

1 identity

why do teens seem strange online?

In 2005, an Ivy League university was considering the application of a young black man from South Central Los Angeles. The applicant had written a phenomenal essay about how he wanted to walk away from the gangs in his community and attend the esteemed institution. The admissions officers were impressed: a student who overcomes such hurdles is exactly what they like seeing. In an effort to learn more about him, the committee members Googled him. They found his MySpace profile. It was filled with gang symbolism, crass language, and references to gang activities. They recoiled.

I heard this story when a representative from the admissions office contacted me. The representative opened the conversation with a simple question: Why would a student lie to an admissions committee when the committee could easily find the truth online? I asked for context and learned about the candidate. Stunned by the question, my initial response was filled with nervous laughter. I had hung out with and interviewed teens from South Central. I was always struck by the challenges they faced, given the gang dynamics in their neighborhood. Awkwardly, I offered an alternative interpretation: perhaps this young man is simply including gang signals on his MySpace profile as a survival technique.

Trying to step into that young man's shoes, I shared with the college admissions officer some of the dynamics that I had seen in Los

Angeles. My hunch was that this teen was probably very conscious of the relationship between gangs and others in his hometown. Perhaps he felt as though he needed to position himself within the local context in a way that wouldn't make him a target. If he was anything like other teens I had met, perhaps he imagined the audience of his MySpace profile to be his classmates, family, and community—not the college admissions committee. Without knowing the teen, my guess was that he was genuine in his college essay. At the same time, I also suspected that he would never dare talk about his desire to go to a prestigious institution in his neighborhood because doing so would cause him to be ostracized socially, if not physically attacked. As British sociologist Paul Willis argued in the 1980s, when youth attempt to change their socioeconomic standing, they often risk alienating their home community.¹ This dynamic was often acutely present in the communities that I observed.

The admissions officer was startled by my analysis, and we had a long conversation about the challenges of self-representation in a networked era.² I'll never know if that teen was accepted into that prestigious school, but this encounter stayed with me as I watched other adults misinterpret teens' online self-expressions. I came to realize that, taken out of context, what teens appear to do and say on social media seems peculiar if not outright problematic.³

The intended audience matters, regardless of the actual audience. Unfortunately, adults sometimes believe that they understand what they see online without considering how teens imagined the context when they originally posted a particular photograph or comment. The ability to understand how context, audience, and identity intersect is one of the central challenges people face in learning how to navigate social media. And, for all of the mistakes that they can and do make, teens are often leading the way at figuring out how to navigate a networked world in which collapsed contexts and imagined audiences are par for the course.

Taken Out of Context

In his 1985 book *No Sense of Place*, media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz describes the story of Stokely Carmichael, an American civil rights activist. In the 1960s, Carmichael regularly gave different talks to different audiences. He used a different style of speaking when he addressed white political leaders than when he addressed southern black congregations. When Carmichael started presenting his ideas on television and radio, he faced a difficult decision: which audience should he address? No matter which style of speaking he chose, he knew he'd alienate some. He was right. By using a rolling pastoral voice in broadcast media, Carmichael ingratiated himself with black activists while alienating white elites.

Meyrowitz argues that electronic media like radio and television easily collapse seemingly disconnected contexts. Public figures, journalists, and anyone in the limelight must regularly navigate disconnected social contexts simultaneously, balancing what they say with how their diverse audiences might interpret their actions. A context collapse occurs when people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses. For example, some people might find it quite awkward to run into their former high school teacher while drinking with their friends at a bar. These context collapses happen much more frequently in networked publics.

The dynamics that Meyrowitz describes are no longer simply the domain of high-profile people who have access to broadcast media. When teens interact with social media, they must regularly contend with collapsed contexts and invisible audiences as a part of everyday life.⁴ Their teachers might read what they post online for their friends, and when their friends from school start debating their friends from summer camp, they might be excited that their friend groups are combining—or they might find it discomforting. In order to stabilize the context in their own minds, teens do what others before them have done: just like journalists and politicians, teens imagine the audience they're trying to reach.⁵ In speaking to an unknown or

invisible audience, it is impossible and unproductive to account for the full range of plausible interpretations. Instead, public speakers consistently imagine a specific subset of potential readers or viewers and focus on how those intended viewers are likely to respond to a particular statement. As a result, the imagined audience defines the social context. In choosing how to present themselves before disconnected and invisible audiences, people must attempt to resolve context collapses or actively define the context in which they're operating.

Teens often imagine their audience to be those that they've chosen to "friend" or "follow," regardless of who might actually see their profile. In theory, privacy settings allow teens to limit their expressions to the people they intend to reach by restricting who can see what. On MySpace and Twitter—where privacy settings are relatively simple—using settings to limit who can access what content can be quite doable. Yet, on Facebook, this has proven to be intractable and confusing, given the complex and constantly changing privacy settings on that site.⁶ Moreover, many teens have good reasons for not limiting who can access their profile. Some teens want to be accessible to peers who share their interests. Others recognize that privacy settings do little to limit parents from snooping or stop friends from sharing juicy messages. Many teens complain about parents who look over their shoulders when they're on the computer or friends who copy and paste updates and forward them along.

