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This study examines the works of a group of child development psychologists and compares their findings concerning adolescents to the self-portrayal of a group of ten adolescents in their weblogs.

The weblogs revealed a group of adolescents very focused on themselves and their immediate concerns, who are, with some exceptions, developing in the same manner as suggested by the developmental experts. Further research should be conducted using both the weblogs and direct observation of adolescent lives to fully examine the use and impact of weblogs on adolescents.

Headings:

Child Authors

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ADOLESCENT BLOGGING: A COMPARISION OF DEVELOPMENTAL
PSYCHOLOGY AND SELF-DEPICTION IN ADOLESCENT BLOGS

by
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Introduction

Blogging has developed from a hobby kept by a few into an online phenomenon of which everyone has heard in a remarkably short period of time. Granting any person with access to the World Wide Web (meant in this paper to refer to the graphical interface presented to most Internet users) the power to publish their thoughts and opinions online, blogging has now become one of the most widely accepted forms of communication and impacts innumerable facets of our lives. Everything from politics to knitting, gardening to open source software development is now fodder for blogs. As Cory Doctorow writes in his book:

> Creating a taxonomy of the blogiverse is a fruitless task. There's no good, central directory of blogs that puts each one in its own pigeonhold, because even the most topical blogger will stray from the subject from time to time to celebrate some personal victory or warn his readers off a terrible movie.

The world of blogging has fascinated me for three years. Many friends began to tell me about their various blogs, insisting that I visit them occasionally and leave comments on their posts. At the time, I had little idea what they were referring to. This quickly changed, however, and through research and casual web browsing, I have become familiar with the many uses of blogs, the different web services and software packages available to power blogs, and many of the most prominent blogs on the web.

There are numerous online services which authors can use to create and host blogs. To find just how popular these services are, you can go to their home pages and look for links to recently updated blogs. The service LiveJournal.com has a page which aggregates the most recent posts onto one page, descending chronologically. According to the page statistics at http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml, there is an average of 455 posts per minute on LiveJournal; sometimes that number is larger, sometimes smaller, depending on the current activity. It is difficult to say exactly when the peak hours for a

blogger are, considering the service is used around the world. Whatever the average rate per minute, however, it does seem as if quite a lot of people have something to say.

I have also noticed that a large number of these bloggers are in fact adolescents, defined in this paper as people from the age of eleven to eighteen. For instance according to the April 2005 MSNBC article Kids, blogs, and too much information by Bob Sullivan, a study in 2003 conducted by the Perseus Development Corporation found that about half of all blogs are in fact authored by teens. To give you an idea of the numbers this refers to, the home page of http://www.technorati.com, a service which tracks the blogging culture, states they are currently keeping tabs on 20.7 million blogs; however, if Cory Doctorow's estimates of daily blog creation hold true or have increased since the book's publication, this is a relatively small number of blogs. In addition, referring again to the LiveJournal statistics, most bloggers are between the ages of fourteen and twenty. Given these numbers, young adults, it seems, have even more to say than people had thought.

The question then arises: what are young adults saying? Given an open forum to say whatever they want, which roughly only five percent of parents are aware they possess, are teens really speaking their whole and honest minds through their blogs? The possibility certainly exists, though it is equally possible that blogs represent a performance piece to young adults, one in which they are free to project the thoughts and characteristics of an entirely different person. Such is the quandary of evaluating the worth of any online source – in cyberspace, we can choose to be anyone we wish.

Over the past century, a growing body of literature has developed in the study of young adults and adolescence. Triggered by a multitude of factors, adolescents, especially in the United States, possess a unique role in the developmental cycle of humans. It is one in which they are no longer children and are far from being considered adults, but nonetheless possess many of the qualities and responsibilities of both these groups. In the last three decades, there has been an even larger focus on the study of adolescence and we now understand more about them than ever before.

Or, at least we think we do.

In order to reconcile the quandary of reality versus representation in the adolescent blogosphere, the trendy label for the electronic ether comprised of all the

world's blogs, it becomes necessary to closely examine these blogs and compare the words of their authors to words of developmental experts. The driving question behind this entire paper is whether the prepsentation of adolescents in their blogs is similar to their representation by developmental psychologists.

First this paper provides an overview of the literature currently available concerning the development and lives of today's adolescents, followed by a short overview of blog-related literature. A content observation and analysis of a selection of blogs authored by adolescents on the blogging service Xanga.com will follow, comparing, as written above, the authors' representations of themselves and the observations of the experts. Following this will be an exploration of how the two sets of data match up, why they differ, and the impact that blogs could have on both adolescents and on the researchers seeking to understand them.

Adolescent Development Literature Review

Adolescence is a time characterized by change: change from child to adult, from few responsibilities to many, from relative ignorance of the world and the self to fuller awareness.

Tracking the many changes from childhood to adolescence is a complex task. The study of adolescent behavior takes place across several fields of study (Peterson 585). There are biological, sociological, anthropological, medical, and psychological considerations when studying this development and those are only the most obvious fields.

Even given all of this, the study of adolescents is, in its own way, only in a period of adolescence itself. The idea that people have a childhood is a relatively new way of thinking about human development, and now adolescence provides a sort of bridge, if you will, between childhood and adulthood. This way of thinking has taken hold just in the past one hundred years; serious study of adolescence has come about only in the last fifty years.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century, this new way of thinking about human development was becoming very popular in France, where adolescence was thought of as a period in which people suffered and

required guidance. It was now a discrete period in a person's life in which they were "physically and mentally malleable." This period was especially influenced by the work of G.S. Hall, who provided the first systematic analysis of adolescence in 1904 (Pomfret 455). However, these findings, according to Anne C. Petersen, "were not based on research and were probably not representative of adolescence even at that time" (Petersen 586).

One of the next major players in the study of adolescents was Piaget, who, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of adolescence, developed a theory of cognitive development. In his theory, children's "knowledge schemes are integrated and reorganized into more complex systems that are better adapted to their environment" (Meece 168). Children's cognitive abilities progress along a set path which does not vary from child to child. Piaget has divided the cognitive development of children into four discrete and universal periods:

1. The Sensorimotor Stage, from birth until two years old, in which infants learn to direct their behavior in such a way as to accomplish a goal and come to understand object permanence, or the idea that an object still exists even if it is not currently within the eyesight.

2. The Preoperational Stage, from age two until age seven, sees children using language and symbols to think; they grow more skilled with problem solving, but their thinking is still very set and self-centered.

3. In the Concrete Operations Stage, from age seven until eleven, children are able to think more logically and classify things in their lives, and their thinking begins to include people and events that are not directly a part of their lives.

4. Piaget's final stage of cognitive development is the Formal Operations Stage, which the subjects for this paper, adolescents from eleven years and older, all should be well into. At this point in their cognitive development, adolescents are able to think abstractly and use various methods of reasoning that require an examination of the world outside their sphere of knowledge and experience (Meece 147).

There have, of course, been criticisms of this theory. One of the largest concerns is the universality of his stages. Studies have been done which prove that given

adequate training, younger children can perform within stages of cognitive development into which they should not fall given their age. These stages may also be culturally biased, even within the formal operations stage (Meece 145-149).

Vygotsky likes to take into account the social interactions of children when explaining their cognitive development. "Knowledge is not individually constructed, but constructed between two people. Remembering, problem solving, planning, and abstract thinking have a social origin" (Meece 169). Put another way, according to Lois Holzman on the mission page for the East Side Institute for Group and Short-Term Psychotherapy, Vygotsky "rejected the inside-outside dichotomy that has been a part of psychology since its beginnings." Development is not a result of changes that take place within a person isolated from the rest of society. Rather, it is a process that requires the input and interactions with a society in order to occur. Conceivably by the time a child has reached adolescence, his or her social interactions have allowed them to develop in a number of manners, depending on the type and quality of that adolescent's social interaction.

