’m not really looking for new friends right now. I’m not really into that.
- Would you join a social networking site if the sites contents centered around an interest you had?
  - No, I can’t say I would. I’m not really into anything that extreme. Maybe if it was something I was really interested in and I loved it.
- Are you a part of any groups on Facebook?
  - Yes, I have no idea why I’m a member of them. Some were recommended, some were thought out. Some were from High School, some are random.
- What about silly things?
  - I was a member of a group for the Bacon Cheddar Cheeseburger from Wendys, but I’m not in that anymore. (Laughs) I tried to cut it down to like 30.
- For Myspace, when you had it you used a lot of colors on your profile, how do you feel about it?

- Oh god, some people go above and beyond, like crazy backgrounds and crazy fonts, different layouts. The reason they do it is to make it individual. In reality, there are one hundred million people who have the same things.
- What do you think of twitter?
  - It's awful. I can't stand it, I don't see the point in it. It's annoying because everyone is obsessed with it now. I feel like the only person who is not.
- Why do you think people need to tell people what they are doing at any given moment?
  - It's a little bit of narcissism, you feel like you are so important. Which you very well may be. I don't see the point of it. I don't see how 140 characters matters.

### **Rose**

- State your name, age, and occupation.
  - My name is Rose. I'm 21. I am a full time student and tutor at the Pace Writing Center.
- How often would you say you use the internet?
  - Pretty much constantly, when I first wake up in the morning. At night. It's not so much time as blocks of time, I guess.
- Describe your daily internet routine.
  - I check my email, I check my Twitter, I check my Facebook. I read 5 or 6 web comics. I read blogs like Feministing.
- How does the internet make you feel?
  - It makes me feel good. If it was my friend it would be the friend who knows everything that's happening in the news and always has something interesting to say. They know what's going on with my other friends so I can stay updated.
- Describe yourself.

- I am mostly outgoing. I am not bashful. I used to be really shy and quiet, but I just don't care what other people think now. I like knowing what's going on in the world. Part of being a tutor, I like knowing the answer. I love helping people.
- Do you have any interests or hobbies.
  - I love reading. I love science fiction and fantasy in any media. Anything that's not real basically. I loved Ender's Game.
- Describe your group of friends.
  - My friends are crazy. They are all very different. My two best friends have the same name which is weird. One of them is neurotic and needy, a perfectionist. She drives me crazy. My other best friend is like a mom to everyone. She gives the best advice.
- What would you say you and your friends have in common?
  - We are all dorks. We love reading and we love breaking things down and analyzing them.
- If you had to give your friends a stereotypical label what would it be?
  - Oh definitely dorks. Book nerds. Late middle school and early high school we would spend our lunch time in the library. We are huge music nerds too.
- Do you have any hobbies you don't share with your friends?
  - I love going hiking and camping and stuff but my friends humor me and go with me sometimes.
- Would you be happier if your friends shared this interest?
  - Oh, of course, then I wouldn't have to drag them and beg and plead.
- What social networks are you a part of?

- Facebook and Twitter are the ones that I use multiple times a day. I think I'm still registered with Myspace but I haven't checked it in about two years.
- Why would you say you transitioned from MySpace to Facebook and Twitter?
  - Well Facebook first got big when I entered college. The consensus was like "Oh my God, you don't have a Facebook!" It seemed essential to being a college student. I loved the way it was formatted. Myspace was getting really flashy and "ad-dy" with music blasting and such nonsense I don't care about. Twitter, I signed up this semester because I was required to for a class, but it really just came out of nowhere that it got so big.
- How often do you update your Twitter?
  - I would say I update my Twitter, between like 3 or 4 times a day. If I'm sitting at my computer all day it would be around 8, 10, 12 times. It's an easy procrastination tool.
- What are your Twitter updates about?
  - Random stuff, things like I'm going to Bonaroo this summer.
- What about your experience on Facebook?
  - I used to love Facebook so much that I never closed it, I would leave it open constantly. Now, the past few months I phased away from being completely addicted to slightly addicted. I love staying in touch with my friends. It feels like you can be constantly in touch with them on a variety of levels. It's less invasive and time consuming than a phone call.
- Describe how social networking makes you feel?
  - I guess I like the functionality of it. You don't need to call people. I guess it's sort of a content happy. I like that I can manage my relationships in a nice organized setting.
- Do you find you become a different person on social networking sites?

