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## Internet Social Networking in Young Women's Everyday Lives: Some Insights from Focus Groups <sup>1</sup>

*Facebook — it just takes over your life!*

*I know, you become like such a stalker...you always have to see what's going on with everybody else's lives...it's horrible...you can't stop!*

For the past few years youth have been avid users and participants in Internet social networking spaces such as MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook, finding them to be a facile, innovative, and socially attractive method of communicating online to their friends and peers. In 2007 Media Action (formerly Media Watch) with research contributions from Ekos Research Associates held several focus groups to consider how social networking sites (SNS) are being used by young Canadian women. Two focus groups each were conducted in Canadian urban centres: Montreal, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Toronto, for a total of 64 participants ranging in age from 14-24. Questions focused on the nature and use of SNS, preferences and dislikes of SNS, perceptions and awareness of privacy issues, and whether or not SNS can be used as a viable tool to disseminate alternative images and messages about female sexuality distinct from the mainstream media.

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A significant finding from all of the focus groups is that SNS is a popular, pervasive, and mainstream form of everyday communication, socialization, and entertainment amongst young women. When participants in each focus group were asked whether they were familiar with Facebook, they all burst out in familiar laughter and chatter. All of the focus group participants have experienced different forms of social networking, including MSN (instant messaging), MySpace, or Facebook, with the average length of time using these networks two years, with some professing use for three to four years. The overwhelming majority of the participants were current Facebook users (and with a few exceptions, all of the commentary from participants here reflects their experiences using Facebook). Younger participants were more likely to spend daily time using Facebook than older participants, probably since their ability to work part-time and engage in social activities without parental rules is more restricted than older youth. Some participants go on more during the school year, “cause you’re supposed to be doing your projects, you’re on”.

Most participants said they enjoyed social networks because they are convenient and an enjoyable way to stay in touch with former school, camp, and sports friends while also remaining current with the various activities of their immediate social circles. Several participants cited peer pressure associated with Facebook:

*At my school...some people that don't have Facebook, don't even exist socially...other people can't even place them in their minds or realize they've met them before because they don't go to the photos of the parties where their friends are at, and like they see the guy in the photo but they can't remember his name... if you're not on Facebook you don't exist...*

Some participants dislike how time consuming social networks are; how it can “suck users in”; as one participant said, “It’s a bad procrastinator, it really is.” Another commented that “there’s a lot of drama on Facebook, people try to start fights...like if you can say all this garbage about me on Facebook why can’t you say it in person?” Some expressed a social obligation to answer various posts, wall messages, and friend requests, and one questioned the nature of ‘friending’: “I like your profile picture, let’s be friends — how can that work? Friends take on a

whole new meaning...its probably like 0.5% of people on Facebook are actually people that to their face...[would say] 'You are my friend!'" Another questioned "random guys who add me — and they have 300 friends — and they're all girls... 'different motives for different people'".

Most participants spend substantial time and energy in developing and updating their profiles via posting pictures, documenting their social activities, writing on other users' walls, and uploading new applications.

Participants post varying degrees of personal information on their profiles, from the basic (name, city of residence and date of birth) to more personal preferences (favourite books and movies, religion) to personal identifiers (cell phone numbers, name of school). Younger participants were more likely to include more detail on their profiles. Most admitted to posting information about their interests to reflect their favorable self-impressions: "My movie taste is kind of different... I like smart movies, I choose movies [to post about] that I think are more intelligent and clever...like more adult movies...I don't want to be thought of, as 'Oh, she just likes dumb movies', I want to use my brains when I watch movies". Another participant constructed her profile to seem as if she was popular — and mysterious. Creating an appealing profile so as to attract potential new friends, and modifying and updating profiles to reflect an interesting and lively social life is also common; said one participant, "I go to a private, all-girl school. Facebook is another way for me to introduce myself to friends of friends and get invited to parties."

Given the ubiquity of digital cameras (one participant said "digital cameras are everywhere..."), posting pictures of themselves and tagging photos of their friends is a popular activity. Posted images included everyday activities, social events, and travel diaries. Photographs allow one "to see the other side of people too because when you go on you see their pictures [you think] 'I never thought they were like that'". But many also expressed disdain with those who post too many photos: "I know a guy that has 3,000 pictures — what's the point of it? They're camera whores — they take the same picture in the same pose..."; "One of the disturbing things — a lot of girls do this — you go to their profiles and there are 30-40 albums and it's the exact same picture...".