Moving away from strictly cognitive development, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed an ecological theory of development wherein he believed that development took place across several layered contexts, with the child at the center of this model and the most immediate influences upon him or her directly outside the child. As the child grew up, other contexts layered beyond these initial ones would become relevant; these later contexts increased the person's social contact and complexity. Within Bronfenbrenner's model, change and development can come from within the child and from the outside. With the onset of adolescence, it is likely that multiple new contexts are revealed and begin to affect a person's continuing development (Meece 33-34).

These theories, whatever their criticisms, have supplied the foundation for many more complex and thorough studies of adolescence. The multidisciplinary quality of adolescent research has pushed the growth of adolescent development theory in many different directions. Or rather, there are a number of facets of the adolescent life that are now under scrutiny to help understand the young adult condition.

Konopka details many of the major characteristics noticed in adolescents. These include experimentation mixed with "audacity and insecurity"; a sense of loneliness and

vulnerability; mood swings, which she attributes to "moving from dependence to interdependence"; feeling at once omnipotent and knowing that this is a falsehood; a need for a peer group; and a general need to be argumentative and emotional, in the process of "trying out their own changing values and their own relationships with the outer world" (300 - 301).

Robert Havighurst divided development into several phases including infancy, early and middle childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age, and later maturity and defined sets of developmental tasks and their characteristics that took place during each phase. Adolescents must learn to accept their developing physiques; develop healthy relationships with the opposite sex; achieve emotional independence from parents and other adults; take care of themselves financially; prepare for and gain employment; develop the competencies needed for societal involvement; desire and achieve socially responsible behavior; and prepare for marriage and family life (Havighurst 30 – 54).

Elizabeth Fenwick and Tony Smith also outline characteristics of various stages of adolescence in their book "Adolescence." Ages 11-14 are characterized by the initial changes in body development, rebellious behavior, the need to belong with peer groups, and overall selfish attitudes. At ages 15 and 16, adolescents increase in confidence and independent thinking; they continue to push their social, intellectual, and physical boundaries; lasting and intimate friendships develop and identity experimentation increases. In the last years of this period, 17 and 18, adolescents are idealistic, involved with life, work, and relationships outside of the family, especially romantic ones, and overall are on their way to true independence and self-reliance (29-32).

On top of the social and mental changes that adolescents all go through, they are also changing physically, as they grow into their adult bodies. Body weight increases dramatically, giving rise to increased muscle mass in boys, though girls gain muscle and fat deposits in their hips, breasts, and waist. Secondary sex characteristics, such as deepening of the voice, increased muscle mass, facial hair, and growth of the penis in boys and breast development, widening of the hips, and the start of menstruation in girls, begins to appear as well. Boys generally take more pride in these developments, while girls are left feeling much more insecure about their bodies. Early physical maturation

has the potential for a negative impact on girls, as they may feel less feminine when compared to their less developed peers and as a result may engage in more risky behaviors, such as sex, drug and alcohol use; their larger and more developed bodies serve to differentiate them from other girls their age and identify them with older, more life-experienced girls, which they are far from being. Boys, on the other hand take pride in their early maturation and may finder greater social acceptance and success. On the other hand, there are no clear winners when it comes to late physical maturation; both boys and girls whose bodies do not mature at a normal rate are likely to experience increased lack of self-confidence and self-esteem (Fenwick and Smith 18-25). On the whole it seems that boys will tend to be more secure and confident with their bodies during adolescence, but as Fenwick and Smith write in their book, "Adolescents are intensely self-conscious and sensitive about their changing bodies" (21). No one can say with certainty who will feel good about their bodies and who will feel poorly.

It is important to remember that there is far more to adolescence than physical development; teachers, parents, and other authority figures who influence the lives of adolescents need to be aware of the complex needs of a developing child.

Conditions necessary for healthy development to take place, according to Konopka, include the time needed to be able to make choices not based on instinct; to belong with their peers, as well as with adults, in healthy relationships; a chance to "thrash out their reactions"; a chance to "reflect on self"; discover their own strengths and weaknesses, to deal with all situations, whether they turn out for better or for worse; the ability to look outward at the people around them as they grow up, as well as within themselves; and an environment wherein they are encouraged to enjoy their lives (302-303).

Much attention is paid to the number of risk factors faced by adolescents as they grow up. Many of these are behavioral risks, such as drug, alcohol, and substance abuse, unsafe sex, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, crime, and suicide. A large literature review and study of these problems was conducted by Richard Lerner and Nancy Galambos, in which they state, "About 50% of youth in the United States may be at moderate or greater levels of risk for engaging in unhealthy, unproductive and even life-threatening behaviors" (438).

One of the largest areas of study and concern for adolescents is poverty. The list of concerns over the affects of poverty upon child and adolescent development includes "higher rates of perinatal complications, reduced access to resources that buffer negative effects of perinatal complications, increased exposure to lead, and less home-based cognitive stimulation" as well as lower teacher expectancies and poorer academic-readiness skills", to name just a few (McLoyd 185). Unfortunately, according to McLoyd, "there is some suggestion that since the 1970s, poverty has become more difficult to escape." Also of note is the fact that "African American and Puerto Rican children are more likely than non-Latino White children to experience persistent poverty, and if they are poor, to live in areas of concentrated poverty" (186).

With all of these factors in mind, society is at risk of viewing adolescents in a very negative light. Certainly the media, in news and in entertainment, portrays adolescents in such a way, as dangerous, moody, and unpredictable. Though it is true that while the study of adolescence has grown in the last two decades, this body of knowledge has done little to quell the increase in the risk factors facing adolescents or improve their overall well-being (Compas, Hinden, Gerhardt 266). Worsening the situation is the impression these negative portrayals can have on adolescents; they can be led to believe they should fit a certain mold created for them by a media stereotype. However, it is not only adolescents who are affected by these images – researchers of adolescents can also be affected and led to form expectations, perhaps quite falsely (Petersen 584). According to research reviewed by Petersen, 57% of adolescents experience basically positive development, with 32% having "more intermittent and probably situational difficulties" and 11% experiencing "serious chronic difficulties." Though this research is somewhat dated, it could be inferred that the negative image of adolescents portrayed in the media and other forums of public opinion is shaped by a relatively small number of adolescents.

Because I will be examining the blogs of adolescents, or their publicly written words, academic achievement and self-perception are of some importance in understanding their cognitive, academic, and social development. Promoting literacy in adolescence is not an easy task, according to Susan Strauss and Judith Irvin; adolescents are confronted with a great deal more reading than they were required to handle in their

earlier years of school. These readings are representative of several different fields of study and make use of more complex syntax and vocabulary than adolescents have been presented with before. They go on to suggest that adolescent literacy "constructs and constrains" identity formation (56). Hynds is quoted in their paper as writing that "rather than mastering a set of discrete, decontextualized skills, students engaged in a complex array of social practices that defined and developed their identities as readers, writers, and language users" (56). This is a quote that I believe will become especially relevant once I begin my examination of the blogs to be analyzed in this paper; are the bloggers' writing styles the result of their social interactions?

Looking at general performance, statistics about adolescent writing ability from the National Assessment of Educational Programs quoted by Richard Vacca in his article, "Let's Not Marginalize Adolescent Literacy" show that "all students, even in Grade 12, had considerable difficulty moving beyond minimal performance to more elaborate writing tasks that require a higher level of coherence and detail to support points made in the writing." According to Vacca the resources and attention for developing reading and writing skills are focused upon younger learners and later set aside in adolescence. This may not come as a surprise when the complexity of writing in the several different fields of study that adolescents are exposed to is taken into account.

Still, this is all examining adolescent literacy from an academic standpoint. From listening to the media and word-of-mouth, the tendency may be to believe that adolescents are a particularly illiterate group. A study conducted in four North Carolina high schools found this assumption to be flawed. While students may adopt a negative attitude toward the school reading and writing they are required to complete for class, they may at the same time be reading and writing very creatively within their own passions (Luttrell & Parker 235). In cases such as these, it is important that educators realize that while this disconnect does exist, this does not mean that students are not aware of the importance of their schoolwork and certainly does not mean that they are illiterate.

