

# A Coconstructed World: Adolescent Self-Socialization on the Internet

Laurel Anderson and Deborah Brown McCabe

*This article examines the ubiquitous Internet as a context for socialization for both younger and older adolescents. This research finds that the Internet adds dimensions to and takes away elements in the socialization process that have not been manifest in the same way in the past. The Internet serves as both an influence agent and an interactive context in which socialization and identity development takes place. The authors find that the lack of the usual adult socialization agents in this context challenges the more traditional view of adolescent socialization and results in a self-socialization process. The authors attempt to understand some of the more subtle practices of self-socializing and identity development that occur during adolescence by describing the interrelated themes that arose from the data, including (1) the online structure and context that supported this self-socialization, (2) adolescents' goals while online, (3) predominant socialization and identity development activities that they partake in, (4) negotiated norms of this online coconstructed world, (5) multiple identities related to their identity development, and (6) carryover to the offline world. By examining the confluence of these adolescents with the often "hot" context of Internet social space, this article demonstrates how self-socialization and the negotiated norm of deception and lying gives rise to both benefits and potentially risky behaviors.*

**Keywords:** children and adolescents, Internet issues, vulnerable population, socialization, risk

I work down at the Pizza Pit  
And I drive an old Hyundai  
I still live with my mom and dad  
I'm 5 foot 3 and overweight  
I'm a sci-fi fanatic  
A mild asthmatic  
And I've never been to second base  
But there's whole 'nother me  
That you need to see  
Go check out MySpace

—Brad Paisley, "Online"

Adolescence is a period of identity exploration and development, which occur in tandem with important socialization (Arnett 1995). New to such socialization is the unprecedented amount of time that adolescents spend on the Internet. In the United States, 93% of teens use the Internet, and 61% of them log on daily (Lenhart and Madden 2007). With newer forms of social exchange, such as instant messaging, social networking, and chat rooms, the Internet offers an exciting and innovative space for socialization, and it serves as both an influence agent and an interactive context in which socialization and identity develop-

ment take place. However, the Internet lacks many of the checks and balances previous generations have experienced. Thus, the question must be raised: Which dimensions in the adolescent socialization process does the Internet add, take away, or manifest in a different way from the past?

Both the advantages and the disadvantages of the Internet have captured the public imagination, whether the Internet is conceived of as an entry into a world library of information or a dark alleyway of unsavory portals and sexual predators. In this article, we aim to understand some of the more subtle practices of socialization occurring on the Internet, often "over the heads" (Arnett 1995) and behind the backs of parents.

Adolescence is a time of increased risky behavior. "Public health researchers estimate that the annual cost to the [United States] that is due to morbidities related to adolescent risky behavior is more than \$33 billion" (Gans et al. 1995, p. 1230). The negative outcomes of these risky behaviors can have an enormous cost to the adolescent, families, and society. Although some experimental research has examined adolescents and risky behavior (Beyth-Marom et al. 1993; Halpern-Felsher and Cauffman 2001), few studies have examined risky behavior in real-life situations (cf. Robinson, Chen, and Killen 1998; Seguire and Chalmers 2000). Following Pechmann et al.'s (2005) call for more real-world studies of adolescents, we employ a multi-method interpretive approach to examine adolescents on the Internet. We begin by considering the Internet as a social

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context. Lerner and Simi (2000) identify social context as a critical trigger to teens' risky behavior. Previous research has found that contexts considered "hot" in terms of triggers are typified by socioemotional aspects, including seeking immediate rewards and sensations, taking risks, and being influenced by the presence of peers. "Cool" contexts embody more rational aspects (Reyna and Farley 2006). We examine the Internet as a context for socialization.

From a marketing perspective, we consider the Internet both a product adolescents consume and a medium they experience. Thus, given its ubiquitousness in many societies, adolescents' consumption of the Internet during a critical socialization period should be of concern for parents, marketers in the Internet arena, and public policy officials. Although mass media's impact on socialization has been studied previously (e.g., Arnett 1995; Moschis and Churchill 1978), there has been little examination of the Internet as a context for socialization. Previous research has examined the impact of the Internet on how adolescents learn to be consumers but not the Internet as a general socialization context (Lee, Conroy, and Hii 2003). The call to study the importance of technology changes, such as the Internet and its role in socialization, is more recent (Dotson and Hyatt 2005; John 1999). The characteristics of the Internet medium and product—in particular, the interactive and anonymity aspects—differ greatly from past media (Friestad and Wright 2005) and, as such, are likely to have an impact on traditional socialization.

Thus, this study responds to the call for research and examines the Internet as a context for adolescent socialization and identity development. In our progression toward a more current reconceptualization of adolescent socialization, we begin with a discussion of the theories of adolescent socialization and identity exploration and relate these to the concept of context. Next, we describe our interpretive methodology. Then, we present our findings and socialization framework. We offer findings that point to a transcendent theme of socialization on the Internet and complement this theme with other supporting themes found in our research. Finally, we examine questions our findings raise for parents, marketers, policy makers, and researchers.

## Conceptual Overview

### Adolescent Socialization

Socialization is the preparation of newcomers to become members of an existing social group and to think, develop attitudes, and behave in ways the group considers appropriate. Here, novices collaborate with elders within the group to develop acceptable values and behaviors (Grusec 2002). For the most part, research in consumer socialization has assumed that adolescents enter into an already constructed and structured world (Youniss 1983). Thus, the goal of socialization is for adolescents to learn to navigate this existing world. However, with the newness of the Internet, a structured world into which adolescents can enter does not exist. In addition, if we consider many teens' and adults' respective levels of expertise on the Internet, socialization seems to reflect the reverse direction—that is, teens

become "the elder" in this context. This raises significant questions with regard to the process of socialization.

In early childhood, parents are the dominant socialization agents. As children mature, the number and variety of socialization agents increase to include peers, media, and marketing institutions (Arnett 1992; John 1999; Moschis and Churchill 1978). The relative influence of these agents is nuanced and depends on various aspects, such as the type of relationship and degree of family bonding, the specific domain, and the amount of time spent with each agent (Brown et al. 1993; Jang 1999; Noller 1994). In today's world, teenagers spend far more time in the exclusive company of their peers than their counterparts did in the past (Steinberg 1996). However, Jang (1999) finds that for risky behaviors, though peer influences increase over time, parental influence remains the same throughout adolescence.

We use the term "extended" adolescence in our study, which encompasses adolescents from the ages of 13 years to the mid-20s. We base this age span on two factors. First, recent brain research and corresponding findings indicate that there is dramatic and ongoing reorganization of teens' brains that extends beyond what prior research has defined as "adolescence"; this reorganization lasts into the mid-20s (Giedd et al. 1999; Steinberg 2005; Strauch 2003). Second, using developmental tasks, researchers have identified a time frame that extends beyond the teen years and into the mid-20s before most adolescents in the industrialized world reach the next developmental stage of young adulthood. According to Arnett (2007), this extended adolescence, as with the traditional adolescent period, is the age of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities.