To complicate matters, just because someone is a part of a teen's imagined audience doesn't mean that this person is actually reading what's posted. When social media sites offer streams of content—as is common on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—people often imagine their audience to be the people they're following. But these people may not be following them in return or see their posts amid the avalanche of shared content. As a result, regardless of how they use privacy settings, teens must grapple with who can see their profile; who actually does see it, and how those who do see it will interpret it.

Teens' mental model of their audience is often inaccurate, but not because teens are naive or stupid. When people are chatting and sharing photos with friends via social media, it's often hard to remember that viewers who aren't commenting might also be watching. This is not an issue unique to teens, although teens are often chastised for not accounting for adult onlookers. But just as it's easy to get caught up in a conversation at a dinner party and forget about the rest of the room, it's easy to get lost in the back-and-forth on Twitter. Social media introduces additional challenges, particularly because of the persistent and searchable nature of most of these technical systems. Tweets and status updates aren't just accessible to the audience who happens to be following the thread as it unfolds; they quickly become archived traces, accessible to viewers at a later time. These traces can be searched and are easily reposted and spread. Thus, the context collapses that teens face online rarely occur in the moment with conflicting onlookers responding simultaneously. They are much more likely to be experienced over time, as new audiences read the messages in a new light.

When teens face collapsing contexts in physical environments, their natural response is to become quiet. For example, if a group of teens are hanging out at the mall and a security guard or someone's mother approaches them, they will stop whatever conversation they are having, even if it's innocuous. While they may be comfortable having strangers overhear their exchange, the sudden appearance of someone with social authority changes the context entirely. Online, this becomes more difficult. As Summer, a white fifteen-year-old from Michigan, explains, switching contexts online is more challenging than doing so in the park because, in the park, "you can see when there's people around you and stuff like that. So you can like quickly change the subject." Online, there's no way to change the conversation, both because it's virtually impossible to know if someone is approaching and because the persistent nature of most social exchanges means that there's a record of what was previously said. Thus, when Summer's mother looks at her Facebook page, she gains

access to a plethora of interactions that took place over a long period of time and outside the social and temporal context in which they were produced. Summer can't simply switch topics with her friends at the sight of her mother approaching. The ability to easily switch contexts assumes an ephemeral social situation; this cannot be taken for granted in digital environments.

Because social media often brings together multiple social contexts, teens struggle to effectively manage social norms. Some expect their friends and family to understand and respect different social contexts and to know when something is not meant for them. And yet there are always people who fail to recognize when content isn't meant for them, even though it's publicly accessible. This is the problem that Hunter faces when he posts to Facebook.

Hunter is a geeky, black fourteen-year-old living in inner-city Washington, DC, who resembles a contemporary Steve Urkel, complete with ill-fitting clothes, taped-together glasses, and nerdy mannerisms. He lives in two discrete worlds. His cousins and sister are what he describes as "ghetto" while his friends at his magnet school are all academically minded "geeks." On Facebook, these two worlds collide, and he regularly struggles to navigate them simultaneously. He gets especially frustrated when his sister interrupts conversations with his friends.

When I'm talking to my friends on Facebook or I put up a status, something I hate is when people who I'm not addressing in my statuses comment on my statuses. In [my old school], people always used to call me nerdy and that I was the least black black person that they've ever met, some people say that, and I said on Facebook, "Should I take offense to the fact that somebody put the ringtone 'White and Nerdy' for me?" and it was a joke. I guess we were talking about it in school, and [my sister] comes out of nowhere, "Aw, baby bro," and I'm like, "No, don't say that, I wasn't talking to you."

When I asked Hunter how his sister or friends are supposed to know who is being talked to on specific Facebook updates, he replied,

I guess that is a point. Sometimes it probably is hard, but I think it's just the certain way that you talk. I will talk to my sister a different way than I'll talk to my friends at school or from my friends from my old school, and I might say, "Oh, well, I fell asleep in Miss K's class by accident," and they'll say, "Oh, yeah, Miss K is so boring," and [my sister's] like, "Oh, well, you shouldn't fall asleep. You should pay attention." I mean, I think you can figure out that I'm not talking to you if I'm talking about a certain teacher.

Hunter loves his sister, but he also finds her take on social etiquette infuriating. He wants to maintain a relationship with her and appreciates that she's on Facebook, although he also notes that it's hard because of her priorities, values, and decisions. He doesn't want to ostracize her on Facebook, but he's consistently annoyed by how often she tries to respond to messages from his friends without realizing that this violates an implicit code of conduct.