From this review, I hope a general picture of the literature written about adolescents can be generated. I will later compare this literature to the lives of ten

adolescents as portrayed in their blogs. Now I will give an overview of blogs, including their history, uses and applications, and their impact on society.

Blogging Literature Review

"Blogging has exploded. Everyday 1,500-3,000 new bloggers join the Internet" (Doctorow ix). Blogging is a free, easy-to-create, online publishing form which most everyone in the United States and around the world can read. This is the new realm in which adolescents have chosen to express themselves and they are doing so en-masse.

Blogging was once a form of the Internet elite, in the late half of the 1990s when the creation of blogs or any type of Internet resource required at least a modicum of web design knowledge. From this new form of online communication arose the tools that are now used by millions the world-over to share their thoughts and ideas; and from the rise of these tools has come a growth of the form that is rivalling email and instant messaging.

As Rebecca Blood writes in the introduction to the book We've Got Blog, "The web invented weblogs, but they are still being defined by the people who make them" (Blood xi). She makes one of her strongest points when she writes the following:

> Read any weblog for a few weeks and it is impossible not to feel that you know its writer. The best weblogs are those that convey the strongest personality. Every weblog has a point of view, and even those that contain no personal information reveal, over time, detailed maps of their creators' minds. It is captivating to see the biases, interests, and judgments of an individual reveal themselves so clearly (xi).

One of the largest boons to blogging came with the Blogger service, which was started by Evan Williams in 1999 through his company, Pyra. At the time, many people were publishing their web sites as blogs and the programmers at Pyra decided to automate the process through an online application which would make it simpler for everyone to create blogs. Williams saw the "blog concept" as involving three things: "Frequency, Brevity, and Personality." (Turnbull 82). After the launch of Blogger, Williams eventually had to let go of most of his staff, due mostly to financial constraints. In 2003, the search engine company Google acquired Williams' Pyra and with it Blogger

(Wikipedia). With this acquisition came a new, more intuitive interface and set of features which made blogging even easier.

Blogger is far from the only tool with which authors can create their blogs. There are two distinct types of tools for creating blogs: online services and server-side programs. The online services host all of the programs and tools needed to create blogs on their servers; users can then sign up and use these tools to create their blogs, which are normally hosted on the service's servers as well. Examples of blogging services include Blogger, LiveJournal, Xanga, Blogsome and OpenDiary, though there are more. Most of these services are free, though for an extra fee many of them offer increased benefits, such as more customizability of the blogs and the removal of banner ads normally used to pay for the blog hosting. Server-side tools require that authors have some HTML and programming knowledge as they are downloaded and installed directly on the authors' own server or space rented from a hosting company. These tools are far more powerful than the blogging services, as they allow complete control over the presentation of the blogs; many of the programs are even open source, meaning that their code is freely distributed and may be altered without worrying about fees, only attribution. Again, this does require a larger knowledge of computers than services would, but they have the advantage of being completely under the author's control. These tools include Movable Type, Word Press, and Manilla.

From my own observations, there are a few different, albeit blanket categories that blogs can fall into:

- Community blogs, in which multiple people all post content of a similar theme to the same blog;
- Hobbyist blogs, in which a person chooses a particular interest or area of expertise to track and report on; these topics can be anything, from information technology to cooking to knitting.
- Personal diaries which, authored by adolescents on the blogging service Xanga, are the concern of this paper.

The presence of online personal diaries begs the question, "Why would so many people post their diaries – perhaps the most intimate form of personal musing – on the most public communication medium in human history, the Internet?" (Nardi, Sciano, &

Gumbrecht 222). This is an excellent question, especially in light of the perceived decrease of privacy due to our increasingly electronic society. "Diaries have long been written and stored in secret; the classic diary is a volume whose privacy is secured by lock and key" (222).

According to Nardi, Sciano, and Gumbrecht, blogging is a very social process:

> We learned that blogs created the audience, but the audience also creates the blog. This linkage happened in a number of ways: friends urging friends to blog, readers letting bloggers know they were waiting for posts, bloggers crafting posts with their audience in mind and bloggers continuing discussion with readers in other media outside the blog (224).

So blogging is not a solitary activity. Unlike a personal diary which is written only with its author as an audience, personal blogs have readers with whom authors are in tune. Blogs are about interaction. However, privacy is still part of the equation, as authors may choose what they do and do not post to their blogs. This social aspect of blogs will play heavily into my analysis of their adolescent authors.

Trust is an issue everywhere on the Internet. It is exceedingly easy for a person to create a reputable looking web site and use it to publish completely erroneous information. This issue has not dissipated with the advent of blogs and may have increased with it. While people can and do turn to blogs for their news and truthful information, a caveat of reading blogs is that one must always bear the issue of trust-worthiness in mind.

An example of this comes in the form of Kaycee Nicole Swenson, an imaginary person and victim of leukemia, given life in the blogosphere by a high school girl, her mother and a friend who set up the blog for Kaycee. Kaycee, through her creator Kelli Swenson and Kelli's mother Debbie, became an extremely popular person in online forums and the CollegeClub online community. So convincing was the farce that Kaycee was even quoted on college life in the New York Times. Eventually Debbie Swenson decided to "kill" Kaycee with an aneurysm. When grief and condolences over Kaycee's death began to come in, the Swensons became very tight-lipped about an address to send cards to or funeral details. An investigation eventually found Kaycee's life to be entirely a fabrication (Geitgey 89-98).

The point to be taken from this is that anyone can post anything and pose as anyone online. Nothing can be taken for granted and "truths" that circulate as far as your neighborhood or beyond to major news and credible news sources may in fact be nothing but falsehoods. It is with this wariness that one must approach blogs, even blogs used for the purposes of this paper.

Methodology

The blogs for this paper were all taken from the blogging service Xanga.com, a free and easy-to-use service, which attracts a large number of users. According to a WXPI.com article by Gordon Loesch, there are now over 40 million blogs hosted on Xanga; of those 40 million, 91% are said to be authored by people between the ages of 13 and 29. From their homepage, Xanga links to a list of the most recently updated Xanga blogs, http://main.xanga.com/NewlyUpdated.aspx. It is from this list that I've selected the blogs to study. This list is updated as the blogs hosted on Xanga are updated; I selected a total of seventeen blogs from two updated lists. Meeting the requirements for inclusion in this paper was simple: the blogs had to explicitly give the birthdate of the author on its main page as now being a teenager or adolescent. I chose not to take gender or race into account because I wanted to study blogs that are actively being authored. The necessity for active authoring is important, since according to an October 2003 study conducted by Perseus under Chief Operations Officer Jeffrey Henning, about two thirds of the blogs they studied had not been updated with a new post in two months or more.

The content analysis was multi-faceted. The first area of consideration was the blog's appearance – were they using one of the pre-made Xanga layouts or had they been customized in some way by the authors? Did the blogs include lots of pictures or other multimedia content? What set this blog apart from the others visually?

Next was an analysis of the author's life as they represented themselves on their blogs. Were they angst-ridden time-bombs of hormonal frustration and fury; were they what the status-quo might consider more normal and well-adjusted? Who are these people and what are they like, at least according to themselves?

Going along with the analysis of the blogs was an analysis of the comments left on the blogs by other bloggers. What did they have to say in response to the posts? How did they interact with the author? Did the author choose to respond in any manner?

Finally I examined writing style. Are the authors using a great deal of web-borne slang, intentionally using misspelled words, numbers in place of letters, emoticons, and other types of web-spawned linguistic irregularities? Are they writing in complete sentences and using proper spelling and grammar? Can an assumed level of education be compared to their personal writing style? Is there any development in their writing skills, either positive or negative, over a period of time?

These are all questions I used to guide my examination of the blogs to see how they match the literature about the age group within which the authors fall.

