

Jewish Teenagers and Online Social Networking: It's Not What They Do – It's Who They Are!

The study of adolescents is important for many reasons, first and foremost because it is a demographic that with all of their complexities is often both misunderstood and paradoxically under researched. It is also critical to know what trends – political, social, cultural etc – are present among teenagers – because logically they represent the future of any society.

Without question, the single most dominant activity that I discovered in my research about Jewish teenagers was the pervasiveness of online social networking in their lives.¹ Although my research did not attempt to discover how many Jewish teens used online social networking sites I found it extremely rare for a Jewish teenager to not have at least one (very) active online social networking profile – most commonly Facebook, to a lesser extent MySpace, and a growing number with Twitter accounts.²

For the purposes of this article I am more concerned with what Jewish teens are doing on these sites as representative of who they are as individuals and as part of their broader identities.

Facebook is my life. It is addictive. I learn more about people online than I do from real life. I don't keep a lot of stuff on there. I have a lot of pictures - you can learn a lot from pictures. It has pretty much taken over everyone's life. (Addison; November 9, 2007)

¹ My broader research, as part of my doctoral dissertation focuses on the role of the peer group in the identity development of Jewish teenagers in the United States. My research was based on qualitative methodologies, including interviews and observations, which generated all of the themes that my dissertation focused on. Along with issues of gender, sexuality, and popular culture, the role of online social networking sites was seen as critical in the identity development of teenagers today.

² In my study I classified Jewish teenagers into five broad categories reflecting both the amount of time they spent on these sites and the types of activities they performed on them - Obsessives (25%), Socializers (40%), Infrequents (15%), Reluctants (15%) and the very few Non-Users (5%).

Comments like Addison's were not necessarily among the more OMG moments of my research – anyone who knows anything about teenagers today knows how much time they spend online. But comments like these certainly were among the more prolific that I encountered, and support much of the research and media hype that indicates how ingrained online social networking has become ingrained in the lives of American teenagers in the twenty-first century (Levy, 2007). Indeed these sites have become so pervasive, and such integral parts of the fabric of teenagers' lives, that they are as much about who they are as what they do. To date there has been limited research conducted about the role of social networking sites in the lives of teenagers today³ and even less pertaining specifically to Jewish teenagers, and while no comprehensive data about the Jewish use of these sites exists, some reports are beginning to emerge suggesting that Jewish teenagers are using the internet and social networking sites at even higher rates than the general population (Cohen & Blitzer, 2008).⁴

As my research showed, for Jewish teenagers, whose Jewishness was often closely entwined within their overall identities, these sites were repositories for chronicling their Jewish selves. In uncovering the world of the Jewish teenager today, and in particular, the role of peer group influence on the formation of Jewish identity, it became overwhelmingly clear that online social networking sites are a main arena in which young Jews like Addison play out both their personal and Jewish identities.

³ There is an emerging literature within sociology relating to the usage of social networking sites including studies that focus specifically on gender, (O'Brien & Bierman, 1988; Rosenbloom, 2008), race (Burkhalter, 1999) and class (Boyd, 2007b).

⁴ One study of Jewish teenagers attending Jewish Community Center activities reported that 74% of these teens had an online profile, with 48% of these teens using these sites on a daily basis. The vast majority of the teens surveyed in this study also used online communication such as e-mail and instant messages with 75% of them using these on a daily basis (Cohen & Blitzer, 2008).

Social Networking Sites as an Expression of Self

When Irving Goffman wrote the “Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” in 1959, even he would not have conceived of the ease at which technology today allows people to perform and present multiple versions of themselves in a variety of different contexts (Goffman, 1959/1973). In an online world it must be accepted that the internet now allows teenagers to morph between multiple identities (Tapscott, 1998) when, where and to whom they want to (Donath, 1999).

Although I believe this to be true of all people, I would suggest that given the understanding of adolescence as a time of transition and discovery that the movement of individuals between multiple identities may occur more frequently for teenagers than in other age cohorts.

