Negotiation(s) of Identity Through Online Social Networking

and Implications for Educating Youth

by

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ABSTRACT

"I think adults have a very distorted view of Nexopia saying they think it's all; they think it's bad and I don't know. Every adult is "What's Nexopia; I better not let my kid get on that!" It's a way to communicate with your friends and put a little bit about yourself, right". Blain

Social networking sites have become increasingly popular among various segments of youth culture. Online, users of the Internet have formed a reciprocal relationship with media sources: they are not simply consumers but active collaborators and producers of remixed content. Individual spaces on social networking sites, also known as homepages, have become a medium for identity representation and negotiation during adolescence. Literature attributes self-presentation and impression management as the primary goals of online users; however, embedded within impressions are controlled symbolic representations embodied through text and graphics. Adolescents online are motivated to regulate how others perceive them. This case study describes the actions of at-risk adolescent social online space creators between the ages of 14-18. Ten adolescents were interviewed and transcriptions analyzed. The central aim was to provide a greater understanding of the extrinsic motivations of adolescents for the use and management of individual social online spaces. Adolescents revealed their primary reasons for creating an online space was communication with peers. The space was used as an outlet to reflect and reveal discourses—the transgression of values, thoughts and understandings in relation to peers and society. I found that at-risk adolescents experience a relational and representational continuum with their social space: the longer they are online the less reliance they attach to their peer group and their page becomes more of a functional place to commune with peers. Time online maintaining a social online space was connected to an increased
awareness of peer perception in relation to symbolic portrayals. In summarizing, the adolescents interviewed used a space online to validate and negotiate emerging representations of self-identity. There was an active state of negotiation as users explored aspects of self-identity offline and transferred this knowledge into their online social space over an extended period of time. The online representations were related to offline realities regardless of the content of the space. The acknowledgment of marginalized out-of-school identities within school contexts would begin to bridge the exclusion some adolescents' experience. The study suggests educators examine online themes of marginalization, acceptance, culture and power within the framework of primary and secondary discourses.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

During adolescence youth aspire to have more autonomy in their home and community. Ironically, in education it is also a time when fewer options are available. Youth also experience more challenges across the curriculum and begin to feel the strain between home and school.

The following case study examined the use and intent of online social networking spaces from the website Nexopia. Ten adolescents were interviewed over a period of two months at a local alternate school on the lower mainland of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Representations through design and multimedia choice were analyzed, along with online meanings of self- and social identities and the influence and validation of audience. What emerged were characteristics of this unique population's motivations in an online venue. This population has traditionally been difficult to access for research purposes.

The five research questions which directed the case study were:

1. What are the motivating factors involved in the design and use of online social space representation for marginalized adolescents?
2. How is identity role exploration related to marginalized adolescents' choice of representation on Nexopia?
3. What influences multimedia choice in online social spaces among marginalized adolescents?
4. What meanings of self and social identity do marginalized adolescents construct through their social presence online?

5. To whom are statements intended? What role does social validation from online and offline peers play in online presentation of self-identity for marginalized adolescents?

I had wondered whether online social networking spaces like Nexopia offered adolescents an extended community and acted as an alternative venue for them to explore parts of their self-identities. Such exploration is typically not encouraged in secondary school settings. This speculation was driven by my former professional interactions with youth, as I describe in the following section.

1.2 Situating the Researcher and the Study

As a resource teacher at an alternate high school, I became aware of the disparity between students’ achievement on literacy assessment instruments and their performance in school. This difference was very pronounced in the opinions of at-risk youth. Using formal assessments, I examined the students’ individual strategies for comprehending text. Following each assessment, students would informally disclose educational and personal histories in relation to their current behaviours and practices with reading and writing. Over time I developed a structured interview process where the assessment was used in conjunction with other formal reports to explore present patterns of the individual youth’s academic performance. As a result of exhaustive detailed student assessments and discussions, a pattern emerged: students’ abilities on the assessments and their actual performance in school were conflicting, with students often scoring higher on the
assessment than their school performance reflected. This disparity raised questions about the variables of school, family, and peer influences involved in adolescent academic success. Additionally, it raised questions about issues of marginalization and culture. Hu-Pei & Mason (1981) describe the disparity between Hawaiian children’s reading performances on assessments and performance in the classroom to be a result of social organization factors in school and reported that, “While minority children may possess a considerable degree of cognitive and linguistic competence that they exercise in their everyday environments, they often do not use this competence in dealing with academic tasks in the ordinary classroom” (p.117). To prevent a clash between teacher and student, the researchers suggest the integration of culturally-relevant educational reading lessons. Research exploring culture as a factor in academic competence among at-risk populations is limited as accessibility to these populations is a barrier.

Within my own school environment at the time, assessing students’ reading strategies individually enabled me to explore students’ perceived understanding of themselves in relation to their actual ability (academically and emotionally). An assessment took from fifteen minutes to one hour depending upon a number of external factors (comfort with the assessor, fluency in reading passages, etc.). After passages were read, scored and analyzed they were presented to the student. Students were then invited to discuss information about past reading histories. A number of students’ histories were loaded with heavy emotions like public humiliations from teachers or social embarrassments from Resource program placements or other pullout intervention programs. For example, one female student (16 years old) started the assessment by declaring that she was stupid and could not read. Her results indicated that, in fact, she
was reading near grade level. Upon discussion, she disclosed the social alienation she had succumbed to in her elementary school years and the dismissive messages she received from school staff due to her class and school behaviours. She expressed frustration at being ‘locked into' a ‘negative’ student identity and the resulting feelings of school social failure. It appeared that she had internalized the label of a ‘non-reader' and subsequently refused to accept any evidence which might alter that erroneous perception. She refused academic support and spoke at length about her out-of-school culture, which was marked by violence, drugs, and physical aggression.

Williams (2003) emphasizes the need for literacy instructors to account for and acknowledge identities constructed outside of the classroom. The author identifies the stream of students within school populations who resist attempts to integrate into the social, academic and behavioural requirements within it. Giroux (1983) and others (Blake, 2001; Klein, 1999; Pasco, 2003) explore in varying ways how the concept of capital is attained for the most marginalized of students within schools. As behaviours accumulate for such students, identities begin to appear less fluid. Additionally, adolescents seek venues to explore and express their frustration and alienation at larger macro institutions. These students look for and later create spaces to validate experiences and communicate alternate discourses (Ferrell, 1995; Gee, Allen & Clinton, 2001; Moje, 2000) which may translate into tagging or graffiti in some cases. Wood & Smith (2005) define discursive resistance as “a process through which text, oral, nonverbal communication, and other forms of meaning-making are employed to imagine alternatives to dominant power structures” (p. 180). A space becomes a venue to respond to dominant authority forces. It is based on an individual's will and is personally crafted.
Going online is enticing because the ability to locate intentional communities and carve out personal spaces is immediate, as Wood & Smith contend. Offline a crafting occurs, which Ferrell (1995) describes as a ‘dance of authority and resistance’ in which “graffiti writers resist the pressure brought against them not only by fighting it, but by using it for their own purposes” (p. 82). His four-year study identifies the collective network built amongst marginalized youth for the purpose of constructing identities and communities and creating avenues for achieving and maintaining status. These youth were creating alternative spaces to meet their social needs.

Observing those students reading significantly below grade level, over time I noticed how their ingrained identification with their out-of-school lives prevented them from accepting academic support, while their in-school behaviours left staff feeling frustrated and helpless to intervene. These students presented a great challenge behaviourally to staff both inside the classroom and within the school environment. They appeared to sabotage staff attempts at support. They were immersed in a lifestyle of drug use and exhibited anti-social behaviours. At the time I wondered how ‘discourse’ and culture created a standoff between staff and students. Consequently, the students’ unsafe behaviours ensured their rapid departure from school.

By the time a child becomes an adolescent struggling with academics and more importantly, exhibits disruptive behaviour within the educational system, there are limited service options. Suspensions become a normative response to many students’ refusals to accept or ‘buy into’ academic cultures. The division between school and the severe at-risk student grows quickly. I believe some students drop out due to the implicit belief that their out-of-school lives and their in-school experiences are in direct conflict.
In the course of my twelve years of teaching and administration, many students have told me that this has been their experience. I wondered if schools were the place to analyze how local cultures of marginalized students are created and maintained. Initially, I was interested in examining the ideological intent within online texts of students to better understand explicit and implicit racial, political, class, and gender messages (Moje et al., 2000). I was also curious as to whether educators were equipped with methods to discuss and deconstruct alternate discourses. If so, could the knowledge of students’ out-of-school experiences support their re-integration into an academic culture, in particular for students who leave school prior to graduation and exhibit particular behavioural tendencies? I was intrigued by these questions.

In summary, I began this case study with the knowledge that many students’ perception of their current academic capabilities are intertwined with their self-concept, regardless of whether contrary evidence is present. It has been my experience that some at-risk students are unwilling to accept positive academic outcomes (i.e., a high mark on a paper, praise from a teacher, high grades) and instead seek to maintain a constructed self-identity of resistance to academia that has been cultivated over the years and influenced from past schooling and personal experiences. As well, the younger the adolescent student, the less likely he or she will accept challenges to the constructed self-image, especially if he or she exhibits at-risk indicators like a poor sense of personal control and a low interest in school (Pasco, 2003).

Eighty-eight percent of the student body at the school at which I worked were designated ‘Special Needs’, with the majority of students having a provincial behavioural designation (i.e., Student requiring Intensive Behaviour Intervention). Many of these
students had previously been placed in resource or behavioural in-district programs. The other staff and I experienced the reluctance of students to build attachments and to accept educational, academic and emotional support.

The school’s former principal recognized the importance of examining alternate discourses and out-of-school cultures. He formalized a framework of building attachment as a method for reducing defences to learning and pro-social influences. School staff would model ‘appropriate’ and acceptable mainstream values to students. Over time a segment of the student population began to resist and withdraw from these staff attempts at enabling school assimilation. Many of these students eventually dropped out of the school. I questioned whether the reluctance of staff to acknowledge certain student discourses placed them in direct conflict with such students. The majority of staff maintained that the validation of students’ out-of-school experiences was equated with the acceptance of deviant behaviours and lifestyles.

Staff also expressed mounting concern over the growing student disclosure in social online spaces of drug and criminal interests. Among a segment of male and female students, the text and visual multimedia (i.e., animation, film clips, and uploaded personal pictures) on their online spaces were marked with violent, drug-related and sexualized imagery. A cursory review of social online spaces revealed gender distinct representations, with males aligning themselves with hyper-cultural masculine images of violence and drugs and females highlighting their pages with themes of sexual dominion and peer loyalty. Underlying themes of power, control and group association were evident from the related imagery (i.e., guns, gang declarations, visual posturing). Current research has yet to investigate how social online space content changes over the time an
adolescent maintains a presence online. For example, how does such change occur and what prompts it? As well, how are specific statements of youth culture communicated to users and how does audience awareness direct the constructions? Understanding how at-risk students utilize social online spaces is crucial to understanding adolescent development in relation to media. Adolescents are increasingly turning to sites to find individuals with similar interests. Some would attribute this as a response to feelings of isolation and alienation, which can be exacerbated during adolescence. The importance of examining and analyzing the messages and meanings behind the content and the user on social networking sites would offer valuable insights into an increasingly popular medium for communication and expression.

1.3 Statement of Purpose

The aim of my research was to gain a greater understanding of the uses of online social spaces among at-risk adolescents. The alternate high school I worked at was an ideal venue to conduct a case study due to the unique population and mandate of the school. At Pathways Secondary, the majority of students were referred by District counsellors or staff and had struggled socially, academically, and behaviourally in other schools as evidenced by formal reports (suspensions, expulsions, etc.). Through an in-depth analysis, my goal was to describe and address some of the complex issues associated with online social networking sites among marginalized adolescents as a forum in which users explored their self-identities. Within the context of this study, I used the following two terms, ‘at-risk’ and ‘marginalized,’ to describe the community of adolescents at the school. Pasco (2003) lists the family, as well as social and personal
factors for identifying such students. At-risk students’ lives are marked by a range of negative school experiences; they have been shown to have lowered levels of school interests and school histories characterized by decreased levels of achievement and increased behavioural problems. These students also struggle with drug addictions, home, health and relationship issues. They are caught in self-destructive entrenched patterns. These are further exasperated by school difficulties and translated into cycles of suspensions and other punitive measures which have the effect of streaming such students out of schools. By the time such students enter secondary school, many have constructed a seemingly fixed negative self-concept. In some cases the online space provides a peer group, reinforcing and perpetuating the current role they are ‘performing.’

This study examines whether online social networking spaces like Nexopia offer such adolescents an extended community and present alternative venues for adolescents to explore parts of their self-identities, typically avoided and neglected by cultural institutions like family and school.

1.4 Significance

The significance of this case study within a secondary school context is that it offers a unique perspective on the importance of adapting and understanding various discourses for marginalized adolescents. It adds further insight into students’ personal formation of self-identity and the attachments students construct around school cultures. As a reading teacher working directly with at-risk students who are perceived to have distorted self-images and reference points, my intent was to gain a greater awareness of
the factors involved in constructing self-identity online and the transfer of it within an educational setting. I wanted to learn more about the literacy strengths of students and understand the relationship to media in students' lives. The study explored technology as a venue for constructing meaning and examined the relationships between users, images and text.

1.5 Organization of Thesis

The following chapters outline the methodology, literature review, description and analysis of the study, and recommendations arising from the study. Chapter 2 describes the choice of methodology and the challenges of the interview process. In Chapter 3 I review literature that focuses on the uses of online social spaces among adolescents and the relationship to identity exploration. Chapter 4 discusses student responses to the interview questions. I also analyze the findings from the interviews and relate them to key concepts within the literature. Finally, in Chapter 5 I discuss the implications of the findings and offer recommendations within a secondary school alternate educational setting for understanding how space construction drives adolescents to negotiate changes in development and the knowledge educators can bring into the classroom regarding media and culture and the desire for meaning.
Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

Case study was used because it offered a unique firsthand look at information. In this situation, marginalized students provided direct knowledge and experience of a phenomenon generally limited to online anonymous responses. Students spoke candidly, without fear of judgement or the restriction to a focused set of questions. The levels of description and analysis within the case study made it the most ideal methodological approach.

The primary aim was to gain a greater understanding of the uses of social spaces among at-risk adolescents. I also had three additional objectives: to determine whether social networking sites offered at-risk adolescents an extended venue to explore parts of self-identity; to examine how and why at-risk adolescent experiences influence the disclosure of specific topics; to identify and analyze what types of impression-management techniques do at-risk adolescents use on their social spaces.

In the study, I conducted one-to-one interviews with five male and five female adolescents at an alternate secondary school; these interviewees will be described as participants. Many of the students live independently, in foster care or group homes. Students from grades eight to twelve were offered the opportunity to participate through an initial recruitment letter. Those who participated expressed interest and contacted me, after which an Initial Contact Letter, Subject Assent Form, and Consent Form were sent.
home. Once the parental approval forms were submitted, participants blocked times to meet before, during and after school. The interviews were completed at the end of the school year, after a hectic rescheduling, as many times participants failed to show up. Interviews ran anywhere from twenty to sixty minutes depending on the length of the online space. A set of sixty-nine guiding questions focused each interview. The questions were based on the five research questions. All the participants were videotaped and audiotaped and later I transcribed all the interviews into 240 pages of student data.

2.2 Research Questions

The purpose of my research was to gain a greater understanding of how adolescents aged 14-17 use online networking social spaces. Five questions led my research:

1. What are the motivating factors involved in the design and use of online social space representation for marginalized adolescents?

2. How is identity exploration related to marginalized adolescents’ choice of representation on Nexopia?

3. What influences multimedia choice in online social spaces among marginalized adolescents?

2. What meanings of self and social identity do marginalized adolescents construct through their social presence online?

3. To whom are statements intended? What role does social validation from online and offline peers play in online presentations of self-identity for marginalized adolescents?
2.3 Methodology

Riva & Galimberti (2001) discuss the social context of the Internet and the negotiation between the user and the different situations encountered that, "the only way to understand it is by analyzing the subjects involved in it, and in the environment in which they operate, meaning that the social context in which the Internet experience occurs plays a crucial role" (p. 2). The authors speak to the importance of examining the relationship between the user and online space. This is comprised of many dynamic and complex internal and external beliefs and assumptions; principal among them is the social association in online interactions. A relationship is present and what is embedded within it becomes the analysis.

Within social situations, the case study can be used to investigate alternate versions of reality. It is descriptive and consequently invites interpretation from different readers. Its appeal to me was that it is relational, integrative and aligned with discourse analysis. This case study allowed me as a researcher to "probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 106). It offered a way to probe the most in-depth information of a unique phenomenon or particular situation, in this case a personal social online space. I needed to use a methodology that was interactive and inclusive for a marginalized and sensitive population of at-risk adolescents. Wilson (2006) further emphasizes that "the integration of ethnographic methods, both traditional (offline and face-to-face) and virtual, can be helpful in developing rich and comprehensive understandings of relationships between online and offline cultural life, and for examining the diffuse
character of youth culture and resistance” (p. 309). The study of user interests was central in my task and it required a different degree of familiarity with the participant.