In this research on adolescent socialization, we are especially concerned with context—specifically, that of the Internet. Although considerable socialization research has examined the family (e.g., Barber and Olsen 1997; Baumrind 1989; Kalmus and Seltzer 1989), peer, and school (Ryan 2000) worlds as contexts for socialization, less attention has been paid to other contexts in which intense socialization occurs, such as the Internet (John 1999). The context within which socialization occurs influences its process, content, and results.

In recent years, developmental contextualism has been a significant influence in the field of human development (Lerner and Simi 2000; Youngblade and Theokas 2006). This conceptualization of development emanates from systems theory and is based on the premise that behaviors and socialization derive from the engaged, bidirectional interaction between a person and the many contexts in which he or she lives, including social ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Lerner 2006). We adopt this framework in the current research: We view this interaction in terms of both socialization and how adolescents create the social context of the Internet.

### Identity Development

It is within social contexts that adolescents accomplish their key developmental task of identity development (Erikson 1968). However, there are many varied considerations to the concept of identity. Three aspects are especially relevant

to our study of adolescents' socialization on the Internet: the previously mentioned developmental contextualism, multiple identities, and possible selves.

Particularly applicable to our research are the sociocultural approaches to identity that emphasize the social context (Baumeister and Muraven 1996; Gergen 1991). Developmental contextualism (Lerner 1993) aligns with this approach in that it focuses on the different personal and contextual factors that interact reciprocally to form a sense of identity over time. The postmodernists address another issue of identity relevant to our research when they argue for the existence of multiple identities that people take on in different contexts (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997). Each person is assumed to have a repertoire of identities that are salient in different contexts. Turkle (1996, p.148) addresses the context of the Internet with regard to possibilities of multiple identities:

The anonymity of MUDs [multiple user dungeons or multiuser real-time virtual worlds] gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones. MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion.... [I]n MUDs, one can be many.

Finally, trying on possible selves is another possible mechanism of identity development (Markus and Nurius 1986). Erikson (1968) calls for a "psychosocial moratorium" during this identity development time—a time when adolescents are free to try on possible selves without suffering sanctions or having to commit to various roles. Because this time implies a reduced capacity for coping with problems and stress, creating a safe environment for identity growth is critical (Erikson 1968). Adolescents' lack of established identities, their efforts to search for and develop identities, and, in particular, the lack of the usual socialization agents in the ubiquitous context of the Internet combine to form a socialization process not previously envisioned.

## Methodology

This research is a multimethod, emergent, interpretive study that we conducted across two adolescent developmental ages and three research waves. We focused on the social interacting Internet—namely, instant messaging, e-mail, chat rooms, games, and social networks. In the first round of the research, we sought to broadly understand younger teens' relationship with the Internet by using an unstructured metaphor-elicitation method (Zaltman and Coulter 1995) with 149 eighth graders (80 boys and 69 girls). We chose this age because it is a critical age corresponding to the beginning of the identity formation task stage. These teens were students in language arts classes at a middle school in the southwestern part of the United States. The students had just studied metaphors as a component of their curriculum. The language arts teacher asked the adolescents to develop metaphors to describe their relationship with their computer/Internet, create a collage that depicted their metaphor, and write descriptive paragraphs explaining their metaphors. Metaphors allowed for personal, deep accounts (Zaltman and Coulter 1995) and were engaging to these young adolescents, matching their active contexts (Deacon 2000). The metaphor descriptions were vivid and rich. Emergent fac-

tors and themes arose in the general categories of identity exploration; risk taking; and, in particular, fantasy, pretending, and deception as they relate to socialization.

These dominant themes of deception, fantasy, and pretending led us to question how this fictional behavior played out, both online and offline, with regard to socialization and identity processes when the adolescents were older. We used theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in the emergent design to explore these themes with older participants. In the second wave of data collection, we held focus groups that involved 97 participants (aged 19–23 years) and then used open-ended critical incident questions to examine their Internet perspectives and experiences. These informants were students at a large southwestern U.S. university. The open-ended focus group questions explored the themes that arose among the younger adolescents, such as deception and fantasy, and how these older adolescents thought they were different and similar in the online and offline worlds. We used focus groups in an effort to maintain our emphasis on social context and socially constructed worlds. Thus, as Catterall, McLaran, and Stevens (1999) advocate, the method was parallel to our phenomenon of interest. In an effort to triangulate and gain an understanding of the adolescents' experiences, we also employed critical incident technique (CIT). Immediately after the focus groups, these same participants described in writing their best and worst online experiences between the ages of 13 and 23 years. Critical incident reports of experience were suitable for collecting contextual information about the Internet experience. In analyzing these data, we used the age the participants indicated at the time of the incident.

Finally, in further theoretical sampling and emergent design, we conducted in-depth interviews with ten informants in their early 20s who spent considerable time on the Internet and developed their online identities extensively. This group was recruited from university classes or referred by students in these classes and included five women and five men ranging in age from 21 to 24 years. We included this final group in an effort to further examine the latter part of adolescence and the impact of the Internet context. That is, we wanted to pursue, in more depth than was allowed by either the focus groups or the CIT, the socialization themes of fantasy, deception, and pretending and their carryover between the online and offline worlds. Here, we used a broad, open-ended question guide. The adolescents answered questions that focused on their experiences and related to their online and offline identities, likes and dislikes, rules and norms, and experiences. Specifically, we explored the following topics: what they would do in one world versus the other, things they learned in one world that they could and did use in the other, how they transitioned between the two worlds, expectations and behaviors that differed between the two worlds, and how deception was defined and experienced in the two worlds. Information from the early interviews provided insights for additional questions to ask in subsequent interviews—thus, the iterative nature of the process (McCracken 1988). All the interviews were taped, resulting in 18 hours of taped material and 207 single-spaced pages of transcription.



There was a developmental nature to our methodological progression (from projective to focus groups and critical incidents to depth interviews) that allowed us to begin with exploratory insights that we could use as stimuli for deeper and eventually more precise probing. This tiered pattern of inquiry (McCracken 1988) allowed for the emergent themes to be taken into account and iteratively inform the subsequent round of data. Thus, data collection and analysis intermingled (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Analysis of the data was an iterative process, in which we interpreted the data, examined new questions, collected additional data, and identified emerging themes (Thompson 1997). These interpretations developed over multiple readings and the interaction between previous and emerging insights (Spiggle 1994). Following Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Thompson (1997), we used a hermeneutic framework that involved two stages. First, we analyzed each participant's data holistically and used open coding (Goulding 2002) until recurring themes appeared. Second, an intertextual examination followed that compared participants' perspectives, identified patterns and clusters, and developed thematic understandings that accounted for the data (Spiggle 1994). Using investigator triangulation, we each separately analyzed the data and then conferred, combined, extended, and refined to develop a common, acceptable understanding. To provide further assurance, an additional colleague familiar with this area of study participated in the analysis phases and the identification of themes and patterns. In an effort to check our interpretations, we went back to three interviewees to uncover any information that did not support our interpretations. Triangulation of sources (age), methods, incidents, and investigators built confidence in the data and interpretation.