Such was the case among the Jewish teenagers in my study who spoke openly about the multiple versions of their selves that they displayed in various settings including their online worlds. Many of the teenagers I spoke with also described embellishing their online profiles, experimenting with new identities, and finding, with somewhat more ease than in the real world, a place in which they could feel comfortably expressing themselves. Online teenagers were able to be who they wanted to be, when they wanted to be without the risk of being labeled or judged by their peers.

Some critics have labeled today’s younger generation the “Fakebook Generation,” suggesting that online social networking sites encourage people to misrepresent themselves. They cite not only the untruths that people post on their online profiles but also the increasing number of fake profiles that are online (Mathias, 2007). In contrast,

others contend that these websites have become one of the only places where people actually are able to present their true selves to the world (Moses, 2007).

On these profiles teenagers routinely posted information about their hobbies, interests, favorite music, books, television shows, movies, religious beliefs, favorite causes, and groups which they want to be a part of. One might argue that students who regularly update their own profiles are actually engaging in the development of their identities at far greater rates than at any other time in history. While teenagers have always been active in outlining these parts of their life in diaries and journals now they are choosing to do so in a public forum.

In relation to how much of themselves teenagers chose to share with other people, some of my findings support reports which have noted gender differences in the ways teenagers utilize social networking websites (Rosenbloom, 2008). Females were more likely to spend more time looking at other people's profiles, photos, writing lengthier messages to one another and being more creative than their male counterparts. Males, on the other hand, tended to spend far less time on these sites, looking quickly through photos, seldom reading profiles, and sending shorter messages.

At times I was skeptical as to whether these sites were in Himmelfarb's language more closely related to his concept of *identification* (e.g. their behaviors and affiliations) rather than *identity* per say (Himmelfarb, 1980). However in choosing to share even their affiliations and beliefs with others they are also presenting the self that they want others to see and know them by – a key element in the development of anyone's personal identity.

Social Networking Sites as an Expression of Belonging to the Other

While social networking has always played an important role in the lives of teenagers these sites provide a new location for this networking to take place (Stager, 2007), the popularity of online websites such as Facebook and MySpace is largely due to their capacity to connect people – in an instant – and from as far away as across the globe.

Connections and social networks are some of the basic building blocks of any community. Howard Reingold invented the term “virtual communities” to describe public discussions in cyberspace that contain both sufficient human feeling and the capacity to form personal relationships (Reingold, 1993, p. 5). Others suggest that the reverse may be true and that there can be no community building without relationship building (Tapscott, 1998). Either way, the interplay between personal relationships and community building in online forums represents some of the greatest challenges facing institutional Jewish life in the new millennium.

There is much evidence on these social networking sites to suggest that Jewish teenagers are having meaningful Jewish interactions online that are leading to the development of “communities” and “personal relationships.”

In my study I identified three major types of online communities that Jewish teenagers belonged to. The first are communities that directly reflect the communities that they belong to in their real worlds. For example, many of the teenagers belonged to groups related to their youth group, school or summer camp on Facebook or MySpace. The second type of community expands upon what these teenagers do in their real lives. Several other teenagers, who openly supports Israel also belongs to several Israel related

groups online. These are certainly not always Jewish communities related as is evident by the many teens who belong to several groups that reflect their musical interests. These communities are with people they do not know but feel a sense of kinship with because they share similar beliefs and values. The third type of group, are those that somehow seem disconnected to the real world of these teenagers. Able to make these groups private so that they can determine who sees that they are part of them, these teenagers often explore aspects of their identities that they are unable to in their real world existence. At times these virtual communities might even seem incongruous with their real world existence because the values or behaviors that they reflect contradict those that are exhibited in real life. Such examples include the Jewish teenager I met at summer camp who also belonged to a Christian youth group and one female who identified in public as being heterosexual but who belonged to several online lesbian communities.⁵

It was important for me to understand how the teenagers in my study specifically understood this concept of community- because I was interested in both their individual and collective identities. This discussion revealed a changing language among the teenagers of today reflecting a change in some of the key concepts that are central to Jewish life today. Terms such as community, affiliation, and membership are radically

⁵ This study did not enter into research about virtual communities such as Second Life because it was not prominent in the lives of the specific subjects in this research, although it is a subject that I have since investigated and believe has much to contribute to this discussion, including an active Jewish presence full with synagogues, Jewish study sessions (Voloj, 2007) and journeys within Israel (Snyder, 2008), and the expression of many types of traditional and non-traditional Jewish selves.