My starting assumption was that online social spaces were personal, so I knew that this understanding dictated a need for greater sensitivity on the researcher’s part. My prior relationship as a teacher helped gain access to adolescent motives and intentions in social space construction. Individual interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format. This choice of formats allowed for the natural flow of discussion. Interviews were conducted between the participants and me, as I assumed that this situation would be more likely to result in individual responses unbounded by the pressures of group situations or detached questionnaires. Focused criteria were used with the recordings to structure the qualitative data. I coded transcriptions according to theme and question response and later analyzed them based on this structure.

2.4 Participants

Ten adolescent participants, five males and five females, were interviewed at depth to examine how their social online spaces were used. Participants provided detailed anecdotal information and reflected on the construction and social engagement of online spaces. Within present research, very few studies have used interviews when examining social online spaces. Access to adolescents can be a challenge and the empirical dimensions of collecting data can be difficult, especially when accessing marginalized groups. My former presence in the school, along with my prior relationship with students, allowed for greater participation as I had initially double the number of participants express interest in being interviewed. I visited each of the classrooms and
discussed the intent of the case study and handed out Recruitment Notices. Participants were required to have an active Nexopia web space and had to have logged into their account within six months of the case study starting. This ensured consistency and reliability to the online spaces.

Twenty students collected the package of forms to be signed by parents, which included the Initial Letter of Consent, Subject Assent Form and Consent Form. The forms stated that all data would be confidential and privacy would be ensured. The interviews were labelled with a randomly selected number and erased later according to UBC’s Policy #85 of data storage and destruction. Half of the participants who expressed interest did not return the forms and thus were screened out by their own omission. The remainder of the students were very eager to begin the interviews and came to me daily to check on the status of the project and to ensure they had blocked in times to be interviewed. As the interviews progressed it became more challenging to meet with participants as they regularly missed interview times. I had to block in times at lunch and schedule students immediately after school. The participants ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen. Some had been using a social networking space for years, others for less than a year. I wanted to have an equal number of each gender and, as noted previously, they naturally screened themselves through the delivery of the consent documents. Additionally, some potential participants were in foster care or in the care of an adult who was not their guardian and thus could not participate. One young girl could not get her father to sign her forms due to the instability of their relationship and after several attempts gave up. The male participants were Aidan, Liam, Niko, Blain and Desmond.
The female participants were Naomi, Tabitha, Kandice, Chantel and Sydnee. Names were changed to ensure confidentiality.

2.5 Procedure

I had to request approval from the District School Board and my submission included the District’s Research Application Form, my Research Proposal, Recruitment Notice, Consent Form, Initial Contact Letter with Participants and the Interview Questions. These were submitted on March 28, 2007. The regulations of the district stated that all documents are “evaluated by the District Administrator [and then] referred to the relevant principal and district staff for their review of the educational value of the research” (Policy Manual, 1980, p.1). On the same day I emailed my proposal to the school’s principal, he approved it in person. On April 20, 2007, I received approval via email from the District’s Executive Assistant of Human Resources.

I submitted my proposal to UBC’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board on March 28, 2007. On May 1, 2007 and subsequently on May 11, 2007, I was asked to make provisos, and on May 17, 2007 a Certificate of Approval was issued. Following this, I discovered that the District had blocked Nexopia and this prevented me from interviewing the participants: “Nexopia.com is actually blocked at the internet gateway not the local router. This was a global block placed on all PLNet internet users by the ministry of education” (personal communication, May 2, 2007).

I contacted the school’s principal along with the District’s Coordinator of Instructional Services who directed me to the District’s Business Systems Technician. He told me to submit all of the original documents to him on May 8, 2007. One week
later, the site was accessible. Following this, I set up an interview schedule with the ten participants.

Among the participants, the oldest male was eighteen and the youngest was fifteen. The oldest female was also eighteen and the youngest was sixteen. The total number of years the participants had maintained their social online spaces varied, the average being two years. One youth proudly declared his early relationship to the site,

There’s 1, 054,271 users and I was user 1061 so that’s how much it has grown in the past three years and that’s pretty insane. In like three years, a million people and like when I used to be on here I knew everyone on the entire site and like it’s grown so, like rapidly, like I told like one person in Northgate, like to my knowledge, like to all of my knowledge I was like, when I came on there was like three people that lived in Northgate and I’d used to show my friends and they’d show their friends and I pretty well guarantee I’m responsible for a couple thousand of people getting on, getting on this website.

Liam immediately declared this to me when he started his interview. He expressed pride in the growth and popularity of the online site and was eager to discuss his relationship to the site.

What I found extremely challenging was the number of times participants cancelled or did not show up for interviews. I had to constantly reschedule interview times. I met with the participants in the school’s computer room and later in a separate office. The noise of youth outside the room and the need for other students to be able to use the computer room made it difficult to meet with the participants. It was impossible to interview the participants while other students were using the room, so I had to move
to an adjacent office with my laptop. I set up the video and audiotape for each interview and transcribed each shortly after recording. The interview questions were organized according to the research questions as I sequentially posed each of them to the participants. Questions were generated from myself, along with previous studies of online identity exploration (Papacharissi, 2000; Rosenstein, 2000). For example, in discussing meanings of self and social identity as constructed on social spaces online, I asked the following questions:

- What kinds of connections are there between your page and who you are outside of the page?
- What do you want people who see your page to think about you?
- How would your page define you?
- What parts of your page are your own creations vs. those taken from other individuals/artists?
- How has having a page affected your social relationships?
- Do you have many friendships?
- How do you think your friends see your page?
- Do they influence your homepage content?
- Is it important for your friends to interact with your page and leave a message?

I asked a total of sixty-nine questions (see Appendix A) and the time interviewing each participant took on average two half-hour sessions. The larger the online space (with more multimedia), the longer the interview took. Length differed as well, with
most participants averaging nine pages of content. The largest was forty pages and the smallest was two pages.

2.6 Limitations

Only once was a participant reluctant to discuss an image on his online space, as it was extremely sexually explicit. The remainder of the participants appeared to openly describe the imagery and text and shared personal details of their lives as evidenced in the transcriptions. Participants wanted to ensure confidence due to the sensitive nature of the content of the web pages. The participants discussed their activities that parents or other authorities were unaware of in terms of duration (i.e., drug use), possession (i.e., drugs, weapons) or association (gang affiliation). My relationship and role within the school could have had both beneficial and limiting effects. For some participants there was an increased level of comfort and trust and for others there may have been an adverse effect. They may have seen me as an authoritative body and thus have been less likely to share online and offline details for fear of disclosure. I did, however, notice that participants revealed and described personal experiences regardless of gender.

2.7 Population

The participants were self-selected from a school of 134 students. The secondary alternate school in Northgate, BC serviced youth between the ages of 13 and 17. The school worked specifically with youth who had a range of behavioural and learning difficulties. Eighty-eight of the school’s population had Ministry designated behavioural
diagnoses and thirty percent had learning disability designations. The school had a small Aboriginal population (9%).

2.8 Setting

Northgate is composed of Northgate Rural and Northgate Township with a total of 125,000 residents. The school district has 7 secondary and 29 elementary schools and 19,874 students. The school where the case study was conducted was the only alternate public school in the district. It opened in September 1996 with 31 students and current enrolment stands at 134 students.

The school was located on a busy downtown street and was bordered by a number of small businesses and mixed income rental properties. The school was housed in two buildings. An older heritage building contained four classrooms along with a music room, weight room and woodwork room. A second, newer, building contained the main office, gymnasium and three additional classrooms. Two portables were also on site; one was used as a classroom and the other for group therapy. Two extra programs operated in the latter: one serviced the integration of youth on-probation into school and the other was an after school addictions and counselling program for enrolled and non-enrolled students.

The school staffed six enrolling teachers and three non-enrolling teachers. Two full-time special education assistants and six full-time family support workers also worked in classrooms. In addition, the school had a half-time drug and alcohol coordinator. An adjacent program operating within the school employed another half time coordinator and youth worker.
Students attended school from 9:15 am to 2:15 pm. There were four scheduled curricular blocks in the day. Along with these blocks students also participated in individual counselling, group addictions and identity development lessons. The school provided free snacks in the mornings and at breaks and students paid a fee for daily hot lunches. After school, students could participate in a number of culture clubs which ranged from mountain biking, wrestling, music training, and extra academic tutorials.

Chapter Three explores a number of concepts within the literature related to online presentations. Online self-presentation is threaded into socialization, idealized and exaggerated conceptions of self-identity are prominent among adolescents. As well, the desire to cultivate and colonize a space for expression is common.
Chapter 3
Review of Literature

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the increasingly interactive relationship adolescents participate in with media. This relationship is unique as it has become an instrument to explore and manage identity within a contained environment. The effect is control and regulation of one’s self-identity in relation to others. For at-risk adolescents self-presentation is an open door of sorts to examine self-identity against sources of authority. The monopolization of a space to reveal aspects of self-identity traditionally restricted in public environments is very enticing and empowering. Online spaces present youth who are constrained by external influence with an outlet both to express themselves and assess themselves against peers. They are places to share experiences, reflect on challenges and connect to likeminded peers. One of the participants, Aidan, described his need to ‘fit in’ through the deliberate construction of his social networking space over time. He explained the change in his representation as it aligned more with him: “When I was in grade seven I thought I had to appeal to everybody. You know, I had to have the booze on there, the hot chick, and the weed cause that’s probably what everybody else has right but you know when you really start like, getting like, I’m still young now but in like all my years I figured out it’s more important to stay true to yourself then to stay true to everybody else”. Adolescent relationships with media are becoming more intimate and, as a result, more manipulated, as the following section describes. In the interview findings, I expand on the questions regarding the level of manipulation and accuracy.
3.2 Reciprocal Role with Media

Adolescents have a reciprocal role with media. They interact with them and partially use them for the emotions they evoke. Youth alignment with media provides identification within a group and removes feelings of estrangement, which can be prevalent during adolescence. Marginalized adolescents sometimes use media as a form of liberation from mainstream norms. They use media to perpetuate personal and social discourses, which in some cases are oppositional to institutional norms of conformity. Further to this, youth identities presented online at times become a form of validation and resistance for adolescents who feel alienated from mainstream standards of success. Many adolescents recognize the power of belonging to an online group and are attuned to the audience effect of their associations.

Online adolescents will experiment with personal identity. By identity, I refer to Wood & Smith's (2005) definition of "a complex personal and social construct, consisting in part of who we think ourselves to be, how we wish others to perceive us, and how they actually perceive us" (p. 52). In a safe, contained environment adolescents express aspects of self-identity. Media forms of exploration have extended what traditionally has been confined to external dress, behaviour, and other formal and accepted expressions of self-identity. All of this occurs in relation to peer and social interactions.

Representation of self-identity is motivated by a number of underlying variables. In the construction of social online spaces, the most common tactic involves ingratiating oneself with the audience as the fastest way to achieve acceptance and receive social
validation from the peer group. The importance of control and management of self-identity online becomes all the more essential (Papacharissi, 2002; Stern, 2004; Valkenburg, Schouten & Peter, 2005). Within social online spaces, textual and visual design elements are purposely constructed to produce group impressions. Impressions are tactics young people use to create favourable personal projections (deCerteau, 1984).

In seeking to present such projections, adolescents online lean towards an idealized version of self-identity. Social spaces allow and even encourage users to explore aspects of self-identity normally denied by society. Technological advances have had the effect of shifting cultural, social and developmental changes within adolescent years. Some youth have automatic access to a larger disconnected community and can choose how they want to utilize that access. Youth on social networking sites are aware of the need to belong and align with specific groups and associations. Awareness of the social sphere of presentation is constant and has an effect on how one deliberates on the adaptive impact of conceptualizing a sense of self-identity.

3.3 Nexopia

Nexopia was created in 2001 and is a Canadian-based social networking site. As an online social space, it enables users to ‘gather together’ in a common space where they can connect with familiar and new users. Within Nexopia, users aged 14 and higher create profiles online. Additional services like forums, comment areas and private messages allow visitors and users to interact. Currently, the site contains 912,479 accounts (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nexopia). The number of users in any given day averages anywhere from 2500 to 7000 (http://www.big-boards.com/board/856/).
The site identifies guidelines for online space construction. For example, once an individual logs on and creates an online space, moderators review it before it is publicly posted. According to user rules posted on the site’s main page, moderators examine all posted images. “The rule of thumb used by picture and content moderators is that if it is not allowed in public, it is not allowed on the site” (www.nexopia.com). The site states that anything that is perceived as racist, violent, or sexualized is prohibited. It contains a number of forums, among the most popular of which are the Teens, Attention Seekers and Sex forums. Users can also create their own forum, gallery and personal blog. An additional cost feature, Nexopia Plus, allows users to customize webpage and profile features.

According to adolescents aged 14-17, 75% of them use the Internet for three main reasons: leisure, information, and social purposes (Pew Research Centre, 2002). Ninety six percent of students aged nine to seventeen access social networking spaces online and their time spent on such spaces is equal to that spent watching television (NSBA study, 2007). Communicative reasons have become common, with more adolescents accessing sites to create blogs and webpages and to participate in forums or chat groups. The design and use of social online spaces can serve different functions. For example, some adolescents want to connect with peers, find others who share related interests, experiment with aspects of self-identity typically discouraged by present institutions. The effect of these varied goals is that adolescents have taken on three interconnected roles: consumer, producer and audience. The interaction and interplay between each is complex and diverse, depending on orientation and alignment with adolescent development theories. Petric (2006) states that three elements are present for Internet
use: purpose, factors, and consequences. The author presents a typology where individual reasons for using the Internet are divided by whether they are communicative or strategic; the latter is used to persuade others. In the subjective world where speech is governed by individual experiences, a person uses the Internet as either a self-presentation or misrepresentation device, with this goal in mind—the individual intends to achieve something and fulfill a need. The following describes some of the research exploring the reasons behind adolescent presentation in online social spaces.

3.4 Self-socialization

Arnett (1995) examines how adolescents use media for self-socialization, gender role exploration and youth culture affiliation. Youth explore their identity and gender, and ideal images of what it means to be a man or a woman are transferred through multimedia constructions. These become a base for accepting or challenging constructed norms (Arnett, 1995; Stern, 2004). The degree to which adolescents are able to exert personal control over media choices increases their attraction to it as a socialization agent. Arnett, Larsen & Offer (1995) commonly refer to the uses and gratification model, which stresses the different responses users acquire through media interaction. The model explains how individual characteristics, including self-socialization, affect the goals and reasons the media is used. The effect of this is that adolescents will use the media as far as they receive a satisfying response from it. They must receive something in order to use it for their own means. The rise and popularity of social networking sites addresses the need for socialization and communication.
Greenfield & Yan (2006) contend that for adolescents the central reason for Internet use is communicative purposes. The authors discuss how the need to explore identity during adolescence is a developmental task. The popularity and access to various media forms like the Internet has consequently influenced adolescent experimentation with different media. They are able to use the Internet not only to acquire knowledge but also to experiment with different aspects of self-identity. The authors go on to emphasize that the social context of the Internet should be examined, as it is the backdrop for meaning construction and manipulation among adolescents. Willis (1990) further explains that, “young people have not only learnt the codes [in media], but have learnt to play with interpreting the codes, to reshape forms, to interrelate the media through their own grounded aesthetics. They add and develop new meanings from given ones” (p. 30). This concept of reshaping within the individual context is important as new digital forms and alternate aesthetic spaces emerge. Most of the research I reviewed suggests that youth seek places for expressing their experiences of different social and personal relationships. Their use of media is extensive and intricate and online social spaces represent an outlet for such expressions.

Research also reported that some adolescents are interested in media due to the high sensation of feelings it evokes. Youth identify with the intense imagery constructed through genres like music and film and align themselves with specific artists and actors. Through media, adolescents find common allies in individuals who share their interests (Larson, 1995; Maczewski, 2002; Matsuba, 2006; Valkenburg et al., 2005). Cultural groups are formed and maintained and, within groups, adolescents can safely explore self-identity as the likelihood of rejection is decreased.
Arnett (1995) provides the example of oppositional adolescents seeking like-minded peers and alternate media forms that “give voice to their alienation and [their] group identity” (p. 525). Relationships are thus established and media acts as a socialization agent for adolescents to accept, resist or reject cultural norms. Moinian (2006) discusses the connection of youth online presentation topics generally avoided by larger institutions like the school and family. This study supports other research that contends that youth use media to create a space for the discussion of subversive topics (Fung, 2002; Mitra, 2001).

