



November 20, 2008

Teenagers' Internet Socializing Not a Bad Thing

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Good news for worried parents: All those hours their teenagers spend socializing on the Internet are not a bad thing, according to a new study by the [MacArthur Foundation](#).

“It may look as though kids are wasting a lot of time hanging out with new media, whether it’s on [MySpace](#) or sending instant messages,” said Mizuko Ito, lead researcher on the study, “Living and Learning With New Media.” “But their participation is giving them the technological skills and literacy they need to succeed in the contemporary world. They’re learning how to get along with others, how to manage a public identity, how to create a home page.”

The study, conducted from 2005 to last summer, describes new-media usage but does not measure its effects.

“It certainly rings true that new media are inextricably woven into young people’s lives,” said Vicki Rideout, vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation and director of its program for the study of media and health. “Ethnographic studies like this are good at describing how young people fit social media into their lives. What they can’t do is document effects. This highlights the need for larger, nationally representative studies.”

Ms. Ito, a research scientist in the department of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, said that some parental concern about the dangers of Internet socializing might result from a misperception.

“Those concerns about predators and stranger danger have been overblown,” she said. “There’s been some confusion about what kids are actually doing online. Mostly, they’re socializing with their friends, people they’ve met at school or camp or sports.”

The study, part of a \$50 million project on digital and media learning, used several teams of researchers to interview more than 800 young people and their parents and to observe teenagers online for more than 5,000 hours. Because of the adult sense that socializing on the Internet is a waste of time, the study said, teenagers reported many rules and restrictions on their electronic hanging out, but most found ways to work around such barriers that let them stay in touch with their friends steadily throughout the day.

“Teens usually have a ‘full-time intimate community’ with whom they communicate in an always-on mode via mobile phones and instant messaging,” the study said.

This is not news to a cluster of Bronx teenagers, gathered after school on Wednesday to tell a reporter about their social routines. All of them used MySpace and instant messaging to stay in touch with a dozen or two

of their closest friends every evening. "As soon as I get home, I turn on my computer," said a 15-year-old boy who started his MySpace page four years ago. "My MySpace is always on, and when I get a message on MySpace, it sends a text message to my phone. It's not an obsession; it's a necessity." (School rules did not permit using students' names without written parental permission, which could not be immediately obtained.)

Only one student, a 14-year-old girl, had ever opted out — and she lasted only a week.

"It didn't work," she said. "You become addicted. You can't live without it."

In a situation familiar to many parents, the study describes two 17-year-olds, dating for more than a year, who wake up and log on to their computers between taking showers and doing their hair, talk on their cellphones as they travel to school, exchange [text messages](#) through the school day, then get together after school to do homework — during which time they also play a video game — talk on the phone during the evening, perhaps ending the night with a text-messaged "I love you."

Teenagers also use new media to explore new romantic relationships, through interactions casual enough to ensure no loss of face if the other party is not interested.

The study describes two early [Facebook](#) messages, or "wall posts," by teenagers who eventually started dating. First, the girl posted a message saying, "hey ... hm. wut to say? iono lol/well I left you a comment ... u sud feel SPECIAL haha." (Translation: Hmm ... what to say? I don't know. Laugh out loud. Well I left you a comment ... You should feel special.)

A day later, the boy replied, "hello there ... umm I don't know what to say, but at least I wrote something ..."

While online socializing is ubiquitous, many young people move on to a period of tinkering and exploration, as they look for information online, customize games or experiment with digital media production, the study found.

For example, a Brooklyn teenager did a [Google](#) image search to look at a video card and find out where in a computer such cards are, then installed his own.

What the study calls "geeking out" is the most intense Internet use, in which young people delve deeply into a particular area of interest, often through a connection to an online interest group.

"New media allow for a degree of freedom and autonomy for youth that is less apparent in a classroom setting," the study said. "Youth respect one another's authority online, and they are often more motivated to learn from peers than from adults."

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)