- Maybe in the beginning, when I was younger. As an incoming freshman, not knowing anybody, I definitely wanted to present myself as cool.
- How did you do that?
  - I guess I wouldn't put pictures that I didn't think were my best pictures. Now I'll put anything up. I would have had to have the best quotes from the funniest movie or the smartest book. It made me seem really deep and cool.
- Do you ever interact with strangers on social networking sites?
  - Occasionally a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend will message me. Right now, I have a picture of my new tattoo. So I've had random people messaging me saying how cool it is, and then we'll start talking.
- If a stranger contacted you with a similar interest, what would you do?
  - I'm usually pretty open... I would try to figure out why they are messaging me out of the blue. But I'm willing to give people a chance.
- Would you join a social networking site if the sites contents revolved around an interest you had?
  - I did join the myBarack site during the election. I went on a couple message boards and posted a few blogs. When I was younger I was really into Wicca, the religion. I joined this site that was about the religion and they formed groups in person.
- Are you a member of any groups on Facebook?
  - Yea like 40. I'm not active on any of them, but I run a group for the writing center. My favorite group is about Bill Pullman being the President in Independence Day. I join them because they amuse me.
- What's your primary purpose of having a Twitter?

- So I can chat with friends outside of Facebook. I love how quick it is and how I can update it from my phone.

### **Patricia**

- State your name age and occupation.
  - Patricia, 21, I'm a student.
- How often do you use the internet?
  - Daily, I would say approximately 3 hours a day.
- Describe your daily internet routine.
  - Facebook, Gmail, Perez Hilton, sometimes MySpace, and back to Facebook.
- How does the internet make you feel?
  - It makes me feel like I'm wasting my life. For how many years I existed without the internet. Since it's introduction we've spent so much of our time on it, when I could be out doing productive things like school work and advancing my life.
- Describe yourself and your group of friends.
  - I'm fairly laid back, anything I do recently consists of school work. That will change over the summer when I'm a camp counselor. I like to go out sometimes, be social, and drink. My friends are the same way, a little less concentrated on school then I am, but laid back and sociable.
- What would you label your group of friends as?
  - I wouldn't label them as anything. They are fairly eclectic.
- Do you have any hobbies you don't share with any friends? Like knitting?
  - (laughs) I can't believe you said that! I just started knitting and no one knows that, my boyfriend doesn't even know that.

- Would you be happier if your friends shared this interest?
  - No. It's a personal thing. I do it for me. It's very therapeutic.
- Briefly describe your social networking history.
  - I got my Myspace when I was about 16 and I got my Facebook when I was in High School, like a day after it was opened to High School students. I was 18 when that happened. That's mainly what happened. I'm active on Facebook. I only use Myspace to make sure no one is hitting on my boyfriend! (Laughs)
- How has your experience been on them?
  - Uneventful. No real drama. Anything that happens via Facebook has already begun in real life.
- How does social networking makes you feel?
  - Sometimes it makes me feel that I have no friends and I'm searching for attention.
- What's your primary purpose of using a social network?
  - To not be left out.
- Do you find you become a different person on social networking sites?
  - I don't think so but at the same time I don't think anyone could admit that.
- Do you think that people put on a different face on Facebook?
  - I think a lot of people tend to, kind of elaborate, their social or ideal self. On a social networking you have the ability to make other people see who you want to be, even if you might not be that person.
- Have you ever tried to maintain a certain image on a social network?
  - If anything I've tried to make my image seem like I'm less of a drunk than I am. I wouldn't really say that I've altered it in anyway.

- What about deleting pictures?
  - Well, you know, I think everyone deletes pictures of themselves at some point or another. If it's embarrassing it's embarrassing and you don't want people to see you at your worst. But you would do the same thing if you got pictures developed for real.
- Do you ever interact with strangers on Facebook?
  - No. If a stranger ever tries to contact me, I'll respond I don't know you and I don't want to know you, see you later.
- What if a stranger contacted you that liked to knit?
  - Nothing.
- Would you join a social networking if it was about knitting?
  - No way! That's weird! If you can't meet people with similar interests in real life than that's pathetic!
- Are you a member of any groups on Facebook?
  - Yes, like the one about being against the NYC MTA fare hike. I oppose it and if something is organized to do something about it I would like to be apart of it. All the other ones are typically funny things. There's this one about some kid I graduated with in High School. It's all in good fun.
- How do you feel about profiles on Myspace that are all flashy and colorful.
  - It's potentially artistic. Most people get them from some kind of service, so it's less so. It's more of an annoyance.
- What do you think about Twitter?
  - It's useless. They took one aspect of Facebook and made it into an entire site so you can let everyone that you know 500 times a day what you're up to. What happened to

privacy? I don't know, possibly it's to project themselves as having an interesting life. If you have the time to be on Twitter all the time, then you don't!