Research also contends that marginalized individuals purposely challenge power institutions with the intent of achieving some inner emancipation. Examining how disadvantaged individuals use online social spaces as a form of liberation against existing power structures would expand current knowledge of Internet use. For example, research connecting literacy and identity describes how students struggling with reading and/or writing typically align themselves with one of two identities: the hero and the rebel. In short, the rebel is the student who views the literacy discourse as a form of power and status and rejects it due to the values and beliefs which are associated with it. From this position, accepting institutional norms and the academic discourse is ‘selling out’ and students have a vested interest in maintaining ‘resistance.’ Research also suggests that any educational attempt to ‘fit’ students into the mainstream only further alienates them (Williams, 2003b; Williams, 2005). Sociocultural factors influence home, school and community discourses. Gee (2001) defines discourse as “a sort of ‘identity kit,’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognise” (p. 526).
Williams (2005) describes the challenges adolescents are confronted with when they gain mastery in one discourse and the effect it has on other competing discourses. Issues like cultural capital and power further impact the discourse experience and transition between different competing worlds. Fung (2002) clarifies, “It is more important to reveal how the practices of the minority group constitute a form of resistance to the pressures of normalization” (p. 200). Exploring broader concepts of context and culture within the framework of Internet use is essential. Mitra (2001) examines immigrant use of the Internet and the renegotiation of identities online. Oppressed individuals create dialogue with dominant members online in a quest for acknowledgement. New narratives are created. From this, members can distance themselves from stereotyped constructions created by the dominant group. Therefore, new identities emerge. Killoran (2003) agrees: “the personal homepage can be read not just for its particular autobiographical details but for how it struggles to present in public someone denied such status” (p. 66). Examining how marginalized adolescents use social online spaces will further clarify the connection between present narratives and peer recognition.

McKenna & Bargh (2000) found that marginalized individuals' benefit and receive encouragement within an online group normally unavailable in their offline lives. Adolescents receive approval and identify with parts of themselves formerly rejected by society (McKenna & Bargh, 1988). Participants in online Internet groups value membership and recognize the influential power of group norms over member behaviour. As participation increased in McKenna & Bargh’s study, so did the positive feedback similarly with negative feedback, participation online decreased with participants. In earlier research, McKenna & Bargh (1999) formulate a framework for social interaction
online based on the needs of an individual (the needs are either individually or socially connected). The three phases they describe in the framework initially establish the driving motivations of the user and then are subdivided by what occurs online and later the consequences in their offline life. For example, individuals with stigmatized identities are more likely to disclose secrets online and expose their idealized selves — as a result, they experience less isolation and greater self-acceptance. McKenna & Bargh (1988) also conducted a study of marginalized individuals and found the disclosure of one’s identity online led to individual acceptance of a particular identity. Stern (2003) studied adolescent female self-expressions on homepages and found that, “the girls used the various formats of each section to either affiliate themselves with or distance themselves from certain public identities. These self-presentation tactics suggested that the girls were still grappling with how they wished others to view them” (p.3). Through the use of specific graphic and textual representations youth express aspects of their unique selves. Giese (1998) noted that the use of such features “is analogous to clothes and body language in ordinary face-to-face conversation” (p. 9). Such choices are purposeful and directed. Affiliation to an identity and subsequent disclosure to a specific audience are addressed later in the findings from the present case study.

Walker (2000) distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic uses of homepages. In the case of extrinsic pages, the students know their audience. In the case of intrinsic homepage construction, the students create for an unknown audience and are more aware of making a general impression. Consequently, they tailor pages for their intended audience. In this case, introductions online are more detailed and descriptive and include individual photos and bookmarks with links divulging certain aspects of their identity,
and audience counters are present. Walker determined that user's recognize and admit that identity plays a role in the construction of their homepage. However, for those individuals who created extrinsic pages, they saw their pages "not as a reconfirmation of identity, but strictly as new bulletins" (p. 109). In these cases, individuals tend to post photos with friends. The relationship with the audience plays a large role in how users manage homepages.

Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop (2004) suggest that future research of Internet usages of marginalized members should include the following factors: "type of group, kind of individual vs. shared community experience, perception of what is considered meaningful by different users, purpose and role of the internet in achieving particular agendas, types of applications of internet use and different 'problem-solving' situations in which the internet is applied" (p. 795). I also used a situated approach to examine the context of online social spaces in order to participate in and add to the discourse.

3.5 Identity Role Experimentation

Stern's (2004) study offers further insights into the relationship between personal webpage construction and adolescent identity exploration. Online homepages are presented as an extenuation of an adolescent's offline self-disclosure practices. The analogy of a locker was applied as adolescents created a space to explore who they want to be, and how they want others to see them. This dual-role, as described by Greensfield & Yan (2006) also involves the individual in social communications with others, thereby having an impact on him/herself in addition to affecting others' social environment (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006; Talamo & Ligorio, 2001; Walker, 2000).
Self-expression and clarification are fostered in an online environment; however, the preoccupation is with how others (audience) interact with individual content, and the relationship to media engagement remains unexplored. My study will add further insight into the phenomena of dual roles online.

In relation to audience communications, Stern (2004) theorizes the feedback systems in place on homepages both allow visitors opportunities to communicate and provide more substantial support than adolescents receive offline. As well, when individuals feel inhibited by their offline experiences they turn online for a peer group that supports the exploration of different roles and expectations. McKenna & Bargh (2000) argue, “This ability to carve out different identities or roles may be particularly important for those who are role poor (i.e., they have self-defining roles and identities) and for those who feel important aspects of their identity are constrained in the relationships they maintain in the non-Internet world” (p. 63). If individuals cannot explore different roles within the context of their present peer groups, they can ultimately use the Internet as another resource. Qualifying how the Internet is used in an offline context is difficult due to access to participants.

Lloyd (2002) suggests that media like the Internet “provide new opportunities for learning appropriate and inappropriate socio-cultural behaviours and practicing these new behaviours cognitively without risking peer rejection” (p.75). Examining adolescent identity formation in relation to Internet interaction must encompass larger ecological and contextual aspects. Lloyd goes on to propose AIMSS: An Integrated Framework for Examining Identity, Media, and Sociocognitive Schemas. Within this framework are macro and micro components like family, cultural and political forces. The meaning of
the mediating structure, like the Internet, interacts with the individual’s self-identity and the outsider’s perceptions of the structure. The purpose is to achieve social competence during adolescence. How adolescents perceive others (family/peers), along with their own selves requires ongoing examination and refinement of behaviours and ways of thinking (Turkle, 2004). Lloyd discusses the reactive and proactive social schemata which the adolescent uses as he or she arranges observations from the social environment. For example, in the application of a proactive social schema, the use of a “positive or adaptive framework would lead to a successful navigation of key challenges of the developmental period. In contrast, the reactive social schema would reflect a tendency to organize perceptions of the social environment based on maladaptive components” (p. 86).

Walker (2000) explores identity development roles online and concludes, “Whether people list their titles and roles, tell stories about themselves, or present themselves as embedded in a network of interests and activities, they are locating themselves and their biographies in a context, arranging the details of their biographies into an identity ‘repertoire,’ and allowing others to see and react to this presentation” (p. 105). Locating oneself in relation to and alongside others is thus part of one’s identification.

3.6 Self-Presentation: Online and Offline Disclosure

Exactly to what degree are adolescents attempting to exert control over representations of self-identity on homepages to other like peers? Dominick (1999) defines self-presentation as, “the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions
others have of them" (p. 647). Jones (1990) identifies five strategies used: ingratiation, competence, intimidation, exemplification and supplication. Each of these is used to varying degrees, some are more prominent at different development periods, and all are connected to environmental factors. Dominick (1999) examines tactics for self-presentation used in websites and concludes that homepages predominantly use ingratiation. In this situation, the participants’ intention is to obtain the acceptance and approval of online peers. In the analysis of my case study I return to ingratiation as a technique for audience regulation. Boortree (2005) examines girls’ weblogs and concludes that the users sought acceptance from their online peers through their blogs. Effective self-presentation requires an understanding of the audience, and the study conducted by Dominick (1999) concludes that the participants found ways to investigate who visited their sites, the use of guestbooks and other page items geared towards this purpose.

Extending the understanding of impressions, Schlenker & Weigold (1992) explore impression management and define it as “the seminal idea that people attempt to regulate and control, sometimes consciously and sometimes without awareness, information they present to audiences, particularly information about themselves... people’s agendas systematically influence how they prefer to interpret events and how they package information for consumption by audiences” (p. 134). Those internal agendas can be difficult to identify as individuals are continually presenting and limiting information as evidenced later in the analysis of the present case study. Schlenker & Weigold (1992) explore the motives behind impression regulation and identify three reasons: self-glorification, self-consistency, and self-authentication. Self-glorification occurs as a result of individual attempts to maintain and promote self-esteem. Instinctively,
individuals seek positive evaluations of themselves and these are achieved through self-regulation. Further to this is the presentation of possible selves and ideal selves, which “act as guides or scripts for self-presentational activities, specifying what should and should not be done” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 139). Compensations are made if any limitations exist in attempts to bolster the self-identity to others. The authors explain that threats to the self or personally important areas will typically be bolstered.

Second, with a motive of self-consistency individuals will attempt to maintain current self-conceptions regardless of their negative nature. This is achieved through the use of “private and public strategies, including selective processing and recall of confirmatory information, selective affiliation with others who provide confirmatory feedback, and public self-presentation designed to evoke confirmatory responses from others” (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992, p.140).

Finally, the motive of self-authentication applies if there are benefits when evaluation of the self occurs, especially when this analysis is accurate. Thus individuals will seek out confirmatory evidence of their self-portrayals. Self-identification requires three parts: the individual, the audience and the situation. Each of these interacts with the other and is manifested in different ways. Schlenker & Weigold (1992) explore the desirable identity which requires an element of believability and beneficial status. The degree to which self-identification takes place depends upon whether there are positive consequences from the believability, the existence of features that decrease any potential negative consequences of disbelief and of other features that increase the chance of audience belief. I return to the feature of desirability in the analysis for the present case study.
Individuals will employ a number of different methods to reach their desired outcomes, regardless of whether they are positive or negative in nature. Schlenker & Weigold clarify that “people do not merely want to present themselves positively; people aim to accomplish goals, and these goals may involve modest or even unflattering self-presentations” (p. 144). There are also obligations associated with any self-presentation, and if an individual bolsters their representation they have expectations which may be unobtainable. Realistic and verifiable expectations of self-identity are presented. These expectations are always contextually-based. Different audiences have different expectations thus the application of possible selves becomes a necessity. A youth expressing a street identity online will likely differ greatly from that same youth writing a science test in school. Self-presentations will vary based on the desired outcomes for each context. This is not to say that identity is constantly in flux, but rather that accommodations are made based on self-beliefs. These accommodations were central in my case study. Schlenker & Weigold explain three ways that self-beliefs are linked to self-presentation, among them the idea that individuals will only claim to possess characteristics that can be confirmed. In the same vein, beliefs act as a filter of sorts and screen out qualities that cannot be verified.

The common understanding is that people accurately and honestly present themselves. However as Schlenker & Weigold (1992) point out, “translating the vast stores of information about oneself in memory into a compact form that seems to be representative of the whole and that others can comprehend and accept requires considerable skill in role taking and acting” (p. 146). It requires deliberate, concise and managed effort. There are two styles of self-presentation, acquisitive and protective. The
latter is used to avoid negative effects and the individual works from a defensive position, evading social situations and circumstances where self-disclosure might be necessary. On the other hand, acquisitive self-presentation is used to attain desired outcomes. In this case, individuals initiate and use social situations to advance their goals.

During adolescence, peer validation is crucial and self-disclosure is used in an effort to gain approval and acceptance. The absence of judgement from authorities reduces the inhibitions and normative risks typically involved. Stern (2004) explains how the Internet has virtually removed old notions around reciprocity in sharing information, as users can now disclose personal information without having an established relationship. This has become prevalent with online social networking sites and the remixing of content. Self-publishing has also changed disclosure norms. According to Stern, “home pages require only a communicator, but do not obligate a recipient” (p. 221). However, other researchers have argued that a recipient is always present, though not always physically. Physical and emotional proximity are additional factors. Stern analyzes homepage content and suggests, “home pages may both stimulate and supplement traditional (offline) forms for self-disclosure” (p. 238).

Adolescent self-disclosure serves a number of functions. Youths use it to increase their social control, clarify personal values and beliefs, express notions of self-identity, and enrich relationships (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). The Social Identity Theory of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) was developed to explain self-disclosure. This theory has been used to examine how a group follows norms when the group’s sense of social relations are generally cohesive and individuals give in to social compliance. If the norms of the group dictate self-disclosure then the group members will self-disclose and
this is especially the case in computer-mediated situations where participants have no
history and are afforded a certain degree of anonymity. The diminishment of personal
identity falls in line with anti-social behaviours. What occurs online is that users are
forced to rely on the few remaining cues, which are generally social. The result of this
lack of visual cues is an increased stereotyping of individuals online as the personal
becomes the social (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). Dietz-Uhler et al (2005) describe this
norm of reciprocity as a situation where, if one discloses, others will assume it is the
norm and they will also disclose personal information based on this assumption. As long
as the results are positive, participants will continue to self-disclose. Dietz-Uhler et al
(2005) explain that this behaviour is predicated on the need to be liked by other members
of the group. The interactive characteristics of digital social spaces also increase the
group members’ sense of significance and have a tendency to result in group conformity
due to a lack of individuating information among the people in the group.

On the other hand, the importance of social validation amongst the online group
members can sometimes prevent adolescents from disclosing their interests. For
example, Stern (2004) reports intimate topics like violence, drugs/alcohol and sex are
referenced least on homepages. This may also be attributed to the sociocultural group to
which the adolescents are attached as the opposite was encountered in my findings. Stern
(2004) notes that a lack of experience with intimate topics is an indicator of a personal
reflective absence within homepages. From an educational perspective, I am curious to
know if factors like personal history and experiences could positively influence the
disclosure of meaningful and relevant topics. Are there benefits for adolescents who
experience violence to reveal such experiences or affiliations on homepages? To what degree do themes of power influence homepage reflections among adolescents?

Although it seems counter-intuitive, some research reports that youth use their online presence to gain greater management and control over the projection of their sense of self-identity in relationship to others. Valkenburg et al. (2005) conclude that the strongest motive for identity experimentation among adolescents was related to audience reaction, and that girls and younger adolescents seem to engage in greater experimentation. Stern (2004) analyzes descriptions from adolescent homepages and relates how youth may be more attuned to presentations of their self-identity offline. She states, “home pages were not maintained simply for the benefit of their authors, but also for (and because of) the potential audience” (p. 238).

In a related study, Gibbs et al. (2006), using a social information processing theory, found that the time-lag in online presentations provided users with more opportunities to be selective, and that the impact of potential future interactions also affected the degree of self-disclosure between individuals. In addition, the lack of nonverbal cues forced participants to rely on other remaining communication cues. Another factor was that youth with long-term online goals disclosed more personal history. Their ability to use “language, content and timing” was essential to achieving personal goals (Walther et al., 2001, p. 108). For this study I found it might be useful to examine adolescent future associations in relation to their short or long-term intentions online.

Maczewski (2002) relays the importance of examining offline lives in relation to online lives and concludes that each is interconnected and serves a variety of needs and purposes. McMillan & Morrison (2006) discuss how offline experiences were managed
in part by online experiences. Overall, online dialogue was used to enhance offline relations and communications—the fluid nature of each is suggested. In a Multi-User Domain (MUD) analysis for preadolescent children, Calvert, Mahler, Zehnder, Jenkins & Lee (2003) found that children's choice of name/avatar selection/role paralleled real life presentation. Research is emerging which definitively states adolescent presentations of self-identity online match offline presentation (Bargh et al, 2002; Giese, 1998; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Walker, 2000).

Huffaker & Calvert (2005) examine adolescents' use of blogs and suggest that feelings of empowerment encourage users to disclose personal information. The disclosure of self-identity is a form of personal expression represented through a system of language. Goffman (1959) differentiates between the performer and the audience and proposes that strategies are employed to engage with the audience. For example, when selecting text, media and links for a Webpage, the user's 'success' is judged by whether or not he or she communicates a sense of self-identity to others. Papacharissi (2002) concurs: "The Webpage creator executes a carefully controlled performance through which self-presentation is achieved under optimal conditions" (p. 644). In a study about social spaces, Papacharissi (2002) found design elements were used as nonverbal components of a website. Youth, according to Papacharissi, "seek to manage expressions given and given off in a manner that simulates offline interactions, to make this online performance more convincing and more satisfying" (p. 646). Online youth performance is an attempt to elevate social status by producing a public perception through their websites.