To make matters worse, Hunter's sister is not the only one from his home life who he feels speaks up out of turn. Hunter and his friends are really into the card game Pokémon and what he calls "old skool" video games like the Legend of Zelda. His cousins, in contrast, enjoy first-person shooters like Halo and think his choice of retro video games is "lame." Thus, whenever Hunter posts messages about playing with his friends, his cousins use this as an opportunity to mock him. Frustrated by his family members' inability to "get the hint," Hunter has resorted both to limiting what he says online and trying to use technical features provided by Facebook to create discrete lists and block certain people from certain posts. Having to take measures to prevent his family from seeing what he posts saddens him because he doesn't want to hide; he only wants his family to stop "embarrassing" him. Context matters to Hunter, not because he's ashamed of his tastes or wants to hide his passions, but because he wants to have control over a given social situation. He wants to post messages without having to articulate context; he wants his audience to understand

where he's coming from and respect what he sees as unspoken social conventions. Without a shared sense of context, hanging out online becomes burdensome.

The ability to understand and define social context is important. When teens are talking to their friends, they interact differently than when they're talking to their family or to their teachers. Television show plotlines leverage the power of collapsed contexts for entertainment purposes, but managing them in everyday life is often exhausting. It may be amusing to watch Kramer face embarrassment when he and George accidentally run into Kramer's mother on *Seinfeld*, but such social collisions are not nearly as entertaining when they occur without a laugh track.⁷ Situations like this require significant monitoring and social negotiation, which, in turn, require both strategic and tactical decisions that turn the most mundane social situation into a high-maintenance affair. Most people are uncomfortable with the idea that their worlds might collide uncontrollably, and yet, social media makes this dynamic a regular occurrence. Much of what's at stake has to do with the nuanced ways in which people read social situations and present themselves accordingly.

Identity Work in Networked Publics

In her 1995 book, *Life on the Screen*, psychologist Sherry Turkle began to map out the creation of a mediated future that resembled both the utopian and dystopian immersive worlds constructed in science fiction novels. Watching early adopters—especially children—embrace virtual worlds, she argued that the distinction between computers and humans was becoming increasingly blurred and that a new society was emerging as people escaped the limitations of their offline identities. Turkle was particularly fascinated by the playful identity work that early adopters engaged in online, and with a psychoanalyst's eye, she extensively considered both the therapeutic and the deceptive potential of mediated identity work.⁸

Turkle was critical of some people's attempts to use fictitious identities to harm others, but she also highlighted that much could be

gained from the process of self-reflection that was enabled when people had to act out or work through their identity in order to make themselves present in virtual worlds. Unlike face-to-face settings in which people took their bodies for granted, people who went online had to consciously create their digital presence. Media studies scholar Jenny Sundén describes this process as people typing themselves into being.⁹ Although Turkle recognized that a person's identity was always tethered to his or her psyche, she left room for arguments that suggested that the internet could—and would—free people of the burdens of their “material”—or physically embodied—identities, enabling them to become a better version of themselves.

I wanted Turkle's vision for the future to be right. When I embraced the internet as a teenager in the mid-1990s, I was going online to escape the so-called real world. I felt ostracized and misunderstood at school, but online I could portray myself as the person that I wanted to be. I took on fictitious identities in an effort to figure out who I was. I wasn't alone. Part of what made chatting fun in those days was that it was impossible to know if others were all that they portrayed themselves to be. I knew that a self-declared wizard was probably not actually a wizard and that the guy who said he had found the cure to cancer most likely hadn't, but embodied characteristics like gender and race weren't always so clear.¹⁰ At the time, this felt playful and freeing, and I bought into the fantasy that the internet could save us from tyranny and hypocrisy. Manifestos like John Perry Barlow's 1996 “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” spoke to me. Barlow told the global leaders at the World Economic Forum that the new “home of the Mind” enabled “identities [that] have no bodies.” I was proud to be one of the children he spoke of who appeared “native” in the new civilization.

Twenty years later, the dynamics of identity portrayal online are quite different from how early internet proponents imagined them to be. Although gaming services and virtual worlds are popular among some groups of youth, there's a significant cultural difference between fictional role-playing sites and the more widely embraced

social media sites, which tend to encourage a more nonfiction-oriented atmosphere. Even though pseudonymity is quite common in these environments, the type of identity work taking place on social media sites like Facebook is very different from what Turkle initially imagined. Many teens today go online to socialize with friends they know from physical settings and to portray themselves in online contexts that are more tightly wedded to unmediated social communities. These practices, which encourage greater continuity between teens' online and offline worlds, were much less common when I was growing up.