altered as a result of this technology – how will Jewish communal institutions adapt their ways of thinking and operating to meet these changing times?⁶

It is not surprising that for many Jewish teenagers these social networking websites have become another setting in which they can explore their Jewish identities. Interestingly, this exploration is often taking place on these general social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace rather than specifically Jewish sites like Shmooze.com, chosennet.com, koolanoo.com, and B-linked.org that have been set up primarily for Jewish outreach and interaction. Such findings extend to the virtual world of teenagers the work of Cohen and Kelman who argue that Jewish young adults enjoy participating in Jewish cultural activities but prefer to do so in secular locations rather than in specifically Jewish institutions (Cohen & Kelman, 2005).

For Jewish teenagers these sites have become a place where both individual and collective identities are being expressed. These online social networking sites have indeed become a place where teenagers want to see others and be seen by others (Boyd, 2007a). The Jewish community must recognize that these sites are very real and authentic expressions of Jewish identity in order to better understand who Jewish teenagers in the twenty-first century really are.⁷

⁶ As indicated by Putnam, this changing relationship towards community might be disturbing as it seemingly indicates a shift away from belonging to and affiliating with more traditional institutions (Putnam, 2000).

⁷ Such discussions are not specific to Jewish teenagers. Christian organizations and leaders, in particular, have begun exploring the connection between religious identification and the cyberworld for teenagers. Most of the research on these topics focuses on Christian spirituality among teenagers and is mainly being conducted by ministries looking at ways to reach a younger audience (Piatt & Piatt, 2007).

Conclusions about Social Networking Sites in the Lives of Jewish Teenagers

The world of cyberspace is in many ways still an uncharted frontier whose boundaries are expanding much faster than researchers are able to keep up with. There is also a generational gap in evidence that makes it more and more difficult for researchers to even know what questions they should be asking. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be made based upon my research.

First, there is much that we can learn about the Jewish community that these teenagers relate to through these websites. These online websites reflect an evolving and changing Judaism. Despite some understandings about Jewish teenagers that suggests otherwise, these online profiles provide much evidence of a deep connection to the Jewish people as a cultural, national, and ethnic affiliation, rather than a more traditional notion of Judaism as a religion.

Second, social networking websites are part of who teenagers are and not just what they do. In order to fully understand teenagers one must develop an understanding of how these sites operate and what roles they play in the lives of teenagers today.

Third, this technology is also what teenagers today understand and can relate to. Although some recent efforts by various Jewish communal organizations have been made to explore how to utilize online technologies in Jewish education, the community is overwhelmingly slow to take advantage of such advances (Address, 2007; Amkraut, 2007; Matanky, 2007). There must be a recognition that in order to remain relevant educators should understand and if possible incorporate contemporary technology in their

teaching.⁸ As one Jewish educator recently said to me, “Why is it that I am able to have the best theological discussions about God and truth on Facebook?”

The changes brought by this new technology extend beyond educational activities or the promotion of social events to Jewish teenagers. Technology has the power to allow conversations to occur that could radically alter the makeup of the Jewish people. Such potential is only beginning to be explored by the Jewish community - driven largely by younger members whose knowledge and expertise make them the perfect candidates to lead such ventures.

Despite the various efforts of parents, teachers, camp directors and youth advisors to monitor and restrict the use of online social networking sites, Jewish youth are flocking to such sites in exponential numbers. There they are expressing themselves as Jews in the 21st century often in ways that can be interpreted both as inspiring and shocking. By design these sites encourage and empower the adolescent peer group to become an even more dominant and potent force in the development of collective and individual identity. Failure to recognize the power of the peer group in this domain will perpetuate the widening of the gap between Jewish teenagers and the organizations that work so diligently to ensure their continued involvement.

⁸ There are some attempts being made by some educators to utilize this technology in their classrooms, such as a teacher of Talmud who asked each student to create a Facebook profile page of a rabbi in order to engage in textual debate, but nothing has yet to be documented.

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