Youths use online social spaces to display their alignment with certain ideas and with other people. Textual elements might be used to accept, resist or oppose certain
social norms or to convey personal narratives. Dominick (1999) reports that online hyperlinks were also used by youth as a form of identification with other online users. They used links and graphical features on their webpages to reflect association or affiliation with certain groups. Hine (2001) explains that young designers of online social spaces must have knowledge of their audience as they construct their personal webpage. Webpages have a social function. They “can be thought of as performances in relation to both online and offline contexts, which are thoroughly imbued with understandings of what the technology is for and how it fits into the author’s institutional and personal goals” (Hine, 2001, p. 195). In this case the audience cannot be singularly defined. As contexts shift, so too will the audience which was true in the present case study.

It is important to consider the social contextual conditions associated with the use of social spaces when discussing conceptions of youth self-identity, social identity, and social relations in relationship to media. Waskul & Douglass (1997) emphasize the importance of examining the social contextual conditions of online interactions. Meanings and values are co-constructed based on relationships between and among people through a medium. Online social relations are new forms of human interactions, which are situated in unique contexts relative to face-to-face encounters. Wynn & Katz (1997) argue that “rather than fragmenting the self, personal homepages are attempts to integrate the individual, make a personal statement of identity, and show in a stable, replicable way what the individual stands for and what is deemed important” (p. 318).

In this study, I am interested in learning about the varying impression-management techniques employed by youth to create social spaces. Sherman, End, Kraan, Cole, Campbell, Klausner, & Birchmeier (2001) contends, “the author of a
homepage has a high degree of control over the self-image that is projected through the careful selection and arrangement of photographs and other graphical elements, as well as in the number and type of external links that can be chosen to convey interests, attitudes, values, and other personal qualities” (p. 124). These researchers reason that online social spaces are unilaterally presented, therefore removing dyadic meta-accuracy and focusing instead on generalized meta-accuracy. The former “refers to people’s ability to know how they are differentially regarded by other people, whereas generalized meta-accuracy refers to people’s ability to know how they are generally viewed by others in a particular audience” (p. 125). Through their analysis, Sherman et al. (2001) found users had limited knowledge about who was accessing their webpages, even if a particular site hosted them. Webpage designers make assumptions about their audience based upon a limited amount of information, which may or may not be accurate. In the case of Sherman et al., the webpage designers felt the audience had favourable impressions of their homepages, when in fact the opposite was found to be the case.

Adolescents tend to feel greater control is exerted over their lives when they select impressions to display to others online. If audience effect is salient among adolescents, then how and why does the absence of online physical and social cues encourage youth to adopt the display of an idealized self-identity?

3.7 Idealized Self

Turkle (2004) describes some of the appeal of computer activities for users. She states, “Being alone with a computer can be compelling for many different reasons. For some the computer as a solitary mirror offers the promise of perfection, the fantasy if you
do it right, it will do it right, and right away” (p.20). One is able to interact with others at
a distance, yet maintain a psychological connection. Expanding Erickson’s (1963) work
on identity formation, Marcia (1966, 1993) describes a psychosocial moratorium in
adolescence identity experimentation. During this moratorium, adolescents explore
different beliefs with the goal of developing their own views. This development is not
fixed and its purpose is to aid in the development of a core self. Turkle (2004) proposes
that current cultural practices have interrupted opportunities for youth to engage in the
moratorium time. Instead, the Internet has become a place where adolescents can explore
their developing identities. Markus & Nurius (1986) refer to possible selves in the same
vein as idealization. Implicit within the possible selves are the cognitive aspects of self-
knowledge which go unnoticed. The authors define these as, “the ideal selves that we
would very much like to become” (p. 954). These cognitive expressions of self-identity
include fears and hopes of the past and the future. The relevance of this is that behaviour
is influenced in part by the presented positive or negative outcomes of possible selves.
One effect is a linkage between motivation and self-concept. The authors go on to
clarify, “an individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of
possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individuals’ particular
sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided
by the media and by the individual’s immediate social experiences”(p. 954). They note
that external factors influence internal expressions. This relates to the locker analogy and
to social networking curiosity, the ability to communicate possible selves more readily
has become more accessible to the public. In McKenna & Bargh’s (2000) study the
researchers describe how young people present an idealized version of themselves when
they interact with unknown others: “it seems that on the Internet people are indeed seen as they wish to be seen” (p. 65). Individuals are driven to present an ideal self-identity because they acquire material or emotional rewards from doing so and they are able to assert an identity for themselves (Baumeister, 1988).

Walker (2000) discusses how the webpage designer displays an idealized image for others in relation to what is imagined. Online social spaces allow youth to explore idealized aspects of identity roles through the display and presentation of positioned narratives, where “affiliations with activities or broader communities function as identity statements” (p. 104). Giese (1998) identifies the emerging concept of cooperative narrative where the text written by the individual becomes accessible to all members of the community and negotiations are ongoing. Unspoken rules exist whereby members are expected to conform within the group. The same exists within offline relationships and settings. Drastic changes are infrequent, however, over time smaller changes may occur. The core self remains the same despite peripheral changes, so “one’s clothes may change as one moves from the office to the beach but one’s identity remains more-or-less constant as across these two contexts with appropriate modifications in dress and behaviour” (p. 23).

Tice, Butler, Muraven & Stillwell (1995) describe how strangers convey an idealized perception to other strangers upon meeting. If someone they knew was present the participants in the study were more likely to align their narrative of display with a more accurate sense of self-identity. Thus the presence of a known friend created a condition whereby inaccurate information might be refuted. Vazire & Gosling (2004) conclude that personal webpages reveal both an accurate and ideal self.

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Waskul & Douglass (1997) note that the social conditions of online interactions increase the likelihood of users creating multiple identities. The diffusion of social communicative systems alongside individual experiences has the potential to create increased displays of social identities. According to their research, "a self [is] presented, negotiated, and validated in an ongoing process of interaction" (p. 385). This can result in "cyberselves [which] are attempts at a 'true reflection' of 'who the person is'...the self is...a continuous product of a meaning-conferring process [which] emerges in the course of social interaction...Hence, situational elements are particularly central to the emergence, maintenance, and transformation of the cyberself" (Waskul & Douglass, 1997, p. 388).

Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino (2006) found that participants were less successful in establishing relationships when they revealed too much information through online personal displays. They briefly mention the external pressures individuals face, which force them in some respects to create an idealized version of social identity. The constructed display of social identity is what typifies the start of many new online relationships. The multiple and hyperpersonal perspective provides added weight, as the authors suggest that fewer cues online encouraged users to employ more deliberate forms of social representation (Walther, 1996). Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell (2001) also studied the use of images in the presentation of social identity online. They conclude that the less physically attractive a person's image was, the more they used other forms of media as self-presentational techniques. Those whose pictures were more physically attractive also tended to think they were less successful in managing impressions.
From the literature reviewed, research shows that if an individual looks for affirmation online, they are more likely to use certain social representation techniques. Glatzmeier & Steinhardt (2005) examined webpage content and found social representation was paramount. They describe how online social spaces are used to express the wishes and desires of the designer. How the designer sees him/herself is communicated, along with his/her values. This process is conducted through the presentation of relevant images and objects. In the current study, the use of uploaded graphics would reveal parts of the adolescents which may be based upon fantasy and not necessarily real. How then does one distinguish on homepages what is imagined and what is real for adolescents who are still developing a self-identity?

3.8 Multiplicity

The ability to explore multiple aspects of self-identity online continues to be an emerging area of research (Burke, 1980; Hermans, 2001; Larson, 1995; Maczewski, 2002; Stryker & Stratham, 1985; Turkle, 2004; Walker, 2000). In sociology, identity multiplicity has been defined as “one’s social roles and status, as well as one’s personal characteristics and feelings” (Hermans, 1996, p.33). The online experience can enable individuals to explore or challenge parts of their many selves (Turkle, 2004). Hevern (2004) refers to spinning, where online identities are constantly managed and developed across time and space. This is applicable in the social networking context where younger users are being drawn to the online experience. Waskul & Douglas (1997) discuss how time and space shift online to create new ways of knowing and understanding one another. They explain how the saturation of technologies allows individual selves to
continually emerge. Users' perceptions of reality undergo a fundamental change in a virtual social space. Waskul & Douglas (1997) state, “With the click of an icon, people may interact with diverse others in a multiplicity of socially produced places, providing for the emergence of simultaneously anonymous yet personally meaningful identities situated in a space less context, where commitments to any given self are easily dispensed with as they are accessed” (p.381). In an online social space the user can wear many hats. The degree to which this realm of multiplicity is possible online is unknown. However, what is known is that this lack of commitment implies that adolescents can constantly switch between displays of multiple identities. It is still unknown if these practices feed into theories espousing unhealthy adolescent experimentation.

Waskul & Douglas (1997) refer to a self-game in the multiplicity of self online in chat sessions: “one’s self can be a fluid, discursive horizon of possibilities. Each user has the power to create a sense of self through interaction with others in a given situation” (p. 390). I am interested in their metaphoric reference to play and game and to interactions of playfulness online where change is unbounded. Giese (1998), on the other hand, makes the point that in life people constantly adjust to different people and groups. He provides the following literal example: “one does not wear a suit and tie to a beach party nor a Hawaiian shirt and shorts to the office” (p. 12). I understand this to mean that the connection between self-identity and social identity (community) is enmeshed in a fluidity of self as socially constructed and continually situated through social relations. Giese (1998) argues that the differences between various forms of self-representation are not revolutionary, nor unique. Rather, social representation is simply expected, given changes in media.
Talamo & Ligorio (2001) discuss identity formation as a form of \textit{positioning}. They claim, “The positioning is related to the persons’ perception of how that social situation is characterized and what features are more relevant and effective in that specific situation” (p. 112). Context conditions how, why, and where individuals act in relation to particular historical, social, and cultural forces (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000). In an online situation, adolescents are well aware of their group and seek to achieve a certain social status, which I further address in the analysis of the present case study. In their study of Euroland, Talamo & Ligorio (2001) conclude that context and role were in a process of constant negotiations. Hermans (1996) also refers to positioning in a study where individuals broke away from cultural norms to develop different aspects of themselves online.

Walker (2000) discusses multiplicity in relation to the division of roles online, ‘the fragmenting (of) the self’. He explains, “Because people have multiple roles, their identities are multifaceted….Because home page owners can control the order in which information on their page is encountered, they have the opportunity to present their different roles and identities in order of salience” (Walker, 2000, p. 105). Social identities, though, “are rooted in and constrained by the knowledge of the intended audience, knowledge founded on relationships that exist previous to and independent of the Internet” (p. 113). Again, research returns to the importance of the audience so, although the vicarious element of presenting multiple identities has increased, pre-established social relations function to gauge individual presentations of self-identity. I am interested in knowing if adolescents understand what they are presenting online when they upload personal pictures and disclose personal information.
Williams (2003a) links literacy, culture and identity, cautioning that "adolescents not only are still struggling towards understanding their sense of self, in both physical and psychological terms, and how they construct and perform their identities, but also are having to negotiate times in which their identities (which they can perform for others and how those performances are received) shift from year to year, if not month to month" (p. 181). This ever present shifting forces a constant negotiation among the contextual conditions that form online social spaces.

3.9 Cultural Spaces

Willis (1990) explores outlets of expression among adolescents. He poignantly affirms that, "young people’s lives...are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols, through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity and meaning" (p. 1). There is a type of work embedded within the play of spaces, both physically and socially, which youth inhabit. He goes on to investigate a variety of young people’s social engagements, explaining, “certain kinds of symbolic creativity in the expressive and communicative activity of 'disadvantaged' groups exercise their uses and economies in precisely eluding and evading formal recognition, publicity and the possible control by others of their visceral meanings” (p. 3). For at-risk adolescents who are marginalized from formal cultural institutions, like classrooms, an online social space may be a safe outlet for the representations of themselves otherwise denied and suppressed. The subversive communication of symbols is important to understanding adolescent participation online. Willis (1990) discusses how actions by marginalized youth are too often frowned upon and misjudged as acts of deviance. He proposes that there is something more
foundational at work and asks these questions, "Why are their cultures not like ours?" and more importantly, 'Why are their cultures not as we think they should be?'" (p. 5). I return to this in the conclusion of the present case study.

Willis (1990) contends that symbols are embedded in cultural institutions and that these same symbols can be also utilized among cultures for varied reasons. He demonstrates why exploring identity through symbolic play is developmentally appropriate for young people in a time when they are saturated with media. In this study, I am interested in knowing how and why youth explore, construct, and produce multiple identities and meanings within emerging online social spaces. I agree with Willis that identity is "related in time, place and things" (Willis, 1990, p. 12).

For example, what are some of the meanings associated with tagging and why are these practices so important to understanding adolescent constructions of self-identity? The need to mark public spaces which have been constructed for a particular discourse speaks to a marginalized voice. Whereas mainstream society views these practices as obtrusive and deviant, young people use them as a way to identify themselves and circulate personal meaning in a public domain which they have been restricted from accessing. This domain can be both psychological and specific. MacGillivray & Curwen (2007) studied some of the reasons why youth engage in unsanctioned activity and conclude, "tagging's varying purposes [are] to sustain relationships, carry on dialogue, provide social commentary, and establish an identity by being recognised and known" (p. 367). Tagging is a written style of graffiti. I believe this social act parallels that of creating an online homepage on Nexopia. Adolescents sign up for an online social space in which to display their own cultural, political, and personal perspectives. Through this study, I am interested in looking into
MacGillivray & Curwen’s (2007) suggestion that “when educators open up the curriculum using students’ everyday literacy interests as starting points, they can also attend to issues of power, authenticity, and culture embedded in the social practices” (p. 368).

Gee, Allen, & Clinton (2001) explore connections between language, class and identity and conclude that class affects one’s social and personal use of language. For example, they found that working class teens understood issues of power within a narrow personal conceptual framework. During interviews there were common themes, such as descriptions of violence and conflict between peers and adults. “The working class teens express, directly and indirectly, much less alignment (indeed, in many case misalignments) among family, school, community, adult, and teen in terms of norms, values and goals” (Gee, Allen & Clinton, 2001, p. 184). On the other hand, descriptions of daily experiences from upper middle class teens were generally more accepting of social norms. One’s position in society influences one’s perception of how to engage in social relationships.

3.10 Conclusion

The research on the interaction between media, identity and presentation is complex and the element of online representation can blur understandings of reality versus idealization. I was curious to learn more about online and offline disclosure and the social communicative reasons for distributing personal information within social networking sites among adolescents. How individuals attach meaning to their identity constructions is paramount throughout the current case study. In the following chapter, I present the five research questions that directed the case study and examine them in relation to the literature.
4.1 Introduction

The ten participants responded to five key areas: extrinsic factors in the design and use of social online spaces, identity role exploration and representation through multimedia choice, meanings of self and social identity, and social validation and audience perception. They were asked a series of questions that required direct and indirect references to their online space on Nexopia. The goal was to engage them in conversation about their relationship to the space. Below I will use key concepts from the literature review in areas of self-presentation and disclosure of the formation of self-identity. Cultural conditions emerged as mediating factors. The responses to the five research questions are divided by section and an analysis of each question is conducted regarding the literature.

Having acquired over two hundred pages of transcriptions, I divided each response based on theme and coded it into categories for analysis. Within each theme I examined the imagery and text alongside to see if there was alignment or division. The themes were condensed as I studied similarities and differences between participants and responses.

4.2 Research Question 1

*Question 1: What are the motivating factors involved in the design and use of online social space representation for marginalized adolescents?*

This question was formulated to generate an understanding of the design and use of online social space representation. Twenty-three specific questions addressed aspects
of motivation. This was the least intrusive question for participants to respond to, due to the reliance on the social online space, and it referenced several areas, including types of activities conducted online, the time spent online, and organization, theme and format of the space. Based on the literature, communication was embedded in issues of audience ingratiation and self-presentation. I expected the question to provide information about the concept of self-regulation.

Participants had a number of reasons for initially constructing a space online. Communicative purposes, as noted by Greenfield & Yan (2006) was the primary reason for page use identified by all participants. Niko explained, "it's a good way to communicate, cause like, I don't know MSN is always just too fast...I mean, if you like send somebody like one message it's a lot easier than you don't have to explain it all and you just, it's a lot more straightforward." He liked the site's ease of communication. Participants could send and receive email with greater ease, knowing which of their networked friends was online, and could view updated pictures. The diverse communicative features are contained within one page, for example, a participant can send messages, find friends and view peer designed spaces. Many of those interviewed were initially introduced to the site by peers who already maintained a page and simply wanted to continue pre-established relationships online. In other cases, they noted the additional benefit of reconnecting with former peers. Niko, for example stated, "Sometimes if I haven't seen somebody for a while and then I'll just like look up and try to find theirs [Nexopia space] and then if I do I'll message them and be like, 'What's up.' Chantel reaffirmed, "people that you haven't talked to for a long time that are on here will find you and then they'll talk to you that you haven't seen forever." She liked
that she had the ability to locate and re-establish former friendships and was not interested in talking to unfamiliar individuals. “I don’t like talking to people I don’t know...they’ll say their name and I’ll be like, I don’t know you, don’t bother me.” This was a common statement made by many of the females interviewed. They had been the object of social and/or sexual harassment and clearly specified the personal intent and use of their social online space. Kandice’s reasons were provoked by a personal event. “I went crazy...because of my ex-boyfriend. I just decided to make a page and because everyone else had Nexopia I wanted to see what it was about and why everybody was so fascinated by it.” She indicated that she had recently broken up with her boyfriend and recognized that she could still access him and have him access her through her page. She clearly observed that many of her peers had an online space and that acted as a prompt for her to create her own space, as did public access to an individual which was now absent in her life.