This doesn't mean that identity work is uniform across all online activities. Most teens use a plethora of social media services as they navigate relationships and contexts. Their seemingly distinct practices on each platform might suggest that they are trying to be different people, but this would be a naive reading of the kinds of identity work taking place on and through social media. For example, a teen might use her given name on a video service like Skype while choosing a descriptive screen name on a photo app like Instagram.¹¹ And when choosing a login for a blogging site like Tumblr, she might choose a name that intentionally signals her involvement with a particular interest-based community.

Quite often, teens respond to what they perceive to be the norms of a particular service. So when a teen chooses to identify as "Jessica Smith" on Facebook and "littlemonster" on Twitter, she's not creating multiple identities in the psychological sense. She's choosing to represent herself in different ways on different sites with the expectation of different audiences and different norms. Sometimes these choices are conscious attempts by individuals seeking to control their self-presentation; more often, they are whimsical responses to sites' requirement to provide a login handle. Although some teens choose to use the same handle across multiple sites, other teens find that their favorite nickname is taken or feel as though they've outgrown their previous identity. Regardless of the reason, the outcome is a hodgepodge of online identities that leave plenty of room for

interpretation. And in doing so, teens both interpret and produce the social contexts in which they are inhabiting.

Context matters. While teens move between different social contexts—including mediated ones like those produced by networked publics and unmediated ones like those constructed at school—they manage social dynamics differently. How they interact and with whom they interact in the school lunchroom is different than at afterschool music lessons than via group text messaging services. For many of the teens I interviewed, Facebook was the primary place where friend groups collide. Other services—like Tumblr or Twitter—were more commonly used by teens who were carving out their place in interest-driven communities.¹² For example, there are entire communities of teens on Tumblr who connect out of a shared interest in fashion; collectively, they produce a rich fashion blogging community that has stunned the fashion industry. On Twitter, it's not uncommon to see teens gushing about the celebrities du jour with other fans. These examples illustrate how these particular platforms are used circa 2013; teens' approaches to different sites may have changed by the time you're reading this book, but managing context within a given site and through the use of multiple sites has been commonplace for well over a decade. What matters is not the particular social media *site* but the *context* in which it's situated within a particular group of youth. The sites of engagement come and go, are repurposed, and evolve over time. Some people assume that these ebbs and flows mean radical changes in youth culture, but often the underlying practices stay the same even as the context shifts what is rendered visible and significant.

The context of a particular site is not determined by the technical features of that site but, rather, by the interplay between teens and the site. In sociological parlance, the context of social media sites is socially constructed.¹³ More practically, what this means is that teens turn to different sites because they hear that a particular site is good for a given practice. They connect to people they know, observe how those people are using the site, and then reinforce or challenge those

norms through their own practices. As a result, the norms of social media are shaped by network effects; peers influence one another about how to use a particular site and then help collectively to create the norms of that site.

Because teens' engagement with social media is tied to their broader peer groups, the norms that get reinforced online do not deviate much from the norms that exist in school. This does not mean that there aren't distinctions. For example, I met a teen girl who was obsessed with a popular boy band called One Direction even though her friends at school were not. She didn't bother talking about her crush on one of the band's members in the lunchroom because she knew her friends wouldn't find such a topic interesting. She didn't hide her passion for One Direction from her friends, but she didn't turn to them to discuss the band members' haircuts or their latest music video. Instead, she turned to Twitter, where she was able to gush about the band with other fans. She first turned to Twitter because the members of One Direction were using that platform to engage with their fans, but as she engaged with the broader fan community, she spent more time talking with other fans than replying to the musicians' tweets. Through this fan community, she began interacting on Tumblr and posting fan-oriented posts on Instagram. Her friends all knew about her obsession—and occasionally teased her for her celebrity crush—but they didn't follow her on Twitter because they weren't interested in that facet of her life. She wasn't hiding her interests, but she had created a separate context—and thus a separate digital persona—for talking with fellow fans. When she wanted to talk with her school friends, she turned to Facebook or text messaging. At the same time, the contexts were not wholly distinct. When she found out that one of her classmates was also a fellow fan, they started engaging on both Facebook and Twitter, talking about school on Facebook and One Direction on Twitter. And she even ended up Facebook friending a few fans she met through Twitter, which created a space for them to talk about a different range of topics.

This young fan is a typical savvy internet user, comfortable navigating her identity and interests in distinct social contexts based on her understanding of the norms and community practices. She moves between Facebook and Twitter seamlessly, understanding that they are different social contexts. She has a coherent understanding of who she is and is comfortable choosing how she presents herself in these different environments. She moves just as seamlessly between these mediated environments as she does between online and offline settings, not because she's cycling through identities—or creating a segmentation between the virtual and the real—but because she's switching social contexts and acting accordingly.

As teens move between different social environments—and interact with different groups of friends, interest groups, and classmates—they maneuver between different contexts that they have collectively built and socially constructed. Their sense of context is shaped—but not cleanly defined—by setting, time, and audience. Although navigating distinct social contexts is not new, technology makes it easy for young people to move quickly between different social settings, creating the impression that they are present in multiple places simultaneously. What unfolds is a complex dance as teens quickly shift between—and often blur—different social contexts.

