THE CHANGING FACE OF YOUTH: MASS MEDIA CULTURE AND THE LIFE OF THE AMERICAN TEEN

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THE CHANGING FACE OF YOUTH: ADOLESCENT LIFE AND CULTURE IN PRINT AND ONLINE SPACE

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ABSTRACT

This project’s goal is to examine the modern adolescent experience as it relates to the mass media. The scope of this project is primarily cultural and calls upon the related disciplines of Sociology, Cultural Studies, History, Media Studies, and Psychology for its context and grounding. It incorporates evidence from both print and online spaces to demonstrate these suppositions. Throughout the project, the arguments presented here demonstrate that the media in both print and online forms is playing an ever-increasing role in the lives of American teenagers, having larger impact on peer and family interactions, romantic liaisons, and the psychological well-being of adolescents. I also argue that the heightened presence and power of the media in teenage life and culture is bringing about changes in larger American society. A primary example of this comes in the examination of changes in American death and funerary customs as they relate to online space. In particular, the changing nature of many of the critical aspects of the grieving and memorial construction processes, further highlighting the prevalence and popularity of online interaction and communication among teenagers. Through analysis of many publicly-available MySpace profiles of recently deceased adolescents, an interesting phenomenon emerged. The posting walls of many of the profiles on this...
popular social networking website had many of the trappings of a ‘virtual tombstone,’ the walls serving as immediate and constant public memorials to these individuals. This project’s aim is to show the immense power of the mass media in the everyday life of teenagers, and examines surrounding factors in larger society that help to further comprehend the daily experience of youth in modern America.
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INTRODUCTION

“In some ways, the shift toward melancholy in young people seems paradoxical: Generation Me has so much more than previous generations…but Generation Me often lacks other basic human requirements…the United States has become a place where we have more but feel worse. Technology and material things may make life easier, but they do not seem to lead to happiness. Instead, we long for social connections of past years, we enter a confusing world of too many choices, and we become depressed at younger and younger ages.”

-A combination of excerpts from the Introduction to Generation Me, by Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D.

As an innovation and larger force, technology has brought about both positive and negative changes in the areas of culture and society, with particular regard to family sociology and interaction. This has had clear effects for adolescents on their roads to adulthood. A positive example could be that access to so much more information and programming at a younger age has brought more sophistication and awareness of the world to young people than was previously possible; however, on the other hand, this prevalence of mass media outlets have intensified depression in many adolescents, changed cultural norms governing traditional events such as funeral customs and mourning, incited new kinds of fears, and have also been used by marketers to aggressively target these same young people for financial gain.

My overall interest in this research and this project is to explore how the experience of adolescence within the modern mass media culture differs from that of previous generations. Further, this project also seeks to investigate the role that technology, family dynamics, and overall cultural shifts are playing in the modern
coming of age process. Through the examples of print and online space, I am able to show the popular culture effects technology and the mass media are playing in teen culture, life, and even death. Exploration of this topic requires an exploration also into the related fields of cultural theory, sociology, developmental psychology/interpersonal interaction, community building, media studies, and history, to provide cultural contextualization and relevancy to the topic and the issues to confronts. This project and its evidence will be evaluated primarily from a pop cultural point of view. To this end, the chapters have been divided into two major categories. The first focuses on the history and current state of print publications and adolescence. It traces the influences of this medium on teenage girls over the last century up to the present to show its power as a cultural product and larger force. The second chapter concentrates on online space as a cultural movement in teen life, holding a major place in adolescent relationships, interaction, growth, and development, and death. It also examines the cultural values and norms surrounding death, mourning, and the grieving process, throughout history and in the current age. The examples and evidence contained in this section prove as support for the arguments I present about the vast penetration and influence online space holds in teen culture and norms. Contextualization for the experience of modern adolescence results from examples in both of these spaces, and supported by the theoretical framework from a variety of disciplines that underlie it.

This project seeks to examine a variety of issues with particular relevance to teenagers in modern America. The overarching questions and issues it aims to address using examples from the selected print and online spaces include: what changes in
modern culture have changed this experience from that of decades before, and what role
does technology have in this as a force of cultural/social change? Additionally, this
project asks what issues/priorities are current teenagers confronting, and also, along with
this, the ways in which cultural norms/rules have changed as a result of the modern mass
media machine, particularly with regard to interpersonal relationships, romantic liaisons,
and family dynamics. Ultimately and throughout, this project and the research it
comprises aims to present some of the upsides/downsides to communication in today’s
world – mediated v. face to face, and how these are changing the ways in which young
people relate to each other, their families, strangers, and their world at large.

My overarching argument running throughout this project is that mass media
outlets, largely driven by technological development, have come to hold increasingly
powerful influence and priority in nearly all aspects of everyday teenage life and
existence. This influence and centrality in everyday life is shown in a variety of different
areas, spanning from articles in print magazines to serial fiction books, to virtual posting
boards and profiles surrounding issues of death, grieving ,and the mourning process.
Beneath these arguments also lie additional hypotheses regarding the other cultural
changes that are taking place simultaneously that are ultimately rendering the modern
conception of ‘life’ a starkly different one from that of decades before, particularly the
family and early growth of children, and the long reach of shifts enabled by online culture
to more traditionally recognized aspects of American life, such as death customs and
grieving rituals.
This project focuses on two specific aspects of mass media culture which exert importance and popularity among their teen participants and audiences: Print culture and online space. For the print culture section, original research was gathered from close reading and analysis of current issues of teenage magazines and serial fiction books aimed toward teenage girls in America. To contextualize this, a brief history of teenage girls in print culture precedes the original research section. Specific articles related to online activities, such as instant messaging in romantic relationships, and the feeling of overwhelming pressure to succeed were analyzed and given context into the larger focus of my project.

The chapter on online space aims to investigate the overwhelming prevalence that virtual communication, friendships, and interaction have taken on in adolescent life. A particular example used which runs throughout this section is the influence of online space and community-building with regard to death and the grieving process, resulting in a departure from many of the traditionally accepted norms it once entailed. Through a brief history of funerary customs in America, an original analysis section of deceased teens’ public myspace pages followed, spurred on by notices posted on the archival website that links news stories and obituaries with public myspace member profiles. This analysis was extremely interesting and telling for the overarching goals of my project, particularly the ways in which the online realm has changed not only the way teens interact with others and live their lives, but also how they conceptualize death and remember their loved ones on the deceased persons’ myspace posting boards. In part, these profiles have come to form a type of virtual shrine, or tombstone, showing
ultimately the vast power of the online community and world surrounding it in modern teen life and culture.

The approach of this project, while primarily pop cultural, comprises a large gamut of related subjects and disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and literature. Overall, it intends to highlight not only the experience of growing up today, but further, the enormous role the media, in the forms of print culture and online space, are playing in the raising of today’s young people on their road to adulthood. This project is about messages American culture is constantly sending to teenagers all the time, everywhere they go. It is about also the fact that these messages, although undoubtedly born of some intention or strategy, whether for marketing purposes and financial gain or some other, once they are issued, influence the people they reach in sometimes unpredictable ways with even more unpredictable outcomes.

In terms of method, evidence-gathering and analysis, the print culture section was guided chiefly by a brief summary of the history of print media and the influence it exerted in the larger popular culture of the time, particularly among teenage girls. From this, original readings and analysis of current print publications aimed at the adolescent girl market followed, shedding light on critical examples of the prevalence of media culture in teen life, thus supporting my overall arguments. Interestingly also, a large amount of articles featured in the print editions of the magazines selected addressed online subjects and virtual interaction. The blurring of these two media was especially telling about the changing climate and culture of American society today.
For the chapter focused on online space as a community-builder, and overall cultural phenomenon among the teenage population, the primary source of evidence gathering was obtained from mydeathspace.com and the social networking website, MySpace. The analysis of selected profiles of recently deceased adolescents spurred the majority of my arguments for the overall project, the most prominent of these being the large degree of importance and influence online life and interaction holds in teen culture, to the point that it becomes such a major grieving forum and point of ‘closeness’ with a lost loved one in death. MySpace has become a virtual grieving location for countless numbers of teenagers who, using dead friends’ posting boards on their MySpace pages, leave their friends notes, tell them they miss them, and generally conduct (no doubt one-sided) conversations reminiscent of those people often have at physical gravestones of their loved ones. This discovery helped to steer this chapter focusing on online space in an entire new direction, shedding light on a fascinating aspect of teen culture. I then used sources to help trace a history of death, mourning, and grieving rituals and processes in America over the last century, and was able to use all of this to relate to my examples from mydeathspace and the teen profiles I analyzed to create a persuasive case for the huge influences of the media and the surrounding culture on teen life and even death.