## Findings and Self-Socialization Framework

### Transcendent Theme: Self-Socialization

The reciprocity between adolescents and their socialization contexts is the foundation for identity development (Lerner 2006). Consonant with the theory of developmental contextualism, the major theme of our research, we found aspects of bidirectional influence between the adolescent and the Internet context. That is, it became apparent from our data analysis that adolescents were self-socializing and creating the context of the Internet at the same time that the Internet context was influencing their behavior and socialization. In the sections that follow, we examine the facets of our research's overarching emergent theme: self-socialization online. We expand on aspects of Arnett's (1995) and Heinz's (2002) work on self-socialization as we discover processes of self-socialization online. In self-socialization, adolescents gain more independence and control over their own socialization. Although adolescents traditionally grow in independence, we found that in the Internet context, adolescents gained even more independence and agency than has traditionally been the case; in addition, with their peers, they were coconstructing their own environment and socializing themselves without the checks and balances of previous generations. This finding led to the following questions:

How are these adolescents cocreating this socialization world? And what are they creating? We address these questions by describing the interrelated themes that arose from our data, including (1) the online structure and context that supported this self-socialization, (2) the adolescents' goals while online, (3) predominant socialization and identity development activities in which they partake, (4) negotiated norms of this online coconstructed world, (5) multiple identities related to their identity development, and (6) carry-over to the offline world. These themes provide the basis for the development of our self-socialization framework.

In traditional socialization, although meanings are constantly negotiated, impactful social structures that influence occupants of that world are in place (Berger and Luckmann 1966). A structured world is defined by symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002), which include norms, cultural attitudes and practices, patterns of likes and dislikes, and cognitive distinctions that define a group and separate it from others. The traditional view of socialization fits into the concept of a structured world that socializes newcomers into it. However, with the Internet, rather than a structured world, a new type of world is being constructed—namely, self-socialization, or what we call a “coconstructed world” in our framework. Here, we do not mean that the structured world is not or has not been negotiated or constructed or that this process is not ongoing but rather that on the continuum between structure and agency, a constructed world falls more toward the agency end. We next describe the self-socialization themes that arose from our data and subsequently incorporate each into our self-socialization framework.

### Internet Context Supports Self-Socialization

The adolescents described the structure and context of the Internet that played a part in allowing self-socialization to occur. They emphasized the following themes in this self-socialization: a parent-free zone, broadened context, anonymity, and hot and cool aspects of the context.

#### *Parent-Free Zone*

In general, throughout adolescence, parental influence wanes relative to peer influence (John 1999). In our study, we found proactive behaviors among the adolescents in this direction. The informants, from middle school-aged children to emerging adults, made a concerted effort to ensure that the Internet was a parent-free zone: “Kids get by with things because the parents have no idea how things work” (female, age 20, CIT). Informants believed that their greater computer sophistication gave them the skills to banish parents from their online world: “I was actually controlling what my parents could see on how I was using the computer” (male, age 22, CIT).

The informants attempted to keep the Internet parent-free by migrating to new electronic spaces as parents “caught on” to a technology and by sidestepping parental controls: “When I was about 15 or 16, I figured out my dad's password online and used it to remove the parental controls on my own screen name” (male, age 21, CIT). This factor had a vivid impact on these adolescents' socialization and, furthermore, illuminated factors not previously accounted for

in socialization models. In our study, this Internet space was populated by other adolescents with little presence of the traditional socialization agents of parents, teachers, and other adults. Parents, who in the past had provided monitoring, were decidedly absent and had little control over this ubiquitous context. These teens were not entering an already-constructed world with adults who served as models and monitors; rather, they were constructing their own world (self-socializing) and socializing others on the Internet in what was essentially an adolescents-only zone.

### **Broadened Context**

In discussing socialization, Vygotsky (1978) observes that through collaboration with more competent others, children and adolescents solve problems beyond their actual development. He labels this the zone of proximal development. With respect to our study, the important contextual question, then, is this: Who inhabits the Internet context in which the adolescent is situated who can provide this collaboration? In our study, we found that occupants of the adolescents' online world were more geographically and value diverse than what they experienced offline. The result was broader socialization than what might have occurred without the Internet.

Many of the adolescents took advantage of the Internet context that allowed them the opportunity to interact with others throughout the world, something that most would not experience in the offline world: "It is [a] people meeting process that definitely helps to a degree where it can branch out your friends. You can meet a lot of people from other places" (male, age 22, interview). For others, this expanded circle provides them the ability to disconnect with their offline world and meet other people or "start a new page" (female, age 21, interview). Other participants reveled in the opportunity to interact with people with different values than those in their more limited offline zone of proximal development: "You learn about different things ... that no one can judge you about" (female, age 22, interview).

### **Anonymous Nature of the Internet Context**

The adolescents noted that the anonymous nature of the Internet context expanded their behavior. In particular, they described this expansion in terms of deceiving others, using aggressive language, experimenting with different identities, being less shy, and being more "real" and less concerned with being judged. In addition, they noted anonymity not in the traditional sense in terms of others not knowing who they were but most frequently in terms of others not being able to see them:

Because they couldn't see you, you didn't feel like they were judging. (male, age 21, interview)

A lot of people would be more outgoing online because like you really don't see the other person. And they never, they'll never see you so you can be yourself and not have to think about the consequences. (male, age 22, interview)

It is kind of like more relaxed 'cause they're not right there face to face looking at me. A lot more online than when I'm talking to someone in person. I'm more shy because I can see them actually. (female, age 21, interview)

### **Perceptions of the Hot and Cool Contexts**

The adolescents described the contexts on the Internet as ranging from cool, rational, tool-oriented contexts to hot, impulsive, risk-taking, sensation-seeking contexts. This coincides with research that indicates that risky behavior is partly determined by whether a context is "hot" or "cool" (Reyna and Farley 2006). The metaphor data from the younger adolescents support the view that the Internet is a tool to complete tasks (e.g., homework, arrangement of social meetings). Here, cool metaphors, such as library, dictionary, encyclopedia, bookshelf, and newspaper, were routinely used. As one informant (male, age 14, metaphor) said, "My computer was a tool. [It] helps me do all sorts of things," and another (male, age 13, metaphor) said that "my computer is a teacher.... It teaches me how to spell. It teaches me grammar."