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Most participants professed to posting favorable and flattering pictures of themselves: “I like to use pictures that I look better in”; “you’re not going to put a bad picture of yourself up — you don’t want to look bad.” Many also expressed distaste at having photos of themselves tagged (identifying friends in photos so that the photo turns up in their profile) by other users — without their permission — particularly photos seen as unflattering: “I don’t necessarily want some random person to tag me”. Others were not as concerned given their ability to de-tag their photos.

Most participants admitted to seeing images on Facebook that surprised them; these ran the gamut from sexually provocative images to those engaged in illegal activities: “this one girl took pictures of herself naked and ... guys at private schools saw them ...they just went everywhere...”; “people sometimes put up pictures of them drinking, or like smoking weed”; another girl “can’t go back to camp — cos there were pictures of her smoking weed.” But the majority of participants agreed that profiles reflect common sense: “you don’t put things up on Facebook you wouldn’t do in real life.”

### Privacy Issues

*It’s not like very private, you know, anyone can read your profile.*

Participants varied in their concern about personal privacy and their awareness of how they can control their privacy on Facebook. Many felt that personal information they posted (e.g., name, date of birth, interests, pictures, etc.) was innocuous and generic, with few evincing strong concerns about privacy:

- Who is going to be interested in me?
- What can they do with my name?
- I only put up information that I would share in any other context.
- I’d be more worried about buying something online and having to give my credit card number.

Others were more cautious about revealing personal information on their profiles (such as their home address and telephone number, meeting venues, and by deleting overly personal mes-

sages) with some setting their privacy settings to allow full access to their pages only by immediate friends.

Many commented that they were not worried about people looking at their information because they could limit their privacy setting: “Facebook already has pretty good safety features. You can limit who sees what.” Comments revealed an implicit trust in the privacy settings made available on Facebook — detagging photos, hiding profiles, and deleting postings — as ways to safeguard one’s personal information.

Most don’t worry too much about strangers looking at their profiles: “I know they’re out there, they’re not going to take pictures of me and put them on porn sites.” Others report that “You can make your profile hidden and not have stalkers.” Face stalking — checking people’s profiles and ‘stalking’ them around on the Internet — was felt by many to be “creepy” yet prevalent in a large network such as Toronto.

*Is it like a government conspiracy thing?...so they can watch you....  
cos everyone’s on Facebook.*

There was growing concern, however, about the future ramifications of ‘negative’ personal profiles for employment and higher education. One participant stated that “I have friends who didn’t get jobs, it was between two candidates, and there were photos of them drinking beer underage.” She went on to say that “background checking companies have a lot of access to these [profiles]...my school tells us to remove all illegal stuff. I would take off anything that looks like I have a life....besides work ...” Another participant was concerned about overt surveillance by schools and governments: “All of a sudden, Facebook popped out of nowhere and got so popular and they’re saying like the police and stuff are monitoring it.” Given recent media coverage of actions by some Toronto area schools because of alleged Facebook infractions, it is not surprising that participants commented on their unease with access to Facebook by teachers and school administrators:

*This girl...she’s really weird with all of the teachers...she’s like friends with them...she gave her password to one of the teachers so that all the teachers could watch...*

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*Teachers have them...they just put weird names...and then they add you...*

Another growing concern was parents using Facebook; as one participant commented disdainfully, “My friends mom has Facebook, that’s kind of sad,” while another agreed, saying, “They can stalk their kids.”

With only one exception, participants were not aware or concerned about the tracking of personal information by marketing companies:

*Facebook is becoming so corporate, it’s so ridiculous, the other day I was on Facebook and there were random survey questions....and then there are all these applications you add, where you completely give out all your information to these random websites...*

*I’m concerned what Facebook will disclose to companies and the fact that there’s so much like marketing there now, I don’t know ...they say, ‘we’re keeping this private’, but...you don’t know...*

### Social Networking for Alternative Messaging

*Facebook is not a good way to get a message across — that is not what it is made for.*

When asked whether Internet social networking could be used in a positive manner to disseminate alternative messages about female sexuality, the overwhelming majority of participants were pessimistic and wary about such a possibility. Many could not even imagine how Facebook, given its design, could be used for such a purpose (one participant commented how MySpace allows users more ease in customizing their profiles.)