The overall goal of this project is to provide a glimpse into the life and times of the average middle-class adolescent in modern America. The research and examples, fueling the arguments for the strength and influence of media (in various forms) in teen culture, spanning academics, romantic relationships, friendships not limited by geographic proximity, and even death – all holding larger ramifications on the greater
scale of American society and culture. Related issues, such as changes in family
sociology, dynamics and composition, economic factors, and generational
characterizations help to gain a fuller integrative picture of the issues addressed. At its
most general level, this project intends to explore the traditionally acknowledged process
of adolescence and growing up amidst the vast availability of media in the current age,
and the changes in culture these have evoked.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship surrounding this project, and the related issues it addresses have all helped to inform the overall subject, underlie the evidence, and guide it to arguments and conclusions. Issues of adolescent life and culture in mass media society, including background sources in cultural theory, history, developmental psychology, and family studies that all comprise this larger topic are best divided into three categories. The first includes a historical and theoretical approach to technological advancement and culture theory, and the accompanying discourse surrounding the theories of both technological and cultural determinism, social disconnection, and shifts in previously established social codes of conduct among individuals within American society. This category of works, though not confined to their own separate chapter, serve to generally inform and underlie all other sources and arguments presented here. The second category of works includes sources detailing youth media culture and the changing dynamics of the American family in the modern age, the history of print and popular culture on the development of teenagers, particularly teen girls, as well as the role of technological innovation and online communication modes within this and the effects they can have. Finally, the third category of literature that informs the third chapter involves adolescent psychology and sociology with respect to online space and virtual interaction, the history and evolution of death culture and customs in America, and the role of technology and youth sociology in the changing cultural attitudes surrounding death, mourning, and the grieving process. The ultimate goal of this section is to attempt to communicate firstly the prevalence that
online space holds in teen culture, and also to highlight that technological innovation does not have to foster solely disconnection among people, but can also be a key instigator in the formation of new types of communities, particularly online ones through social networking websites, such as MySpace, and their posting boards, among others.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This topic and its related disciplines are underpinned by a long and strong tradition of theoretical and philosophical argument and discourse, centering around the ways in which goods take on social significance and material value and thus form the basis for popular culture. On the other side of this, there has also been numerous works published on social disconnection and potential alienation that can result as a corollary to these other developments in popular culture and contribute significantly to the evolution of the human condition in society. Both of these viewpoints are worthy of inclusion as foundation sources for my overall project, providing it with a theoretical frame and grounding point throughout.

Donald Fiske’s essay, aims to explain the effects of a social scientific approach on the study of individuals within society and the challenges that may result. He details, “…knowledge in social science is fragmented, is composed of multiple discrete parcels, and that the separateness or specificity of those bodies of knowledge is a consequence, not only of different objects of inquiry, but also of method specificity.”¹ Fiske’s more generalized beliefs on the field of social science and the interaction between the factors

that comprise it are useful as a way to conceive of the overarching approach to my topic, problems, and questions, particularly because the ultimate tone of my work is sociological. The view that the social sciences are composed of several disparate bodies of knowledge and that no complete, uniform analysis is possible with regard to social questions is continually relevant to this topic as it evolves throughout this project.

Many theoretical works in cultural studies and technology argue that these innovations have profound effects on the cultural values and codes of conduct of that society. An example of such work is Lynn Spigel’s work on television as a technological innovation in postwar America, as well as her portrayal of it as an agent of larger cultural change renders her work intensely relevant to my subject for these basic reasons. Spigel’s work examines the technological innovation of television from a cultural and historical point of view and she focuses her work on the ability of the technology to engender shifts from primary ‘exhibition experiences’ from the public space to the privacy of people’s own homes. This, Spigel argues, affected social mores of the time, particularly the ways in which people in society interacted with each other now that they could largely obtain privately what was previously an experience reserved for movie theaters in the public sphere. Spigel employs historical, cultural, and social approaches to the technology of the television and the changes it brought into effect in all three arenas. The blurring of public and private spaces, Spigel argues, influenced changes in community formation, family dynamics, and home construction in the new suburban developments. Spiegel uses Warren Susman’s theories to influence her own in terms of the role of technology in inciting fear and anxiety within societies culturally, as well as elaborating on the theories
of culturally-driven versus technological determinism, and the relationship between the
two. Although Spiegel’s work centers primarily around television, it is useful in the
context of my research because of the cultural and sociological arguments, methods, and
findings it presents that can be related to later developments in technology that would
come in later years, particularly in my case, the Internet and online communication
systems. These too have changed community relations, family dynamics, home design,
and people’s relations with each other. In this sense, Speigel’s work serves as theoretical
foundation and a point of comparison for my exploration into online technological
innovation and its impacts on adolescent sociology, community formation, and the online
environment.

Paul A. Shackel’s essay explores the material goods that comprise what is
commonly known as ‘popular culture.’ As is made clear in the introduction to Shackel’s
work, “Goods establish norms and culture flaws and must be understood.” Shackel’s
work uses what he terms an ‘emulation model’ of Daniel Miller’s work which uses
historical examples from 16th century England for Shackel to analyze colonial Annapolis,
Maryland. “Miller explains that symbolic use of material goods in a society increasingly
oriented to consumption were used by interest groups to reinforce their position in the
social hierarchy.” Shackel’s methods comprise numerous other theorists, including

Daniel Miller, Michel Foucault, Michael Shanks, Christopher Tilley, and Ian Hodder, in

2 Browne, Ray and Pat Brown (Eds.) Digging into Popular Culture: Theories and Methodologies in
Archaeology, Anthropology, and Other Fields. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University
3 Browne, Ray and Pat Brown (Eds.) Digging into Popular Culture: Theories and Methodologies in
Archaeology, Anthropology, and Other Fields. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University
his work to demonstrate the relation between physical goods themselves and the ways in which commerce and consumerism mold them into objects that exist within a social hierarchy, possess not only economic but also material, social status value, and take on new meanings in this capacity; thus coming together to create what Shackel believes to be the components of ‘popular culture.’ Shackel quotes Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley as saying, “Goods provide a communicative medium of symbolic significance…and provide a medium for social domination as an expression of power and ideology.”¹ These arguments are useful in the context of my research because they help to show the progression of human culture and highlights the assumption that social interaction and status are in part derived through the meanings attached to certain goods available within society, whatever those goods may be.

Following on from arguments presented above by Shackel, Shanks, and Tilley about the ability and power of goods to exert social pressure and possess value, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” present their own take on the concept of cultural goods as products, and what they feel is taking place in their production, consumption, and corresponding social power. Their revolutionary essay, dating to the mid-1940’s, establishes the major groundwork for their theories on the culture industry as a whole. They put forth the idea that culture itself has become largely nothing more than an industrial product, produced in mass quantities for mass consumption, and desperately lacking in individuality, originality and artistic value. Further, their theories postulate that this shift has occurred

¹ Ibid, 38.
in response to shifts to a society that they believe no longer values or respects true freedom and individuality on the cultural stage, and for the most part individuals are willing to sacrifice that original, individual product for one that may not possess these qualities, but is available quickly, conveniently, and because so many others can also obtain it, social value.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s theories lament the absence of the sense of the individual, lost to the mass cultural machine that they believe is largely driven by the needs of the capitalist system. As they say, “culture now impresses the same stamp on everything…a technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself….the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry.”\(^5\) Their beliefs are crucial to my topic and work because in several ways, I agree with them that a large amount of individuality has been lost, in part sacrificed on the altar of what can be referred to as ‘culture’ – which Adorno and Horkheimer argue to be primarily composed of standardization and driven to feed the market machine. I think in many ways, this central belief and argument laid out above, centering around the sacrifice of the individual and original on the altar of mass production and consumption, will serve to underlie and enrich my work as I examine modern society, today’s popular culture, and the paradoxical, materially-driven, life of the American Teen.

The theories of Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard add significantly to the direction and tone of my work. McLuhan, who is best known for his insight into cultural effects of mass media written in the 1960’s, believes that inherent in every technological product produced by society lies an unmistakable element of human potential and drive. McLuhan famously argued also that ‘the medium is the message,’ Much of his argument centers around what he views as the impact media exerts on culture in the ways in which it changes our own perspectives of and attitudes toward our world and all that is within it. His technological determinist stance, and overall belief that technological development directly influences cultural change and evolution is very much in agreement with my own beliefs and generally supported by much of the evidence I have gathered and analyzed in my two chapters. Baudrillard is often viewed as following on from McLuhan’s theories. Baudrillard tends to be more negative overall as to the effects of electronic media on society, where McLuhan has more of a tendency to see the silver lining. For Baudrillard, instead of ‘the medium is the message’ he believes that “‘the medium is the model,”6 in the sense that the media’s power is evident in its ability to shape and provoke cultural attitudes and behaviors in society. The views and arguments put forth by McLuhan and Baudrillard are relevant to my project down to its core, because the problems and questions my project raises fit somewhere in between these two basic views of the role of technology in the resulting culture of a society, and those within it. These issues are at the center of my topic and resulting research and analysis.

THE UNDERLYING HISTORICAL BASE:

The first category of literature that comprises the historical underpinning for my work that will run through the two chapters that are to follow. This collection of sources centers around the provision of a larger historical approach to the subject of culture, technology, and their relationship to social interaction. Along with a theoretical foundation, this historical framework of sources aims to outline the traditions of the birth and growth of the mass market machine and beginnings of popular culture, as well as the potential of these to incite anxiety and the propensity for formation of social capital and community on one hand, disconnection between people on the other. These works are relevant when approaching and exploring my topic and ensuring my research a place within the scholarly community because they help to show the tradition of study in this area that has already been undertaken, what has been accomplished, and how research and evidence on this topic can fit in to that history of scholarship.

Erich Fromm’s work within the fields of sociology and psychology during the 1940’s is a critical historical underpinning to one side of technological innovation that also feeds into some of the anxiety, fear, and trepidation that many people feel with the introduction of a new technology, as is also described by Lynn Spigel. Fromm’s work also originates from a similar time period to Adorno and Horkheimer’s, and in several ways echoes many allied concerns and fears as the new mass media culture was beginning to evolve. Fromm examines the situation of modern man in modern times, particularly the interplay between psychological states and sociological ones. His primary focus is the concept of freedom, but he also performs considerable study and analysis on ideas of social isolationism and alienation during the 1940’s in the aftermath of World
War II. His work is valuable to this topic because it is primarily a historical tracing of the character of the modern human and the conventions of society, and the world around us that has led to the aforementioned ideas of isolationism and disconnection to explain the state of the human condition in a theoretical sense. “It is the thesis of this book that modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society…has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self…Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and thereby, anxious and powerless.” For example, Fromm’s description of the masochistic and sadistic characters, representing the need to bring harm to others or oneself, respectively, he believes, arise from intense feelings of loneliness and insecurity within their larger social sphere that eventually can actually fuse with an individual’s personality. Fromm’s work, because of its connection to the various theoretical works on the development of culture and the opportunities a mass market mechanism driving popular culture and the accompanying fears of a loss of individualism and a corresponding loss of freedom and control as a result.