**Design of Space**

Participants were careful in the design and content uploaded to their pages. Kandice described the process, “God, I went through probably like at least a hundred pictures. I don’t know I took a whole bunch of pictures and put them on my computer and then eventually I was just satisfied with these ones.” She was very careful in her image choice, and in narrowing down the images she was able to state her satisfaction through the sorting process which was based on some internally constructed criteria. She had an overall aesthetic in mind, as did other participants. Kandice had the most images of all
the participants interviewed. Her images ranged from photos of shoes to a multitude of images of guns.

Participants were aware of various design elements in web page construction, Tabitha explained, “This I centred [her picture] cause you centre stuff and you make it on the right, like I put all this in the centre and then this stuff goes off like that, like slanted and that took me a million years because you have to take each letter if they are a different colour and put a font and centre all around it and then I put this and I put this is like my picture with this underneath like about me so people would know it’s about me and I put that because I’m going to fashion school.” It is clear that Tabitha was aware of the importance of creating an impression and relied on the overall impression formed by the organization and layout of her images. She realized the importance of engaging the audience and connected the image to a personal goal. Her statement expressed the detail and time she took in creating a specific impression. Kandice described this progress further: “I just wanted to have it all fit in if I could, right, to make it look like it was supposed to fit on the page.” Her use of the words “supposed to” indicates her implicit understanding of the norms, rules and expectations of design elements. Blain articulated his format as “image, word, image, word, image, word. I like my pages to match or at least have a theme that goes together.” Along with order, this indicates something broader, a core driving principle which pulls together the whole page. Participants interviewed wanted to create a particular effect and this informal principle was crucial in the design. Blain reasoned clearly, “I wouldn’t put a picture of weed on here that didn’t go with my theme. Why? Because it would look like a sore thumb.” Even though he had other interests as well, like dirt biking and rugby, he did not include them and may have felt they would
detract from the overall subject matter or potential impression he wanted to construct. Participants wanted to control the impression they sent out to viewers and through the careful structuring of their pages, they felt they were able to (Sherman et al, 2001).

A sense of order was also important, Desmond explained, “I let my profile go like a little while ago cause like I had it organized and then everything I like had pictures everywhere, pictures were everywhere, like little clips, big clips, everything right and it just became too much and I, I deleted, I took all the pictures off because there were so many things on my page. It was like too much on the page cause like people when they like post comments, they don’t want to sit there and have to scroll down the page forever.”

Desmond was aware of his audience and wanted to make accommodations to maintain their interest. The use of the words “too much” and “too many” indicated his awareness of the features of attractive and enticing pages for outside viewers. He understood what would be perceived as more distracting and thus less appealing to his audience.

Related to this sense of order is the importance of maintaining interest and therefore updating content regularly. Tabitha wanted her page to be unique and didn’t like it when others had similar content, “I try to get pictures that like no one else had because everybody on Nexopia copies each other and I always get new pictures of everyone and then they copy me and I have to get new ones because I hate having anything that’s the same as anyone.” She wanted to portray her page content and thus her interests and herself as being distinctive from other peers on the same online site. She later spoke of the timeline of updating: “sometimes I change it a lot, sometimes I keep it for a while, like a month, sometimes I change it every few days. If I find somebody has this picture, like one person, I might take it off.” Her compulsion to create an exclusive
page, unlike others drove her to look at other pages to compare content. She was extremely aware of other user pages on the site. Kandice also explained that “when I first had my page I just got a whole bunch of pictures, of random pictures and started putting them up on my page, whatever, like, if I liked the picture I didn’t care if it looked good on there or not, I just put it on, right. So now like, I was more, after a while, I got more conscious about what I was putting on my page and more observant to what like looks better and like works and what wouldn’t work.”

Kandice’s discussion of “what is good” and “better” could have been based on design elements, or on the personal expression she wanted to communicate. She had established a screening process and, like the other participants, wanted to be consistent with her content. Consistency of theme was crucial for the participants. Kandice later described the social awareness she tuned into and was cognizant not only of the internal and external operating elements of social online space design but also of the social impact implied in her page. She went through a process from initial randomness of design and possible intent to something more constructed, organized and impression driven. Her awareness of the audience grew and impacted her content and embedded message delivery.

Participants knew others were viewing their page and wanted to direct their impressions. Tabitha stated, “I want them to think that this is me, like when it says that my favourite activity is shopping I want them to think, ’Oh, that’s what she likes’ like not that it is just like a joke and like when they read this they should actually go away [laughing] and I like cherries, like not everyone would think that. Some people would just be it looks nice and some people will just put things on to make it look better but I ultimately think that I actually like those things.” Tabitha wanted others to understand
that her interests were reflected in her content and were not frivolous, but intentional. The viewer was required to read into things that gave her pleasure and set her apart from other peers. Naomi similarly wanted to share her interests on an accessible space: “I thought like it would be cool cause then I can like put what I like on it and stuff.” Her page had a photo of her boyfriend with text suggesting relationship commitments. Wynn & Katz’s (1997) notion of users expressing their convictions online is confirmed in statements like Tabitha’s. She wanted others to know her and understand what she enjoyed and make a personal connection to her content.

Participants described future revisions and related them to the organization, as noted by Chantel: “I’d like to change the way it’s [social online space] arranged...it looks messy.” Those interviewed did not want their page to appear disorganized and disordered; they wanted to ensure the format was clear and visually palatable. Chantel’s page had pictures which looked as if they had been haphazardly placed, and she later accounted for this as being due to a friend who had uploaded the images to the page though she chose the content. Participants were clear in stating that images had a specific placement and purpose. They had a relationship to the images and order of the design.

Aidan wanted the colours in his images to align with his personality and explained, “I, I, I kind of like, I kind of like just the blue and the black cause I’m not really like colourish, like, like don’t really have, like if you look at most of my pictures they’re very dark like they’re not like the most nicest like beautiful lit pictures they’re kind of grimy, like they show the way I am.” He associated image colour choice with his personality and was aware of the mood he wanted to project and manage. The expectation that the audience reads into the explicit design elements again occurs. They
had to understand that colour reflected personality and lifestyle. "Grimy" for Aidan was communicated through his images; he wanted the audience to understand what dark images reflected.

When asked whether the colour scheme of her page influenced her image choice Kandice replied, "well, not really, but a certain extent, see how the top half [of the social online space] is like all colour and then it gets darker and then it’s like blue and grey and black, and then there’s more colour down here right." Kandice initially was like most others and was reluctant to connect colour with organization, but upon reflection she understood how purposeful she was in the design and order of her page. Her statement provided evidence that she had her images organized by colour. Further, her pride in the time she devoted to her page was expressed, "it took me like two months to finish it, it took me four months to finish this page completely." Participants spent a great deal of time collecting, screening, organizing and later updating their images.

Desmond explained how he dismissed outdated content, "It’s like so many things have gone onto my page, there’s so many things [that] have got off like if something gets way too old and it’s been on there forever I usually change it unless it’s something cool I want to keep on there." He had an idea of what was considered ‘cool’ and it guided him. He continued, "I put on a lot of things that I just think are cool, some things I have interest in." There were two principles he applied in narrowing down his image choice: individual interest and public trends. Later, when asked what he would add, he said more dirt bikes and cars "because I don’t know, I’m eighteen and stuff now so that’s what I’m starting to think about, right." Desmond was undergoing a shift in his personal life as he
was making critical changes from school to a work career and he wanted to project that onto his future page.

When asked what prompted changes to his page Blain responded, “You want something new on your page, you want something new for people to look at.” This affirmed his knowledge that other individuals were viewing his page and his understanding that an audience’s attention can be inconsistent and unpredictable.

4.3 Interpreting Research Question 1

The key factor that motivated the use of the online space was communication. Once participants were in the construction stage, they spent an inordinate amount of time finding images and placing them on their space. The choice of images was very purposeful and was intended to create a particular effect. Participants had an implicit understanding of online design and were very specific in the order and placement of text, images and multimedia. Sydnee explained, “It’s just everybody has it, like all your friends have it, and it’s just a lot of fun like cause I like designing it too. And you get to design it and it’s kind of like your own unique space that you can show off whatever you want.”

Participants aspired to create unique spaces where images were not duplicated or used in the same way as in other online peer spaces. Overall, they worked towards creating a theme and used the images to reflect their interests or personal philosophies. The audience was critical in the construction as well, as participants had an idea of how they wanted others to view them and made the connection between design and peer impression. They were always looking to update their page to reflect current interests. Liam accurately summarized the purpose, “[It’s used for] Communication, um, trying to
make new friends, support yourself, show your interests, show pictures of yourself, try to like get yourself out there.”

4.4 Research Question 2

*Question 2: How is identity role exploration related to marginalized adolescents’ choice of representation on Nexopia?*

This question involved more personal references to the individual. There were twelve questions which related to the perception of the participant, to self-identity, and the community both online and offline. Topics of accuracy of portrayal and reflection of images and texts to the person were addressed along with changes in personal development. The questions encouraged more reflection and analysis on the part of the participants as they examined connections among themselves, peers and local communities or discourses. The idealized self-identity as examined in the literature review was expected to emerge in varying degrees in the self-presentation.

In relation to audience management and impressions of self-identity, participants’ responses appeared to indicate a series of developmental public and personal phases confronted when they represented themselves on a social online space in relation to audience management and impressions of the self-identity. There were changes in self-identity offline which participants correlated with changes in the content of their online spaces. The shift in outlook toward, and expectation of the audience was dramatic, but this effect was reduced the longer the participant maintained a social online space. This may be attributed to the creation of a new narrative, (Mitra, 2001) or it may be due to the social acceptance and internalization of a new secondary discourse (Gee, 2001).
Alternatively, it may be connected to new positioning (Hermans, 1996). Participants developed new ways of relating to differing contexts. Gee, Allen & Clinton (2001), in examining class in relation to language and identity, found that working-class teens discussed everyday activities without references to the future. The language of the upper middle-class teens, on the other hand was directed “more towards their personal biographical trajectories through an ‘achievement space’ defined by the (deeply aligned) norms of their families, schools and powerful institutions in our society” (p. 177). I wonder if the shift in page content of the adolescents I interviewed was related to the idea of future achievement—economically and personally. The older participants were about to graduate and leave school and described the out-of-school changes they were soon to confront. The participants interviewed were able to explain the informal phases and acknowledged personal changes encountered. Initially, participants identified feelings of release and catharsis in the construction of their online spaces. When asked about the time spent on Nexopia, Kandice, the most recent participant to create an online space, replied, “It used to be ten hours out of the day, but now it’s probably more like twenty minutes at that because I just got better things to do now.” The amount of time she initially spent online was exorbitant, but as time progressed she became involved with other activities which occupied more of her time and decreased her time online. When asked about personal changes since the construction of her page she continued, “I was going through a lot things, like emotional stuff and like just trying to figure out like how strong I really am and how much I can take and stuff like that.” The page acted as an emotional fluid space that encouraged the sifting of and concurrently shifting status of self-identity in relation to personal events. Kandice’s disclosure about her emotional
connection to the online space indicates that the developmental implications and possible intent of online spaces is far reaching. She was not relying on the norm of reciprocity as Dietz-Uhler et al. (2005) describes, instead she presented herself online in a vulnerable and yet focused fashion. She had concrete reasons for creating the online space and needed it to fulfill a specific personal purpose. She further elaborated,

It’s almost when I was going through the stuff that I was going through my page was too and like when I was like changing so was my page and my page was changing and changing all I was changing it was all the time and I was changing like how I was feeling right and then eventually I was just done and it was. You know and I was okay and my page was okay. I don’t know how to explain, it’s weird, it’s like when I was like knew I was okay and then my page was done too and it was like I don’t know.

Her response shows insight and a capacity to utilize a social online space for informal ‘therapeutic’ intent. Her repeated use of the word “change implied direct connections between her page online and her life offline. She was also invested in her page. It reflected the transition she was experiencing from offline events.

Blain explained some of the physical changes he had experienced since posting his page over a year and half previously: “Before I used to be like so short right, a lot of people from my old town if they come across my face they’ll go, “oh you’re so much taller.” He made a connection with viewers outside of his space who knew him and could account for the physical changes. He continued, “And like last year too like, I don’t know I used to wear a lot, like before, like before all this I didn’t wear hats and shit right. I hated straight brimmed hats. I’d never wear them and then I went through my little
Airwear [brand], like you get baggy clothes and all that other shit and this one is completely different [showing me another picture].” Blain was aware of the personal changes he underwent, which were prompted by external changes in dress and physique. He recounted the changes in his appearance and later related them to challenges in character and behaviour. As he continued his reflection, he described a developmental shift in perception: “when you’re younger you kind of feel more indestructible, like, like, I don’t know. You’d look at a big guy and go like, ‘oh I’d smash him’ and even if I could or not I’d still give him a black eye but when you get older you start realizing that this guy will fucking tune me! [laughing].” He related the changes to development and a greater awareness of self-identity in relation to others. Later, when asked about specific changes he had undergone since first publishing his page, he replied, “Before I didn’t work or I was probably more of a chronic [regular marijuana user] back then like fuck, you guys think that I’m a chronic now and you guys would shit your pants if you saw me before, like if I didn’t come to school high you’d think I was high because I looked different, you know what I mean? I’m growing more, like last year I was shorter and skinnier right, growing more mature, growing older.” Blain’s reflection on and analysis of his current and past life (in the areas of school, work, physical health and mental health) and the impact it has had on him is crucial to accurately understanding and contextualizing his online space. There was far more to it than what he initially presented and he brought the audience’s impression and understanding into what really was occurring for him at the time. His current page had three images on it: a picture of kush (cannabis with a high THC content), a movie still of Al Pacino from the movie Scarface and another marijuana-related image.
Desmond also had numerous marijuana-related images. When asked about his actual usage he responded, "I smoke weed after school a lot." This was congruent with the presentation on his online spaces, similar to Blain. He went on to explain, "The only reason I put a lot of stuff on my page was because like it seemed like, it seemed like back probably like two years ago that's the only thing I could really think of was getting high and smoking weed, yeah." He continued to reflect and clarified, "Now...I pay attention to what like I am going to do in the future, like I, some, some like, I work sometimes like not that much but if like I went stoned to work I wouldn't get through the day too well." He was aware of the changes he had undergone since initially posting his page three years previously and specifically referred to how he regulated his marijuana use in order to maintain work commitments, though he continued to be engaged in consumption. His usage had shifted and he accounted for this in his discussion of whether his page mirrored his current status: "Not so much anymore, but I don’t know, I smoke weed the odd time now and if somebody looks at this page, they’d be like 'ah, holy this guy must be like a straight chronic or something’ but I don’t know. You go through a lot of stages in like three or four years right. I know when Nexopia came out I thought it was the coolest thing in the world but now it’s probably one of those things that is shoved in the corner, it’s one of those things that’s not on my mind all that much anymore." Desmond was conscious of how an unfamiliar audience would respond to his online space, though he maintained its relationship with his current habits. It played a less significant role in his life; however, it was still a part of it. He had other activities in which he invested his time. The importance of the online space changed over time as his interests changed.
Sense of Detachment

Naomi also underwent personal changes over the two years she maintained her page. “When I first got it or whatever I was more like partying and like I don’t know, just into drinking and drugs and stuff and I’d like display on my page but now like it’s not in my life. I don’t really care anymore what it looks like [her page] cause I don’t go on that much. When I was younger I used to always want to go on it and change it and stuff.” Her motivation changed dramatically over this time of her development. Originally, she represented the events and interests in her life, but over the years, as her interests shifted, so too did her attachment and desire to share that part of herself with others.