Introduction of the Blogs

Note again that all of the following blogs are taken from Xanga.com. I will introduce the following information:

- The username, formatted as it appears on the author's blog
- The blog URL
- The author's real name, if given
- The author's gender
- The author's birthday
- The author's geographic location, if given

1. XXXTHOMASLUVXXX, http://www.xanga.com/xxxthomasluvxxx
   - Real name: Rachel
   - Gender: Female
   - Born: July 9, 1993
   - Location: Laguna Beach, California
2. erikite, http://www.xanga.com/erikite
   - Real name: not given
   - Gender: Male
   - Born: April 30, 1990

- Location: not given

3. bloodylover, http://www.xanga.com/bloodylover

    - Real name: Ariel

    - Gender: Female

    - Born: March 17, 1989

    - Location: Fishers, Indiana

4. jtmoney4545, http://www.xanga.com/jtmoney4545

    - Real name: JT

    - Gender: Male

    - Born: July 16, 1989

    - Location: Virginia Beach, Virginia

5. adorkuhbleashley, http://www.xanga.com/adorkuhbleashley

    - Real name: Ashley

    - Gender: Female

    - Born: October 13, 1993

    - Location: Jacksonville, Florida

6. J22punch06, http://www.xanga.com/j22punchy06

    - Real name: Randy

    - Gender: Male

    - Born: May 4, 1988

    - Location: Abilene, Texas

7. SassyRecombinantPassion, http://www.xanga.com/SassyRecombinantPassions

    - Real Name: Samantha

    - Gender: Female

    - Born: June 7, 1989

    - Location: not given

8. beckster72, http://www.xanga.com/beckster72

    - Real name: Rebecca

    - Gender: Female

    - Born: May 20, 1988

- Location: Chicago, Illinois

9. monkeyZroK_2005, http://www.xanga.com/monkeyZroK_2005

  - Real name: Julia

  - Gender: Female

  - Born: June 21, 1993

  - Location: Fort Worth, Texas

10. greatness_is_overrated, http://www.xanga.com/greatness_is_overrated

  - Real name: Nick

  - Gender: Male

  - Born: January 4, 1989

  - Location: Wichita, Kansas

Blog Visual Styles

As much as they are diaries or works of personal writing, these blogs are also performance pieces, ways of impressing upon their readers the uniqueness of the writers. Xanga, as well as all other blogs, have different ways of formatting the visual styles. When examining a blog, there are a few different visual aspects that I look at:

- Background color/imagery

- Page colors

- Page fonts

- Use of pictures and other graphics in posts

- Section layouts (e.g., where are the links placed, where is the user information placed, etc)

When first setting up their blogs, authors are given the choice of several different default layouts, which are relatively plain and uninspiring. After all the steps in the process of setting up the blog have been completed, however, users may go back and customize the layouts themselves. They may do this by working with pre-configured settings that allow them to customize the "Look and Feel" of their blogs, wherein they can alter the color schemes, banner, background image, fonts, link styling, background music, and overall size of the page. Another option is to alter the blog "skin"; this differs from the "look and feel" in that people have taken the time to alter the HTML

and CSS code powering the blog appearances, which lets them make more radical changes to the appearance than working with the "look and feel" alone would allow. Premium members, those members who have paid a subscription fee and are granted a large array of user options, may choose from an archive of skins created by other users and automatically apply this skin to their own blog using a single-click interface, as opposed to having to edit the HTML and CSS by hand.

Of the ten blogs chosen for this paper, only one of them, jtmoney4545, has opted to use one of the default layouts and has not made any changes to it at all. The other nine have all chosen either to slightly alter one of the default layouts or have chosen a skin not designed by Xanga. Of these nine, four have only altered the default settings of the blog look and feel: erikite, bloodylover, j22punchy06, and beckster72. The other five have installed some type of custom skin.

All of the blogs have unique backgrounds, although four of them are either black or employ a great deal of black in the background image. Four of the blogs also use a background image instead of a solid color. The girls tend to favor text and formatting colors usually associated with their gender stereotype; readers will find various shades of purple and red, often pastels.

Only those pages who have not chosen to use a custom skin are using the default font. A few of the pages, those belonging to beckster72 and xxxthomasluvxxx, have actually chosen to switch fonts multiple times across several posts.

Imagery plays a large role in most of these blogs. Out of all ten blogs, two of the four boys have chosen not to use any imagery outside of their profile pictures. Greatness_is_overrated, actually uses his blog as a home for his photography of friends and athletic events in which he participates. The variety among the types of images these authors choose to post is great and would be even greater among a larger group. This is hardly surprising given the high customizability of the blogs and the differing backgrounds of each of the authors. All of the authors save one have chosen to post some kind of profile picture, a picture which serves as a sort of identifier or avatar in the Xanga community; monkeyZroK_2005 has not posted a profile picture, but rather has a banner image at the top of her page – a collage of three images of a young woman holding a bouquet of red roses with lyrics from the alternative rock band "My Chemical

Romance" at the bottom which read, "What's the worst you take from every heart you break; I've been holding on tonight." monkeyZroK_2005 is also the only of these blogs to be subscribed to the premium Xanga service, as is evidenced by the lack of any banner ads at the top of her blog typically used by Xanga to pay the bills when a user sticks with a basic account.

Returning to the profile pictures, not all of the authors have chosen to post an actual picture of themselves under their profile picture. It appears as if while xxxthomasluvxxx, erikite, adorkuhbleashley, j22punch06, and beckster72 have posted pictures of themselves, the rest have chosen pictures not of themselves to serve for their profile. For instance, SassyRecombinantPasssions has chosen to post a picture of a silver and purple-haired anime character; greatness_is_overrated displays the front of a telephoto lens of an expensive looking camera being held by someone taking a picture; bloodylover has posted a realistic illustration of a pale skinned, black haired, green eyed young woman touching her face – this may or may not be a representation of the author, though in the larger picture it hardly matters, since we as the readers take it on faith that the personal photographs which have been posted are actually of the authors themselves; they may well not be.

Of these profile pictures which we assume to be of the authors, we can observe a number of characteristics. erikite shows a picture of a shirtless young man in profile drinking from a styrofoam cup at a social gathering; xxxthomasluvxxx and adorkuhbleashley show images of teenage girls smiling at the camera, one from a car seat, the other lying on her bed, respectively; j22punchy06 shows a lean and toned shirtless young man with a blue ball cap on backwards leaning against a silver car.

The three authors who've chosen to use a background image on their blogs should not go unnoticed. Bloodylover has a tiled illustration of an attractive blond girl in a state of some undress in her background, as shown below:

This image, it might be noted, stands in stark contrast to the image of a pale-skinned girl used in bloodylover's profile picture:

j22punchy06's background image, which is appears to depict a gray hand holding a set of keys, is displayed below:

The filename for this image is "keyring_of_life.jpg." Greatness_is_overrated simply has a photograph of a misty field of tall grasses.

There is nothing significant to be said about the blog layouts, though I'll give an idea of how they appear. The layouts are all fairly uniform: the left side of the screen is partitioned off into a column which displays the author's username, profile picture, information, and a list of other blogs on Xanga which they read, as well as special communities of blogs on Xanga to which they belong. The rest of the screen is typically dedicated to the posts themselves, which follow the standard format for most blogs, both on Xanga and elsewhere: the entries are arranged chronologically beginning with the most recent entry at the top of the page. Each post then has a link to a comments page

where other authors on Xanga may place their thoughts on that particular post. adorkuhbleashley and SassyRecombinantPassions have devoted the right column of their blogs to what are known as "chatter boxes" which allow users to carry on asynchronous conversations on the blog; people often use the comments function for the same purpose, but the chatter box differs in its presence on the main page of the blog where all the entries are posted.

Visual Analysis

Upon examining the visual appearance of the blogs, there are a few observations that I can make.

First, these blogs reflect diversity in visual preferences and creativity. Some have put much effort into designing their blogs to look just the way they want them, or they have at least hunted for skins to customize the appearance of their blogs. Either way, the appearance is significant to most of the authors, while a few are content with the default settings.

Second, the appearances divide fairly well down the stereotypical gender lines. The girls tend to use softer colors and pastels, employing shades of purple and pink. However, it's difficult to attribute this phenomenon also to the boys, since only one of them, greatness_is_overrated, has chosen to really customize his blog.