Laura Pappano, a visiting scholar at Northwestern University and also a journalist, and James Beniger, scholar of communications, offer valuable insight in the areas of society, technology, culture, and the economy that form a solid base for a historical grounding in these subjects. Laura Pappano gives excellent background on social alienation, loneliness, and related dilemmas that she argues are plaguing the

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American public, with particular attention to technology’s role in this process. She argues that the technological role in this growing phenomenon of loneliness is primarily based in its ability to connect people in new and different ways, and despite this, people are still feeling isolated and alienated from one another. Her largest question in her work is firstly, why is this happening, as it definitely appears to be counter-intuitive at first glance, and secondly, how does this perception of loneliness between people in society correlate to the cultural factors and implications that correspond with it. Her work is focused entirely on America as a study group, and one of her primary focuses, as hinted in her Introduction, is “It may seem ironic, when “connection” has become the buzzword of the moment and anyone at all is immediately reachable from any location, that people are suffering from loneliness. But many of us are.”8 Her work, thus is a founding one for the genesis of this topic. James Beniger’s book, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*, by contrast, is more economic in scope but presents similarly aimed cultural and social questions in regards to this.

Beniger’s work utilizes the fields of sociology, social psychology, and behavioral scientific analysis. He provides a solid conceptual and historical framework within which technology, society, and the changes and shifts brought about by the progression to an information society have been brought about as a result. Beniger’s work is constructed in more of a factual, economic format as opposed to solely narrative. It addresses invention, technological innovation, political and economic conditions and philosophies of different

eras throughout history, and lays a clear path to where he believes today’s society has come to exist, particularly through his central argument about the idea of Control, defined as “purposive influence toward a predetermined goal.”

Beniger’s and Pappano’s works are fitting for my own research purposes, primarily because of their integrative approaches to the historical progression of their arguments and suppositions, which hold relevance both to past eras as well as the present, establishing a good foundational as well as grounding source for my research.

Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University is known by many as a leading theorist in his field, primarily in policy studies and the role of technology in political socialization and engagement throughout past decades, with particular attention paid to the current one and today’s young people. Putnam’s work is relevant to my own as a grounding source for historical and ideological arguments, particularly those surrounding community-building and social capital (or lack thereof) in the modern mass media society. Putnam’s arguments and findings will underpin my work, particularly in my third chapter, where I address online space as a primary fixture of teenage culture, as well as its abilities to form communities and networks of diverse groups of people, a particular example of which I found in the grieving process and coping with the death of friends and loved ones.

Putnam’s overarching argument is that mass media culture is directly contributing to a marked deterioration in social capital and interpersonal trust in society. His primarily

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negative dismissal of the potential merits of mass media culture and the Information Society will help drive many of my own arguments, as many of them exist in direct opposition to Putnam’s. The bulk of the evidence I have gathered and compiled in my third chapter takes direct issue with Putnam’s overall suppositions, and inclusion of his work as a foundation source for my project is therefore useful for its dissenting view. Additionally, Putnam discusses the potential for technology, the Internet in particular, to engender the formation of new ‘communities’ of individuals, connecting them in new and different ways, and in several aspects, taking the place of the actual, physical ones that existed in prior generations. A central question he asks in his work is: “…In short, how do small groups, social movements, and telecommunications qualify our judgment about declining social connectedness and civic engagement?”\(^\text{10}\) His main area of focus is civic engagement among young people in America, however, his arguments on social capital and community-building in the Internet age are relevant to this project both as historical and theoretical foundation as well as ideological support for my third chapter and findings.

Putnam’s work is important in exploration of the ideas my work presents, mainly for the contrast and opposing viewpoint it provides, initiated by Putnam’s example of the changing face of youth civic engagement personal belief, and his opinion that the mass media are actually decreasing overall engagement and that participation through online forums, petitions, or blogs does not constitute ‘engagement’ in the way that it once had.

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By extension, this view can be also applied to other types of communities and ways of engaging and interacting with others that online space so uniquely fosters, such as my examples of mydeathspace and MySpace. I take issue with this particular argument of his, but find them also useful to gaining a full contextual picture of the views of technology on society and cultural values of America as a whole. As Putnam details, “It is reasonable to suppose…that views about something as basic as reciprocity and generalized trust are especially influenced by personal experience and social customs early in life…most Americans today believe we live in a less trustworthy society than our parents did.”\(^\text{11}\) Putnam further postulates that this downturn in social trust and America can be explained by generational differences, and more importantly, the experiences that eventually form these opinions of trust and faith in others in society are generally obtained in early childhood and youth, leading him to argue that “the social distrust among America’s youth should be seen not as a character flaw, but rather as a mirror held up to social mores of recent decades.”\(^\text{12}\) Putnam’s work grapples with a new era with new social mores and modes being formed through and by communication through technological means, and his work is useful, then, in both laying foundation and exploring the issues further of American youth.

Following along with the general theme of the literature within this first category, comprising historical approaches, social disconnection theories, and the arguments surrounding the role of technological innovation in these, John C. Woodward and Janel

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 141.
Queen, both Professors at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in their work, The Solitude of Loneliness provide an excellent source of information. Their work gives insight into the psychological experience that we define as ‘loneliness,’ and how it differs and is similar to the idea of solitude. This work is valuable to this section of my work for the more clinical background to what it means to experience loneliness, here not simply due to society or technology, but more generally. In the Introduction, Woodward and Queen describe initial thoughts on loneliness in general as it applies to the adolescent in modern society:

“Young adolescents strive to be different but at the same time they want to be accepted by their peers…They want to be individual and autonomous but the same time to be identified as part of the group….Teenagers rejoice in their emancipation, independence, and individualism, but this new independence is often accompanied by deep feelings of loneliness.”

Edward M. Hallowell, M.D., previously a professor at Harvard Medical School and now director of his own private practice in Massachusetts, and writer of CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap! Strategies for Coping in a World Gone ADD, puts forth several other interesting arguments and theories that can work with the above ‘foundational’ sources to create a fuller picture of the historical, theoretical, and cultural context within which my research takes place and will fit. Much of the examples Hallowell provides, as well as his general arguments about being willingly over-stressed in the modern age are echoed in many of the print publications analyzed later on in the first chapter. Hallowell addresses what he refers to as ‘modern life’ and the issues he believes are plaguing our society, affecting and in several ways controlling us, even

13 Ibid, 2.
invented by us in some part, but over which we ultimately have little control.

“Paradoxically enough, it is in part the desire for control that has led people to lose
it…the greatest damage from being too busy is that it prevents people from setting their
own temperature, controlling their own lives.”¹⁴ He looks at how certain aspects of life in
our society come together to form a de facto tether to which we are attached, many times
because we feel we must be, for whatever reason, whether it be to be better connected, to
not miss out on things going on around us, or simply because of our society’s seeming
thirst to be ‘in the know.’ Hallowell also devotes an entire chapter to “Disconnection”
and what he calls “collected anonymity”¹⁵ that references blogs and interaction in online
space, as well as generally characterizing online communication:

“A person can connect online intimately while remaining completely anonymous.
People used to be able to do this only at masked balls…The electronic age has
taken anonymity to a whole new levels, for better and worse…while connected
anonymity can be ominous at times, it can also be useful, as when a person
participates in a blog.”¹⁶

His focus is not specifically limited to adolescents, but instead his goal is to present both
positive sides and pitfalls to modern life for all of us within it and also discusses the
idea that many of these constructs (social, technological) that seem to be reining us in are
interestingly, also of our own making, in many cases. This could then prompt even
further exploration into potential causes for such a phenomenon to exist in the first place
within society. Interestingly, we often know this about ourselves but can’t seem to escape

¹⁴ Hallowell, Edward M, M.D. CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap! Strategies for
¹⁵ Ibid, 34.
¹⁶ Ibid, 34-35.
it. Hallowell’s work has a very honest, open tone, and is complemented by Stephen
Johnson’s thoughts on the subject. Johnson’s work, like Hallowell’s, addresses modern
culture and the vast amounts of multitasking and information that today’s youths must
sort through and make sense of. Johnson goes even a step further to argue that because of
the increased complication that today’s society involves, existing and succeeding within
it actually requires greater mental power and a sharper intellect, simply to keep up.

Johnson’s work argues that while the conventional wisdom maintains that today’s
society and all of the television shows, tabloids, websites, and other trappings of today’s
popular culture are bringing our brains to a lowest common denominator level, this may
not actually be the case after all – that, perhaps, because of the increased speed, breadth
of information, and availability that today’s culture offers us, it actually pushes our minds
to think quicker and more sharply, simply in order to stay afloat and survive. Johnson’s
thesis argues that instead of a quick plunge to a more base and simple society, the exact
opposite scenario is actually taking place. Johnson instructs his reader to “…think of it as
a kind of positive brainwashing…”

Johnson’s metaphor of what he calls ‘The Sleeper Curve,’ is derived from another
cultural product, the Woody Allen film of the same name. It puts forth the overarching
argument that today’s society and culture, instead of serving to numb our brains and
render us incapable of the advanced cognitive function that once existed, the wealth of
cultural products, made possible largely through technological innovation, particularly

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television and the Internet, are forcing our minds to become sharper and more toned, as
culture has become more complicated, deep, and involved than that of previous eras in
history. Johnson’s arguments have connection to the technological determinist points of
view underlying many of the above cultural theorist arguments, suggesting that the
culture in which we live today was largely constructed around the wealth of innovations
that were made possible through development of advanced technological systems and
products. His work has obvious value for my own, particularly for support of my original
beliefs that, contrary to some scholars, such as Robert Putnam, the culture of today is not
necessarily one that brings today’s youths to a base, deteriorating level, rife with
cynicism and apathy, and devoid of emotion, interpersonal trust and valued
communication.