Older adolescents also frequently created a cool context on the Internet for research, schoolwork, and planning. "[If] I'm stuck on a project, I just hop over and see who's on and say, 'Hi, I'm stuck on this. Can you help me? Give me some ideas or something'" (male, age 22, interview). "I think it has to do with convenience.... You can have your research on ... and can be in your pajamas in bed" (female, age 21 interview). One informant noted that the additional time required to receive feedback from e-mail allowed him "time to breathe and just calm down" (male, age 23, interview).

In addition to informants' creation of cool contexts online, the combination of the Internet context populated by peers and the arousal of anonymity also created triggers for a hot context according to the participants:

I'm usually a nice person, but having a conversation online made me feel like it was OK to be snappy with people. The person I was talking with turned out to be someone I knew from school. I knew who he was but when he realized who I was he just stopped talking with me. (female, age 19, CIT)

Younger informants revealed hot metaphors, such as socializing (e.g., fraternity house), leisure (e.g., roller coaster, movie theaters), travel (e.g., cars, magic carpet), addiction (e.g., drugs), and deceit (e.g., masks, makeup). The triggers of a hot context were also vividly evident among the older adolescents. Talking about the experience of playing military games, an informant (male, age 22, CIT) said, "My unit killed 26 other players alone. I felt invincible." Many adolescents echoed the comments of informants who said they "acted more rebellious [and] independent when talking to strangers online" (female, age 22, CIT). Some "would find an obnoxious person and call them names" (female, age 21, CIT) or "swear at each other, stuff like that" (male, age 23, interview). One informant said, "I went on to an Internet chat room pretending to be a girl" (male, age 24, CIT).

In part, during socialization, people learn and adopt rules of the structured world and culture. In this online coconstructed world, rules are being created. Rules, which are anchored in rationality and norms, constitute a cool context sometimes overridden by hot-context features, such as impulsivity, sensation seeking, and peer pressure. Illustrative of this push-pull of hot and cool contexts, many times adolescents would explicate their rules for safe behavior on the Internet and then subsequently contradict the rules when

describing their actions. A 22-year-old woman (interview) explained that she was not afraid of predators on the Internet because she was not that open; however, she went on to note that openness online was necessary to make friends. In addition, she believed that it was imperative that people be more open online so that “people know we aren’t (predators).... They know we are genuine.” Many informants not only contradicted their rules by their own behavior but also did not seem to recognize this contradiction between their behavior and their rules. It is in this contextual milieu that substantive socialization occurs.

## Learning to Achieve Freedom and Connection Goals

### *Freedom Goal*

In the spirit of arousal, sensation, and risk, the participants strive for and attain a sense of freedom on the Internet. The most frequent types of metaphors used to describe the younger participants’ computers were transportation/freedom metaphors (e.g., cars, rockets, planes, skateboards, highways, paths, gateways, portals, keys, magic carpets). When using these metaphors, participants who were too young to drive frequently talked about having a license to go wherever they wanted and to do whatever they pleased. As one participant (male, age 13, metaphor) said,

My computer is a freeway because, when you are on, you just can’t stop. When I get on my computer, it is like a dimension to another world. There is [sic] just so many things on it; it’s almost more addicting than some kind of magical drug. Just like when you are in the car, going 50 miles per hour, and you’re on the freeway, there are no red lights stopping you, and you feel like you can just about go anywhere in your car.... So that is why when I am on my computer I am riding the freeway, and there are no limits to what I can do.

For the older informants, their goal of freedom pertained more to their desire to remove constraints from the offline world. “Safe haven,” the analogy one young woman used to describe the online world, captured the sentiment of many of these adolescents, despite its characteristic being a hot context. This was not a safe haven in the sense of being a less risky place but rather in terms of being away from uncomfortable rules and norms of the offline world—their freedom goal. These older adolescents talked about being more real online because they did not have to be “proper and save face” (male, age 21, interview), “keep the image up” (male, age 21, interview), “follow certain etiquette” (male, age 21, interview), or “behave a certain way, all proper” (female, age 21, interview). Many informants talked about how tiring it was to pretend offline. As one young woman (age 23, interview) said,

[It] gets me to be ... that I don’t get to be ... like it’s real exhausting being the Teresa I am offline, because ... I’m always trying to prove myself. I’m always trying to compensate for one little flaw that I have. And you know that just doesn’t work.

This freedom from restraints was often demonstrated in language. The informants talked about a socially derived and habituated e-language that was often terse and aggres-

sive. This hot language’s construction and delivery frequently stood outside conventional societal norms regarding appropriate discourse. As one informant (male, age 21, interview) announced,

A lot of people give an outward appearance because of societal rules, online they can completely change in terms of personality.... Society tells you, you should be nice to everybody, [but] what are they going to do [online] if you’re not?

Another participant (male, age 21, CIT) was more explicit:

People are really rude [in a chat room] and will make racial comments [and] talk badly to people because they know that person doesn’t know them and they know they can’t find them.

This sense of freedom also manifested in the extensive pretending we found in our study. We delve into this major theme in more depth in the subsequent sections on fictional behavior and one of its manifestations, deception.

### *Connection Goal*

The adolescents chronicled three aspects to their other goal of connection. First was the aspect of broadened connection for the sake of learning, adventure, meeting new people, and establishing new relationships. The second and third aspects—the availability of people with whom to connect and the acceptance of people in their world—related to an absence of something in the offline world that informants then sought in the online world.

Broadened connections gave informants more opportunities to meet new people, some of whom they would not have met otherwise in the offline world. Some informants were simply broadening the opportunity to establish new relationships. For example, some of the interview participants were dating people they had met online.

The second and third aspects of the connection goal reflect a sense of loneliness. Sometimes this related to the availability of others, as one young man (age 23, interview) described:

I kind of got attached to him because he was there all the time. Every time I was there, he was there. He stays at home 24 hours a day; he’s always signed on. When I had questions... when I needed someone there. Most of the time it wasn’t [that] I had to ... figure out this life mystery; it was just the fact that someone was there.

At other times, connections involved people who were simply willing to listen. As one woman (age 21, interview) said, “At least somebody is going to listen to you, to what you have to say.”

Finally, the adolescents strove for connection to receive validation for their actions and acceptance by others and talked about the importance of being understood. As one adolescent (male, age 21, interview) said, “Any level of acceptance, any level of friendship was wonderful.” Another young woman (age 21, interview) added, “So that’s why the Internet was so important.... [It was] the only force of acceptance I had.” One young man (age 23, interview) struggling with his sexuality said the following:

I had just broken up with my first relationship. So it was very comforting to have other people there that understood. I talked with them a lot about things I couldn’t talk with others about,



because everyone I knew wasn't OK to talk about my sexuality which was basically coming out.... [The Internet] was very open, there was no judgments so that was why [it] was enticing. If anyone did judge you, you just move on to someone else.... [It] wasn't a rejection thing; it was more of an acceptance thing, an understanding thing.