Dark colors seem to be appealing to this age group. Five of the authors use a black background. This may be a reflection of style in the popular culture, which often seems to favor black clothing and sunglasses. It may also be a reflection of their feelings, of darkness or angst. I will look more at this later when examining the actual content of the blogs.

The profile pictures are especially fascinating to me. As I mentioned above, of those authors who chose to use a profile picture, only four actually posted photographs of people whom we may assume to be the authors. The two girls, xxxthomasluvxxx and adorkuhbleashley, have posted full-face pictures taken in good light of themselves smiling. They both also employ very feminine colors on their blogs and are the two youngest bloggers studied in this paper; they both appear through their pictures and through their blogs to be the epitome of adolescent female beauty, which stands in

contrast to bloodylover's crass, and perhaps pornographic background picture and inscrutible profile picture. Some of the girls seem to desire a more innocent look, while others are intentionally trying to adopt the veneer of someone with more experience, though all are eager to impress their feminity upon their readers.

Erikite, one of the boys who chose to post a personal photograph as a profile picture, shows a shirtless young man in profile drinking from a cup at some kind of social gathering; the banner of his site reads "Im not drunk!" (Please note the lack of an apostrophe in the contraction "Im" as I will come later to writing style.) One may take this juxtaposition to be ironic, or at least meaning to convey irony or humor, as this person does actually have the appearance of someone who may very well be intoxicated. Looking also at j22punchy06's picture of himself shirtless, both boys may be making an attempt to draw attention to themselves as being the picture of masculinity, as the girls attempted to portray femininity; erikite may want his readers to assume a certain level of maturity and masculinity from his picture of drinking, while j22punchy06 is clearly showcasing his superior physique and masculinity, especially when juxtaposed with the silver car he is leaning upon. Drinking, a good body, and the possession of a car might all be considered status symbols, both within the adolescent world and certainly in the adult world, which readers may be intended to believe these authors are members of.

It is difficult to judge what those authors who chose not to post profile pictures of themselves mean to convey. Perhaps it is a matter of an object's significance, as in the case of greatness_is_overrated, where he has posted a picture of a camera, while his blog is used for a photo gallery, presumably of pictures he took and is very proud of. jtmoney4545 has posted a photograph of a distant figure surfing, which may be meant to convey his enjoyment, expertise and subsequent pride in this activity.

The important message to be taken from these profile pictures is that these authors are trying to impress upon us who they are through these pictures. They have been selected for a reason, most likely to provide for us and for them a sense of identity that words alone cannot convey.

This may prove also to be accurate for those authors who posted photographs inside their blog entries. The showcasing of these pictures in a public forum was not done to keep the pictures private, but to show them off. In addition, because most of

these photographs are of people together looking as if they're having a good time, it may be safe to assume that readers are meant to be impressed by the author's social life and status with other people. This becomes especially true when we consider that many of these blogs are read by a select group of people, who would recognize and understand the significance of these images.

In summary, there are four interrelated themes I believe the visual components of these blogs represent:

1. Maturity
2. Sexuality
3. Hobby/Interests
4. Social Status

Maturity and sexuality are interrelated as sexuality might be meant to indicate maturity or a desire to be recognized as mature. bloodlover's imagery is very sexually overt, as perhaps are the images of jp22unchy06; both of them are old adolescents, who naturally desire to be viewed as adults, which sexual experience or representation would denote in the minds of many people. The younger bloggers do clearly convey their gender through the imagery they choose to display, though not sexual experience. Some of them, like jtmoney4545 and greatness_is_overrated, want to express their hobbies and interests. Finally, all the bloggers want their readers to know what their lives are like, about the people who are in them and the good times they are having which is evident in much of the imagery, especially in the case of beckster72 and greatness_is_overrated.

Life Examination

Now that I've introduced the authors, the appearance of their blogs and an analysis thereof, it's time to move into the written content, which certainly comprises the main focus of this paper and of the blogs. I will go through and give a short synopsis of the events detailed in the blogs of each of the authors for the last fifteen entries they have posted. After this, I will compare their lives to the literature outlining the development and issues faced by modern adolescents.

XXXTHOMASLUVXXX

This is a twelve year old girl named Rachel living in Laguna Beach, California who appears from her profile picture to be Caucasian. In her profile, she lists her interests as including shopping, kissing and volleyball; she defines her expertise as "EVERYTHING. . . YES EVEN SEX LOL". Rachel's posts are not terribly substantive. She does not go into great detail about her life, but writes in short, excited bursts of words, altering her font and font color with every post. She writes about shopping at popular stores like American Eagle and Abercrombie & Fitch, about her new hair highlights, other girls at whom she is mad, the new flip phone her mother bought her from Verizon, and how happy she is when she does not have school.

erikite

erikite, whose real name is not listed, writes mostly about the time he spends with his friends. The time they are together is spent watching movies, going to Starbucks, to parties and to lots of rock concerts. He apparently has a girlfriend; when she demanded through an instant messenger chat that he update his Xanga to talk about her, he posted the conversation to his blog and then wrote the following:

> look at this person think so full of herself, thinking that the whole world revolves around her.. well guess what!!! MINE DOES <333 lol

He speaks poorly of school:

> umm schools boring and soo fucking tempting to cut since i have lunch and gym as the last 2 periods... wow its hard not to cut,, specaiallly how i hate getting all sweaty in gym... but i gotta try and do good.. wanna make me proud of myself....mehh

He implies close ties to his family when he talks about how much he will miss his brother when he leaves for London and also how he wishes his mother were teaching him; while this latter point may simply be him expressing a desire not to be in school, it is telling that he would be willing to spend every day with his mother.

Bloodylover

This author's real name is Ariel Phelps. She is sixteen years old and from the town of Fishers, Indiana. Ariel writes a great deal about her sexual self-experimentation. For instance:

> I have had the best two days. I have had a total of seven orgasms in the past TWO days. New record for me!!

She writes about her sexual paraphenalia, including vibrators and erotic fiction and expresses frustration that her mother is constantly searching her room looking for these things. Ariel also rather dislikes school:

> I hate fucking High School. It is a load of bull shit. All the teachers want you to do is fucking busy work and then they get pissed when you don't do it because you already know how!!

Depression is a common theme for Ariel to write about, as she laments the lack of sexual activity with a partner in her life and her newly diagnosed Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Of particular concern is one post in which she writes about cutting on herself, which she attributes to her lack of a boyfriend and depression over her self-image as undesirable.

jtmoney4545

This author's real name is JT. He is a sixteen year old from Virginia Beach. He lists his interests as classic rock, bodyboarding, baseball, photography, and making surf/bodyboarding movies. He also lists bodyboarding as his area of expertise. JT writes about a number of different aspects of his life on his blog. Many of his posts make mention of his girlfriend, Deanna, such as in a post where all he wrote was the following:

> deanna lloyd = coolest girlfriend ever. her house is really really nice. and we played tennis and then hung out and watched a movie till 12 last night. it was really fun.

He makes brief mentions of his bodyboarding, as well as his fears about the impending

SATs and whether or not he should go out for baseball in college:

> . . . i have to figure out if i wanna play college baseball or not, because if i quit i know i'll seriously let my dad down and stuff.

He is excited about finally getting his driver's license next month. When he discusses school, he writes about it in a generally positive light, though he feels his English class is difficult:

> my english teacher is eating me alive with work. she's KILLING ME. so i have to go type a huge essay on a book that i never read past chapter 2 and have no clue about what is going on. well i'm gonna go attempt that essay. bye everyone.

He makes use of the acronym C.R.E.A.M. on his blog in a few places, which according to UrbanDictionary.com, stands for "Cash Rules Everything Around Me."

adorkubleashley

This author's real name is Ashley. She recently turned twelve years old and lives in Jacksonville, Florida. She lists her interests as including hanging out with her friends, Harry Potter, shopping, school, instant messaging, many different bands and many types of food. Her expertise includes sleeping, breathing, getting good grades and staying on the computer too long. Ashley writes in many of her posts about school and generally in a positive manner, as when she writes, "Hey everybody!!! Today was my first day of school. It was so much fun!!!"