The popularity of social media in recent years has produced a significant rise in nonfiction or so-called real names identity production, but it is also important to recognize that there continue to be environments where teens gather anonymously or don't craft identities to create a separation between the kinds of social contexts that are viable offline and those that can be imagined online. Most notably, multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft and StarCraft were quite popular among youth I encountered. It is within these spaces—along with virtual worlds like Second Life and Whyville—where teens can and do engage in much of the playful and productive identity work that early internet scholars initially mapped out.¹⁴ The process of creating an avatar and selecting virtual characteristics requires tremendous reflection, and teens often take this seriously.

Although some teens do invest a great deal of time and thought into their avatars, other teens I met were no more invested in their gaming character than in their Twitter handle. Their choices had meaning and were valuable, but not something that they felt needed to be analyzed for significance. When I asked one teen boy why he had chosen to be a particular character in *World of Warcraft*, he looked at me with a scrunched face. I pressed on to ask if his choice had any particular meaning, and he responded with an eye roll, saying, "It's just a game!" before continuing on to talk about how he had a collection of characters with different skill sets that could be used depending on what he was trying to achieve in the game.

Choosing and designing an avatar is a central part of participation in immersive games and virtual worlds, but youth approach this practice in extraordinarily varied ways. Some teens purposefully construct their avatars in ways that they feel reflect their physical bodies; other teens choose characters based on skills or aesthetics. For some teens, being "in world" is discrete from their school environment, whereas others game with classmates. It may seem that the role-playing elements of these environments imply a significant separation between the virtual and the real; however, these often get blurred in fantasy game worlds as well.¹⁵

Alongside the identity work done within common social media sites and wildly popular gaming services, a subculture has emerged in which participants outright eschew recognizable identity altogether by proclaiming the virtues of anonymity. Nowhere is this more visible than in the community of individuals who participate in and contribute to the image-based bulletin board site 4chan. 4chan was initially created in 2003 by a fifteen-year-old named Chris Poole, known as "moot," so that he could share pornography and anime with other teens.¹⁶ Often referred to as the underbelly of the internet, 4chan is an active source of internet cultural production as well as malicious prankster activity. It is the birthplace of popular memes such as lolcats: often entertaining, widely distributed pictures of cats portrayed with text captions written in Impact font using an internet dialect

referred to as lolpeak.¹⁷ 4chan is also where Anonymous—the "hacktivist" group mostly known for a series of well-publicized political actions—originated.¹⁸ Although it's impossible to know much about the site's contributors, the content typically shared on the site reflects tastes and humor usually associated with teenage boys.

The reason it's hard to get a handle on who participates on 4chan is that most of the content produced on the site is shared anonymously. As I met teen boys who contributed to 4chan, I found that many of them relished the anonymous norms of the site. They felt that anonymity gave them a sense of freedom they didn't feel they could have on sites for which constructing an identity—pseudonymous or "real"—was more typical. Some admitted to using this freedom in problematic or destructive ways—recounting acts of ganging up on girls whom they deemed annoying or using a combination of wits and trickery to manipulate Facebook administrators into providing data. But more often than not, teens talked about wanting to have a space where they weren't constantly scrutinized by adults and peers. By becoming anonymous and being an invisible part of a crowd, these teens knew that they weren't building a reputation within the site. Yet even when they weren't being personally recognized, many relished seeing their posts get traction and attention within the site; this made them feel part of the community. Furthermore, extensive use of in-group language and shared references made it easy to identify other members of 4chan, thereby enabling another mechanism of status and community.¹⁹

As teens have embraced a plethora of social environments and helped co-create the norms that underpin them, a wide range of practices has emerged. Teens have grown sophisticated with how they manage contexts and present themselves in order to be read by their intended audience. They don't always succeed, but their efforts are phenomenal.

Crafting a Profile, Creating an Identity Performance

Chris was ecstatic when his sixteen-year-old daughter invited him to be her friend on MySpace during the height of the MySpace craze. He had decided not to require that she befriend him on social

network sites, so he saw her invitation as a signal of trust and love. He immediately accepted the friend request and logged in to look at her private profile. His heart sank. About halfway down the page, there was a panel with a question, "What Drug Are You?" followed by a picture of a white substance on a mirror with a rolled-up dollar bill; the text below said, "Cocaine." Trying not to panic, he approached his daughter quizzically. She responded with laughter, followed by a drawn-out, "Daaaaad." She explained that what he'd seen was a quiz. Quizzes were all the rage in her school, and this one was currently making its rounds. She explained that whenever there were quizzes, you could easily guess where the quiz was going and answer so that you could get the result you wanted. This did not give Chris any sense of relief, but he reserved judgment and hesitantly asked why she wanted to get cocaine as the result. She proceeded to explain that the kids who smoked marijuana at school were "lame," while those who took mushrooms were "crazy." And then she explained, "But your generation did a lot of cocaine and you came out OK!" Chris burst out laughing, humored by how she perceived him and his peers. He had grown up in a rural white Midwestern community where alcohol and teen pregnancy dominated. Indeed, Chris was only sixteen years older than his daughter. After high school, he had gotten involved in the music scene, but being a single father left little room for partying. Cocaine was not part of his youth at all. Chris then grew serious and asked if she was interested in cocaine; he felt relieved by her exasperated rejection of this idea, and they proceeded to have a long conversation about how an onlooker could easily take what seemed like a funny quiz out of context.