We recognize that there is a level of tension between these freedom and connection goals. Connection connotes some type of responsibility to the other person, while the freedom goal is based on liberation from constraints, especially for the older adolescents. This contrast seems to exemplify the tensions of this stage of identity development: learning the balance between freedom and maintaining connections and relationships.

## Scaffolding and Fictional Behavior as Online Self-Socialization Activities

### Scaffolding

Balaban (1995) describes scaffolding as the process whereby more competent others give advice and aid to someone in their zone of proximal distance and then taper off this assistance as it becomes unnecessary. In the Internet context, which lacks traditional socialization agents, peers provide considerable scaffolding. The 13- and 14-year-old informants used terms such as "guide," "tutor," and "teacher" to describe their interactions with others online and felt empowered by being listened to and paid attention to without pressure:

People in chat rooms always listen to your problems. This way you would get a lot of advice, and the people around you wouldn't pressure you to tell who the person was or where you were. (female, age 13, metaphor)

The potential risk of these adolescents guiding one another is that they may not be developmentally prepared to take on the role of guide in some areas and do not have the checks and balances of adult socialization influences. In addition, the data revealed the adolescents' almost unquestioning acceptance of peer-to-peer (or supposed peer-to-peer) advice on the Internet. This made the context potentially risky. In parallel to the previous comment, an older informant's (female, age 21, CIT) comment reflected this acceptance: "It's a really good way of getting advice.... [If] you had a problem with one of your friends, you could go on a chat room. People in chat rooms always listen to you."

The older informants relied on others online to learn about processes (e.g., instructions) and to obtain guidance on their professional and personal life. However, the preponderance of the advice older informants sought was relational advice. As we mentioned previously, the informants strove to receive validation for their actions and acceptance by others, talked about the importance of being understood, and often seemed to exude loneliness. Others repeatedly talked of consoling or comforting others and emphasized the importance of having someone pay attention to them. In talking about his scaffolding relationships, one informant (male, age 23, interview) noted,

Some of the other people online ... you've never even seen them before, never met them in real life, but you've just been

talking to them like for however long;... you have a really bad day you know, they're online, they talk with you, they ask you how you're doing and stuff like that. And you tell them about your day, they help you;... they give you advices [sic] and stuff like that. It's kind of like, but, it's more about, I think they help you because they feel that they built that relationship, like a friendship with you already.

There also was the expectation that people would help others because they had been helped previously. One young man referenced the movie *Pay It Forward* to illustrate the expectation of giving advice and helping others in return for being helped in the past.

Informants also talked about interacting online with people who, though close in age, took on a role of provider of advice on important life issues. One informant (male, age 22, interview) stated that an online acquaintance "was kind of a big brother, father figure ... comforting me, telling me to be safe and these things, and I would talk to him about sex." Another informant (male, age 23) explained his advice-giving involvement with a young man he described as "pretty poor" with a "drug problem, maybe alcoholism." A young woman (age 22, interview) established a friendship with an adult male who gave her relationship advice. She said, "He just checks up on me like he's my dad;... like if I meet a new guy, I have to go through him like and tell him about the guy ... so he can approve before I date someone."

Another informant (male, age 23, CIT), describing his best experience on the Internet, interacted with a more knowledgeable peer to extend beyond his own social experiences. This collaboration gave him more elaborate and complex learning than what he could create on his own:

I was 20. I pretended I was gay and still in the closet. I told the person I was 18 and going through this crisis I did not know how to deal with. He was actually a great guy, gave me advice about what I should do and also provided me with support and reassurance. This turned out to be great when I was 22 because his advice helped me help my best friend who was going through the situation I was pretending to be in.

### Fictional Behavior

The most dominant activity that ran through each of the phases of research is what we call fictional behavior. As one respondent (male, age 13, metaphor) said, "The Internet taught me I can be anyone,..., not my old boring self." Fictional behavior ranges from pretend, fantasy, and role-playing to lying and deception. Across the different waves of our research, the strongest norms, most common behaviors, and most developed skills were these fictional behaviors. They occurred in different forms, from "visiting" another country to spending hours immersed in a made-up identity to examining possible selves by entering particular situations to experiment with different identities. The sense of freedom that the adolescents attained supported a high degree of fictional behavior. The Internet context provides unique opportunities for identity exploration. In general, it lacks face-to-face communication; a person can be anonymous. Many of its activities, such as role-playing games, involve taking on other identities and possible selves. For our infor-

mants, there were many opportunities to practice and perfect identity exploration, pretending, and deception.

The fictional behaviors of the younger informants, which became apparent from the thematic analysis of the metaphor phase of the study, can be explained by contrasting fictional and nonfictional behaviors. Using the patterns of behaviors, we anchored the metaphors in two dimensions: reality/fiction and their perception of positive/negative experience. The reality/fiction dimension gives people the opportunity to contrast and then flesh out the fictional behavior component. The behaviors in the positive–reality quadrant are reflections of how the adolescents created cool positive contexts online. The younger teens used words such as “bookshelf,” “scrapbook,” and “flashlight” as metaphors for their computers. As one informant (male, age 13, metaphor) said,

My computer is my parents. They both make me look good. They make all my papers look professional. They correct my spelling, check my grammar, and keep things neatly filed.... My computer is a parent because it is never too busy when I need help ... unless my sister is bugging my parents.

The metaphor data in the positive–fiction quadrant indicated an abundance of the pretend aspects: masks, makeup, fairy tales, magic carpets, wizards, and genies. Two of the informants demonstrate this theme:

This is because a Fairytale is whatever you want it to be. Just like my computer. My computer takes me places that I have never been. My computer is full of extraordinarily great things, such as talking to friends, and meeting people you have never met before. (female, age 13, metaphor)

My computer is a match to my imagination. A candle wick blown out can always be lit again.... It can ignite my thoughts again because the computer has tons of different programs to help my imagination get going again.... Like a candle, my imagination can most likely wither out. The match is always around to bring the candle back again. When you're all out of ideas the computer has enough pizzazz to keep your ideas going. A candle can light up a room with pleasant light and warmth. The computer, on the other hand, lights up your imagination and creativity. (female, age 13, metaphor)

The metaphors anchored in the negative–reality quadrant were represented by terms such as “junkyard,” “fraternity house,” “anthill,” and “barren wasteland.” As an informant (male, age 13, metaphor) said,

My computer is a trash can because it has so much unneeded stuff on it. The reason it came to this point was from so many downloads. I would sign up for some club online, but then I would get all this stupid stuff I did not need. Then this junk they sent without our permission would not be able to come off, just like a grape stain on a white couch.... Sometimes with these clubs we would get bills. And my dad (a.k.a. great provider) would get so mad he would erupt like a small volcano and tell us to quit the club.... I stopped trying to sign up for clubs on the Internet. But the real annoyance was still to come. They started to mail stuff to us.... I saw Mt. Dad erupt and shoot ashes into the air. Now you get the idea of a trash can, to get rid of stuff you don't need, but mine's more of a recyclable bin sometimes.