### **Jackie**

- State your name, age, and occupation.
  - I'm Jackie. I'm 21. I'm a student full time and I intern at a real estate company.
- How often do you use the internet?
  - Everyday! Leisure time is mixed in with everything else I do on the internet. I'd say I stare at a computer screen on the internet for at least 8 hours a day.
- Describe your daily internet routine.
  - It starts with email. I look at social networks next. It goes personal email, work email, go online, check to see if I have any new notifications on Facebook because that's literally like besides Twitter the only network that I use. See what other peoples statuses are. That's about it.
- How does the internet make you feel?
  - It feels good to be connected to people, in a way that even a year ago I wouldn't have been able to be as connected. It's convenient to find information at a seconds notice.
- Describe yourself.
  - I am a graduating senior. People would describe me as nice, friendly, resourceful, goofy.
- Do you have any interests or hobbies?
  - I'm into photography, writing, keeping up with pop culture.
- Describe your group of friends.
  - They are energetic. They like to stay connected. My closest friends I talk to everyday online. In person, I see them at least two or three times a week.

- What is the main thing you and your friends have in common?
  - Most of my closest friends are really ambitious but know how to have fun. We all work very hard, but at the end of the day we like to have a laugh.
- Would you label your group of friends as anything in particular?
  - I feel like my friends are all so diverse that I can't really label them as anything.
- Do you share your hobbies or interests with friends?
  - Yes, a lot of my work I do online I like to get feedback for it. I like to post a lot about my daily life online, whether its pictures or just knowing where I am. I don't update every second but if I have a thought I want to connect it with other people. I have a Flickr account, which other people can comment on it and put their own work and compare works.
- Briefly describe your social networking history.
  - I had Myspace. I don't have it anymore. Everyone had one. The last year of High School I got one. Facebook came and I got my college email so I could get Facebook. I've been loyal to Facebook since then. It's the one place you can go online and everyone has an account. Not everyone has a Gmail or Twitter.
- How has your experience been on social networks?
  - It's interesting because while you are connecting with people you are also kind of passively reading what they are doing. You are not always giving feedback, you're not always interacting. My friends and I always have jokes about what people post. I'm sure vice-versa. It's been good, you can connect with people so quickly.
- How does social networking make you feel?

- In a lot of cases social networking is really a reflection of ourselves and a documentary of our own social lives, and so, in that case for better or for worse our lives are online. It's good for me to be able to reflect in what I've done and what I've done with my friends online.
- Do you find you become a different person on social networking sites?
  - Not really, obviously the chance of monitoring yourself is easier because you can think of what you are going to say. You can use it as a form to alter your personality in a certain way but I don't do that.
- Why do you think they do that?
  - Because its easier, the impression is not, your not getting the full package. When you look at someone online, it's just fragments and your imagination fills in the rest. In person, you get the entire thing, and you know, some people lie on social networks, some people exaggerate. It's a place for them to try to escape I guess.
- Do you ever try to maintain a certain image on a social network?
  - Personally, I just try to manage my reputation. You hear about employers checking Facebook. My family is on it. I wouldn't say something online for the risk of offending people. I'm mostly myself online, but I try to maintain a certain image. A desirable one.
- Do you often delete pictures that are tagged of you?
  - Yes, some of them are awful.
- Do you ever interact with strangers, or people you don't know?
  - No, I would say before I maintained my identity, I was more comfortable with people online because I was young and wanted to meet people for the sake of meeting them. But

now I think that I've made an effort to only have people I know to connect with. There's a lot of identity issues and its just kind of weird.

- If a stranger contacts you with similar interests would you ignore it?
  - At this point in my life, probably. Unless they seem totally genuine. I don't see it as a reason to meet people. I already have so many friends and I want to maintain them before I meet other people.
- Would you join a social networking site if that sites contents revolved around an interest that you have?
  - Yes, it cuts through all the red tape and gets to the point. You can connect with people based on one particular interest instead of many. You don't have to spend more time searching.
- Are you a member of any groups on Facebook?
  - Yes, some of them are networking groups for jobs. Some are more broad, groups for New York City, stuff like that.
- On Myspace did you use codes to customize your profile? What is your opinion about them?
  - Yes, it's a way for people to express who they are. How they want to put their spin on a very generic template. I mean, people literally make their personalities out of who they are online. Even if they are around their friends, we are constantly always checking our phones or our blackberries to see whats going on.
- How often do you update your twitter?
  - About 2 or 3 times a day. If I'm sitting at work I'll update it more frequently.
- What is the primary purpose of having a twitter?