Many teens post information on social media that they think is funny or intended to give a particular impression to a narrow audience without considering how this same content might be read out of context. Much of what seems like inaccurate identity information is simply a misinterpretation of a particular act of self-presentation. This issue was particularly noticeable in early social media genres in which explicit identity information was required for participation.

Consider, for example, MySpace, which required a user to provide age, sex, location, and other fields to create a profile.

When I stumbled on Allie's MySpace profile, I learned from the demographic section that she is ninety-five years old, from Christmas Island, and makes \$250,000+ per year. While it is possible that she is nearly a centenarian and logging onto MySpace from a remote, sparsely populated island in the Indian Ocean while running her highly profitable company, this seems unlikely. A quick glance at the rest of Allie's profile reveals other information that suggests that she is more likely to be a teenage girl attending high school in New Jersey. Her photo album includes self-portraits, photographs of Allie with friends, and images of teens goofing around. The majority of her friends indicate that they're from New Jersey, and the high school she lists on her profile is also located in that state. The comments on her profile included messages about homework and parents. I don't know Allie, but I doubt that she is trying to deceive me with demographic outliers.

I met many teens who fabricated answers like name, location, age, and income to profile questions. They thought it was amusing to indicate their relationship status on Facebook as "It's Complicated" whether they were in a relationship or not. A casual viewer scanning Facebook might conclude that an extraordinary number of teens are in same-sex relationships because so many have chosen to list their best friend as the person that they are "In a Relationship" with. In the same vein, Facebook profiles suggest that the US census data must be inaccurate because, at least on Facebook, teens often have dozens of siblings; of course, a little bit of prying makes it clear that these, too, are close friends. These are but a few of the playful ways in which teens responded to social media sites' requests for information by providing inaccurate information that actually contains meaningful signals about friendship and sociality.

When I talked with teens, I learned that there were also numerous ways of repurposing social network site fields for entertainment and humor. Outside of wealthy communities, where talking about money is deemed gauche, I met countless teens who told MySpace that their

income was “\$250,000+.” Choosing a birth year that made the age field depict “69” was also a common, if unsurprising, trend among teenage boys.²⁰ Searching for social media users in Afghanistan or Zimbabwe offers an additional window into teen life, as many teens select the top or bottom choice in the pull-down menu when they indicate their location. Facebook expected users to provide “real names,” but many teens I met offered up only their first name, preferring to select a last name of a celebrity, fictional character, or friend. These were but a few of the ways that teens provided what appeared to be fictitious information on their profiles. These practices allowed them to feel control over their profiles, particularly given how often they told me that it was ridiculous for sites to demand this information.

One way of reading teens’ profiles is to assume that they are lying. But marking oneself as rich or from a foreign land is not about deception; it’s a simple way to provide entertaining signals to friends while ignoring a site’s expectations.²¹ Most teens aren’t enacting an imagined identity in a virtual world. Instead, they’re simply refusing to play by the rules of self-presentation as defined by these sites.²² They see no reason to provide accurate information, in part because they know that most people who are reading what they post already know who they are. As Dominic, a white sixteen-year-old from Seattle, told me, he doesn’t have to provide accurate information “because all my [social media] friends are actually my friends; they’ll know if I’m joking around or not.” Awareness of the social context helps shape what teens share and don’t share. Many teens treat social media requests for information as a recommendation, not a requirement, because they view these sites purely as platforms for interacting with classmates and other people they know from other settings.

Why teens share what they do is neither arbitrary nor dictated by the social media sites where they hang out—nor by the norms that govern adults’ use of those same sites. The youth-oriented social context in which teens share matters. Teens don’t see social media as a virtual space in which they must choose to be themselves or create an alternate ego. They see social media as a place to gather with friends

while balancing privacy and safety with humor and image. When Los Angeles-based Chicano fifteen-year-old Mickey says, “It’s not that I lie on [MySpace], but I don’t put my real information,” he’s highlighting that his choice to provide false data allows him to control the social situation. He doesn’t want to be easily searchable by his parents or teachers, nor does he want to be found by “creeps” who might be browsing the site looking for vulnerable teenagers. He wants to be in a space with friends, and so he provides just enough information that his friends can find him without increasing his visibility to adults.