Niko extended this sense of detachment. When analyzing whether or not his page could reflect him, he claimed, “Not really cause there’s not enough information to give it out”. His approach to posting information had changed, over a year and a half: “I used to have like a bunch of stuff on my page and then I don’t know I calmed down now. I just don’t like giving them [other people] all my information right. Before I’d always like want people to know who I was when I was a big trouble maker in Tasas, that’s a different story.” He continued, “I don’t do drugs anymore, well I smoke pot but, I don’t know I calmed down a lot. I’m not so rowdy anymore. Like my page before was really crude and just like out there and violent and everything, I’ve matured a lot more and I don’t know, I’ve just grown up I guess.” His page used to have pictures of guns, weapons and naked women and over time he removed the images. This progression was prompted by personal changes he experienced. His current page had three images, one of his girlfriend and two of a friend who had died in the past year. He paid homage to his friend through a section of explicit lyrics that detailed the extent of the relationship
between two men, "One of the few I would take a bullet for, my neegaaro...Whoa. Let's toast till we die. Roll up the weed and blow the smoke in the sky." He keeps the drug and gang connection to the drug as evidenced by the relationship description. Regarding the visually simple layout of his online space, he explained, "I don’t want it [his page] to be too flashy and everything cause I don’t need it to be or I don’t need to impress people really right. I mean maybe people want me to but I don’t really want to and I don’t have to. [Before] it stuck out kind of right." He was less reliant on other people’s impressions of his page and disregarded the expectations of his peers as to his overall representation. He wanted more uniformity of his space in relation to other peer spaces. His changes, like Kandice’s were personally and socially significant.

Aidan also detailed his personal life changes over the time he had an online space, I remember back in Grade Seven all I put on my Nex page was a picture of a hot girl, South Park, a beer, a picture of a beer and a picture of bud and yeah, that’s what I liked in Grade Seven, that’s what I thought I liked, that’s what I thought I loved doing. I thought I loved to get drunk every weekend and feel shitty. I thought I loved smoking. I don’t even like to smoke marijuana anymore cause you know what weed is too heedy for me um, I’m going to say it straight up to anybody, I’m a hash head now. I’m a hash head like that’s the way I go and and really I’m, I’m not a drinker anymore. I’ve really like slowed down and realized you know with my family past and all the people like my sister and my dad being alcoholics like it could get into me really easily and I noticed that whenever I used to drink I’d get really dizzy and would make bad decisions like, it was like I could kind of see but through a fog and you know I didn’t really want to have to see
through that fog so I just dropped it and you know, the hot girl, every guy is going
to think every girl is hot you know the big headed guy. Now I don’t really look
for outer beauty it’s more like you know, I mean outer beauty is not bad but you
know inner beauty right like I realize that from even like since grade seven.

His page in Grade Seven was reflective of his lifestyle, it was not exaggerated. He
went through a transition where he examined his personal situation and situated himself
within it. His current page had images of the drug acid, of which he was a user, along with
favourite musicians, TV shows and films. He went from the stage of ‘thinking’ about things
he enjoyed to accepting other pleasurable activities. He also reflected on the early pressures
of conforming and how he had created his uniqueness within his current context.

Such changes of lifestyle were commonly described. Liam, for example, had had a
page for three years and explained the changes in his usage in this way: “I used to log on ten
times a day now I do it once a day. I don’t go on here anymore. I like once, I was at my
house more but now I have a car. I have a job now, I don’t really have much time to sit on
the computer and talk to people [Now I spend] about 5-10 minutes a day. I used to spend
five hours a day on there. A lot of time. I don’t put any information at all up about myself
anymore, I just put a few pictures cause I don’t really go on here anymore and I’m not really
interested in letting people know, know like what I’m about and stuff.” He also underwent
changes that prompted him to change his relationship with his page. What was once regular
usage transformed into occasional intent. He also shared less of himself with his audience
and was more strategic in this presentation. He spent less time on the space and over time
was less concerned about constructing and maintaining an impression. A motivation of
bravado was transformed into a less personal transference of an impression.
Common in viewer response was the competing notion of individuality which the participants sought to establish with their audience. Initial page updates and time spent online were transformed over the time they maintained their pages and coincided with transitions into ‘adulthood’ and the responsibilities of work or other personal investments.

These participants were not trying on new behaviours as Lloyd (2002) asserts; on the contrary, they were representing through symbols and text how they interpreted their environment and communicating the values with which they aligned themselves. What is apparent is the relationship between representations online and presentations offline. Those interviewed did not appear to present idealized images of self-identity. As Giese (1998) confirmed, the ‘core self’ did not shift, but changes to external connections did.

4.5 Interpreting Research Question 2

Both age and length of time online influenced participant’s relationship to their online space. The longer participants maintained an online space, the less attached they were to it and the more they understood its limitations for accurately reflecting and portraying them. The desire lessened as the relationship between online space and the need for representation diminished. Liam had maintained a space for over three years, described the personal and social changes he underwent and the effect on the design of his space: “I have probably changed my life completely, like when I first started this I used to basically be like an immature little fifteen year old, used to party and do drugs and stuff and I used to like have pictures of drugs and be basically proud of it, but now I’m against drugs and stuff and I’m pretty mature for my age and ah, I pretty much probably a completely different person than I was when I first started and that’s probably why I changed my profile so dramatically.” Such
shift in representation was very common for the participants. Initially, in interviews participants explained how they wanted others to perceive them along with their own perceptions. This was fluid, as the longer they had a page the less importance they placed on peers. Aidan, the newest participant, was very direct in his explanation of his depiction, “I do portray what people know about me.” He wanted to present a very specific construction of himself. Liam, on the other hand, reflected the continuum in the social networking online experience. His response indicated the shift of participants with regard to both the site and the self-identity, “I don’t know, cause I don’t really care what people think of me on this website really anymore, but I’d like them to think I’m a pretty well put person that has, has my life together, like not immature and stuff, not like a stupid little fifteen year old like I used to be.” I attribute this developmental change to the awareness and inclusion of secondary discourses (Gee, 2001) among at-risk adolescents. Related to this is Giese’s (1998) cooperative narrative, participants engage in a form of negotiation with their peers online and conformity shifts as the group changes overtime. The rules change as the community adapts to differing discourses. The positive and negative outcomes as discussed by Markus & Nurius (1986) apply, as participants behaviour is influenced by what they can achieve in relation to their offline lives. This process is constantly occurring due to the interplay between online and offline selves.

4.6 Research Question 3

*Question 3: What influences multimedia choice in online social spaces among marginalized adolescents?*

This question was connected to research question 1 in the interview. Participants easily responded to this question as they referenced their online space. They shared and
related outside experiences and influences. They also addressed and directed multimedia choice to authorities of importance in their lives offline. The topic of disclosure as expressed in the research was expected to surface, along with that of relationships with media.

Participants were conscious of what portrayal they did or, conversely, did not want to send out through their content choice. For example, Tabitha stated, "okay this girl, her name is Jessica Burciaga [model and go-go dancer] and I just put her on my page because I think she’s really pretty and I don’t like respect her or anything like, she’s not someone I would look up to because she’s a go-go dancer. I just think she’s pretty and I like pink so I put her picture up." With regard to choosing her content, Tabitha later noted, "I like the colours and stuff, like it’s not because like cause some people would look at it and think, ‘oh you’re just putting a girl on your page, like she’s slutty’, oh no. It’s because she’s wearing all pink and I like her makeup and I like everything.” Tabitha was aware of how others would interpret her image choice and made it clear that she did not want to be associated with the particular celebrities she uploaded, though this acknowledgement did not prevent her from posting sexually provocative pictures. She had an expectation that her audience would look past the images and infer certain symbolic associations. She was more fixated on the overall colour and the elements within the images which others were expected to understand. However, her notion of what was pretty is important, as she chose a go-go dancer and there is a sexual association attached. Her statement that design was her motivation is surprising considering the embedded sexual message.

Some other participants’ image choice was based upon consumer desires, and yet others wanted to align themselves with a specific brand or celebrity. Tabitha, for instance
noted that cherries were her current preoccupation and had reformatted her page with cherry images and commented, “I really want a cherry bikini...I’m just going to change the colours on my page and make a little cherry thing.” Kandice, on the other hand, had an image of the rapper, The Game. When asked what prompted her to display his photo she stated, “cause he’s worthy enough to be on my page.” She had a clear sense of who she perceived as being ‘significant enough’ to represent her. She associated herself with the hip-hop musician who rose from a life of violence and crime. When asked if there were specific brands she wanted to display, she exclaimed, “yeah, my Louis Vuitton Kicks [shoes] and my Air Force One’s [shoes] cause I love Air Force Ones [shoes]. I like Louis Vuitton right. Anything to do with like bling, bling.” Her interest in expensive and flashy items was shown in the countless pictures of consumer items like hats and articles of clothing that she had on her page. The pictures could be interpreted as an expression of her desire to own and associate herself with elaborate items. She backed this up with the following statement, “everything I’ve chosen is like, um, something, like, I’d only choose things that represent me almost like in a way because I’ll only choose pictures that I like love so much or I, I can relate to you know, and stuff like that.” She wanted to establish her orientation, relationship, and status to the products.

Sydnee explained her content in terms of likes and dislikes. For example, for one picture she noted, “I like the way she’s [woman holding a Louis Vuitton purse] dressed and her purse as well. I really like that girl’s outfit, I think it’s cool.” In explaining what she wanted to put on her page she said, “Just basically things that are popular, things that other people would find interesting I think.” Her online space was littered with her favourite brands- Chanel, Gucci, Victoria Secret, French Connection U.K. She also had
an image of a gun with blood oozing out of it and noted, “[it’s] probably intimidating in some ways.” What is interesting is the contrast between images that made her appear approachable and others which made her appear threatening.

Blain had a movie still of Scarface and, when asked about the significance of the image, he replied, “it’s real life.” Aidan had a picture of the rapper Necro and explained, “he’s not really big mainstream, he’s known but he’s not and I think the way he raps he speaks to me.” He, he, he’s like, he’s my idol. I want to rap like this guy like, and I, I have respect for all his work”. The impression of respect earned was critical. Necro is well known for his explicit violent and sexual lyrics. Another favourite celebrity was Paris Hilton. Chantel’s page had pictures of this socialite and, when asked about her choice, she stated, “I have Paris Hilton, she looks kind of like a whore but I like Paris Hilton but ah, I wouldn’t want to be reflected by her.” When asked to explain her image choice she stated, it was “mostly just pretty stuff that I like I guess.” When further questioned about the images of guns she had on her page she replied, “I’m not really a gangster but I like to pretend.” Chantel wanted to present to others how she saw herself. She didn’t want to be reflected in all her image choices, however, there was a certain degree of relationship and thus alignment that she wanted to portray.

There were also images of less recognized and more personal relationships. Many participants had memorials to deceased friends. Desmond, for example, had pictures of friends who had passed away in a car accident and described what “for all the homies like pour some liquor” meant, it was a “ghetto way of saying like goodbye to a dead person.”

Participants’ reasons for posting images were diverse, and with each image an associated message was attached. Some could associate this with Dominick’s (1999)
contention that ingratiation attracts more viewers. Among females there were more
references to popular consumer items and celebrities. The ‘pretty factor’ was important
and this included a sexualized component. The males displayed more musicians and
explicit drug and violent imagery. Overall, an impression of authority and dominance
was communicated. This went along with themes of pride and allegiance to the group.

Liam explained his image decisions in this way: “I don’t really use my profile to
put anything on it now so I just kind of like the things I enjoy looking at. Kind of like
posts my main interests cause this is my, I dream of this car on a nightly basis.” His shift
in intent also shifted his content and his relationship to it, as it became more concrete
both literally and symbolically. There was no room for inference for his viewers
anymore, though he still acknowledged that it was important not to appear uninteresting,
as he noted in his image selection, “they are good pictures of me that show my
personality. I like to travel a lot. I’m not a boring person. I do adventurous, fun things.”
He later commented, “I thought those would be the best pictures for the profile cause I
like to have ah, non-boring pictures up.” Definitions of what was interesting were left to
personal interpretation. Participants did not want to create anything that would be
perceived as uninteresting. They had dual interests, self and social.

4.7 Interpreting Research Question 3

Participants were motivated by the design elements of colour and order in their
online space. As well, they wanted to align themselves with particular brands, items or
celebrities. There were embedded discourse values being communicated, as popular film
frames were uploaded and youths expressed their relationship to their personal ethics.
The participants all wanted to create inviting spaces and regularly changed the content to encourage increased viewing.

4.8 Research Question 4

Question 4: What meanings of self and social identity do marginalized adolescents construct through their social presence online?

This question was composed of thirteen interview questions. It examined relationships online and offline and at the impact of an online space on participant lives. It also explored representations among others and in comparison to the self-identity. Personal understandings and the expectations of the audience in relation to self-identity were revealed.

Conflicting interests emerged as the youth responded to this question. On one hand they felt as if their pages represented their interests easily to viewers. However, they also suggested that they wanted to control audience perceptions and thus limit information and imagery published. They accounted for how others may have perceived them yet expected others to infer specific associations. There was a somewhat distorted process that emerged from the interviews. The participants expressed a desire for the content to reflect their self-identity and yet they also didn’t want it to reflect them entirely. They believed they could control audience impressions and distinguish between the social and personal in their disclosures online.

In reporting whether their pages aligned with their interests, students overwhelmingly agreed that they were accurate in most respects. They said that they wanted to tell others who viewed their pages about them and thus the pages were
reflective. Kandice read a banner on her page, "death before dishonour, friends and family forever'. It's the truth. You don't dishonour your family or your close friends."

Asked later whether her page reflected her she replied, "Yes, more than anyone's pages I've seen cause I have so much stuff on my page, right, and it comes and it's like so much different stuff right, everything I really love, I really like is on my page." The page to her was incorporated into her conception of herself and was an extension of herself. In describing the overall theme of her page Kandice stated, "its gangster." Her page had repeated images of violence, including guns and brass knuckles. In describing the images, her conversation was loaded with terminology suggestive of a non-mainstream lifestyle; words such as "ghetto," "gangster" and "pimping" were common. When asked to describe a photo of a friend holding a gun, she said, "It's just representative of what I've seen and what is in my life." When asked to describe herself, she flatly declared, "I’m a gangster ass bitch." This held consistent throughout the interview; she did not waver in this perception of herself or in her desire to communicate it to the audience. As Killoran (2003) contends, marginalized individuals are given a public space to express and reveal aspects of self-identity. I believe Kandice found a place in which to situate herself and to throw off mainstream symbols of success and compliance.

Common themes of power were expressed through images; for example, stills from the movie Scarface dominated online pages. When Blain was asked about the significance of the image and text that read "first you make the money then you get the power, then you get the power then you get the money," he said that "it's real life." He felt that the movie reflected his lifestyle. Later, in describing the overall theme of his page, he stated, "[it's] a little bit about me, doesn't really go into too depth, if you know
me as a friend, if you come across this I probably just look like a stoner or something. It doesn't really go into depth. It doesn't really describe me as a person. I don't really like to go too in depth if you know what I mean, people knowing all my beefs and shit like that is none of their business.” He acknowledged how others could perceive him from his page as well as the potential limitations of his presentation. As well, he wanted to control the information others could access and potentially interpret about him.

Desmond had a banner on his page that read, “Bros before hoes” and he explained that it meant, “Choose your buds over the girls.” In explaining his image choice he declared, “I just put a couple of things about me, a couple of things about the group I’m in.” He had written on his page, “Just remember as brothers, blood is thicker than water and can’t no man, women or object infiltrate this family. Were a family, fuck wit one family member...you gotta take the rest of the family!” He had aligned himself with a group of individuals and made repeated references to the group on his page. Their importance in his life and in how he perceived himself in relation to them was clear in the text. Individual members supported one another and any threats to each of them would be defended by the whole group. The common theme of brotherhood and loyalty was threaded through all of the male online spaces. It communicated a principle within the discourse of loyalty that those who subscribed maintained.

Association with a particular audience was controlled and restricted by participants. There were individuals online they did not want to befriend. For example, Blain explained that he rejected certain people to his online list of friends on his space because “There’s some people on here you don’t even want to add right. Some people are an embarrassment to your page.” He was invested in maintaining his image online
and did not want to associate himself with other people who could compromise his standing. When asked to describe himself Blain stated, “Before it was all about like being bullied and shit right.” He went from being the victim to having a sense of personal control in his relationships online.

Online spaces become a public place of sorts to share and boast about personal changes. In her online space, Naomi shared with others the importance of her current relationship. There were lyrics from a song that she felt were reminiscent of her boyfriend, and she had a single photo of him. When asked what she wanted to publish, “that’s pretty much it cause like I don’t know, right now he’s like just been supporting me a lot and I’ve been going through a lot so he’s like the only one I care about right now.” The simple nature of her page reflected the personal priorities in her life. When asked if her page reflected her she replied, “I kind of think so cause it like shows that ah, I’m like emotional and caring and loving.” She believed others would assume that “I’m like pretty true to who I love and stuff but that’s not all there is to me really. I like other things.” She was communicating loyalty and expressing her self-esteem through her relationship.

As to the accuracy of the online self-representation, Chantel alluded to it first when she described how she saw herself: “I think I’m pretty, very pretty and good at lots of stuff.” When asked if others would get an accurate impression from her page, she replied, “kind of accurate, they’d know some stuff that I like and they’d probably be able to tell my favourite colour was pink.” There were obvious limitations in her presentation. Her page contained numerous images of girls in bikinis and photos of alcohol.