She was surprised and delighted to discover her language arts teacher also had a blog on Xanga. Recently her uncle to whom she was close died and she has written about this in a few posts:

> also went and visited my uncle Jeff's trailer, where he used to live when before he...passed away. -gulp- On the way to Uncle Greg's I cried. Because I miss him so much. It just makes me think over, and over again, "He isn't coming back."

Very occasionally she will use her blog as a means of attacking other girls she knows:

ewwwwwwww. kaitlin is a bitch. she is teddybearlover94. that is a gay screenname. she can go to hell.

SassyRecombinantPassions

This author's real name is Samantha and she is sixteen years old. She is very interested in anime and manga, as well as sports. She claims expertise in helping people, martial arts, belly dancing and ice skating. Samantha does not write a great deal in her blog. Rather, she uses the space to post massive numbers of anime and manga-related pictures, almost always female. When she does write, she does so briefly, usually only to comment on the pictures or to solicit feedback. In one post, she writes to specific friends, addressing them by their user names:

> At midnight it will be a year since we first spoke and even though we never met you guys are my closest friends and like my 2nd family. May your lives be blessed with endless joy and happiness and may we never grow apart! I love you guys! *hugs all*

Other written content includes quotes from anime shows and manga, as well the lyrics to some of her favorite songs.

Beckster72

This author's real name is Rebecca. She is seventeen years old and from Chicago. Her interests include her friends, partying, and eating; these are all things which she also claims expertise in. Her high school's football games are frequently the topic of her writing, as well as the parties that she attends and the shopping that she does. She has very strong feelings for her group of friends:

> I love you girls! I couldnt ask for better friends you girls are so amazing ik evey group of friends says that but i actually mean it haha...im so thankful for you guys<3love you!

She frequently begins her posts by addressing her readers as "dykes" or "bitches" which she apparently does not mean in a derogatory manner, as the rest of her posts are quite

friendly and lively. She dedicates a lot of her space to quotes that have significance for
her. Some examples include:

> perhaps it is good to have a beautiful mind, but it is an even greater gift, to
> discover a beautiful heart <3

and

> don't be fooled--she may seem like your typical selfish, backstabbing, slut faced
> hoe bag, but in reality—she's so much more than that.

MONKEYZROK_2005

This author's real name is Julia. She is twelve years old and lives in Fort Worth, Texas.
She enjoys playing sports and jumping on her trampoline, but mostly enjoys being with
her friends. Julia has not written much in her blog. She has made posts about her desire
for a boyfriend:

> Hey every one! I am desperate for a man in my life! I need someone to hold!!!
> HEHE!!! Not jk! But I really need a BF!

and

> hey wats up   i am really bored i need to get a boyfriend because i am very
> LONELY

One of her posts is devoted to a poem written in the first person from the perspective of
the three year old daughter whose drunken, abusive father comes home one night from
drinking in a rage and throws her against a wall and leaves her to die; Julia does not claim
authorship of this poem, but comments on how sad it is.

greatness_is_overrated

This author's real name is Nick. He is sixteen years old and lives in Wichita, Kansas.
Nick does not list any of his interests or any expertise, nor does he actually write in his
blog. Instead, he uses it as a showcase for his photographs, of which he usually posts
around two hundred per week. Only occasionally does he write any commentary. From
his pictures, I can infer a few things. First, he is a cross country runner – the majority of

the photos he publishes are from the bus rides to and from meets, wherein he and his teammates are always shown having a great time. Second, he attends a Catholic high school, which I take from the photographs of teachers in church garb and the all-school mass pictures he published and labeled. Third, he has a girlfriend, or at least a very close female friend, of whom there are many pictures. Finally, he is a popular student, or at least a well liked one for all the pictures of people that he takes. Besides taking pictures of people, he also enjoys taking pictures of landscapes and other natural scenes.

j22punchy06

This author's real name is Randy Jackson. He is seventeen years old and lives in Abilene, Texas. He enjoys sports, especially football, track, and golf and is a powerlifter. He also loves to draw. His expertise includes sitting around and sleeping until noon. Randy devotes much of his writing to his football games and to the time he spends with his friends, especially his girlfriend, Heather, who comes up in just about every post. He seems to be especially apprehensive of one of his school teachers, whom he refers to as "Mama Davis." Though he does not mention having relocated, he does write about missing his friends from a previous year of school:

> God i miss all my friends from last year...adam jacob pete..especially cody hell i even miss amber and kat....only get to talk to them for a few seconds after each game but hey at least they come....i think most of all i miss will.....me and him have so much in common...we can help each other out of any situation....

Lately Randy has been experiencing a lot health problems, from headaches to overactive asthma and a more serious problem recently:

> well i dunno what happend to day...i think i had a semi heart attack ....i was ok till like 3rd period and then my chest kinda twinged...didnt think much of it but after lunch like my chest explodes and i coulndt breathe at all....my whole left side felt like some one put a bullet threw it....thue nurse was retarted said it was heart burn yea ok?.....

Literature Comparison

I've given a summary of the events and lives of these authors as they are depicted in their

blogs. I will now compare these depictions to the literature reviewed at the beginning of this paper for similarities and differences across a number of criteria.

Determining cognitive development from these blogs alone is a difficult task because of a few overriding characteristics. These blogs are not used much for deep thinking, reflection, or anything approaching thoughtful discourse. At their heart they are simply a report of events, most likely for the benefit of a social circle of friends and other readers within the author's sphere of acquaintance. When looking for evidence of cognitive development from the blogs, this should be kept in mind.

Based soley on the supposed ages of these bloggers, they all should be within the Piaget's formal operational stage; based on what they have written, making that determination is more challenging. Granted, Piaget cannot be taken at face value; one of his major criticisms is the uniformity of age and development. Even still, if, as Flavell is quoted in Meece as saying the "most important change that occurs during the formal operations stage is that children's thinking shifts from the real to the possible" (Meece 141), it is hard, though not impossible, to place them within this stage of development. Again, these blogs are not used for deep pondering or for hypothetical analysis; there is little talk of what might be, mainly of what *is.* The ability to think reflectively is also a property of this stage of development, but the authors are not reflecting so much as they are, as I mentioned above, reporting.

There are exceptions to this, however. Some of them do show the beginnings of thinking of what's possible, such as the desire by bloodylover and MONKEYZROK_2005 for a boyfriend; in stating this desire, they are showing a thought process wherein they imagine what life would be like with a boyfriend. jtmoney4545 shows consideration for his father when he writes about his desire not to let his father down by not playing college sports, as does j22punchy06 when he talks about the friends that he misses. It is especially poingant when adorkuhbleashley writes about her uncle who has recently passed on and he realization that he no longer is in her life; this shows both the ability for abstract thought and the ability to reflect on other people in her life.

Still, the total absence of events in the world outside what directly impacts them is remarkable. In fact, no world events or even community events are written about or reflected upon, even from the older bloggers. They may occasionally write about a party

that they have been to or a sporting event, but nothing with a higher degree of community or world involvement. I'm confident that as they grow older, their current abilities for abstract thought will grow to include more of the world around them as they become aware of it.

Their writings do remind me some of Vygotsky's theory. For starters, there is not one of these blogs that does not discuss at some length social interaction. In fact, the majority of them spend most if not all their time writing about social interaction. Peers are typically written about in a favorable light, while parents and authority figures might be written about more negatively, but sometimes they warrant a few positive words. It is still difficult within Vygotsky's theory to declare exactly how developed these bloggers are, but it is clear they are interacting heavily with each other and exchanging ideas and values. The sole existence of the blogs themselves are evidence of this, never mind the content of the blogs; the very fact that they are writing for the whole world to see suggests social interaction. There is also the suggestion of interaction by their assimilation of some societal standards, as in the assumption of gender roles as displayed in the color choices and display of imagery or the concerns of MONKEYZROK_2005 for battered children. The writing itself does not seem to reflect any of Vygotsky's levels of speech. They are quite advanced in their delivery of ideas, but I cannot say without direct observation of the authors whether any of it is used to modify thinking or behavior.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development also works well with the observations made from the blogs. Examining the nested contexts within these authors' lives reveals extreme egocentricism. The three things that they write the most about are their friends, their family and school, though most heavily about friends. These groups match the first circle of context suggested by Bronfenbrenner. The next circle moves them beyond their immediate contacts to extended family, the media, the community and so forth. Their blogs don't move them too much beyond the first layer of context. We cannot assume that outer layers of context do not matter to them; such an assumption would be foolish I believe.