The final source that comprises this first category of major sources of literary
support and research for framing my work is found in Kate Hellenga’s essay entitled
*Social Space: The Final Frontier*. Hellenga’s work explores potential reasons for the
prominence of online dating and other forms of personal communication. She puts forth
the theory that such forums and environments as can be found online can help to shield
adolescents from their perceived risks of rejection that often come with face to face
encounters with others. These initial arguments thus relate also to earlier theories about
the role of technology and innovation in the promotion of fear and cultural shifts that may
lead to several forms of social disconnection among individuals in society. Clearly, my
research is directly aided by Hellenga’s essay in part, for its findings in the areas of
interpersonal communication and the culture of society as is formed by the online
environment, a subject that is relevant throughout this project, touched upon in both chapters. Although my focus is on adolescents, this work provides a useful initial entry into the subject itself in terms of general sociology and relations between people and the benefits and pitfalls to this afforded by the technology of online communication.

CHAPTER 2: PRINT PUBLICATION, CULTURE, AND TEENAGE GIRLS

The second category into which my research and work will be divided involves a more specific exploration into media culture particularly through the example of print publications aimed at adolescent girls. Additionally, the works included in this section provide a historical grounding and approach to the representations of teenage girls in particular in popular culture throughout the twentieth century and how the changing dynamics, composition, and structure of the family in America factors into these issues. This section comprises a variety of sources as well as a large selection of current teenage magazine publications, such as Seventeen, Teen, CosmoGirl!, Teen Vogue, among others, which serve as the main source of evidence-gathering and analysis upon which this chapter builds.

The first grouping of sources serve as general works that provide information which helps to set the stage for the current state of youth amidst the mass media culture in today’s society. George Comstock’s Television and the American Child as well as the essays compiled into The Social Life of Children in a Changing Society edited by Kathryn Borman, a Professor at the University of Cincinnati both contribute to this continued search for grounding in the state of the youths in society as well as the roles they play in current media culture and cultural norms. Comstock, the S.I. Newhouse
Chair of Public Communications at Syracuse University, seeks to examine in his work the social and behavioral sides of television as a particular technology in the lives and development of children. He looks into a number of factors, including cognition, the role of the household, and socio-economic circumstances as variables around this central question. Borman’s volume includes work by several others on various aspects of social change, societal and cultural influences exert on society’s young people. Although not solely centered on technology, this book is valuable as a ‘full picture’ source that provides evidence that other factors are also at play for a child growing up in a changing and ever-developing social milieu. The Introduction to the book, written by Kathryn Borman and Harold Fishbein, both of the University of Cincinnati, argues “The children’s lives studied in this book are embedded in the social structure of children’s immediate experiences in families, peer groups, and school settings…the cultural landscape against which children’s lives unfold must be understood in terms of these perspectives.” In short, this source is important and relevant to my subject area because of the argument that it presents that culture is an overarching, historically progressive and inclusive entity, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate any part of it to explain its specific role in an individual’s life. This is an argument I personally agree with which comes through the evidence and analysis in both chapters to follow. This book seeks to examine the experience of children in society as human, social beings, from a variety of different viewpoints, and thus, helps to broaden as well as refine my work in this area.

A more general source useful to outline and draw signposts for the culture and values created by modern mass media institutions, Kids’ Media Culture, edited by
Marsha Kinder, is one of the most crucial sources to this category within my research and work. It serves as a compilation of several different forces that come together to form the world of mass media and culture and the role of society’s youths within it. The work “addresses not only what media culture is now, what it has been in the past decades, and what it might potentially be in the future, but also the debates that have circulated around this form of cultural production…those who see children as passive victims being contaminated by an increasingly corrupt culture and those who perceive them as active players grappling with the inevitable processes of social and historical change.”

This work examines the mass media through the experience of children growing up amidst it, and employs some part of the worries put forth by Ellen Seiter and Samuel Friedman as to the potential pitfalls and exploitation that can result from Internet culture. Kinder’s book is useful overall because it looks at several different aspects of the mediated experience in today’s world as well as the debates that rage on either side of it.

In addition to these, research into the structure and dynamics of the American family is a critical aspect of this project. Theresa Chandler Sabourin’s work on modern family relationships investigates the institution of the American family in contemporary society. “At the individual level, families can be intimate one moment and distant the next…this view [dialectical approach] emphasizes the family as a whole and recognizes that…families are both close and distant, stable and changing.” Sabourin’s book is useful in the context of this project because it takes a modern and cultural approach to the social and personal structure of the family unit and highlights many areas of diversity that

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can be found among them. Family structure and cultural underpinning have direct impact on the experience of teenagers as they come of age, and the family is, for many also, it can be argued, a reflection of the influence of cultural norms and social shifts.

Along with Sabourin’s work, two other sources related to family dynamics and relationships, The Family Communication Sourcebook, edited by Lynn Turner and Richard West, and work by David Newman, Ph.D of the University of Washington are critical to my work in this second stage for their in-depth social and cultural research of the family unit itself. In the first source is an essay of particular interest to me, entitled “Implications of Living in a Wired Family.” Aside from the structural and definitional work many of the essays do in order to provide a greater understanding of what the American family means in today’s world, this essay is chiefly concerned with many of the same issues as my topic presents. For example, the authors note, “…myriad and manifold media are integrated into the modern household to such an extent that we often interact more with media than we do with other family members…two major thrusts of this discussion are on psychologically ‘healthy’ families and how being a modern ‘wired’ family affects social interactions within the family.” This is of great relevance to my topic. The other book, by David Newman, also includes several areas of interest that add to the quality and scope of my research. Chapters such as “What is a Family” that discusses interpretations and differing conceptions of the idea of family, and how culture plays a role in this; and “How Accurate are Popular Images of Families?” which adds the

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technology element to the discussion, particularly the television into its analysis in the
context of the household and familial interactions. Newman’s book also includes a
section that traces the “Historical Ideas about Families” that underscores several cultural
norms and messages throughout time. All three of the above sources are important to
gaining a fuller perspective of the idea of the family and how it relates to both child
development as well as an influence and reflection of cultural norms within a society.

The next grouping of sources within this category dedicated to an in-depth study
of culture surrounding the American teen. Specifically, to look at the role that
technology, particularly the Internet, plays in the context of my topic and research, as
well as to note the potential downsides of the growing online culture. Ellen Seiter,
Professor of Cinema-Television at the University of Southern California, argues in her
work on the Internet and its impact on children, that while the online environment does
provide a wealth of information where nearly anything one searches for can be located in
a matter of seconds, but it has also become a tireless marketing engine preying on
children. In her first chapter, Seiter says, “The technology gap between rich and poor
American children is widening…the growing importance of the Internet has created a
new disparity along class lines…while corporations scheme to profit from children’
interest in Internet use, they target children in different ways.”21 While Seiter’s approach
is mainly concentrated firstly on children, ie. Those not yet into their teenage years, and
she is focused on the opportunities for children to be targeted by the Internet, her work is

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useful as a perspective on some of the obvious downsides to Internet culture and the surrounding social climate that exists around it.

Another work that can be classified along similar lines is Samuel Joshua Friedman’s work on the potential perils of the online environment on children, with special attention paid to the increased vulnerability to exploitation he believes it to invite. Like Seiter, Friedman is also interested in the effects of online marketing endeavors created to specifically target the salient and expansive market of children using the Internet. As is made clear in his Introduction, “The phenomenal growth of this new information and communications medium is nothing short of revolutionary…as the explosive growth continues, complicated new questions about how to handle it are being raised.” 22 Although both Friedman’s and Seiter’s works have primary regard for the Internet as their focus, as the evidence and arguments in my second chapter show, modern mass media culture brings with it an almost inextricable blurring between the two media of print and online space, and for this reason, these sources, along with those by Ilana Nash and Kelly Shrum, are relevant to this project as they help to delineate the highlights of popular culture and young people within the mass media society.

Ilana Nash, a scholar of English who specializes in the related fields of youth history, gender, and popular culture, and Kelly Shrum, a scholar and expert in twentieth century youth culture, both study this subject that underlies much of the second chapter’s analysis of print publications and their cultural implications. For example, Nash’s work

examines the role of culture in its creation and promotion of images of girlhood throughout the twentieth century and provides a historical approach to the subject that chiefly underlies the second chapter. This helps to construct a background against which to present current examples from contemporary magazine publications aimed specifically for the teenage girl. Nash addresses representations of young girls in several aspects of culture, from advertisements to film, to magazines and books. She also confronts the issue of marketing and using representations of girls to mold fashion trends and styles for financial gain and social status. During the postwar period, when greater numbers of clothes and other consumer products were being produced in mass quantities, this was a more potent force as well as an attainable commercial goal that fueled much of the ways in which girls were represented in culture.

Victor Strausburger’s work takes a more clinical approach to the examination of adolescent development in the mass media age. He looks particularly at violence and sexuality on television and the Internet, as well as the prevalent usage of drugs and relations with parents and peers in his attempt to offer an assessment of the roles that these factors have on adolescents as they are growing up, and the consequent effects of these on the resulting society as a whole. This work is an important source in this section of my work for its direct relevance to the discourse surrounding the influence of today’s mass media culture on the development and coming-of-age of today’s adolescents. Along with the work combining insights by several scholars in related fields, entitled

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Adolescence and its Social Worlds, edited by Sandy Jackson of the University of Groningen, Netherlands, and Hector Rodriguez-Tome, C.N.R.S, Paris, France, these two sources have great relevance and lend much significance to my research and its development. The latter, a work combining the writings of several professors from both American and European Universities, also addresses the issues of adolescent development, family structure, social connection and loneliness, and how all of these facets of the developmental experience during adolescence are related to the social and cultural environments within which they are born, raised, and consequently mature. The psychological and sociological arguments and exploration these sources produce help to establish a working, practical infrastructure around which the current state of the American adolescent and the popular culture of today may be contextualized and understood for the purposes of my questions and problems themselves.