Alternatively, Syndee explained that, in her page “pretty much everything does [reflect her], it either represents me in some way or represents something that I’ve seen or
something that I like, yeah, things that a normal teenager would find cool. It reflects on just how I feel about everything, like how everyone, like how I see things, like things that I enjoy, things that I find, I don’t know, interesting.” Her page had numerous photos from raves and she had listed all the ones she had attended. She accounted for the ‘cool’ factor of her page as an understanding that other adolescents would relate to common images.

When asked about the consistent graphic sexual content represented on her space, Syndee stated, “all the sexuality that’s on there and just like how girls are exposed, that doesn’t show what kind of person I am either definitely.” This conflicted with her initial statement that her page reflected her, though she did explain the limitations of her page: “sometimes just the amount of pictures I have of partying and all that stuff and raves, it’s not, that’s not what kind of person I actually am when I go to those things, I don’t just get like rowdy and go all over the place. I’m not like that.” She acknowledged that the page did not entirely represent her values; however, she still wanted to associate herself with the values expressed in them.

4.9 Interpreting Research Question 4

Participants communicated specific messages of their perceived self-identity and their relationship to their social identity through their online space. At times they struggled to merge audience regulation with self-expression. Aidan, the most recent Nexopia, user explained what he wanted to communicate as “Pretty much just trying to tell them that you know, uh I have to think back, what, I’m not really trying to tell them, I’m just showing them and I’m kind of telling them if you don’t like me don’t bother, don’t send me messages…right, but if you think I’m cool send me a message by all
means you know.” He had constructed an idea of what it meant to be popular and thus, as much as he wanted to be unique, he also wanted to fit in. This was common among the participants. They wanted to create a formidable presence online through the use of multimedia. Their spaces were consequently filled with peer, drug and violent images. In many cases they explained that the images reflected their lifestyle. Underlying this was the desire for power and control in out-of-school communities. They wanted to project a representation to the audience and were cognizant of the impact of and struggle between the personal and social constructions.

Adolescent choice of multimedia on online social spaces was influenced by a number of factors. The response that was not surprising was related to pop culture artefacts and symbols of popularity within the peer group. Participants knew what they wanted to project to the audience and therefore were careful in the choice of multimedia. Visual images dominated spaces, with text and video following in order of choice. Liam had had a space the longest and was frank in his response: “Oh, I used to get ideas from other people back in the day because some people had cool pictures. I’d really like their style. I kind of do my own kind of style now.” As time progressed he developed his own style and took more risks in his multimedia choice he was less influenced by peers and trends. This was further evidenced by an explanation rooted in more functional objects: “Like this picture it shows my main interest in like subwoofers and car audio cause that’s a main interest of mine and this is a dream car like I have posters and pictures of this exact car, the same year and model and stuff. I love that car so much.” Here, there were fewer social forces acting on his decisions. Participants rarely used the word “dream” in their descriptions, as items they desired or wanted were not predominant. There was
more of an overall theme of impressions regarding self-identity. There were particular brands, films, celebrities and items participants wanted to be associated with. The participants understood that the content reflected the image they wanted to project and that an image could communicate more than words. Sydnee explained, “It’s very expressive way of visually showing people what kind of person I am and not really having to just write a huge paragraph that’s really long or about yourself and your life, like that’s not interesting to people right. Pictures like, if people put pictures of like bad things and dark things then people are going to think that is what they enjoy right, it’s just basically a visual profile of somebody.” She thus addressed the concept and importance of alignment with content.

4.10 Research Question 5

Question 5: To whom are statements intended? What role does social validation from online and offline peers play in online presentations of self-identity for marginalized adolescents?

This question required more analysis from the participants. They were asked twenty questions which involved peer feedback and audience awareness and knowledge. Prompts to online space revision were examined along with broader themes of personal versus public space expectation and disclosure.

Participants wanted to direct their audience and to send specific messages regarding their self-identity. They wanted their pages to mirror their life at a specific time and they felt as if they had to make their pages visually appealing in order for them to attract and sustain viewers. The sense of control and it transformation in conjunction with offline
changes is reflected and explained in previous statements. Participants had a need to establish some form of status position and alignment among peers. The longer participants maintained a space online, the more diffused the power and group associations became. They identified a shift in investments and interests in personal time to the online space and acknowledged the limitations of the space for self-definition and identification. The pages’ purpose shifted to something less personal, detached and functional and participant’s began to set and manage limits on what they wanted to communication to others online. They wanted more control; however, there was less importance placed on how others perceived them. They identified who they did or did not want viewing their page. There were both extrinsic and intrinsic uses (Walker, 2000). The interplay between the two was unique, as the participants were in a contained online environment with regular familiar users. However, there was a potential for networking with unknown peers, hence the intrinsic connection. Users were walking on both sides of the fence as on one hand, they knew their audience and, on the other, they tailored their pages to attract unknown viewers. As well, they used ingratiation techniques although they were likely not aware of this usage. One could posit that marginalized group members seek to maintain membership within their own group, even though the group is anti-social in nature. The common pattern of exhibiting weapons and drug imagery could confirm this position. Stern (2004) found that few themes like the former were popular; however he suggested that it is important to examine the nature of the themes in relation to the sociocultural context of the participants interviewed. Further to this Huffaker and Calvert (2005) confirm the importance of empowerment in disclosure processes.
Kandice identified how she wanted others to think when they viewed her page “I want them to look at my page and say, ‘Holy shit, this bitch is the dopest chick. She has the fattest page.’” A concern with status and the accuracy of others’ impressions is evident in her statement. When later questioned as to whether she had had an audience in mind when creating her online space she responded, “Yeah, I wanted my ex-boyfriend to see it and I wanted his girlfriend to see it and I wanted, I wanted all my friends to see it too right, to see how you know, I got a Nexopia page now and how dope it is and all that.” She had a clear intent for her page and how others were expected to respond to it. She wanted to establish her position and ensure that the audience knew her status within her community. The concept of the idealized perception by Tice et al. (1995) also accounts for her online presentation. Her representation to the audience was one of resilience although internally she had mixed feelings of her breakup.

Blain noted that “this site is for me to communicate with my friends and post pictures of me having a good time.” He went on to explain how he used the site to meet girls and had met five girls offline, “but it’s not like I’m going to chat up some girl from Sibron or Regent that I don’t know then she asks me to go meet her, I probably wouldn’t do that, right, but most of the girls who’ve done that are from Northgate and are friends of friends.” He explained that Nexopia was unique for him because “you meet people that you wouldn’t have met before, like you know what I mean. Like if you’re not on the site, who are you going to meet? Who are you got to meet new? How are you going to contact these people?” Blain wanted to meet new people and make new social connections. He had met his current girlfriend and previous ones from their contact with his space. The space may have been a more comfortable and less threatening place to
access individuals who were usually unreachable. He sought affirmation from his peers as Glatzmeier & Steinhardt (2005) describe, wishes and desires are communicated online.

Naomi contrasted her initial intent for her page with her present changes: “I was like wanting to find guys I think when I first started I was fifteen or fourteen and that was kind of what I wanted. [Now] I don’t really care who looks at it or anything. I’d rather guys not, now.” With regard to her audience she stated, “If they’ve seen my page before and now they can tell that I’ve like settled down a lot.” She had wanted to meet guys and over time her needs changed. She had a regular boyfriend, and may have become more confident.

Blain explained the importance of audience appeal after being asked what provoked revisions or changes to his page. “Some people like your friends or other people, nobody wants to look at your page after it’s seen like a million times right, but your pictures people only comment on or look at you after for so long.” He talked about the importance of updating presentations of self-identity to others. In describing the pictures of himself he chose to post, he stated, “this one I look happier, more people want to look at it you know what I mean.” He understood that a more appealing image would attract more viewers to his page, and explained, “You get a bunch of pictures like this, you just look like you’re fucking mean right. Before I never even once had a picture on here of me smiling, never once. Well then I met some girls and they were like, ‘oh you’re so, you look so nice when you smile.’ Like when I put these new pictures up so many people were like, ‘oh you look so good there’ but before it’s just like, nobody, it’s like this kid just looks like he’s fucking gangster or something.” He also had impressions of how his peers perceived him, and after receiving positive feedback he appeared to shift his portrayal online. This supports McKenna & Bargh’s (1988) citation of the approval
adolescents receive from peers in online postings. The more positive the feedback, the more participation increased. Blain used the feedback he received and wanted to appear more appealing to his audience overtime.

Liam related how the audience impacted his page content: “I used to have a big write up of my interests, my likes and dislikes, the main topics, but then I realized that wasn’t really relevant and so I took that out and I used to have nothing just my name but I thought it was plain so I put a few pictures [up].” He started the process with more text and more direct explanations of interest but over time decided what was important to his audience and replaced the text with images which he thought had a greater impact on the audience.

When asked whether he had intended to create his page for a particular audience Blain replied, “it’s just for my friends, it’s like here, you go to my page right, it kind of looks nice, like it doesn’t really get anything across, but it’s kind of like something to look at right. You go to this kid’s page [going to another person’s social online space] and be like, ’What the fuck, this is boring’, who wants to look at this? You know what I mean, that’s gay.” Blain’s awareness of what keeps a person interested in an online space was clear in this description. He understood the importance of visual attractiveness.

When asked who Desmond thought viewed his page he replied, “Girls over the age of fourteen.” He claimed that he knew this was because “they send me messages.” He had noticed that since he had posted a picture of him kissing his girlfriend the messages had stopped. His status thus apparently had the impact of him receiving fewer messages from girls. After using the site for three years he stated in response to what he wants other people to think of him when they view his online space, “not that much anymore right, I don’t use it that much. I’m on there the odd time”. As to whether his
site could define aspects of himself, he commented, "Not completely because there's a lot of things the computer could not put down the characteristics right." He understood the limitations of an online space as a place for identification, for "you can't show me ripping around town on my bike."

Niko, on the other hand, wanted to restrict his presentation to his peers. "I always had pictures there and then I don't know, my girlfriend didn't want me to have them on because girls would always like message me and then like I don't know, then there's people I don't like in Tasas right cause I just like take it off so they don't just be like, 'Oh that's Niko.'" He wanted to control the audience because of two factors: his girlfriend and past associations he had left behind. He used his page to inform his audience as well. When asked when he made revisions to his page he replied, "Whenever something happens or if like people should know about anything." He explained that his reasons for posting an image of his girlfriend on his social online spaces was "because people know who I am with a beautiful girl." He wanted to share with others his pride in his current relationship.

Niko experienced a personal transition and explained the change in how he used his page in the following way: "Well, before it was like awesome cause I could just like beak off to people and hit on girls and I don't know, talk to like all my buddies and all that stuff, but now it just for simple stuff like talking to my girlfriend or just saying, 'what's up' to my buddies or making plans for the night or whatever. When I first made it [his page], it was just to show everybody who I was...just mister tough guy and now I don't really care what other people think right." Initially on his social page he had fewer inhibitions and did not censor his thoughts or opinions towards others, both girls and guys. Then later he began to use the page in a different way. Niko used it more for basic
communication whereas before he explains that the intent of the space was for a show of bravado towards others. His perception of his audience and his relationship to them changed over time.

Like Blain, Liam had a desire to meet people and he explained how he had met thirty people because of his space. With regard to the criteria for meeting people, he turned to their profile, “what they’re interested in and what they do for fun. If I thought they looked interesting [I’d contact them].” He explained that, after three years of managing his site, his peers “probably see it, kind of, generally plain, not taking much consideration of effort into it.”

4.11 Interpreting Research Question 5

Participant statements in online spaces were directed towards an intentional audience. Though the degree of importance placed on it shifted based on the length of time participants maintained a page, the need for peer validation was crucial. Participants were hesitant to place any reliance on this; however, their dual intent quickly surfaced. As Liam expressed this, “Like people would talk to me based on my webpage, like they would probably wanna talk to me cause they saw who I am on my, on my, on my webpage.” Implicit within this is the idea that the content must be palatable for the audience. Liam later qualified that “I used to have, not really like relevant things, it’s like things I’d think other people would be interested in so I had them up there.” He understood the importance of content for audience impression. The participants at times identified specific individuals they had targeted and tailored their online space towards or, alternatively, who they wanted to detract. They also had the need to change their
content to encourage greater peer interaction with their space and to maintain interest. Aidan was reflective: “Everybody is trying to update themselves and make them look more different. I simply put on what I really feel is about me. I try to reflect myself. I notice a lot of people nowadays kind of try to make themselves seem more likable and lookable at but they have to realize they are just sitting behind a computer desk, nobody can see them really.” Of course, his page was filled with drug imagery and gang associations. No one was immune to impression management. Aidan certainly wanted to present a very controlled representation of himself; he had an implicit understanding of how people interpret one another and the limitations of online presentation which are helpful for creating a constructed impression. This understanding was similar to the rest of the participants. Though it’s not explicit each possesses an understanding of impression management and the relationship to audience regulation. It would make sense as well, as most of the participants interviewed had been suspended from schools and likely had to have had an understanding of how the effect of their actions may have impacted the outcome of their current situation. They had implicit knowledge of how manipulation of self-presentation effected their audience—from police interactions to educators to parents to peers, each presentation created different impressions. To manage in the discourses they traversed, as adolescents, they would need an understanding of impression management.

4.12 Conclusion

Five research questions directed the case study. The questions were divided based on the central concepts examined, and progressed from extrinsic to intrinsic factors in
online space construction. As participants progressed through the interviews they disclosed more about their personal interactions with the online space. It was used to project interests and communicate values. Participants were aware of the specific impressions portrayed and were aware of the audience. The longer they maintained the space the more functional it became. It still was impression-based however it became more mainstream and less ‘unconventional’. Within the design, they wanted to cultivate a space that was unique, orderly and inviting. Over time they spent less time connected to their social online space and it played more of a peripheral role in their life.

Space content, as discussed by Moinian (2006), included topics which generally are not addressed by other institutions. Depictions of drugs, sexuality and violence were dominant, along with associations of power, loyalty and pride. These extreme representations shifted the longer the participant maintained an online space and there was a move from group identification to more individual recognition. All of the participants interviewed affiliated themselves with specific popular merchandise brands, music genres and, consequently, particular discourses. The uses and gratification model was evident as participants received positive outcomes for construction of their space (Arnett, Larsen & Offer, 1995). This included peer feedback, comments and posts. This interaction with peers was important; however, participants also expressed a need to communicate and relay to the audience a sense of who they were, including their likes and dislikes. Most felt they had achieved this through the text and images. They had a desire to communicate their uniqueness and individuality. Along with this, they aligned themselves with peers who shared similar interests, with links on their pages to other friends who shared similar values and discourses. They had a screening process in place for selection. Dominick (1999)
accounts for this peer identification as *ingratiation* used for alignment and relationship construction. Talamo & Ligorio (2001) believe positioning is embedded in any discourse. The authors account for the sociocultural aspects of identity and the concept of negotiation, which relates to the participants in this study. The participants aren’t so much removing cultural norms as showing allegiance to them. Participants understand part of what they are presenting because they access and judge other online social spaces. Allegiance to peers is crucial, although individual positions are malleable— as youth develop and age, more age appropriate norms are accepted.

Killoran (2003) understood that online information needs to be read like a narrative of a person’s life. Within the space, individual challenges are displayed. Users can easily access other peers’ online spaces to see if they share similar difficulties. All the participants related a personal experience they had undergone and how text or imagery personified the experience. They enjoyed sharing a narrative of obstacles, challenge, and defeat. Along with this, they expressed that they had *settled down* relative to the *other* impressions they had presented online in previous years.

The participants in the case study attested that, over the time of their representations online, there was a noticeable shift in their attachment to their initial desired image. Markus & Nurius (1986) confirm this malleable nature of self-identity: “development can be seen as a process of acquiring and then achieving or resisting possible selves. Through the selection and construction of possible selves individuals can be viewed as active producers of their own development” (p. 955). For example, in the current case study, Liam and Niko, both long-time social networking males, observed their changes in presentation over time, from the adolescent ‘thug’ with themes of
violence on their pages to the 'reformed' older males whose time was utilized in more mainstream tasks (jobs, girlfriends, school).

McKenna and Bargh's (1999) framework for social interaction fits the changes participants experienced over time. Initially they had a direct purpose and reason for creating their space, but over time changes offline were reflected, not so much in text or image posting online, but rather in the attachment and relationship participants had to their space online. They spent less time updating their pages and much less time online communicating with peers. They experienced acceptance in the commonality of interests among peers, however, it didn't appear that their peer base grew so much as the feelings of greater acceptance. The space became more functional and there was less emotional attachment. Stern's (2003) analysis of female affiliations was corroborated in this study, as the female participants expressed either distance or closeness to public perceptions. For the majority of females interviewed it was more closeness to peers, but distance from the narrative of the naïve female. They created the appearance of a bad girl through images and text, and this involved sex and violence, much like with the males. Overall, a powerful influence was constructed and fashioned through images.