- To connect with a people in a more indirect fashion, you put yourself out there and people can read it if they want. On Facebook, alot of people joke about if your updating your status too much. But on Twitter, its what your supposed to do.
- What tone would you say your updates have?
  - Serious, yet relatable. I try not to type something I would in a text to my friend.
- Why do you think twitter is becoming so popular?
  - I think people are kind of voyeuristic in the term that they want to see what other people are doing. Especially for me, it's people who are similar age, similar interest. You want to know what they are doing. It's a way to keep in touch. It's such a quick burst of personality from people that you can just avoid it.

### **Gabrielle**

- State your name, age, and occupation.
  - Gabrielle, 21, student and an intern at CBS Outdoor.
- How often do you use the internet?
  - Everyday, every couple hours.
- How many hours a day?
  - Probably four or five.
- Describe your daily internet routine.
  - I check my email and social networks, Facebook. Normally in the morning when I wake up. When I'm at work I'll use whatever I need to use. When I get home I'll go on Facebook to talk to friends and socialize.
- Describe yourself in 5 words.

- Energetic, Optimistic, Friendly, Outgoing, and Fun
- Do you have any interests or hobbies?
  - I love dancing and eating at nice restaurants.
- Describe your group of friends.
  - Fellow students that share the same interests as me, whether it be school work or my sorority.
- What is the main thing you and your friends have in common?
  - We all like to have a good time in the city and take advantage of what the city has to offer.
- Would you label your group of friends as anything stereotypical?
  - Um, I guess I would say mostly preppy. Everyone's so diverse.
- Briefly describe your social networking history.
  - I joined Myspace when I was in High School. I think I was a senior, maybe a junior in High School. It was big and everyone had to be on it. I got my Facebook when I got my college email. That was back when you had to have a college email to be on it. I don't use Myspace anymore. I use Facebook everyday.
- How has your experience been on them?
  - I enjoy them a lot. I like to keep in touch with people from home. I talk to people I haven't talked to in a while or make plans with the people I do talk to everyday. It's an easy way to get in touch and communicate.
- Describe how social networking makes you feel?
  - It makes me feel happy that I can connect with all my friends. It's like my life on the web and every aspect is on there. I can control it.

- What's your primary purpose of using a social network?
  - To talk to friends and make plans with friends.
- Do you feel that you become a different person on social networks?
  - No, I'm pretty much myself. I noticed when people are younger they try to do that. They try to make themselves be different than who they are. Now that I'm older I don't care.
- Why do you think they try to do that?
  - I think it's that they think they can manipulate who they are and make themselves look cooler or better. Now that I'm older I'm at the point where I don't have to try to be anyone that I'm not.
- Do you try to maintain a certain image on social networks?
  - I try to keep it classy. I don't want pictures of myself on the internet that someone would judge me for. Something that doesn't represent who I am. Somethings are sometimes too personal that I don't want people to know.
- Do you untag pictures?
  - Occasionally, sometimes if I don't think they are appropriate or flattering. I don't want people I might be interested in to see me looking bad.
- Do you ever interact with strangers on social networking sites?
  - No.
- Would you ever interact with a stranger if they had a similar interest to you?
  - No, only if it was for networking or getting a job.
- Would you join a social networking site if it centered around an interest you had?
  - Maybe, but I think I have my fill with Facebook, as it is. I'm on LinkedIn too.
- Are you a member of any groups on Facebook?

- Yes, ones that are on a different work groups I'm a part of. Some are common interests. Some are nonsensical.
- Did anyone recommend these groups to you?
  - I would normally find them on other friends pages, then join from there.
- On Myspace did you use codes to customize your profile?
  - Yea I did.
- What is your opinion of profiles with a great deal of colors and flashy things?
  - Yea it drives me crazy! I'm sure they want to convey an individual style, but it's just too much.
- What do you think about Twitter?
  - I think it's interesting. It's an interesting concept. I've been thinking about getting one for a while I just haven't made any attempt yet.
- Why do you think people are going on Twitter and confessing everything about their lives.
  - I think it's a great way to just have a conversation with someone without actually having it. People want to let other people know what they are up to.

### **Cynthia**

- State your name, age, and occupation.
  - Cynthia, 21, a student and part time nanny.
- How often would you say you use the internet?
  - Everyday, at least three hours a day.
- Describe your daily internet routine.