The metaphors grounded in the negative–fiction quadrant were represented by terms such as “war,” “addicting,” “drunk driver,” and “friends.” One adolescent (male, age

13, metaphor) acknowledged the addictive nature of the Internet and deception:

Computers are a very useful item. But in my mind they are a drug. They are exhilarating but addicting. Cocaine isn't necessarily exhilarating, but it is addicting. Drugs can do things to you like put you in a different state of mind. A computer can do the same. Computers and drugs can change a person or deceive another. They can change a man or woman into something they are not.

We found a clear pattern of considerable experimentation with identities among the younger adolescents. These explorations were very transient—for example, pretending to be a specific age for the moment and then trying something else the next time. The older informants had a wider range of fictional themes than the younger ones. Many of these identity explorations were in hot contexts and involved risk taking, sensation seeking, and interacting with peers. For example, in the following quotation, members of an online game who belonged to the same guild were strategizing their entry into a cave where they would overcome another team:

Well, they had set up all the ground rules.... They get all this together, it takes about an hour and half for setup and they get to the entrance, they go inside and the one new guy went to the right and opened this door and they all got decimated;... they started verbally abusing this guy for doing this and ... on the screen come the letters, “I'm only nine.” At first everything gets silent and after that they wouldn't stop anyway. Certain guys just don't care. They get so into this that they just don't care because when you're online, you are not who you are in the real life. You are that character. (male, age 21, interview)

This identity play constituted a sensational activity engaged in with peers online but is not the type of social risk a person usually engages in offline. Consistent with the sexual identity task of this stage, “sex talk” was common. One informant said: “I would talk sexually, and I wouldn't care.... I was figuring things out [about my sexual preference]. I would act very sexual.... I would talk about gay sex” (male, 22, interview). Another added that his best experience was going into a chat room “pretending we were girls. We were talking with guys and acting like we were looking for sex or something like that” (male, age 17, CIT). Similarly, identity play sometimes involved social engagement under the assumed identity of a relative or friend, and much of the titillation involved duping someone. Acknowledging its dominance, we explore identity and fictional behavior still further in concert with our subsequent discussion of the negotiated norm of lying/deception.

The plasticity of the self related to fictional behavior is perhaps best demonstrated on the Internet when people create disembodied selves and engage in cyber realities in which they create a persona that exists in this world (Turkle 1995). For example, an informant (male, age 20, interview) talked about an online role-playing game:

A man had played as a female character the entire time, and he met another male character online. And in the game, there is marriage. So the guy playing as the female character said, “Okay, we'll get married. We'll get ten grand.” [People actually send money as a wedding gift.] Well, the guy he was playing with was a hard-core role-playing game guy.... He was essen-



tially the same character that he was in the game, so when he said, "Let's get married," he meant, "Let's get married." So, sure enough a couple of weeks later, he finds out [that his bride-to-be was a man] and everything hit the fan. They had traded [credit card] account numbers and all that.

Another informant (female, age 22, focus group) noted the benefits of this identity play:

If you pretend to be someone you are not, but someone you like, you may tend to become that person; you become more confident; pretending can be carried out over to the real life.

### Negotiated Norms of the Constructed World: Deception and Lying

Membership in a sociocultural world, such as the adolescents' online world, is about sharing values, negotiating values, and creating shared meaning—in other words, negotiating and constructing this culture. Negotiated norms and culture occur in new, merged, and evolving cultures. From the beginning of the research, we noted activities regarding a specific type of fictional behavior (deception); with each iteration of the research, we sought to delve more deeply into the definitions and negotiated norms this adolescent online world had created. Through our research, we found that deception and lying as a negotiated norm stood out both in particular and in contrast to the corresponding norm in the offline world. The following comment relates this norm to freedom and release:

On the Internet you are free to do anything—things that are not socially acceptable and then you can easily change your identity, switch into someone else. I think it is OK. Pretending is a release ... like writing in your diary. (female, age 19, CIT)

Much of the informants' experimentation was prankish and for amusement. This exploration often included deception about his or her age, appearance, gender, sexual orientation, or outgoingness. Such deception is often considered harmless; for example, as one informant (male, age 19, CIT) said, "My friend tried to pretend he was Japanese in a Japanese chat room." However, increasingly what seemed to emerge was a new norm about deception and lying. A 23-year-old male participant defined this norm during an interview:

Informant: "I have never lied, never lied (online). I'm not telling you a fib."

Interviewer: "So, what is a lie versus bending the truth?"

Informant: "Well, bending the truth is like there is at least 50% of the truth in there and another 50% is maybe a little twisted."

The following informant (female, age 21, CIT) illustrates the secretive duping of others:

I realized that my boss at the time was Hitler reincarnated. I wished to express to her my feelings on the matter, but I did not want to lose my job. I thus decided to make up at least one fake screen name a day so that I could send her a message describing my true feelings about her management style. Seeing her reaction every day was more than enough to make this a good experience without resorting to keying her car.

Engaging in such deception publicly would be neither socially acceptable nor consistent with the offline norm. Anonymity and the make-believe of the Internet worked to

fuel the negotiated norm of deception. Many focus group informants believed that lying online was acceptable because it was the norm and that, at times, it led to a positive outcome. Therefore, the ends justified the means:

Pretending can be bad if your intentions are not OK. But it can be good, for example, for a homosexual person [to] get help on the 'net. (male, age 20, focus group)

Internet use is easier for such a person [for a shy person] because they do not need to make the effort to actually socialize; they pretend, they lie; they can be different from whom they are in reality. (female, age 20, focus group)

It is okay to lie ... if it's going to benefit—like what are the consequences for that person or even for yourself. You've got to take everything into account.... Teasing or lying, it's sort of the same thing to me. (male, age 21, focus group)

Lying is easier [on] the 'net. One can be more confident, which can be good or bad. (male, age 19, CIT)

So prominent and pervasive was the norm of deception and lying that most of the older adolescents brought up rules and heuristics they used to determine if someone was lying. They noted that these rules were different from offline ones because the Internet medium is, for the most part, devoid of the visual cues they usually used to determine if someone was lying. Our data indicate that these adolescents used three rules or tests as an indication that people were not lying: (1) if they were open and shared a great deal about themselves, (2) if they answered quickly without thinking a lot about what they said, and (3) if they did not contradict themselves.