The final sources in this generalized foray into the childhood and teenage experience in today’s mass media culture include firstly Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media edited by David Buckingham. As Buckingham postulates in the introduction to his work, “The spectre of children narcotized by television, corrupted by video violence, and the overt sexuality of popular music, their intellect and imagination destroyed by the mindless products of the culture industry…the…media are seen to be…a primary cause of the breakdown of the family, of social unrest, and of moral decline…the deadly enemy of literacy, of morality…and ultimately of childhood itself.”

Though the picture these words paint initially seem overdramatic and grim, the anxiety and fear that they bring along with them are more real than many would believe, indicating that perhaps there is some truth to these suppositions after all. This source is particularly interesting to my work at this point because it is not primarily an American source – published in the United Kingdom and comprising European scholars gives it an air of differentiated perspective but also a degree of commonality despite the cultural differences between our two countries. It appears that at some level, the media and culture industries in both countries, though separated by the Atlantic Ocean, bear an eerie amount of similarity, prompting obvious benefits and validation to the above arguments as well as those of my own in my research.

CHAPTER 3: ONLINE SPACE AS A PREVALENT FORCE IN TEEN CULTURE, LIFE AND DEATH:

The third and final category of sources and initial research involves a more specific examination into the particular experience of adolescents in online space, specifically the vast prevalence virtual interaction holds in teen life and the corresponding culture that is ever-evolving around it. The sources listed here form a base upon which the numerous MySpace profiles of deceased teenagers from mydeathspace.com that serve as the primary evidence for the third chapter may be placed, to show the power of online space as a cultural product and instrument that is changing the way teens conceive of life, and especially death. This collection of sources includes general sources on generational studies and online culture, as well as those that provide a history of death culture and grief customs throughout human history. These come together to provide a context within
which my evidence and analysis, as well as my overall argument in this chapter, that online space is not just a prevalent cultural force in teen life, but also that it holds immense power to create community and ‘closeness’ among people in a virtual locale.

Karen Sternheimer’s work, with its focus on influences of the media on children’s development puts forth the argument that many in today’s society blame the media for the seemingly flawed experience of childhood many children and adolescents are experiencing on their road to adulthood, which in turn affect other areas of youth development. Sternheimer says, “Media culture has become very pervasive in the last few decades…at times it feels like it bombards us-twenty-four hour news streams, Internet pop-up ads, instant messaging…have reshaped our daily lives as well as how we interact with each other…the media has come to symbolize society and present a clear picture of both social changes and social problems.”25 Many other aspects of Sternheimer’s initial argument that the media cannot be blamed solely for the resulting societal atmosphere that currently exists in America include the propensity for many to latch on to the fear and stereotypical approaches pop culture often takes as well as the sensationalism and ‘fascination’ factor when it comes to the news media in particular, instead of the provision of raw information.

Generational studies also help to highlight the differences that make this group of American adolescents so different from teenagers of decades past, much of which is due to the starkly different environment and cultural milieu within which they are growing up.

Dr. Jean M. Twenge, Professor of Psychology at University of California-San Diego, and author of Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – And More Miserable than Ever Before, adds significant insight into many of this initial inquiries. A comprehensive generational study examining those young people (up to age 35) that comprise what is known as ‘Generation Me’ or the “self-esteem generation.” This work has several facets – some comparative with Generation X and the Baby Boomer generations particularly, but its overall purpose and aim is to attempt to cogently explain the environment and situation within which today’s young people are growing up and living.

This book exposes the plethora of paradoxes that come with this existence in today’s world, such as, for example, the lives of extreme wealth and glamour shown by today’s mass media and television programs, like Friends or MTV’s Cribs, where, in the case of the former, the characters have seemingly nondescript, non demanding jobs where they supposedly somehow generate the income to afford a sizable New York City apartment, copious amounts of expensive coffee drinks at Central Perk, and random shopping sprees at Barneys or Ralph Lauren. In short, Twenge’s book exposes the fraud that many young people feel has become their lives in today’s world – they are told constantly while growing up and during their education, to follow their dreams and do what they love, while many of these statements in practical reality pale to what they have been trained to expect, through their familial situations, educational experience, and mass media cues. This idea is one of the central concepts to Twenge’s book, which combines many aspects of the young person’s experience in the world today – including political
engagement and attitudes, views toward social equality, the influences of the media (particularly television), family structures, the translation of this ‘me-centered’ self-esteem-led upbringing into the workforce, and is an excellent source of scholarship that helps to depict the whole picture of the lives and times of America’s young people born between the early 1970’s and the late 1990’s.

Tying back to the previous arguments made by Karen Sternheimer about the media and the feeling of the lack of control that many in society feel is all around them at all times, Twenge says “Most of Generation Me’s days are like this: filled with events and circumstances that [they] can’t control. So why should [they] try?...[They’re] not just Generation Me; [they’re] the new cynics. The days when young Americans marched in the streets to change the world are...gone...the young person who believes that she can make a difference in world events, national politics...and her own life...is more and more rare.” 26 This feeling among many youths in today’s society can be argued to directly translate to the decline of youth participation in political events, particularly campaigns and voting, that many feel is occurring in today’s society. This book is a critical one for my research for all of the above reasons.

Death, a central focus of the third chapter as it relates to online space and adolescents, has proven to be a salient example of the changing ways in which teenage culture is shifting, to the point where online involvement is included in even the most terrifying and emotional times in anyone’s life – the death of a friend or loved one. In

examination of the evidence from a variety of deceased teenage MySpace profiles and the posting boards on them that have become virtual shrines to which friends flock to write notes to their dead friends and remember them in an online space that they themselves created in life, it is important to include sources that provide a history of death and the culture of grief, mourning, and memorial sites in America over the last century. Works by Douglas Davies, a scholar and theologian specializing in death and dying rituals, and Jacqueline Thursby, a professor of English with a specialization on folklore and cultural studies, comprise the bulk of sources included in this section of the third chapter to outline a history of the process of death, burial, and grieving customs. Thursby’s work focuses primarily on the funeral as a “festival…[a] ritual for the living.”27 She continues to outline related customs throughout history, such as wakes and food served at funerals, even epitaph writing and placement, and the evolutions that have occurred in these areas over time for a variety of different reasons. Davies’ work takes a more generalized and complete approach to the experience of death and dying, and is useful here as a foundation for contextualizing death and the mourning process in general as it applies in America.28 These sources in this section precede the original evidence section and MySpace profile analysis, with the goal to offer a context in which to conceive of the grieving process that accompanies death in particular to be able to understand how this in turn relates to the modern face of grief and ‘virtual shrines’ that are popularly used by modern teenagers as their way of relating to and remembering the dead in their lives.

CHAPTER 1
The Changing Nature of the Family and Mass Media Culture on Teen Girls – Focus on Print Publications

I. The Sociology of the Family in the Modern Mass Media Age: A Contrast

The lives and experiences of adolescents in America have been undoubtedly influenced by changes occurring in the technological and cultural spheres over the past decade. The prevalence of the mass media in the daily lives of young people has increased exponentially. Few teenagers today can even remember a time when technology or media in some form was not present in their lives. Technology is largely understood by scholars as a concept that “involves cultural values, ideologies, ethical concerns…also shaped by political and economic determinants.”29 This chapter seeks to examine the institution of the American family in the present age and, within it, the history of print culture in adolescent girls, as they form a salient and pervasive example of the effects of modern mass media culture on the American teenager as it derives from a variety of print publications.

The focus of this print media section centers primarily on teenage girls for several reasons. Firstly, in surveying much of the separate sources of scholarship print publications and literature, it is clear that the majority of these are aimed specifically at young girls. Also, there has been a long history tying popular culture with strong influences on young girls, whether it be on self-image, fashion, relationships, or other culture or media driven outlets. Print culture has and continues to exert strong influence

on young girls, clearly evident now in different forms as the mass media mechanisms
grow and evolve in society. The focus on teenage girls and print culture here, then, is
intended to serve as an example of the wider range of cultural messages print culture
exhibits, the history of which is used to provide contrast to the current state of affairs.
The connection between print media and teen girls is also telling of many of the more
subtle messages being delivered to teenage boys as well, for whom fewer magazine
media exists, but who factor nevertheless into the content of girls’ magazines because of
the relationship between teenage girl and teenage boy that is a main focus of girls’
publications.

My argument is that the changing dynamics of the American family are bringing
with them significant shifts in the development and culture of the American adolescent,
particularly visible in print culture aimed toward adolescent girls through a variety of
magazine and book publications. I argue that interaction with media in a variety of forms
has become more prevalent among today’s young people, and often supersedes the
interaction these teenagers are having with their families and face-to-face peer
interactions. I argue also that as a result of the changing nature of the family, with higher
divorce rates and more two-earner households, has often resulted in many more teens
having access to a wider range of technological implements, with also less direct familial
connection and support. This in turn can form some part of the explanation for why more
and more teens are living such deep and intense relationships online through email,
instant messaging, and social networking websites. All of these arguments hinge upon the
overall acknowledgement that mass media culture holds a pervasive and inescapable
influence on the shaping of young people, in this section particularly girls, and the
messages sent by the mass media are in this sense inextricable from other cultural forms,
such as online communication, and other components of the mass media omnibus.