Teens fabricate information because it’s funny, because they believe that the site has no reason to ask, or because they believe that doing so will limit their visibility to people they don’t want to find them. In doing so, they are seeking to control the networked social context.

When teens create profiles through social media, they are simultaneously navigating extraordinarily public environments and more intimate friendship spaces. Media scholars Paul Hodkinson and Siân Lincoln argue that constructing these profiles can be understood through the lens of “bedroom culture.”²³ Just as many middle-class teens use different media artifacts—including photographs, posters, and tchotchkes—to personalize their bedrooms, teens often decorate their online self-presentations using a variety of media. Likewise, teens use their bedrooms to create a space for hanging out with friends and they turn to social media to do the same online. Yet because of the properties of social media, creating boundaries around these online spaces is far more difficult. Although teens complain about the impossibility of keeping siblings and parents out of their rooms, achieving privacy in social media is even harder. This, in turn, challenges teens’ ability to meaningfully portray the nuances of who they are to different and conflicting audiences.

Impression Management in a Networked Setting

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, sociologist Erving Goffman describes the social rituals involved in self-presentation as “impression management.” He argues that the impressions we make

on others are a product of what is *given* and what is *given off*. In other words, what we convey to others is a matter of what we choose to share in order to make a good impression and also what we unintentionally reveal as a byproduct of who we are and how we react to others. The norms, cultural dynamics, and institutions where giving and giving off happen help define the broader context of how these performances are understood. When interpreting others' self-presentations, we read the explicit content that is conveyed in light of the implicit information that is given off and the context in which everything takes place. The tension between the explicit and implicit signals allows us to obtain much richer information about individuals' attempts to shape how they're perceived. Of course, our reactions to their attempts to impress us enable them to adjust what they give in an attempt to convey what they think is best.

Based on their understanding of the social situation—including the context and the audience—people make decisions about what to share in order to act appropriately for the situation and to be perceived in the best light. When young people are trying to get a sense of the context in which they're operating, they're doing so in order to navigate the social situation in front of them. They may want to be seen as cool among their peers, even if adults would deem their behavior inappropriate.²⁴ Teens may be trying to determine if someone they're attracted to is interested in them without embarrassing themselves. Or they may wish to be viewed as confident and happy, even when they're facing serious depression or anxiety. Whatever they're trying to convey, they must first get a grasp of the situation and the boundaries of the context. When contexts collapse or when information is taken out of context, teens can fail to make their intended impression.

Self-presentations are never constructed in a void. Goffman writes at length about the role individuals play in shaping their self-presentations, but he also highlights ways in which individuals are part of broader collectives that convey impressions about the whole group. In discussing the importance of "teams" for impression management, he points

out that people work together to shape impressions, often relying on shared familiarity to help define any given situation in a mutually agreeable manner. He also argues that, "any member of the team has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct."²⁵ When teens create profiles online, they're both individuals and part of a collective. Their self-representation is constructed through what they explicitly provide, through what their friends share, and as a product of how other people respond to them. When Alice's friend Bob comments on her profile, he's affecting her self-presentation. Even the photo that Bob chooses as his primary photo affects Alice because it might be shown on Alice's profile when he leaves a comment.²⁶ Impression management online and off is not just an individual act; it's a social process.

Part of what makes impression management in a networked setting so tricky is that the contexts in which teens are operating are also networked. Contexts don't just collapse accidentally; they collapse because individuals have a different sense of where the boundaries exist and how their decisions affect others. In North Carolina, I briefly chatted with a black high school senior who was gunning for a soccer scholarship at a Division One school. When recruiters and coaches from different schools asked to be his friend on Facebook, he immediately said yes. He had always treated Facebook like a résumé, using the site to position himself as a thoughtful, compassionate, all-American young man. But he was often concerned about what his friends posted on Facebook, and for good reason.

A few days later, I was talking casually with Matthew, one of the soccer player's classmates with whom he was friends on Facebook. Unlike the all-American athlete persona his classmate had crafted, Matthew's profile was filled with crass comments and humor that could easily be misinterpreted. I asked Matthew, a white seventeen-year-old, about his decision to post these items on his profile with a particular eye to how they might get misinterpreted if read by a stranger. Matthew told me that he wasn't friends with anyone who didn't know him and wouldn't understand that he was joking around.

I pointed out that his privacy settings meant that his profile could be viewed by friends-of-friends. When he didn't get my point, I showed him that his classmate had chosen to connect with many coaches and other representatives from schools to which he had applied for admission. Matthew's stunned response was simple: "But why would he do that?" Matthew and his classmate had very different ideas of how to use Facebook and who their imagined audiences might be, but their online presence was interconnected because of the technical affordances of Facebook. They were each affecting the other's attempts at self-presentation, and their sharing and friending norms created unexpected conflicts.