### Socialization and Multiple Identity Development on the Internet

According to Erikson (1968), the task and culmination of the socialization of the adolescent is identity development. As we mentioned previously, although considerable research has been conducted on younger adolescents and identity development, little research has focused on older adolescents. Thus, the last phase of our research incorporates extended adolescence.

The older adolescents displayed a constellation of multiple, fairly consistent, and consolidated identities. Sometimes an informant revealed an identity in one context that differed from the one he or she portrayed in another. For example, as one informant (female, age 23, interview) said,

I don't think I could be the woman that I want to be when I am older and choose the things I do if the Michelle on MySpace comes out more often than she should.... MySpace: that's my public outlet to show that I'm not that cold, and cynical and intimidating. It's almost like my MySpace is my disclaimer basically.

However, she sometimes worked to bring the different personas together:

The Michelle online, she's pushing the Michelle offline. "Hey bend a little, you'll learn a lot more, bend a little and you won't get hurt as often as you do when you set yourself up so." They're slowly kind of talking.

More often, however, this consolidation of multiples identities was reflected both online and offline. Many of

these older adolescents even had unique names for their different identities and commonly referred to themselves in the third person. One informant (female, age 22, interview) discussed her more outgoing online identity, whom she called by her middle name, Marisa. She reported that this identity/name goes clubbing offline:

[Marisa] doesn't have as much of the shyness that I usually portray. She's more open; she's more courageous and she likes to just chat away and talk about random things.... [She] probably doesn't have a care in the world.

As another informant (female, age 22, interview) said,

I feel that the person that comes out when I write in MySpace is ... almost my alter ego. I won't say alter ego, she's different.... She's a romanticist;... she's not hard core. She's soft.... She doesn't judge people.... The way I'm talking now about my personality in MySpace, it's not me. It's as if it's another person ... where I can displace myself.

At times, there were also cues the informants used to trigger certain identities, whether online or offline: listening to music, sitting at the computer, hearing the name of the identity, and drinking. The older adolescents owned the identities, often naming them and maintaining them as long-term, stable identities.

## The Carryover Between Worlds

Adolescents cannot stay exclusively in the coconstructed world of the Internet. As they move between the online and offline worlds, some values may differ. In and of themselves, norms negotiated on the Internet, such as pretending or deception, do not constitute risky behavior. Turkle (1995) and Anderson and Ozanne (2006) suggest the possibility of positive identity play and the ability to work things out in a less risky environment and then transfer that knowledge offline as a transitional, safer space to experiment than the offline world. However, the carryover of Internet norms, such as pretending and deception, to the offline world can be of concern.

In this part of the study, we queried participants regarding the carryover that existed between the often hot online world, with its associated negotiated norms, and the offline world. The unease about risky behavior seems to emanate from a concern that norms from the online world may carry over to risky behaviors in the offline world. This concern raises issues for several offline worlds, including legal, work, education, and family.

Two behaviors that demonstrated carryover to the offline world illustrate the concern for risky or incompatible behavior: meeting someone from the Internet offline and using the aggressive social language of the Internet in the offline world. In our data, meeting offline was a frequent and potentially risky behavior. In the following incident, an informant (male, age 19, CIT) recalled his identity exploration, which spilled into the offline world:

When I was 14, I spoke with a lot of gay men online, trying to work out what was going on in my life. I ended up meeting a guy at a video store in my hometown ... proceeding to have a sexual relationship with him ... got myself into that situation, but I look back at it and realize how dangerous it was being alone with a virtual stranger.

The informant (female, age 22, interview) we cited previously, who contradicted her rule of not being open, flew to another city to meet a man whom she had met online. She described her friend's reaction:

One of my friends, I asked him to give me a ride to the airport to take me to Boston. He's like, I don't want blood on my hands if he kills you, so I'm not going to take you.

Likewise, the participants described a carryover of aggressive language that is typical of the hot context of the Internet and bolstered by the freedom goal. This hot language's construction and delivery frequently stood outside conventional, societal norms regarding appropriate discourse offline, thus demonstrating the conflict that may occur when going between worlds with different norms and symbolic boundaries. As one informant (male, age 22, interview) said, "Online, your natural instinct is when somebody doesn't do something right, you verbally abuse them in some way or somehow. It's just common ground online."

Because the online goal of freedom is to not be bound by real-world restraints, there was a clash of norms between the online and the offline worlds when this aggressive language carried over to the offline world. As one female informant (age 22, interview) said, "My mouth kept going, going, going and I had to remember, 'Okay, you're not on the Internet anymore, so calm down.'" In other instances, problems at work resulted. An informant (male, age 21, interview) discussed how his brother had problems in his job with aggressive language he had learned on the Internet.

As we mentioned previously, pretending and experimentation do not necessarily equate to risky behavior. Some informants suggested benefits of deception and the carryover to real life. However, some participants believed that the carryover of the negotiated norm of deception into real life was cause for concern. In general, informants agreed that lies and pretending can be carried over into the real life:

[Lying] is bad because all the lies can transfer to real life; you can lose yourself in your own lies; it's hard to keep track of all the lies. (female, age 20, CIT)

You lie more and more, and you bring that in your real life because you got away with it on the net. (female, age 22, CIT)

The carryover of the norm of deception from online to offline was manifest in a multitude of examples of potentially risky situations, such as informants pretending to be predators to scare their friends into being safer online, meeting people in person who were not who they seemed to be online, lying on loans and applications, and giving out others' telephone numbers and personal information. Although lying on an application may not be that unusual, what illustrated the negotiated norm of lying and its carryover is that an informant identified this as the "best experience" he had had online. In another case, the norm of deception ran into the laws and norms in the offline world:

My girlfriend's younger brother, who was about 13 at the time, was accused of writing vulgar and sexually explicit instant messages to a girl he has met online, that lived in Colorado. His mother was contacted by the police department from Colorado and informed her that the girl's father had found the transcript of their conversation and was considering pressing charges. After some investigation, it was obvious that someone other

than my girlfriend's little brother had pretended to be him. (male, age 23, CIT)

The last phase of our research, which incorporated older adolescents, revealed an unexpected result. The majority of the older adolescents felt more real online and more deceptive offline, even though many of them spent less time online than when they were younger because of the demands of real life (e.g., work, school, relationships).

## Discussion and Further Research

We argue that marketers, public policy makers, and adult socialization agents should consider the socialization that is occurring among adolescents on the Internet in general and in terms of four significant and interrelated reasons in particular. First, adolescence is a time of increased propensity for risky behaviors. Because the usual checks and balances from more experienced adult socialization agents are missing on the Internet, adolescents may be engaging in even higher incidences of risky behavior. This might be occurring through an adolescent's individual behavior or because of the impact of the collective online.