One of the most compelling reasons for why the media has garnered such success
and power, financially, socially, and culturally, is that it, in all its different forms, has
always had the ability to exert tremendous power and influence over consumers in
society. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their groundbreaking essay from the
mid-1940’s, The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, offer their opinions
for what they view to be the current state of culture and how modern society changed it
and its purpose for existing. Their main argument laments the loss of individuality that
they feel culture has come to experience, asserting that “culture now impresses the same
stamp on everything.”30 With the rise of industry and mass production during the inter
and post-war periods, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that culture has undergone similar
changes, taking on a more mass-produced and generalized character so as to better sell to
a wider strata of consumers. Arguing that “the culture industry…having ceased to be
anything but style…[obeys] the social hierarchy…and perpetually cheats its consumers of
what it perpetually promises.”31 Thus, one may draw from this that correspondingly, the
influence culture exerts over consumers in the modern age is of a much more general,
standardized, and stylized character, making it all the more potent as a force that can

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blanket entire large groups of society and impress upon them its ideals, assumptions, and even false promises.

Additionally, the *Social Learning Theory* developed by Albert Bandura at Stanford University in 1963, found that the media was an influential force that helped shape children’s personalities as well as establish behavioral norms in a young person’s development.\(^ {32}\) The vicarious experience of mediated observation came to be recognized as the powerful and intoxicating force that it still resembles today. Whatever the situation, one of the clearest examples of the toll that some of these changes have evoked can be seen in the changing dynamics, composition, and interaction of the American family as we know it currently from that of prior generations. As could be seen with the innovation of the television in the 1950’s, the entrance of this technology into the private (home) sphere altered the way living rooms were arranged to accommodate it, as well as the way the family as a whole related to each other around it. Today’s world is, for better or for worse, affected by these shifts and innovations, and with it, at a fundamental level, the development, socialization, and coming of age of adolescents amidst it.

Few would dispute that the ideas of what constitutes the family have been drastically altered from the picture of years before. The days when traditional gender roles applied, and the majority of mothers were at home during the day with the children are largely gone in contemporary society. One of the largest differences between the modern conception of the family and that which preceded it is that today, there is no

standard or clear schema with which to evaluate and determine sets of criteria that come
together to comprise what we know as ‘the family.’ As Theresa Chandler Sabourin
explains, “the family today is increasingly diverse in its structure and culture…this
evolving diversity constantly unfolds as families respond to ongoing changes in structure
and culture.”33 In accordance with this, then, I argue that the modern changing family
structure is very much a reflection of the numerous ‘societal blurrings’ that adolescents
are confronting from an even younger age than before, largely by virtue of the cultural
shifts brought about by technological innovation, particularly the Internet. Examples of
this have manifested themselves in other areas of mass media culture, particularly the
experience of online communication and social networking, where much of the pull to
participate comes from this joy of anonymity, but on the other hand also contains this
blurring between actuality in the physical world and reality in the virtual, where people
may or may not actually be who they say they are. These issues, among others, are
critical cornerstones in the modern experience of adolescence, and the changing, some
would even argue deteriorating, structure of the American family factors centrally within
them.

One of the most critical differences in conceptions of family and individuals
viewed as ‘family members’ in the modern mass media age is the recognition that the
importance of non-biological relatives and individuals who have relevance to a young
person’s life in other spheres, such as school, sports, or peer groups have to the raising of

33 Sabourin, Theresa Chandler. The Contemporary American Family: Dialectical Perspectives on
that young person and shaping them on their road to adulthood. Such roles are no longer as limited to blood relations and traditionally accepted family members. Theresa Chandler Sabourin, in her book *The Contemporary American Family: A Dialectical Perspective on Communication and Relationships*, addresses an issue at the core of these beliefs. She establishes a distinction between the definitions of the family in the context of the physical, including blood relations or legal unions, and functional, which includes parties and individuals who undertake certain jobs and roles that factor into the raising of a child. Sabourin argues that these can include “educating children, teaching them to be good citizens, and providing food, clothing and shelter and attending to their medical needs.”

This explanation of the family is especially pertinent in today’s modern context because often it is not solely the biological parents of a child who have a critical hand in raising him or her to adulthood. Divorce rates continue to climb, with increased incidence of parental remarriage and expanding of ‘families’ to include stepmothers and fathers and half-brothers and sisters. It is also true that more families today are seeing both parents working full-time jobs in order to maintain a certain lifestyle in today’s economy. This also clearly increases the roles and importance of others outside the nuclear family unit, such as teachers, and both physical as well as virtual friends to children as they grow up. As Sabourin says, “The level of intimacy between family members is an important quality that distinguishes them from nonfamily.”

In light of this, it is definitely possible to argue that in today’s society, with the diminished presence of biological parents and

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the growth of divorce rates, familial instability, and nuclear family intimacy, there has been a rise in the number of children searching for and often finding that intimacy elsewhere, whether it be at school, or on the Internet. Technology has, in this sense, been a double-edged sword, bringing a feeling of understanding and acceptance by the larger group to adolescents, but also potentially harmful in that it holds the power to also play into this emotional neediness and lack of familial structure.

Today’s notion of what constitutes a ‘family’ is, like any other social or cultural mainstay, subject to change, evolution, and influence by outside In the 20th century, the American family ideal was comprised of a mother, father, and children. The mother often stayed at home during the day, the father went to the office, and the entire group congregated around a dinner table in the evenings to discuss the day, current events, or any other issues of familial importance. As Kathryn Borman and Harold Fishbein, scholars of Educational Leadership, explain, “The primary ideological shift has been toward a positive valuing of personal freedom, personal rights…with a parallel devaluation of social institutions, including the school and the family.”36 Aside from its strong parallels to many generational characterizations and debates, along with this statement it is clear that technology has a major role in both evoking and enabling social and cultural shifts. As Borman and Fishbein continue, “The cultural ecology of child-rearing in families has been illuminated by ethnographic studies of family interaction and serves to illustrate the link between technology, cultural forms and socialization

outcomes.” Following on from this, it is also unsurprising, therefore, the lasting influence of the media and popular culture on representation of the family ideal since the entering of television sets into people’s homes.

Television as a technological innovation as well as an inciting force for cultural and social change is included in this section on the family because of its ability to provide an example of how a previous technology resulted in bringing about changes in family relationships, home design, and consumer behavior, among others, which can be compared to current phenomena in today’s society centering around a technology, the Internet. Similarly to television during the 1950’s, the Internet has been a source of shift and change for today’s generation. As anthropologist Margaret Mead once stated, “TV more than any other medium gives models to the American people – models for life as it is, or should, or can be lived.” Television, in its infancy, and still today as a vehicle for conveying cultural messages and values has held a strong role in effecting larger beliefs and expectations about what can and should constitute ‘a family.’ In many ways, this can be a positive circumstance, by which to gauge cultural attitudes and norms, but in others, it is unrealistic and false, as the families portrayed in programs are rarely confronted with realistic problems and economic pitfalls that are such strong determinative forces in actual family lives. These culturally produced images of what comprises a ‘perfect family’ draw much of their appeal and value to viewers in their role as a standard to gauge one’s own family against. However, like so many other aspects of the mass media

37 Ibid, 22.
cultural atmosphere, it is not an accurate measurement by which to judge. As stated by George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli in 1980, “The mass media have come to absorb many socializing functions of the family…the seductively realistic portrayals of family life in the media may be the basis for our most common…conceptions about what is natural and what is right.”39 The familial landscape of today has undergone dramatic changes, rendering it largely unrecognized when compared with the cultural ideal of decades prior.

It is a safe assumption to make that families throughout time and history, have each encountered their own conflicts, diversities, and transitional periods. As sociologist David Newman details, “media depictions reflect a strong tendency to romanticize family life…this nostalgic image is distorted…the traditional American family of the past never existed.”40 Today is often hailed as the ‘crisis era’ for the modern family, where parents are essentially absent and children are left alone far more often. In several ways, it is easy to feel compelled to hearken back to the nostalgic, classic image of the era of the 1950’s with the mothers cooking wholesome meals with the whole family together around the dinner table, and want to argue that this time was a better time for families. However, this era, like all of those that followed it, was not without its problems in real life. Popular cultural sources from the time simply did not portray this with significance or at all. Popular culture has significant influence over perceptions of families, and in several cases brings with it almost a prescriptive power, with messages others feel they should

39 Ibid, 23.
40 Ibid, 25.
emulate or judge themselves against. This relates directly to images of families in the current age and throughout history, particularly with regard to “false nostalgia” for the 1950’s family and the supposed ideal which really is not able to lend itself to accurate comparison by viewers for resonance in their actual lives. For example, according to David Newman, during the Baby Boom era of the late 1940’s and 1950’s, 25% of the population in America were officially poor and dependent on social welfare programs and high school graduation rates were far lower than they are today. Social equality among different races and ethnicities was not yet achieved, and this also caused significant cultural and social tumult during this time. However, the television programs and magazines produced during this era suggest a much rosier picture than was actually the case for white middle-class families during this time.

This false ideal as well as the desire it fuels for a return to a nostalgic time that never actually existed as such is a clear and seemingly timeless fixture of the mass media and popular culture climate. Lynn Spigel’s Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America discusses the entrance of television as a technology into the private sphere of the home during the 1950s. She examines the ways in which the technology evolved to take on meaning within the social and political milieu of the time, rendering it largely a cultural product. As she explains, “magazines, television programs, and advertisements give us a clue into an imaginary popular culture…they tell us what

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various media institutions assumed about the public’s concerns and desires.”42 Much as television, upon its entrance into people’s homes and lives, brought with it corresponding changes in home designs, consumer culture, and family relationships, the Internet is largely doing the same for today’s generations of families and young people. In several ways, Lynn Spigel’s arguments about how television took on a cultural and social significance during its inception is suggestive of how these similar effects might be made evident by the Internet and online communication, commerce, and culture. In today’s world, the reality for many is that, more often than not, as a result of economic necessity, both parents work jobs of some sort, and dinners together around the same table constitute such feats of logistical effort that they are rarely undertaken. Laura Sessions Stepp, of The Washington Post, addresses many of these similar issues in an article she wrote about the changes in relationships between teens and their parents, and the corresponding effects this has on overall teen sociology.43 Children are alone far more often, and experience more time away from their nuclear families, and thus do not have as much experience with familial bonding through group discussion, or feel as comfortable talking to a parent about personal issues.