Again, there are very few remarks about the world outside their immediate concerns and cares. I was particularly stunned by the total lack of comments about Hurricane Katrina on any of these blogs; the storm and the subsequent problematic

rescue efforts were the subject of debate across much of the blogosphere, but not one of the bloggers studied in this paper made the slightest mention of it, not even the older bloggers. The only indication that any of them are aware of and being inluenced by the world outside their immediate experiences is SassyRecombinantPassions' love for manga, which is of Japanese origin; this may not be entirely meaningful since manga has been very popular with adolescents in the United States for a few years, but she is nonetheless being exposed to foreign culture and probably language through this particular passion. If Bronfenbrenner's model holds up within the blogosphere, as in the case of Piaget, we might assume that the writings analyzed here, if maintained, will begin to take on more worldly concerns as they become immersed in the world.

These bloggers do some justice to the description of adolescents as outlined by Konopka. It takes a sense of audacity to post your thoughts for everyone with an Internet connection to read, but smacks of insecurity; these blogs are almost a desire for affirmation from others of the lives the authors are leading. Loneliness definitely plays a large part in the lives of these authors; bloodylover writes constantly about a desire for a boyfriend, as does MONKEYZROK_2005 who appears to finds the majority of her social interaction in an online setting; j22punchy06/Randy expresses pain and loneliness after seeing friends he was separated from last year under unclear circumstances. These are only the overt references to loneliness; I surmise from the constant writing about social activity and friends that even though most of these authors give the impression of being inundated by social interaction, they write about it more than they should and perhaps are still quite lonely, despite what they record in their blogs. The move from dependence to interdependence is also evident in the amount of writing devoted to a circle of friends; this interdependence as indicated in the writing has yet to extend to their parents, with the exception of jtmoney4545's concerns for his father's opinion of him; it may be a few years longer before that quality begins to emerge in their writing, though it is most certainly a factor in their lives whether or not it is written about. Finally, these authors are using their blogs as a means of experimentation as much as expression, as they try out different identities; many of them have changed their Xanga theme and other graphics, as they experiment with different looks that they feel best define themselves. Their recording of so much of what they do might be construed as an expression of

identity. Another indicator of identity experimentation comes in the form of blog quizzes that a few of the authors have chosen to post; these are online quizzes that ask a series of questions and then identify you in some fashion, usually as a character from a popular TV show or a movie, while others judge levels of characteristics, such as intelligence or sex drive.

Havighurst's list of developmental tasks that adolescents must go through meets with mixed representation. Not many of them write overtly about growing into their bodies, though bloodylover clearly is having self-image problems, as she mentions her six foot height and her pale complexion. A few of the girls write about their clothes and the shopping that they've done for new clothes; while they are not directly telling their readers that they are having a hard time dealing with their bodies, their physical appearance is obviously important to them. Appearance is also important to j22punchy06, as one might guess from the profile picture of himself shirtless and leaning against his car. For the most part however, the authors don't write about their physical insecurities.   Some of them are forming relationships with the opposite sex, but whether or not those relationships are healthy is debatable; for instance xxxthomasluvxxx's Xanga profile lists her expertise as including sex and her age as being twelve; erikite writes about spending time with his girlfriend, but never discusses any sexual activity, so readers outside his social circle cannot know how healthy his relationships are. For the most part, when relationships are discussed, they are platonic and involve members of the same sex. Of course, names are dropped everywhere in their entries and outside readers may not know that a particular person is that blogger's significant other. The lack of information about romantic relationships does not prove or disprove anything.

Havighurst also details their growth into the adult world, the move towards financial independence through employment and a desire for socially acceptable behavior. Most of the blogs don't discuss jobs, save for bloodylover who recently gained and lost employment with Noble Romans. Also, their writing indicates nothing whatsoever about a desire to contribute to society through any kind of behaviors or acts. From reading their blogs, audiences might assume they have no knowledge about the world at all. Still, let me point out that the lack of information in their blogs does not indicate a lack of these characteristics in their authors.

Fenwick and Smith's division of adolescence into discreet periods of time marked by different sets of characteristics is totally unrepresented in the blogs. The fact is that every author shows a tendency towards some behaviors that fall within all of Fenwick and Smith's divisions and many of the behaviors they study just are not evident in the blog writings. On the whole, there is no evident progression in development of behaviors from the youngest author, adorkableashely, to the oldest, j22punchy06. There are some outliers in this observation. For example, xxxthomasluvxxx has an extremely short, hard-to-understand, and childish writing style, which at twelve years old isn't surprising. And blogs like SassyRecombinantPassions and greatness_is_overrated make it difficult to tell at all what developmental stage they might fall into due to their largely graphical posts, almost completely lacking anything in the way of words.

A few of the authors make mention of some risk factors outlined in the literature review. Ariel/bloodylover makes frequent mention of her depression, her suicide attempts, and of cutting on herself, as well as frequent mentions of sexual self-experimentation. Erikite makes a few mentions on his blog of drinking and xxxthomasluvxxx, again, makes mention of sexual experience. As far as health-related behaviors are concerned however, not much is recorded in the blogs. I don't believe these bloggers are ignorant however. They may be aware that their parents could find and read their blogs and do not want to have their words used against them, but then after reading bloodylover's disturbing posts, some of them may not be; on the other hand, bloodylover may be keenly aware of this possibility and is using her blog to surreptitiously ask for help from her family and her friends.

Almost all the bloggers make mention of how little they enjoy school, though adorkuhbleashley actually seems to enjoy most of it very much; the only author to mention seriously worrisome school-related behavior is erikite, who talks in very offensive language about his dislike for school and mentions in a sprinkling of posts how he has cut classes that day. No other health risks are made mention of, however.

I do not believe that poverty is a concern for any of these bloggers, either. The most obvious clue to this is the existence of these blogs in the first place; this implies a connection to the Internet and a computer, which may either come from school or from home. If these resources come from school, they are probably living in an area affluent

enough for the schools to have such resources and if they come from home, chances are good that they are living in a financially stable environment. For those that have listed a geographic location on their blogs, none are living in areas overrun by poverty. Besides these more subtle clues is the fact that none of them write about any kind of poverty or difficulty related to money in any way. It seems to me that none of this paper's subjects are under extreme financial duress or are experiencing any of the other major symptoms of poverty.

Comments Analysis

By and large, the comments left on these blogs do little to impact what the author will write in his or her next post. Rachel/xxxthomasluvxxx's commenters leave comments pertaining to their opinion of her visual layout and occasionally they try to make amends for some recent altercation, though Rachel never writes about these. Erikite's commenters will write direct responses to his posts, but they are short, often no longer than one line; every so often, his commenters will ignore his post and carry on an asynchronous conversation through the comments. These habits are typical of most of the blogs' comments. Most of the commenters to a particular blog continually post comments and also make references to events which the blogger has not mentioned, suggesting that the two have a personal relationship outside of the Internet. I have not seen a comment on any of these blogs which has affected what the author has posted next. However, I cannot take into account these real-world relationships. The comments may very well provide conversation between blogger and commenter the next day or among an entire group of friends, which will then impact later posts by the blogger.

Writing Style Analysis

Whatever else is can be said of these authors, they are not applying all that they should be learning to the writing in their blogs. Let me quote a few lines from various blogs:

- From erikite: "yurp.. i just came back from da phantom of the opera.... that shit was fuckin sick! wow.. amuthafuckingazing! im still stunned of how great it was! im tired as hell... you go to hell!"
- From xxxthomasluvxxx: "Hey u! sorrii i am writn so late! ya i dont have

> time for all that sit at teh comp all day kind of stuff!! well mii mom is going to back to school nite...as yalls are too!!!!!"

