

**Adolescents in MySpace:  
Identity Formation, Friendship and Sexual Predators**

Larry D. Rosen, Ph.D.

California State University, Dominguez Hills

June 2006

Executive Summary

MySpace is an amazing phenomenon that has skyrocketed from being known as a small, music-oriented social network just three years ago, to a major virtual world for more than 89 million people. In May 2006, comscore's Media Matrix reported that MySpace had 51.4 million unique visitors, making it the 7th most frequented website in the world. For its size, it is now the 12<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world.

For the past 22 years I have been examining the "psychology of technology" among children and adults. As a pioneer in this area, I have studied more than 20,000 people in the United States and 23 other countries with my most recent work centering on children and video games, and online dating. These two studies of adolescents on MySpace extend that work to the impact of social networking.

**Study 1**

In March 2006, we collected data from 1,257 MySpacers in the Los Angeles area, ranging in age from 9 to 67 [Note that the youngest allowable age for MySpace is 14 and our sample included 3% who were under 14]. Data were collected through a convenience sample with the stipulation that the respondent currently be using MySpace. Data were collected anonymously with participants directed to a web address where they answered 65 questions concerning: (1) demographics; (2) MySpace usage; (3) MySpace experiences; (4) MySpace friendships; and (5) psychological variables including (a) depression; (b) self-esteem; (c) internet addiction; (d) family and friend support; (e)

impact on family, friends, school and job; and (f) shyness, creativity and honest/superficiality online.

## **Study 2**

In June 2006, we collected data from 267 pairs of teens and parents in the Los Angeles area. Again, data were collected through a convenience sample with the stipulation that the respondent be a teenager currently using MySpace with one parent answering 30 questions and the teenager answering 24 questions. Data were collected anonymously with participants directed to a web address where they answered questions concerning a variety of variables including: (1) parent and teen demographic information; (2) teen MySpace usage; and (3) parent and teen perceptions and attitudes concerning their teen's use of MySpace. In addition, teens and their parents were asked identical questions concerning: (1) time spent on MySpace; (2) concern about MySpace issues (e.g., social isolation, sexual predators, addiction, friendships, and lack of physical activity); (3) teen information given out on MySpace; (4) MySpace interference with daily activities; (5) the prevalence and media coverage concerning sexual predators; (6) time and meals together; and (7) and parental limits placed on MySpace usage.

## **Highlights**

- The typical MySpacer has about 200 “friends” with approximately 75 being labeled as “close friends”, many of whom they have never met. The majority were introduced to MySpace 1-2 years ago by a friend. MySpacers spend about 5 days a week and 2 hours a day on the site mostly using communication tools such as IM, E-Mail, and posting and reading bulletins.
- Less than one in three have had an uncomfortable experience on MySpace but ONLY 7% to 9% were approached for a sexual liaison. Nearly all of those simply blocked the requester from contacting them through their MySpace page.

- 20% feel that MySpace has negatively affected school, job, family, and friends.
- More time spent on MySpace is related to slightly more depression, more Internet addiction, less family support, slightly lower self-esteem and more online friends.
- Having more friends on MySpace is related to more Internet addiction, less shyness, more creativity, more honesty online and more time spent with their friends on MySpace.
- Younger MySpacers (under 18) are more addicted to the Internet, have slightly lower self-esteem, have more family support, feel more creative, have more online friends and more close online friends, and have FEWER solicitations for sexual liaisons.
- Males are more addicted to the Internet, have higher self esteem, have more support from friends and less support from family, have less negative effects on the family, are more shy online and offline, feel less honest online, have fewer online friends and fewer close online friends, and have had fewer solicitations for sexual liaisons than females.
- Parents:
  - ✓ 38% have not seen their teen's MySpace page and 40% never look at their teen's MySpace pictures.
  - ✓ 43% of parents are not sure how many days per week their teenagers they are on MySpace and 36% of parents are not sure how many hours a day they are on MySpace.
  - ✓ 67% view their teen's MySpace page less often than every few months.
  - ✓ 50% allow their teen to have a computer in the bedroom.
  - ✓ 55% believe MySpace is a fad.

- ✓ 33% believe their teen has online friends he/she has never met and 62% have never talked to their teen about MySpace use.

➤ Teenagers:

- ✓ 83% believe MySpace is safe.
- ✓ 70% would be comfortable showing their parents their MySpace page.

➤ Parents and Teenagers:

- ✓ Parents are far more concerned than teens about all aspects of MySpace including sexual predators (83% of parents were concerned compared to only 35% of teens), social isolation (75%-15%), addiction to MySpace (72% to 21%), lack of physical activity (82%-20%), people posting sexual photos (88%-29%) and people making online friends and meeting in person (81%-36%).
- ✓ One-third of the parents are not sure about whether their teen is giving out personal information; even when they think they know, they underestimate how often their teenagers give out their name, school name, phone number, e-mail/IM, and social information. For example, 34% of parents were not sure if their teen had given out the name of their school and 43% were sure that they had done so, while 74% of the teens stated that they had provided their school name.
- ✓ Less than half the parents say they have limits on both computer use (46%) and MySpace use (32%) but kids say that those limits are not followed.
- ✓ Opinion on Sexual Predators: Parents think there are more predators than teens -- 63% of parents stated there were “quite a few” sexual predators on MySpace while 19% of teens declared that sexual predators were very rare and another 46% said that there were some, but not too many.

- ✓ Opinion of Media Coverage of Sexual Predators: Parents think media coverage is accurate (63%) while teens think it is overblown (59%).

### **Implications**

Several findings from these studies stand out as more teens pour into MySpace at the astounding rate of several hundred thousand per day.

Teens are spending large amounts of time communicating on MySpace with school friends and many people they have never met in person. There are some negative implications of their activities, but sexual predators do not appear to be an issue. Certainly there are people who approach teens with sexual propositions, but most teens brush off the person by ignoring the message and blocking him from communicating with them. This research showed that nearly all teens feel safe on MySpace and do not feel that there are many sexual predators.

There are many positive ramifications from time spent on MySpace including more support from friends, more honest communication and less shyness both on and off MySpace.

Most parents believe that there are many sexual predators on MySpace and that the media portrayal is accurate. Strikingly, most parents have never seen their teenager's MySpace page or their photos and do not know how much time their teen is spending on MySpace. Many parents are not aware of what information their teens are giving out to other MySpacers and those who think they know; underestimate the information offered by their teenager on MySpace. Parents allow their teens to have a computer with Internet access in their bedrooms and few set limits on computer or MySpace use. Even those who do set limits fail to follow through much of the time.

Overall, the results indicate that while MySpace may have some negative aspects, it can provide a forum for teenagers to develop a sense of their personal identity through

communication with friends and strangers. The major issue that arose from these interviews is that parents simply ignore their children's activities on MySpace. They allow their teenagers to spend many hours a day, closeted in their bedrooms, with few if any limits. This is particularly striking given that through the media parents are convinced that MySpace is ripe with sexual predators.

The bottom line is that MySpace is not inherently scary or dangerous. In fact, it is helping teens develop an all-important sense of their identity. Parents simply need to pay more attention to what their children are doing, set clear limits, and talk with their teenagers about their experiences. It is not sufficient to simply allow teenagers to live in a virtual world, in their bedrooms, without supervision. It is not the medium that is the problem. Teens need and crave limits and boundaries that parents are not supplying. Once parents start being aware of what their teenagers are doing and talking to them, MySpace will cease to match its negative media hype.