This lack of familial closeness and security, I suggest, forms a part of what attracts teens to become more influenced by print publications and online communication, coupled with mediated interpersonal experiences with a largely

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decreased expectation for emotional vulnerability or even to have to use one’s real name or actual appearance in order to reach out to others. These current social and cultural circumstances encourage today’s teens much more toward online socialization and involvement in order to fulfill these needs. Additionally, the increased presence and influence of the media in the home has also had a role in the shifting of familial relationships and interaction. J. Alison Bryant, a scholar specializing in issues related to children, youth, media, and family relationships, and Jennings Bryant, a widely-published scholar in the areas of children’s television programming and its effects on the dynamics of the American family in their article “Implications of Living in a Wired Family,” explore this very concept. Similar to the introduction of the television into private homes in the 1950’s, the modern corollary to this, the Internet and other forms of the mass media has also had a hand in altering the layout and appearance of the home itself, as well as the connections of the people within it. As the authors note, “…manifold media are integrated into the modern household to such an extent that we often interact more with media than we do with other family members.”44 While the benefits and abilities the modern mass media offer are clear, the reasons for the profound social changes it may incite are less obvious at first glance.

This issue has particular relevance to the perceptions of isolation and disconnection from one another that many individuals are feeling more acutely in today’s world, despite the wealth of technologies that enable us to be closer together. This

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dichotomy lends itself to the overall hypothesis that these mediated interactions and involvements are critically different from face-to-face interaction, largely in the areas of emotional vulnerability, and body language. Instead, the media offers modes of communication that employ different skills and abilities in order to be socially fulfilled. It stands to reason, therefore, that it is these tenets of interpersonal interaction, whether they be within the home, between friends, or among strangers in society, have been drastically altered as a result of technological innovation and the mass media environment. Thus, the role of technology is enormous, with particular regard to its relationship to cultural shifts, particularly family structures and regular pitfalls and achievements associated with growing up. Evidence of the intensified allure of mediated experience in the lives of American adolescents is particularly clear in the example of print publications, particularly books and magazines, and the profound influences they have on adolescent girls, with particular respect to socialization, role-modeling, and conceptions of self-image and purpose.

An example of the potency of print culture on the resulting culture of adolescent females in the modern mass media age can be seen in a February 12, 2007 article featured on the cover of Newsweek entitled “Girls Gone Wild: What are Celebs Teaching Kids?” The authors, Kathleen Deveny and Raina Kelley, discuss the immense power popular culture and celebrity figures have on the lives of young girls, from a younger and younger age, and the effects such individuals are having on role-modeling for girls as they grow up, which seems all the more prevalent in today’s world. As Deveny explains, “Something’s in the air, and I wouldn’t call it love. Like never before, our kids are being
bombarded by images of oversexed, underdressed celebrities who can’t seem to step out of a car without displaying their well-waxed private parts to photographers."\(^{45}\) Her article continues to lay out the common fears that many are feeling about the current generation of young girls in modern society, which are featured prominently in the vast majority of print culture aimed toward teenage girls as the demographic. Many of these fears center largely around the emphasis placed in many publications on sex, body image, and wild behavior. Celebrity culture is able to exert such power as an emulative force, particularly over young girls, because many of the tenets of its existence and functioning are directly correlated with the messages media and other cultural outlets are sending young girls to strive for in order to reach success and happiness, such as monetary comfort, fame, parties, and massive amounts of material luxury. Celebrity culture is the main attraction that drives the sales of teen magazines and books, whether this is explicit or more subtle. Thus, both the print culture industry and the celebrity culture machine together reinforce the values that each are collectively endorsing, having an understandably strong overall influence on young girl readers and consumers. This inclination to emulate celebrities is particularly strong with young girls also as they are searching for an identity of their own and a figure with whom to relate and yearn to resemble. The lessened influence of family ties, I argue, is enabling the more base elements of mass media and celebrity culture to infiltrate young people’s lives even further, this elevating the centrality of popular culture influences in print publications, particularly celebrity figures, in the lives of young girls.

II. A Background History of Print Culture and Teen Girls

The conceptions of adolescence, particularly the messages and representations of what constitutes ‘girlhood,’ are deeply entrenched in social, technological, and overly cultural mores, evident in the changing faces of the teenage girl in popular culture over the past recent decades contrasted with that of the current age. Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation and ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ has distinct relevance in tracing the immense power of media outlets, particularly print culture, on the resulting messages viewers receive from them. Althusser’s argument that “individuals form their identities in conjunction with their culture’s dominant ideologies, which they absorb…through…the media…individuals are ‘interpellated’ into these ideologies, becoming complicit in their own subjugation”⁴⁶ This is to say that media institutions garner significant power, in his estimation, through their ability to define readers’ identities and compel them to submit to societally-defined social and cultural categories. Media critic Gigi Durham applies these ideologies to targeted teen girl print magazine publications to argue that these publications actually incite their teen audiences to partake in the “traditional dictates of heterosexuality…that girls must please boys with submissive and erotic styles of self-display.”⁴⁷ These messages are as evident in today’s print culture aimed for teenage girl audiences as they have been in some form throughout the history of many of these publications.

Much of the intriguing aspects of the history of influences of print media on the self-conception and development of teenage girls lie not only in the cultural milieu within which they are produced, but also in the stark dual-roles representations of teen girls hold. The largest and most prominent of these throughout the decades has been the degree of sexiness with which teen girls have been presented, tempered also by declarations of their childlike innocence. Dr. Ilana Nash argues that beauty pageants are a cultural example of this phenomenon is very telling, because during these events, young girls are dressed to appear as sexy versions of grown women, well beyond their years. They are then judged on the basis of their appearances, and although much of the unspoken goal is to exude sexiness, it is critical that the contestants are always young girls well below legal age. It is also interesting that with these goals in mind, no one is expected to overtly acknowledge the erotic persona that these young girls take on. As Nash continues, “we can tolerate a six-year-old looking sexy as long as she doesn’t know she looks sexy…this presumed ignorance and innocence allow viewers to enjoy the visually pleasurable spectacle without feeling besmirched by any stain of impropriety.”

This very trend has been seen throughout the history of representations of teenage and pre-teen girls in print media as well as film and other visual media, in a variety of different forms, owing to the changing cultural environments within which each took place. The examples of Shirley Temple and Nancy Drew are both excellent examples of how print culture’s power has held potent influence on the lives of teenage girls. Temple,

a child film star during the 1930’s, became a classic example of the dichotomy of the infantilization of the girl in media coupled with the enhanced perceptions of her as a sexual figure worthy of adult male attention and the erotic gaze. Her cutesy and innocent demeanor was often accompanied by dialogue rife with double-meanings and adult commentary, which only increased her appeal with audiences and the popular media. Nancy Drew is an interesting example of these claims particularly in the immense shift her character made from her descriptions in the books and her portrayal in the 1938 film. In print, she was a strong and accomplished teen sleuth, raised by a single father and a motherly housekeeper, and possessive of qualities that at many junctures pushed the boundaries of gender categorizations and limitations. In the films she is immediately personified as a ditzy, beautiful girl not capable of much aside from sleuthing. The four films produced by Warner Brothers amidst the Great Depression deliberately worked to shift her portrayal from the books to the way she appears on screen, played by Bonita Granville. A tag line from one of the many press books sums this up: “If it’s murder, she’ll solve it right…If its homicide, she’ll spell it…wrong!”⁴⁹ From this, many of the aspects of influences of teen audiences persuaded to emulate such messages, and the importance of her representation was for readers and viewers that are still evident today in many aspects of current print media culture can be highlighted and understood in context.

The teen girls’ print fiction movement was largely driven by the larger social and cultural changes taking place between the years of 1900 and 1930 in America. Suffrage and other women’s movements, as well as women taking on more prominent roles outside of the home and private sphere were strong and successful, and along with many of these developments came an increase in the demand for a girls’ fiction component. Technology also played a role in many of the resulting girls’ storylines and heroic tales, seen in series like the Motor Girls and Airplane Girls. During this time also the Girl Scouts developed as a socializing and community-outreach based vehicle for young girls. The representations and roles of young female protagonists in many of these early fiction works were, like they have been for every succeeding era to follow, products of their cultural and social time in history. The roles girls took on were still fairly traditional and subordinate to men by and large, yet still, the girls’ fiction movement had begun, and would mark a beginning to the long and influential history print culture would exert on teenage girls in the decades to follow, beginning with the Stratemeyer Syndicate.

In 1905, the Stratemeyer Syndicate was established by Edward Stratemeyer, who used a variety of ghost writers and pseudonyms under which to publish a number of the different book series.\(^{50}\) A large number of serial books that were released under the syndicate through its mass-produced, assembly-line approach, such as Nancy Drew, the Bobbsey Twins, and the Hardy Boys. The Stratemeyer Syndicate is a critical component of the evolution of teen culture in print media because its main focus was the adolescent readership market. As is described by Ilana Nash in American Sweethearts: Teenage

\(^{50}\) Ibid, P. 20.
Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture, “Stratemeyer’s teen heroes and heroines pursue adventure without the hindrance of parental restraint…teen camaraderie [is] the central focus…adolescents are powerful, righteous, and happy in Stratemeyer’s world.”