- From adorkuhbleashley: "yes, tomorrow is my birthDAY parTAY! i am so happy. i wish i was 13 though. and i wish i had photoshop. my grandpa's version {5.0} SUX TO THE MAX!!!!!!"

- From beckster72: "**This weekend was a lot of funn** friday went to the fball game we won...we had a little fun before the game haha!   After we got some tor<3....hung out there for a little, then went to cherwins! Sat night went clubbing haha ik sounds gay, it was SO MUCH FUN....wow JT thanks for taking me!"

These are entries from four of the ten blogs analyzed in this paper. They vary in age from the very youngest to the second oldest. Yet all of them contain multiple errors in spelling, grammar and syntax. I can see many errors in spelling, uncapitalized letters, unnecessary capitalizations, lack of punctuation, too much punctuation, and the use of special characters where none are called for. This misuse of special characters, letters and numbers is commonly referred to as 'lite speak, short for elite and is popular in online forums, chat rooms, online games, and the like.

However poorly students might be doing in their English classes, a twelve year old and certainly a seventeen year old know how to spell most words correctly, structure sentences properly, and employ acceptable grammar. These blog quotations would suggest otherwise.

There is no way of knowing whether the writing skills, or the lack thereof, is reflective of the authors' academic writing prowess. To reiterate a point from above, so little about these blogs really matches up with what we know about adolescents, that we cannot assume any skill level, high or low.

This leaves us with a set of two hypotheticals. The first is that these authors do possess reasonable writing prowess in the classroom. If this is the case, then it might mean that they are lazy in their writing style out of the classroom or have not seen the point in employing these skills outside the classroom; they might also be intentionally writing poorly to fit into what has become a trend in electronic communication. The other possibility is that they do not in fact possess the skills inside or outside the

classroom to write properly. I consider their use of these writings patterns as a means of fitting into the electronic world to be the most probable scenario, since writing as poor as this would not be accepted in even the worst U.S. schools.

Summary of Observations

These adolescent bloggers fit only some of the developmental characteristics and stages as outlined by some of the top adolescent researchers. Their writings do reveal many insecurities and a sense of defiance, and an extreme need for acceptance by their peers. Development researched beyond mid-adolescence that would indicate a growing interest in becoming more adult and in the world beyond their current boundaries is not reflected in the authors' words. Their words are largely self-centered and directed at reporting the events in their lives; they indicate little capacity for reflection or much in the way of abstract thinking save for their most immediate relationships. The lack of evidence for these characteristics within their blogs cannot be used to assume that their authors actually lack these characteristics. It is more likely that they have not, for whatever reason, chosen to reveal these parts of themselves to their audiences. With a few exceptions, the bloggers all seem to be relatively free of any health or life-threatening conditions. Their style of writing is extremely poor, but this is probably an intentional adoption of online cultural norms.

Discussions

The overriding question of this paper is, do these adolescent bloggers present themselves in a way that matches the experts of child development written about in the beginning of this paper?

For the most part, I believe so.

Their writings do not overtly indicate a tremendous amount of development, but it is nonetheless present. They are aware of the world around them, even if it is only the immediate world, and they are considerate and thoughtful of it and the people in it. They are developing cognitively and though it's tough to pigeonhole them into developmental stages, many of the characteristics of these stages are taking place and being written about. The important thing to remember is just because they aren't writing about it

doesn't mean that it isn't happening.

Are the blogs then any kind of accurate portrayal of their authors? The simplest answer is I don't know. Without direct contact with the subjects themselves, there is no way of knowing how complete a picture we are seeing. I think it's fair to say that overall readers are seeing a fairly limited picture if the literature about adolescent development is accurate, but even such a statement is flawed without direct observation.

The difficulty in the proposition of direct observation is the risk of contamination. Right now, these authors are writing for an audience they know; they do not seem to care about the audience they don't know, which is most everyone on the Internet. If a researcher was to go so far as to observe both the author and his or her blog, such a study would almost certainly require full disclosure at the outset in order to maintain ethical standards; with the knowledge that he or she was being observed, both offline in various capacities and online through their blogs and perhaps other means of electronic communication, researchers risk the subjects altering the words they might otherwise have used.

I have to wonder if these authors are using their blogs to aid their development in any fashion. One might speculate that the blogs help them to organize and focus their thoughts, but there are two sides to this possibility: that in doing so they are in fact sharpening their mental capabilities and developing their ability to think abstractly and reflect; on the other hand they could merely be transferring their mental capabilities, their memory into another format, which in the end weakens their innate abilities. The blogs do serve as a means of networking and therefore social development, both online and offline. Individuals can keep closer tabs on their friends via their blogs, group activities can be organized through blogs, and new friends can be made through the blogs, again both in the online world alone and also in the physical world when someone we don't know from our area is reading our blog. This can aid in moving them from a complete dependence on their family to a mode of interdependent living, as they come to better know their friends through their blogs. The caveat of relying on blogs to understand people is that readers may only know about their friends from their blogs what their friends want them to know, or at least to think. The process of distinguishing the truth from possible falsehoods that have been printed in the blogs may help to

develop both social skills in our new electronic society and possibly cognitive skills; it does not, however, seem conducive to building the healthy and authentic friendships which adolescents require, as do all people generally.

Do blogs have the potential for a detrimental impact upon adolescents? Certainly. I have to take into account a number of factors, such as the fact that adolescents are prone to reveal too much information about themselves through their blogs and that they are largely ignorant to the consequences of this action. Blogs certainly are not improving their formal writing style; whatever skills that are learned in the classroom are not being practiced in the blogs, but rather poor grammar and spelling, often used intentionally I believe. They may also be at risk of inadvertently hurting an acquaintance's feelings with what they have written and subsequently having both parties degenerate into what is commonly known as a "flame war," when two or more parties use online spaces to malign each other in readers' minds.

Future Research

Although I have my reservations about studying bloggers with their knowledge, it is the next most logical step in studying them. Studies likes this have already been performed, such as Nardi, Sciano, and Gumbrecht's study of bloggers in higher education living in California and New York and Denise Sevick Bortree's study of teenage girl's blogs, but there have been few if any studies of adolescents in general.

I would suggest tracking a group of bloggers from the age of eleven or twelve years old until their eighteenth birthday. In that time, track their writing, their social activity, and their development. This should provide a more complete picture of what adolescents choose to post to their blogs and perhaps why.

This is, of course, a problematic study. Maintaining such a long-term level of interest in blogging will be difficult for most adolescents. It will also require a tremendous amount of time and energy on the part of the researchers involved and ultimately may not be feasible. A shorter-term study that compares only the social life of bloggers to what they post is much more doable and may provide a good amount of information as to the use and significance of blogs in an adolescent's life.

Another interesting approach would be to begin studying a circle of early adolescents through their blogs without their knowledge for a year or so. After this time, a study of their blogs and lives with their knowledge would begin. The point of this would be to study how their writings change as a result of this direct observation and academic audience. Will they become more private? Or will they become more outgoing on their blogs, writing about subject matter meant to in some way manipulate the researhcers.

Conclusion

When considering the study of blogs, it is vitally important to remember that blogs are as varied and colorful as the population of Internet users and these are only ten blogs of relatively well-to-do adolescents living in the United States. The study of blogs is the study of human thought and culture, only less reliable and trustworthy than direct anthropoloical, sociological, and psychological study. Blogs by themselves can provide insight into the lives and minds of their writers, but little solid data. Lacking direct observation, we cannot know anything for certain about bloggers and blogs are therefore unreliable sources of information. That being said, they may serve as wonderful complementary sources of data about adolescents under direct observation or about the values of adolescents, but only when their authorship has been firmly established. Their most important function where adolescents are concerned probably lies in helping friends and family keep track of the blogger's life. Researchers should watch the evolution of this format and take into account any changes which might alter the unreliability of blogs.

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