- Checking my email for about ten minutes, checking my facebook for about twenty five plus minutes, then continuing onto blackboard and checking any classwork or homework I have. This happens about five times a day.
- How would you say the internet makes you feel?
  - Connected, its a bit cliché, but its a way to keep in touch with friends and family and contact people, through internet and email and whatnot.
- Describe yourself in five words.
  - Motivated, I like to keep myself busy, friendly, hyper, and active in general.
- Do you have any interests or hobbies?
  - Yea, a couple. I love to read. I also love to be near friends and keep in touch. I love arts and crafts.
- Describe your group of friends.
  - My friends here are more so going out friend. If I see them it's going to be on the weekends or night time. Drinking is usually involved. My second group of friends are the ones from home. We do more things that are closer to emotional stuff, getting coffee, talking on the telephone.
- What the main things you and your friends have in common?
  - We love to go out and have a good time.
- Would you label your group of friends as anything stereotypical?
  - We are very eclectic all of us. I would lean towards preppy. Preppy is probably the wrong word. Very outgoing, loud.
- Do you have any hobbies or interests you don't share with any of your friends?

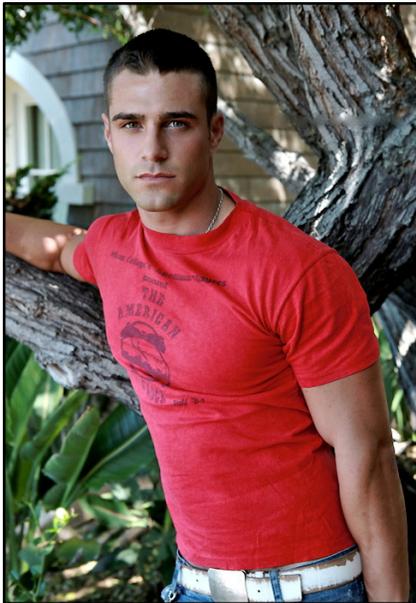
- Oh, many! I love my nieces and nephews and I spend a lot of time with them. I love taking photos. I love walking around the city and taking photos of graffiti. I love taking pictures of them. I love to write cards and send them out to friends.
- Would you be happier if your friends shared some of your interests?
  - Probably much happier.
- Describe your social networking history.
  - I barely used the internet until I got to college. That's when I was introduced to Facebook. I started with Facebook and it was easy to stay in touch with people. Now I even use it to make plans for the night. I'll drop a note or two off and let people respond. Me and my Mom keep in touch through Facebook. My boyfriend has been in Australia so emails, Facebook, and Skype are the only ways we communicate.
- How has your experience been on them?
  - I like them a lot. I get to stalk some people. I get to see what they are doing. I actually know everything that's going on with them based on their Facebook. It's been very positive.
- Describe how social networking makes you feel.
  - I only use social networking to talk to people I know. I do not like to use the internet to meet new people, so I would feel desperate if I had to do that. It makes me feel connected. Sometimes I feel dependent on it. I get anxiety if I don't check my Facebook. It's like a cellphone. My primary purpose is to stay in touch.
- Do you feel like you become a different person on social networking sites?
  - No, but I do monitor how I am perceived on social networking sites.
- Do you think people become a different person?

- Yes, especially with ones where you have more of a customizable profile. Like when you get to pick music or a colored background. It can be a whole different world. I think its mostly young teenagers who do that, girls specifically.
- Do you ever try to maintain a certain image on Facebook?
  - Yes, I have everything private. But if someone puts up an ugly picture I untag it. If someone puts up a risque picture I untag it. Minimum information up. If people friend me if I don't know them I don't say yes.
- Would you ever talk to strangers if they have similar interests?
  - No. I have enough friends. I don't feel a need to try to make new ones. Maybe, if I moved to a new city or something like that, but right now I feel comfortable with where I am.
- You said you liked to take pictures of graffiti, what if there was a social network for that?
  - Maybe, in a very basic sense I would participate. But I would never try to meet up or go to events.
- Are you a member of any groups on Facebook?
  - Yes, I'm not a member of any nonsensical groups. That has something to do with image. They may sound funny. Even those applications. They join a group to portray an image.
- What do you think of those colored profiles on Myspace?
  - I'm not on Myspace and I think it's because they don't use peoples real names. It's easier to find people on Facebook. I think that I'm not interested in that because not only is your profile name part of your image, but the backgrounds and the colors. I originally really liked Facebook because it was only college students. I feel like I know more about the person on Facebook, than on Myspace. Facebook is more realistic and Myspace has a persona to it.

- Do you know anything about Twitter?
  - Besides what they mention on the news, it's pretty much a status update thing. It's kind of like what AIM away messages involved into, but it's on public display for everyone to see, and everyone can see what those people comment on it. So if your posting something witty, someone can be like "HAHA" and everyone else can see that, that person loved what you write, therefore making you "cooler."

## Picture Test

Please describe the following for people in your own words in the space below the picture.



Now assign each person a social network that you think best fits them.