Walker's (2000) distinction of extrinsic and intrinsic factors reflects the use of the participant spaces in the present case study. Participants were aware of their audience and, according to the interviews, sought a desired effect from their web space. Stern's (2004) assertion that the online mirrors the offline appears to apply here. Disclosure was not limited to the online space, as these participants were also exhibiting and expressing the same tendencies offline. The locker analogy applies because it simplifies the concept that individuals locate spaces that have a degree of public access and private knowledge.
to express themselves. These study participants weren’t looking so much for new validation, as they already had it beforehand, so new identities per se were not being constructed. They did want their audience to perceive them in a specific way and weren’t looking for pseudonymity. The participants published and uploaded very specific information about themselves, including birthdates and place of residence, and in some cases provided a contact phone number. Additionally, the majority posted pictures of themselves online.

Jones’ (1990) tactics of impression management are congruent with participant responses. The users all displayed varying degrees of control over the interpretation of the space and therefore of self-identity; early on, in initial postings there was more exaggeration, however, as time went by the importance of the page diminished. Desiring and gaining peer approval is not revolutionary, regardless of the age or context—the degree to which it is negative or positive varies and is an area for further research.

Online images and text catch the user’s attention and thus have a faster effect and popularity with online users. The side effect is the undue attention users receive. Many of the females interviewed stated they did not like anonymous people to contact them from their online space. They enjoyed posted positive comments; however, they did not like it when males directly or explicitly attempted communication.

The question arises as to whether or not the representations online are fragments of self-identity. The participants were projecting something, however, the core self was uniform and they did not jump from one extreme to another in their self-identification. The images may have idealized the extreme end of how they perceived themselves, yet an element of self-identity was also integral in them.
Chapter 5
Summary, Discussion & Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The concept of fluidity in self-presentation was communicated through participant interviews. This was developed in relation to peer influence at a period when culture was prominent. Adjustments to the self-concept were documented online through social networking spaces. It was fascinating to observe the relationship between media and development among adolescents. Based on the interviews and analysis I believe adolescents align their ethos with musicians, celebrities and socialites and their associated artefacts of meaning (products like clothes, lyrics, etc). The symbolism embedded within text (e.g., lyrics and images) is formed into personal discourses and used as a position during times of upheaval and transition. The study showed that personal values, principles and language are being communicated and used in new and inventive ways. The remixing of images and text by local culture speaks to the need for adolescents to create meaning and share it with peers. This meaning is especially prolific when it addresses issues of marginalization, alienation and neglect of a dominant discourse. This study indicates that adolescents desire forms of expression for aesthetics that counter and mirror their personal discourses. They want to communicate and present who they are and to align with similar peers. This situating and positioning is ongoing as their interactions with media grow and change and development occurs. Aidan summarized this negotiation,
The changes I have undergone like yeah, it’s been pretty, it’s been a good trip, I’ll say that, it was almost like a drug trip like, you, you, I went through a lot of different stages like if, shit and I’m nowhere near done I’m in grade nine. I’ve, I’ve still got like, I still fuck like, I’m just about turning fifteen in like about a month and you know like I got a whole new year of being another age and a lot more shit to find out and a lot more struggles to deal with, a lot more self reinvention. I sit and observe. I sit and I observe really good and that’s, that’s what I like to do and that’s what I’m going to continue to keep doing that, sitting observing and thinking, trying to you know, trying to at least connect with people through my thinking and the views that I express.

The media saturation of and relationship to discourses requires study and examination in the classroom. Stepping back from media, culture must be distinguished as a major force in adolescent life. Willis (1990) argues, “The field of education is likely to come under even more intense pressure... [it] will become almost totally irreverent to the real energies and interests of most young people and no part of their identity formation. Common culture will, increasingly, undertake, in its own ways, the roles that education has vacated” (p.147). I agree with Willis that the gap between education, media and youth cultures have the potential to widen further. One cannot meet the entire needs of the other. Media contributes to construction of personal meaning; however, this is based on the individual interpretation of the user. As researchers we must go back to the participant: how do they engage in creating meaning and what does it speak to in the development of the individuals as part of a social group?
An understanding of how marginalized adolescents express themselves in different environments and of the situational and sociocultural effects which mediate expressions are critical in an educational context. Willis (1990) discusses ‘cultural survival’ for adolescents: they are confronted with external and internal threats, some ideological and cultural in nature, and must sift through complex economic, social and symbolic realities and constructions. Mainstream institutions multiply the incongruence of present realities, understandably, since their goal promotes uniformity to and not defiance of existing societal norms (Blake, 2004); thus, there are few spaces or opportunities to candidly acknowledge and legitimize working realities. The US National School Boards Association 2007 report, “Research and Guidelines on Online Social – and Educational – Networking” (www.nsba.org) recommends the following: “Find ways to harness the educational value of social networking” and “pay attention to the nonconformists” (p.9). These nonconformists, though marginal, can present as very challenging. They speak to a population of individuals where expression and presence are brought to spaces outside of the confines of school. The significance of understanding out-of-school identities, especially among at-risk adolescents, is important to constructing relevant curricula. I believe that a growing number of adolescents feel culturally and socially alienated and utilize online spaces as a point of recognition and relief. Willis (1990) explains that “in an unconscious and conscious bid for cultural survival on their own terms, young people seem to turn deliberately to the informal and to resist administrated symbols. It is in informal relations and informal ‘free’ time where they find a greater possibility of authentic and direct communication in trusting contexts” (p. 16). Online spaces are one such place where informal practices surface. Adolescents have
found a virtual space to converge and reveal aspects of themselves to peers. These facets of self-identity often go ignored in other systems. What is of concern is that the network of silent positioning is limited to peers and, as empowering as this is, there is also a feature of alienation connected to such exposure. It makes me question what area needs to be filled in education and where the void is.

Communicative technologies are just this: communicative in nature. The desire to share and express how we perceive ourselves is nothing new. We make meaning out of things we can manage: our appearance, our homes, our surroundings. When we sense there are restrictions we look for alternative venues for expression. These can be misinterpreted if people do not understand the guiding factors for expression. Offline lives are very connected to online disclosure. The need to self-regulate is no surprise, given that youth do it offline. Online, however, youth are discovering this revelation earlier: they believe they can control how others perceive them.

5.2 Discussion

The concept of image construction is not unique or new— it is simply threaded into discourses to which we attach ourselves and reflected through our external appearance and other consumer relationships. Youth identify their alignments, and through such choices come to understand how they can control and manipulate the spill off of self-identity upon others. This is not an attribute of adolescents alone, as other, more adult oriented, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace are becoming more popular. Other networking sites are emerging as individuals realize the myriad benefits of presenting themselves online. Just like the youth, they can meet new people,
express themselves, and present an image of how they see themselves. Presentations of one’s self-identity are endless. Youth are now extending their bedrooms, homes and workspaces online. What people need to be aware of is that youth are malleable and that what is presented online today may not reflect them tomorrow. As youth encounter personal changes, so too are these reflected in their online spaces.

Based on my findings, I believe that it is important for educators to learn how expressions of self-identity are created, managed and negotiated. More work in the area is required. Wilson (2006) notes, “it is important to consider not only how the division between online and offline is in many respects (for many youth) a theoretical one, but also how the study of connections between and flows through online and offline require methodologies that are sensitive to this form of experience and interaction. This point is especially pertinent for those interested in better gauging the cultural experiences of young people in developing pertinent curricula in schools and other settings” (p. 316).

Within my current context, this study has far reaching implications.

The alternate school I worked at was constructed to serve adolescents at-risk. Staff explored ways to connect curriculum to the lives of marginalized youth and examined the impact of attachment on re-engaging youth and building educational relationships. Most of the enrolled youth struggled with peer and family issues and had addiction, mental health and learning challenges. Providing youth with opportunities to examine and debate concepts related to their sociocultural lives is key to bridging the out-of-school and in-school cultures. Examinations of the content of social networking pages would help direct such discussions. Gee (2001) maintains the necessity of educators recognizing and validating local cultures of youth. When educators recognize and teach
from students’ frames of reference, marginalized students can understand competing discourses and position them in relation to their own discourses (Williams, 2005). Many of the participants’ pages had images related to the themes of violence, drugs and sexuality. They also expressed relationship themes of group membership, loyalty and trust. Issues of power were also central in their online spaces, either the obedience or resistance to different dominant authorities. These themes are central in at-risk adolescent lives for a reason.

If educators can capitalize on the themes youth question, struggle with, and challenge, they can begin to weave these into curricula. Social barriers between educators and students would be more transparent and dialogue would open up. Defences could be removed and more opportunities for learning would be present. With this knowledge educational staff could create relevant curriculum that applies to the many multi-literacies students possess and students could begin to narrate their experiences without fear of judgement or criticism veiled as moral authority. The more ‘hidden curriculum’ is revealed, the more students are connected to school, yield more new concepts and may be less resistant to the influence of school.

By examining student social online spaces and possessing an intimate knowledge of student interests, experiences and, ultimately, social milieus, educators can manage and reduce student defences. In order to bring marginalized students closer into the school discourses, educators need to understand these secondary discourses which youth reveal online. Understanding adolescent motivations, reasons and purposes for expressions of self-identity in online social spaces, and using the content to facilitate frank discussions regarding out of school cultures, will work towards supporting student achievement and success in
such an understanding arms educators with a collective knowledge of the working realities of adolescent lives and builds bridges for understanding.

Understanding adolescent multimedia choices and representations will allow educators to teach subject matter which is relevant and engaging to at-risk adolescents. Validating the known is valuable for students who are ‘outside of academic discourses.’ Educators need to understand the importance of ‘out of school literacies’ and acknowledge what happens outside of the classroom. Mitra’s (2001) concept that oppressed individuals can break stereotypes online is counter to this study’s findings. If anything, the students further lived up to the stereotype created offline. I would attribute this more to an influence of cultural capital. Mitra’s study looked more at new immigrants. The potential for dialogue and curriculum around issues of sexuality, gender, media interests, and relationships is far reaching. Understanding why students potentially present as they do and how this presentation impacts their life is important. The connection to content will also act as a bridge to establishing student relationships and building ‘attachment’ within the classroom. It breaks down barriers to learning perceptions and curriculum that characterize many at-risk adolescents. After all, “non-mainstream children will always have more conflicts in using and thus mastering dominant secondary discourses...This does not mean we should give up...We must stress research and intervention aimed at developing a wider and more humane understanding of mastery and its connections to gatekeeping” (Cushman et al., p. 544). Furthermore, Delpit (1993) maintains, “teachers must recognize conflict...between students’ home discourses and the discourse of school. They must understand that students who appear unable to learn are in many instances choosing to ‘not-learn’” (p.293), as Kohl puts it,
choosing to maintain their sense of identity in the face of what they perceive as a painful choice between allegiance to 'them' or 'us'. The teacher, however, can reduce this sense of choice by transforming the new discourse so that it contains within it a place for the students' selves" (Cushman et al., p. 553).

5.3 Recommendations

More ethnographic research in the area of at-risk youth representations online and offline would reveal greater connections between the two areas. As well, it would be useful to examine whether online spaces of adolescents who are not at-risk would reveal the same degree of self-regulation, impression management and role negotiation.

As the research concluded, Facebook was beginning to rise in popularity among the adolescents in my school, and subsequently was blocked from the Northgate School District following a parent complaint. Users appear to be changing social networking sites and have moved towards Facebook, which offers more privacy and less public access and is free. Individuals cannot access online spaces without approval. Regardless of the benefits, the trend towards private disclosure within public online spaces continues to grow. This 'anonymous public disclosure' oxymoron has increased blogging and sites for individuals to display personal text and images.

Age is irrelevant in social networking circles and this speaks to the need for individuals to reveal and control aspects of themselves without restriction. The 'underground' phenomenon points toward the public pressure with social norms and stress towards impression management, which requires more study and analysis in more scholarly fields. As well, research in the area of discourse analysis, culture, 'resistance'
and identity are required. Furthermore, understanding the relationship to the audience requires much more attention. As online public disclosure grows, more research is needed into the nature of the relationships of audience to online spaces. As users recycle media, research is required into the relationship between consumers and producers of content. A follow-up on whether any online spaces were changed and what updates were made after the study would be also revealing.

Some would perceive these participants as being confrontational and anarchist online. They may just be suggesting that structures be torn down or totally rejected; however, as I see it, they are just expressing angst towards educational structures. They want alternatives and likely are responding to some sense of the challenge of the world they live in. Disenfranchised adolescents and online responses to multiple discourses require further investigation.

5.4 Thesis Summary

Most people are going to be checking for pages that have meaning and I hope someday in like kind of like, soon or in the future that people will start to realize that it's not about if you're pretty or if you have a social pace like everybody else, it's more if you, if you have your own originality and your thoughts—Aidan

Adolescents utilize social networking spaces to communicate personal messages. Aesthetic elements are also integrated with multimedia in purposeful ways. Space content reflects and affirms present and future desires. Media contains content, music, film and consumer associations. Along with these, there are broader messages of group
loyalty and friendship. For this group of at-risk adolescents, the audience is critical in constructing impressions and self-regulation is the norm as is the direction of impressions. The longer adolescents are online, the less importance they attach to public impression. Initially, they are motivated to present themselves in very specific ways and they direct this towards specific individuals; however, this shifts over time. They note the limitations of the page to accurately reflect them. The page reflects who and what they wanted to align themselves with, including detached personalities and local friendships. The adolescents wanted to present themselves as unique and as having control of online presentations.
References


National School Boards Association LLC Study. [files.nsba.org/creatingandconnecting.pdf](files.nsba.org/creatingandconnecting.pdf)


Appendix A

Research Questions

1. Extrinsic motivating factors in design/uses of homepage representation:
   - When did you create your social space?
   - What made you decide to create your social space?
   - Were there any influences on your decisions to create a social space?
   - Do you have friends who have social spaces?
   - How often do you log into your site and check your social space?
   - How much of your time is spent on Nexopia?
   - In what sorts on activities online in Nexopia?
   - How much is your time spent on communicating with peers/strangers/family…?
   - What are the benefits of having a social space?
   - What kinds of challenges are there?
   - Have you encountered any problems from posting?
   - Tell me about your social space …describe each of the different items you posted/uploaded.
   - What motivated you to create a social space?
   - Was there specific material you wanted to publish?
   - How did you choose each item?
   - What does each item/image mean/represent to you?
   - Does your social space have an overall theme?
   - How is it organized?
   - How does your social space reflect who you are?
   - How did you choose your design format?
   - Did you model it after others?
   - Are there things you decided not to put on your social space, or that you wouldn’t be allowed to include? Can you describe these? What kept you from including these?
2. Identity role exploration and relationship to student choice of representation on Nexopia/Influencing factors of multimedia choice:

- Describe how see yourself?
- What are your interests?
- How you think others see you?
- Do you think someone looking at your social space would get an accurate or inaccurate view of the kind of person you are (your personality, your interests)? Why?
- What are you trying to tell other people who read your social space about you?
- How does the choice of images/media reflect your interests/self?
- What led you to choose the images/text?
- Do you think you’ve changed much since you began publishing a web space, how?
- Are these changes reflected in content?
- What is the relationship between you and this material?
- Was there a specific affiliation you wanted to publish?

3. Meanings of self and social identity constructed on home pages:

- What kinds of connections are there between your space and who you are outside of the space?
- What do you want people who see your space to think you are?
- How would your space define you?
- What parts of your space are your own creations vs. those taken from other individuals/artists?
- Are there links to other sites?
- Content: Video/lyrics

- How has having a space affected your social relationships?
- Do you have many friendships?
- How do you think your friends see your space?
Do they influence your space content?

How do your friends see you/how would they describe you?

Is it important for your friends to interact with your page and sign your message book?

What importance is the message book to you?

4. Whom are statements intended? Role of social validation from online and offline peers in presentations of self online:

Do you get many visitors to your space?

How do you know who is visiting your space?

Do the visitors influence your space design?

When you’re online, signed into Nexopia what do you typically do?

How long are you on for at one period of time?

What sorts of activities are engaged in? How long are you on for?

When you created your space did you have a particular audience in mind?

Who did you think would be viewing your space?

How has your sense of your audience changed over time…who are you writing it for now?

Do you have a hit meter?

Do you check logs to see who’s looking at it?

What kind of feedback have you gotten from on your space?

Who have you received the feedback from?

Strangers via email? Friends? Family?

Tell me about a time you revised your space in response to feedback you’ve received?

What else prompts you to make a revision?

How often do you/did you revise your space?

Did response to your page meet your expectations?

If you were to revise your space today, what might you do differently?

Is there anything else you’d like to tell me, or anything we’ve missed that it would be important for me to know?
Appendix B

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z9

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

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<td>Self-Presentation Online in Marginalized Adolescent Homeless</td>
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<td>April 26, 2007</td>
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<td>Protocol</td>
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The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and stamped electronically by one of the following:

Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Arminee Kazanjian, Associate Chair
Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair