



## Book review

### Useful resources, important messages: The explosion of parenting books on adolescents and social networking sites

Candice M. Kelsey, *Generation MySpace: Helping your teen survive online adolescence*. Avalon New York, 2007, ISBN: 978-1-60094-011-8 (paper), 352 pp., \$14.95

Larry D. Rosen, *Me, MySpace, and I: Parenting the Net generation*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, ISBN: 978-0-230-60003-4 (paper), 272 pp., \$14.95

“Can anyone help me understand why my son and his friends really only ever talk about what transpires on MySpace.com; I mean what is the appeal?” – Sarah, parent. (Kelsey, 2007, p.2).

“I don’t call anyone any more – I check their MySpace, IM them, or e-mail them. First thing when I get home, I check my MySpace and am usually on and off until I go to bed. I honestly think that if MySpace weren’t around, I wouldn’t have a social life.” – Cameron, age 12. (Rosen, 2007, p.1).

The long-awaited New England spring sunshine is gently casting its beautiful light on two books with colorful covers on my desk. However, when I saw the above two quotes printed on the first pages of these books, my thoughts immediately turned to the thousands of parents and teenagers like Sarah and Cameron, who are puzzling and wondering about the seemingly mysterious social networking sites (SNSs). Added to that are the news reports of online predators and cyberbullying on SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook; a case in point was the recent suicide of 13-year-old Megan Meier from Dardenne Prairie of Missouri and the subsequent revelation that she had been a victim of cyberbullying ([Megan Meier Foundation, n.d.](#)).

The two books, Candice Kelsey’s *MySpace: Helping Your Teen Survive Online Adolescence* and Larry Larson’s *Me, MySpace, and I: Parenting the Net Generation* are fine examples of the many books (see the list at the end of this review) on how to parent adolescents’ use of SNSs. All hit the market around 2007. As applied developmental researchers, it is worth asking why so many parenting books on adolescents and SNSs emerged around 2007. Are these books developmentally sound and practically useful to parents, helping them protect their children on SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook? Are these books scientifically relevant to applied developmental psychologists whose work directly addresses practical concerns about psychological development? Rather than reviewing the over 20 books in the market, I focus on two books in this essay – the Kelsey book serves as an exemplar of books written by lay authors such as educators and the Rosen book serves as an exemplar of research-based books written by veteran researchers.

#### 1. The unprecedented explosion

There are at least three specific reasons that so many parenting books on adolescents and SNSs were published at the same time. First, there has been an explosive growth in the use of SNSs among adolescents. MySpace, for instance, one of the earliest sites, was launched in 2003. By 2006, merely three years later, this website had grown into an international social networking site with over 100 million accounts, and over 230,000 new registrations per day all over the world. Nowadays, hundreds of thousands of adolescents worldwide are attracted to MySpace and other SNSs. In this context, smart publishers are using their own ways of storytelling to reveal the unique social phenomenon that is social networking.

Second, there has been growing concern among parents, educators, policy makers, and many other social groups with regard to young people’s safety on these sites. One important indication of this concern is that the House of Representatives passed the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006, a bill that would explicitly restrict the use of SNSs and chat rooms in schools and libraries. It is by no means a coincidence that the Deleting Online Predators Acts of 2006 and 2007 occurred simultaneously with the explosive growth of SNSs that began in 2006, as well as the flood of parenting books that followed around 2007.

Third, there were very limited scientifically sound and practically useful resources about SNSs that were available for parents in 2006–2007. Although such sites were and still are new to many parents and public concern is enormous, the entire scientific community, including governmental and private funding agencies, theoretical and applied researchers, and journal editors and reviewers, appear to have fallen behind rather than lead the communities of parents, publishers, and policy makers in responding to the growing use of SNSs among adolescents and the accompanying concerns about their safety on these sites.

## 2. Useful resources for parents

Both Kelsey's and Rosen's books are practically useful and developmentally sound for helping parents to protect their children on MySpace and/or Facebook. They provide useful resources for parents in four specific ways: describing the use of SNSs by adolescents, specifying major types of negative effects on adolescents, offering hands-on and minds-on protecting strategies for online safety, and supplying various practical resources.

Kelsey's book has an introduction and 10 chapters. The introduction and the first two chapters focus on describing what SNSs are, how prevalent they have become among preteens and teens, why children love MySpace and YouTube and become addicted to them, and how parents can create a MySpace account. The next five chapters specify five major types of psychological effects of using MySpace on adolescents, including language use, self development, cyber bullying, sexual pressure on girls, drug use, and pornography, all topics of developmental interest and practical utility. The last two chapters offer practical strategies and various resources related to how parents can go about protecting their adolescent children on the Internet. The first two appendices as well as a unique "Your Assignment" feature at the end of each chapter supply additional valuable resources for parents.

The Rosen book also consists of 10 chapters. The first two chapters describe various issues about MySpace, with a detailed discussion of the MySpace Generation (those born after 1979), a generation significantly different from the Baby Boomer generation (those born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1979). The next 7 chapters primarily specify seven major types of psychological effects of MySpace on preteens and teens, that is, effects related to friendship, identity development, privacy, pornography, addiction, family relationships, and bullying. The last chapter offers major parenting strategies for promoting online safety, as well as various resources for further reference. In addition, the first appendix of Notes as well as expert interview scripts at the end of each chapters supply detailed resources for further exploration for the interested parent.

Not only do these two books provide useful resources for parents, they also build some of their presentations and discussions around developmental perspectives, psychological theories, and empirical research. For instance, based on years of experience in teaching high school English and counseling high school students, Kelsey recommends parenting guidelines according to four age groups of adolescents: 11 and under, 12–13, 14–15, and 16–17 and above. Such age-sensitive advice is particularly desirable and thoughtful given the extensive developmental literature and the lack of such sensitiveness in practice (e.g., Yan, 2006, in press). Rosen holds a Ph.D. in experimental psychology and is a full professor of psychology. His book is not only based on his large research projects, involving over 1000 parents and 2500 MySpace teens, but also provides thoughtful developmental analyses (e.g., concerning the process of friendship, the process of identity formation, and sexual growth) and draws on well-established psychological theories (e.g., three major theories of media sexual effects, three major theories of addictive behaviors). Both books are developmentally sound and psychologically thoughtful, making them useful resources with strong scientific bases.

## 3. Important messages for researchers

After reading *Generation MySpace* and *Me, MySpace, and I*, I sense that these books can also deliver three important messages to researchers. First, both Kelsey and Rosen provide unique evidence regarding the effects of SNSs on adolescent development. Kelsey's book, for instance, is filled with "heartfelt vignettes" based on many years of observations and discussions with both teens and their parents: "My parents spend hours reading the newspaper and their stupid magazines, so what's the big deal if I spend hours reading messages from my friends? The hypocrisy really gets to me." (Ellen, 13). "I just read the best book ever! It's the life story of a real porn actress; I couldn't put it down, Mrs. Kelsey. Can't you assign it for summer readings?" (Sophia, 17). Rosen's book also provided various vivid examples based on the authors' years of multiple research projects: "Geez, I'm in my bra and panties. Nobody can see anything. I don't see why everyone's so upset." (JuneBug, 14). "One cool thing is that if someone is having a party they just need put a note on their MySpace and all their friends know about it." (A girl, 15). This type of evidence, based on informal and formal interviews, observations, and surveys, can generally be considered experiential, ethnographic, or phenomenological rather than systematic, experimental, or explanatory. To applied developmental researchers, however, these data are useful for developing valid and reliable survey items in formal interviews and questionnaires. These first-hand observations are fertile grounds for researchers and are perhaps one of the most compelling reasons for researchers to read the books.

In addition, material presented in both two books can help applied developmental researchers formulate research questions and develop insightful hypotheses. The Kelsey book, for example, devotes two chapters, 48 pages out of a total of 300, to the subject of online sex, one of the most popular but least studied effects of SNSs. Chapter 6 focuses on the sexual pressures that girls face on MySpace. A series of research questions can be developed to examine the prevalence of intercourse and oral sex among teenagers; what, how, and why girls post their profiles on MySpace; and teenagers' sexual identity, knowledge, expression, experience, and development. On page 152, the author further suggests four specific research topics on girls' sexual pressures (i.e., peer influence, role model influence, experimentation, and sex appeal). Chapter 8 focuses on pornography on MySpace. However, it has only one paragraph discussing briefly the specific relationship between sex and MySpace. By reading this chapter, various research questions can be formulated, including questions related to the typology of pornography, ubiquitous presence of pornography

stars, effects of exposure to porn stars on teen behaviors, and psychological characteristics of sexual predators. Rosen also provides various anecdotal examples of cybersex, devoting 33 out of a total of 250 pages to the topic. He explicitly recognizes that little has been done to study teen cybersex issues.

Lastly, these books would be important for developmental researchers to read if they are worried parents of MySpace teens, if they are not familiar with or comfortable using MySpace or Facebook, or if they are not aware of the urgent need for research in this area. More importantly, both books would help increase awareness about the importance of online safety research within the applied developmental community. Applied developmental psychologists should pay attention to this MySpace phenomenon and respond to the urgent call from teens and parents in the real world, and in real time. Considering that the business community recognized this need and produced more than 20 books for parents and adolescents around 2007, developmental researchers, funding agencies, local institutional review boards, research institutions, journal editors, and conference organizers should match those efforts to produce scientific findings that could help parents and their adolescents.

In summary, we, as the applied developmental research community, have a lot to learn from the authors and publishers of these parenting books. In a sense, these books can also be useful to applied researchers – to reflect on how we can do our best not only to protect children and adolescents who use the Internet, but also to address the implications of Internet use for their cognitive, social, and physical development. It is hoped that this special issue will similarly lead to a wealth of research related to urgent and critical issues of psychological development in the MySpace era.

#### A List of Parenting Books on Protecting Adolescents when Using SNSs

1. Baker, L. (2002). *Protecting your children from sexual predators*. New York: Macmillan.
2. Bondservant, C. N. (2007). *MySpace for moms and dads: A guide to understanding the risks and the rewards*. Grand Rapids, MI: Bondservant Publishing Company.
3. Centric, S. M. (2007). *E-Parenting: Keeping up with your tech-savvy kids*. New York: Random House.
4. Chris Hansen, C. (2007). *To catch a predator: Protecting your kids from online enemies already in your home*. New York: Penguin Group.
5. Clark, C., & Clark, D. (2007). *Disconnected: Parenting teens in a MySpace world*. Adam, MI: Baker Books.
6. Criddle, L. (2006). *Look both ways: Help protect your family on the Internet*. Bellevue, WA: Microsoft Press.
7. Dale, L. (2006). *A parent's guide to MySpace*. Redondo Beach, CA: Daydream Publishers.
8. Engdahl, S. (Ed.). (2007). *Online social networking: Current controversies*. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press.
9. Farnham, K. M. & Farnham, D. G. (2006). *MySpace safety: 51 tips for teens and parents*. New York: How-To Primers.
10. Fringes, A. (2005). *No child is safe from Internet crime: A guide for parents*. Thonotosassa, FL: DDR Publications.
11. Goodstein, A. (2007). *Totally wired: What teens and tweens are really doing online*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
12. Harris, M. (2006). *MySpace 4 parents: Learn how to protect your child in MySpace*. Santa Rosa, CA: Neptunium LLC.
13. Kelsey, C. M. (2007). *Generation MySpace: Helping your teen survive online adolescence*. New York: Marlowe & Company.
14. Kowalski, R. M., Limber, S. P., & Agatston, P. W. (2008). *Cyber bullying: Bullying in the digital age*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
15. Lillian, J. (2007). *MySpace®, my kids: A parent's guide to protecting your kids and navigating MySpace.com*. Irvine, CA: Harvest House Publishers.
16. Magid, L. & Collier, A. (2006). *MySpace unraveled: A parent's guide to teen social networking*. Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press.
17. Melton, B., & Shackle, S. (2007). *What in the world are your kids doing online? How to understand the electronic world your children live in*. New York: Broadway Books.
18. Rosen, L.D. (2007). *Me, MySpace, and I: Parenting the Net Generation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
19. Smith, G. S. (2007). *How to protect your children on the Internet: A road map for parents and teachers*. Westport, CT: Pager Publishers.
20. Sullivan, M. (2002). *Safety monitor: How to protect your kids online*. Los Angeles, CA: Bonus Books.
21. Willard, N. E. (2007). *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the challenge of online social aggression, threats, and distress* (2nd ed.). New York: Research Press.
22. Willard, N. E. (2007). *Cyber-safe kids, cyber-savvy teens: Helping young people learn to use the Internet safely and responsibly*. Somerset, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

#### References

- Megan Meier Foundation. (n.d.). *In loving memory of Megan Taylor Meier*. Retrieved July 3, 2008, from <http://www.meganmeierfoundation.org>
- Yan, Z. (in press). Limited knowledge and limited resources: Children's and adolescents' understanding of the Internet. *J. Appl. Dev. Psychol.*
- Yan, Z. (2006). What influences children's and adolescents' understanding of the complexity of the Internet? *Dev. Psychol.*, 42, 418-428.

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