Joining groups was one suggestion (although some commented on the ubiquity and playfulness of ‘joke’ groups); however, many commented that one motivation for joining groups is to enhance the appeal of one’s profile to others, or to increase social networks, rather than make a social statement or effectuating a sincere difference in the world: “You can join a group but that doesn’t mean on Facebook that it will...[motivate you to do more].”

Posting positive personal profiles was suggested by several

participants; one former camp counselor recounted how several of her campers asked to be her friend, but that she was put off by their pictures showing “12 and 13 year olds wearing string bikinis, Bacardi Breezers in their hand ... they want to act a lot older than they are ... and they look at my pictures, and they see me skiing, or playing rugby... I hope this is inspiring, so they don’t feel they have to go out and get drunk.” Another participant reiterated this message: “Take it upon yourself, the way you portray yourself, in a positive manner, not like a drunken buffoon, or naked... then I’m doing something good, I’m establishing a positive image of myself which I hope will inspire others.”

Others suggested the following:

- Disseminate stories that illustrate the importance of being strong and smart for girls and women (via websites and perhaps even on Facebook);
- Get celebrities involved and advertise different views on popular websites;
- Use word of mouth as a way to resist the images rather than using the Internet;
- Approach one person and encourage them — this will give them confidence;
- Surround yourself with good friends and positive role models;
- Advertise an organization that can protest these things.

## Conclusions

The Media Action-Ekos focus group reflections on social networking sites show that profiles are constructed for friends and peers — to express facets of their identity to others, to validate themselves to others, to project positive self-images, to learn social skills (through ‘stalking’ sites youth can gain a sense of what’s cool, what music is hot, social decorum, etc.). These are intrinsic elements of networked publics for youth; a way to reinforce or test new identities and perform via the posting of digital text, images, and photos. Youth have always needed their own spaces as a counter to the controlled spaces of home and school. Increasingly these spaces are limited. A newer culture of fear regarding the safety of youth in public spaces, an evisceration of public spaces (e.g., malls are corporate spaces, after-school youth

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programs are suffering from a lack of funding, imposition of curfews in communities) contribute toward the vigor with which youth are attracted to online spaces.

Participants expressed a fair amount of confidence about their knowledge of and control of their personal privacy on Facebook; most expressed trust with the privacy controls Facebook affords users, although how other users ('friends' or peers) treat their personal information (such as tagging photos without their knowledge or permission) are often an irritant and matter of concern. For the most part, participant comments on privacy replicates the recent Pew Internet & American Life survey on how U.S. youth control their privacy on social networking sites; while there are diverging views on the disclosure of personal information, Lenhart and Madden (2007) argue that:

Teenagers do not fall neatly into clear-cut groups when it comes to their willingness to disclose information or the ways they restrict access to the information they do share. For most teens, decisions about privacy and disclosure depend on the nature of the encounter and their own personal circumstances. Teen decisions about whether or not to disclose involve questions like these: Do you live in a small town or big city? How did you create your network of online 'friends'? How old are you? Are you male or female? Do your parents have lots of rules about internet use? Do your parents view your profile? All these questions and more inform the decisions that teens make about how they present themselves online. Many, but not all, teens make thoughtful choices about what to share in what context (p. iv).

Increasing tensions over parental access to Facebook (either through parental attempts to monitor their child's personal profile or parents becoming Facebook users themselves) and how youth will negotiate personal revelations that future university admissions officers, potential employers, etc., could have access to, are yet another challenge.

Participants were all in agreement that presently, social networking presents few opportunities for disseminating alternative messages or images about female sexuality. While personal profiles can reflect progressive, inspirational, or politically-motivated concerns, as a mobilizing tactic, aside from the creation of some specific groups, social networking was not felt to be a



proactive tool for collective mobilization. Participants did not readily identify Facebook groups dedicated to activist issues, although its use in the U.S. to mobilize youth in support of the 2008 Presidential campaign is growing (Przyblyla, 2007).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is an excerpt from “It just sucks you in”: Young women’s use of Facebook. The full report can be found at the Media Action website: <http://www.media-action-media.com>

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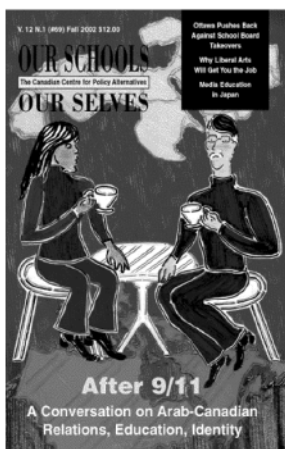
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