Second, the service of the Internet is approaching public goods status. A public or collective good is one for which it is difficult to exclude anyone from consuming and for which additional consumers do not diminish the opportunity for others to consume (Samuelson 1954). As such, it is difficult to exclude a group from this consumption, even if that group is vulnerable, such as adolescents. This public goods status raises many public policy questions in terms of who should make decisions regarding this good (e.g., experts, public officials, private entities [families], commercial entities) and how these decisions should be made.

Third, by definition, socialization has an impact beyond the individual person and on society in that it is the mechanism for the perpetuation of society. Fourth, collective consumption is occurring on the Internet. Thus, the consumption experience is not as controllable by individual adolescents or parents, because the social aspect of the collective interaction constitutes the consumption and socialization experience.

## Reconceptualized Socialization Framework

Our research foregrounds the importance of considering the context in which socialization occurs. The results brought forth themes that led to our development of a framework for understanding socialization within a specific context. We believe that this framework is both theoretically and practically useful for considering and eliciting aspects that may be of concern in nontraditional socialization contexts and, therefore, is relevant in the policy arena. In particular, we focus on socialization contexts in which traditional socialization agents are absent and self-socialization is occurring. This self-socialization framework includes the goals of the socialization group, the dominant socialization activities, the people within the context who are providing socialization collaboration, the norms that develop in this context and that might carry over to other worlds, and their impact on socialization outcomes.

A risk inherent in the increasing complexity of public policy is that citizens and policy makers alike may find it difficult to grasp the intricacies of issues and how their actions may affect these issues (Smith 1991). The role of our qualitative findings and the resultant framework is not to provide discrete policy actions per se but rather to provide a frame for the ongoing discussion about socialization and the Internet. The self-socialization framework we developed specifically facilitates policy discussions by serving an enlightenment function (Janowitz 1971; Patton 1988; Weiss 1988), allowing interested parties to understand and decompose problems and initiate the identification of points of most effective policy intervention, as well as providing a template for a consistent framing of issues on the topic. In addition, this framework also satisfies the key roles of qualitative research in policy discussions by creating "a contextual understanding about an issue, building linkages that will exist over time, and striving constantly to educate about new developments and research findings" (Rist 1994, p. 545).

Such a set of policy guidelines is especially important as the diffusion of Internet-related innovations and the resultant shifts in communication patterns among adolescents continue to morph at a rapid-fire pace with their concomitant changes in socialization contexts. These quickly changing patterns make it critical to think of policy in this arena not as a discrete function but rather as a series of incremental steps that enable us to stay abreast of these changes rather than solving an isolated problem (Rist 1994).

This active technology adoption pattern suggests the continuation of self-socialization and new socialization contexts without the checks and balances of more experienced socialization agents. Our framework provides a consistent schema through which to approach these quickly changing patterns. It also has implications for policy in that many times, by the time adults are aware and policy processes have occurred, a window of opportunity for maximum effectiveness and acceptance of policy may have passed. Many Internet technologies with their attendant consumer behavior changes are adopted and solidified so rapidly by adolescents that making subsequent constricting change is difficult. For example, to try to implement new policies that restrict adolescents' access to social networking sites, as was suggested over several years by the proposed Deleting Online Predators Acts, would be difficult to accomplish given the rapid diffusion and social impact of these social networking sites. These sites have reconstructed the social meaning and construction of communication for adolescents in a very short period of time. Our framework provides efficiencies that would allow for more rapid assessment of appropriate policy implications and action.

## Further Research on Coconstructed Worlds and Self-Socialization

In addition to considering socialization within context, our framework raises questions to consider at a broader level in that it recognizes the carryover between different socialization worlds. This appreciation that people can be socialized simultaneously by different social worlds elicits concerns and raises research questions regarding the consequences of



conflict of norms between these different worlds, the degree of carryover of norms between worlds, and the changes and long-term impact of each world on the other due to the reciprocal carryover between worlds.

Germane to our research are the concepts of self-socialization and coconstructed worlds. Many research questions are evident. We use two issues arising from our findings to illustrate general questions that we believe warrant further investigation: cyberbullying and the safe haven for realness. First, are there likely to be more inconsistencies in a coconstructed world than in a structured world? In addition, what norms constitute risky or detrimental behavior in this coconstructed context? These two issues present an intriguing dichotomy because they both arise from the goal of freedom from restraints. On the one hand, there is the safe haven aspect on the Internet that allows adolescents to be free, open, and real in expressing themselves. On the other hand, this freedom and openness can be expressed more aggressively and, thus, may clash with different offline norms or cross the line into cyberbullying, a potentially risky or detrimental behavior. As we detailed previously, we found considerable evidence of what many of the informants called verbal abuse, attempts to scare others, disparaging comments, and prankish behavior that may not occur in the offline world.

Second, are the impacts of specific behaviors and norms in one context the same as those in another context? Do phenomena have different meanings in different worlds? In this case, we refer to the potentially detrimental behavior of bullying. Is the impact of bullying online different from the impact offline? If the context of bullying is different between the worlds, is the meaning of the phenomenon also different? It struck us that few participants seemed bothered or hurt by the verbal abuse or bullying in the Internet world. Is this because bullying has a different meaning online?

Third, for risky or detrimental behaviors, what processes does a group coconstruct to deal with these behaviors when the protection of usual socialization agents is missing? The context of a world may provide a different way for its occupants to deal with hurtful behaviors. Several of the participants discussed the ability to leave the situation if it became uncomfortable, to "unfriend" someone, or even to lie about themselves to get rid of another person online. Perhaps the ability to remove themselves readily from bullying lessened its impact.

Fourth, what problems or benefits arise as people go between these worlds with their different or nonaligned meanings and norms? Is it stressful to move between worlds? Is the norm from one context dominant over another? Has a hybrid norm developed? What problems or benefits arise from the carryover of the norms from one world to another? The participants discussed instances of the detrimental consequences of carrying over aggressive language from the online world to the offline world. Conversely, participants also talked about the benefits that shy people gained by learning to be more outgoing online and carrying this over to the offline world.

Fifth, what are the repercussions for identity development when going between worlds with their different norms? We found evidence of participants developing multiple identities. The pretending they engaged in online may

be the rehearsal for going back to the real world. However, does pretending have consequences? The questions we raise lead us to close with a caveat from Sherry Turkle of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Program in Science, Technology and Society:

The culture of simulation may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves. But if we have lost reality in the process, we shall have struck a poor bargain. (Turkle 1996, p. 148)

Our research and its corresponding findings strongly indicate that coconstructed worlds, self-socialization, the context of socialization, and going between socialization worlds are rich areas for further research that bear on the welfare of adolescents. We encourage this research.

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