Even when teens have a coherent sense of what they deem to be appropriate in a particular setting, their friends and peers do not necessarily share their sense of decorum and norms. Resolving the networked nature of social contexts is complicated. The "solution" that is most frequently offered is that people should not try to engage in context-dependent impression management. Indeed, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, is quoted as having said, "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."²⁷ Teens who try to manage context collapses by segregating information often suffer when that information crosses boundaries. This is particularly true when teens, like the young man from Los Angeles at the beginning of this chapter, are forced to contend with radically different social contexts that are not mutually resolvable. What makes this especially tricky for teens is that people who hold power over them often believe that they have the right to look, judge, and share, even when their interpretations may be constructed wholly out of context.

In 2010, the American Civil Liberties Union received a complaint from a student at a small, rural high school that sheds light on this issue. At a school assembly, in order to set an example, a campus police officer had shown a photo of one of the students holding a beer.²⁸ The picture was not on that girl's Facebook profile; it was posted by a friend of hers and tagged. The purpose of the assembly was to teach teenagers about privacy, but the students were outraged.

Because of the police officer's attempt to shame students into behaving by adult standards, the student exposed with a beer feared that she would not receive a local scholarship or might face other serious consequences. To complicate matters, she had not chosen to present herself in that light; her friend had done this for her. In choosing to upload and tag this photo, her friend undermined the self-image that the girl wished to present. Some may argue that this girl was at fault for being at a party holding a beer in the first place. She may indeed have been drinking the beer—72 percent of students in high school report having had alcohol at least once—but she may also just have been holding the beer for a friend or simply trying to fit in by appearing to drink.²⁹ This girl certainly did not think that her decision to attend that party would result in such public shaming, nor is it clear that the punishment fits the crime. In situations like this, teens are blamed for not thinking while adults assert the right to define the context in which young people interact. They take content out of context to interpret it through the lens of adults' values and feel as though they have the right to shame youth because that content was available in the first place. In doing so, they ignore teens' privacy while undermining their struggles to manage their identity.

One might reasonably argue that the girl holding the beer was lucky not to have been arrested, since alcohol consumption by minors is illegal. Yet it is important to note that the same shaming tactics that adults use to pressure teens to conform to adult standards are also used by both teens and adults to ostracize and punish youth whose identities, values, or experiences are not widely accepted. I met plenty of teens who wanted to keep secrets from their parents or teachers, but the teens who struggled the most with the challenges of collapsed contexts were those who were trying to make sense of their sexual identity or who otherwise saw themselves as outcasts in their community. Some, like Hunter—the boy from DC who was trying to navigate his "ghetto" family alongside his educationally minded friends—were simply frustrated and annoyed. Others, like teen girls

who are the subject of “slut shaming” were significantly embarrassed and emotionally distraught after photos taken in the context of an intimate relationship were widely shared to shame them by using their sexuality as a weapon. Still others, like the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teens I met from religious and conservative backgrounds, were outright scared of what would happen if the contexts in which they were trying to operate collapsed.

In Iowa, I ended up casually chatting with a teen girl who was working through her sexuality. She had found a community of other queer girls in a chatroom, and even though she believed that some of them weren't who they said they were, she found their anonymous advice to be helpful. They gave her pointers to useful websites about coming out, offered stories from their own experiences, and gave her the number of an LGBT-oriented hotline if she ran into any difficulty coming out to her conservative parents. Although she relished the support and validation these strangers gave her, she wasn't ready to come out yet, and she was petrified that her parents might come across her online chats. She was also concerned that some of her friends from school might find out and tell her parents. She had learned that her computer recorded her browser history in middle school when her parents had used her digital traces to punish her for visiting inappropriate sites. Thus, she carefully erased her history after each visit to the chatroom. She didn't understand how Facebook seemed to follow her around the web, but she was afraid that somehow the company would find out and post the sites she visited to her Facebook page. In an attempt to deal with this, she used Internet Explorer to visit the chatroom or anything that was LGBT-related while turning to the Chrome browser for maintaining her straight, school-friendly persona. But still, she was afraid that she'd mess up and collapse her different social contexts, accidentally coming out before she was ready. She wanted to maintain discrete contexts but found it extraordinarily difficult to do so. This tension comes up over and over again, particularly with youth who are struggling to make sense of who they are and how they fit into the broader world.³⁰

As teens struggle to make sense of different social contexts and present themselves appropriately, one thing becomes clear: the internet has not evolved into an idyllic zone in which people are free from the limitations of the embodied world. Teens are struggling to make sense of who they are and how they fit into society in an environment in which contexts are networked and collapsed, audiences are invisible, and anything they say or do can easily be taken out of context. They are grappling with battles that adults face, but they are doing so while under constant surveillance and without a firm grasp of who they are. In short, they're navigating one heck of a cultural labyrinth.