While the Stratemeyer syndicate included series written for both male and female audiences, his most enduring and famed character is the teen girl sleuth Nancy Drew. The portrayals of a figure like Nancy Drew as well as the general aims and goals of the Stratemeyer Syndicate draw direct parallels to many of the current trends in both magazines and teen novel series in the lack of parental involvement, sense of adventure and teen power, possibility, and immortality, as well as the ever-present socio-economic element, that by and large these adolescent characters always have comfortable lifestyles, trendy clothing, and ready access to much of what they dream or desire. There is an overarching sense of possibility that accompanies many of these teen novels from their early days on, and it is itself a product of contemporary worries, fears, and other social problems that may be occurring under the surface, as is seen still today.

With the rise of rock and roll in the 1950’s, there was an expansion in the youth market as a whole, and with it, the print market and culture as a result. A critical aspect of the expanded emergence of print culture aimed toward and including teenage girls was the marketing and entrepreneurial gains to be made through this very trend-responsive and lucrative teen market. In the 1930’s, businessman Eugene Gilbert, self-dubbed ‘George Gallup of the teenagers’ proved the huge possibilities that teenagers held for their buying power in a variety of consumer markets. Conducting his research through

51 Ibid, P. 31.
groups of high school students he hired, Gilbert was able to argue convincingly that “teenagers spent billions of dollars annually on clothes, food, and entertainment for themselves, and equally important, they influenced family purchases.” Marketers saw the potential for expansive growth that this emerging market of teenagers, particularly girls, held and this is another driving force that enabled teenage girls’ culture in its variety of forms, to grow and flourish. Interestingly, in many ways, Eugene Gilbert’s arguments have been proven true time and time again throughout the decades, as still today, a major goal of the majority of cultural products aimed for teenage girls, particularly print magazines and advertisements, are focused on marketing and selling trends and fashion tips in consumer products.

The inter-war period was particularly significant for this evolution of girl’s culture largely as a result of the availability of ready-to-wear clothing, a stark change from the previous era where clothes were handmade and usually much more susceptible to a parent’s guidance. This engendered the rise of a true fashion industry and culture, because clothing could be imitated for mass consumption and sold, thereby taking on new and powerful cultural meanings particularly within the market of teenage girls. Gilbert’s work, in part, also showed the increased salience that the teenage girl market held particularly over the teenage boy one. He found that “teenagers, especially girls, were quick to follow the latest trends and highly responsive to material ‘developed for their

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This era also highlighted the reflections within print culture of the larger social values of the time, during this era with significant attention to conceptions and conventions regarding family life and suburban sprawl.

Teenage girl culture has also focused heavily on relationship issues, between family members, friends, or romantic partners as its major themes. As still continues to be very much the case in today’s print publications, boys and how to find lasting love, please one’s partner satisfactorily, and sustain a functional relationship. During this time, “mainstream culture celebrated traditional family life and its strictly separated gender roles. Images of girlhood in periodicals, advertisements, and popular narratives focused heavily on romance and the eventual goal of marriage, emphasizing beauty, fashion, and ‘boy-catching.’” Many of these images, if not all, are strongly present in periodicals and novels for teenage girls, and the reflection of current cultural values on subject matter and methods of representation within these works documents them as cultural artifacts with deeper meanings than often meets the eye.

The tradition of print culture in the girls’ fiction market shows at several junctures the evolutions of society and its respective values, and how these have been portrayed in the corresponding social messages teen girls are being sent through these textual sources. In the years since the 1980’s with the development of cinema multiplexes and strip malls, where teens could meet together without parental supervision, the representations of teen girl culture has continued to reflect contemporary social values. In film, the John Hughes

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53 Ibid, 2.
series serves as an example. As Nash states, “Teenage characters, including girls, routinely have their subjectivities represented more centrally now, and more seriously, than in earlier periods.” This is to say that overall, in print and in film, while many publications and written by adults, they are written with a much more self-conscious awareness as to the inner workings of the teenage mind amidst the story being told. There is much more of a focus on the self, which directly correlates to generational characterizations as well as attitudes and behaviors exhibited in the publications I analyzed, which are all supported by my research below. In the end, the print media culture’s influence on teenage girls can be summarized in its use of culturally-determined suppositions and stereotypes, upon which it ultimately plays to gain acceptance and popularity. The influence of the print tradition is large and entrenching, in today’s world as well as dating back to the early years of the twentieth century, particularly among young girls, and have behaved in a sense as instructive and prescriptive models for the ways in which society and culture are mandating behavior and norms among the teenage market, with far-reaching effects.

III. Original Analysis of Modern Teen Girl-Centered Print Publications

An original analysis of a selection of targeted teen print publications helps to reveal many of the issues confronting teen girls in today’s vast media-escape. Such issues generally include identity-forming, a critical aspect of the teenage experience, the socializing process both at the platonic and romantic levels, coping with and understanding familial changes and stresses, and also prime attractions of celebrity

55 Ibid, 218.
gossip, fashion, and style questions. Interestingly, many of the prominent articles featured in these print publications, while they center around these above issues, are actually about experiences and activities that occurred in online space. The two modes of communication seem almost inseparable in today’s world, as the majority of print magazines have online counterparts with the same articles and usually additional interactive capabilities. The entwining of the print and the online in the examples to follow testifies to the large amounts of blurring and collusion that all form a critical part of the modern mass media landscape. Additionally, there seems to be an overwhelming number of books, magazines, and other cultural productions targeted toward girls rather than boys. It is also very telling that there are not more books written for the teenage male audience that also help to highlight these cultural undertones, as there are for teen girls. This could be for a number of reasons, but either way, all of these teen-specific publications offer valuable cues into the experience of adolescence in today’s world vis a vis the media and larger media culture. Also, although there seems to be less actually written for teenage male audiences, the teenage girl publications can be extremely telling for both genders in the themes and messages they present, as relationships from a female perspective have obvious influences on messages males are receiving as well. For the above reasons, this chapter will primarily be focused on the cultural messages teen print publications are sending to teenage girls in today’s mass media culture.

Seventeen Magazine has been a long-standing fixture of the definition and evolution of the teenage girl market in print culture. First published in 1944, Seventeen was popular among teen readers from its inception. In four years, by 1948, $11, 690, 499
had already been spent in advertising dollars with a 150% circulation gain by this point.\textsuperscript{56} As Kelly Shrum, scholar of 20\textsuperscript{th} century girls’ culture, explains, “\textit{Seventeen} magazine was instrumental in expanding the consumer market for teenage girls and in reaching readers...[it was] the first magazine to target high school girls exclusively.”\textsuperscript{57} The timing of \textit{Seventeen}’s emergence is considered a critical aspect to its success, as during this period because of the war, more women and girls were working and therefore had more discretionary funds with which to indulge fashion and other amenities and magazine purchases. Today, \textit{Seventeen} magazine remains extremely influential, and as its publisher Hearst Corporation contends, reaches 13 million young women aged 12-24 monthly.\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Seventeen}, which also publishes \textit{Teen} magazine, has been a force driving youth culture since it’s very early days and continues to exercise that influence still today.

A cover story in the February 2007 issue of \textit{Seventeen} magazine exemplifies the aforementioned propensity for print publications to feature stories relevant to the online space, this article is classic in its combination of the two media. Titled, “I Lied Online to Get Attention,” the story follows a teenage girl, age 15, who first began frequenting chat rooms when she was 12 years old. She posted a photograph she had found on an online site in place of her own, and made up the information on her profile about her family, interests, and school location. Essentially, she was someone else online. After seeing the attention some other girls began receiving after telling their stories of abuse, this girl

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 169.
\textsuperscript{58} http://www.hearstcorp.com/magazines/property/mag_prop_seventeen.html
made up an elaborate and disturbing lie about self-mutilation. As the story got more contorted she received sympathy notes from online friends, which she actively welcomed. Her story is interesting in that, as noted earlier, she is far from alone. When her mother finally discovered her daughter’s addiction to the chat rooms, she responded by taking the computer away. In Kelsey’s own words, “I was so addicted to the chat room that if I didn’t go online, I’d completely freak out…it was my only social contact…” her mom told her “You don’t even know these people! How can they be your friends?”

This statement brings forth a critical aspect of online interaction, as well as the divide between the virtual and the physical spaces. Like Kelsey’s story, the online environment can easily seem so starkly different from and unrelated to one’s ‘real life’ that it makes it all the more tempting and attractive to fabricate stories about yourself since the people you are ‘meeting’ you’ll probably never actually stand in front of, and the ‘you’ online is so different from the ‘you’ in your physical life, that how could a lie in one affect the other? Interestingly, it can and it does.

Also in the February 2007 issue of Seventeen, an article called “Online Love” gives insight into the melding of relationships and the online environment. The most interesting part of this story is that while both parties attended the same high school and were talkative online in the evenings when they would chat on an instant messaging program for hours, whenever they saw each other in the hall, they rarely interacted, or when they did, had an extremely difficult time doing so. As Emily, the narrator says, “Simon and I started casually talking online…over IM, he suddenly

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became… eloquent…” After a few years had elapsed and they had managed a few awkward in-person dates, it is clear that Emily really only felt the most comfortable interacting online. As she continues, “Our perfect relationship existed only in cyberspace. We never fought or disagreed, but we didn’t truly connect either – not in the real world.” Once again, this dichotomy of the ‘real’ or physical versus the virtual plays a large role. Also very strong in Emily’s story of online teen dating is the reason she essentially was more comfortable with it in the first place: it allowed for freedom from the vulnerability and awkwardness, as well as emotional growth and sharing that takes place in face-to-face relationships. Later, after ending this relationship and attending college, Emily is able to put into words this struggle which many teens as well as adults are facing: “I used to think IM made it easier to get a guy. Now I think it makes things too easy, letting you avoid all the vulnerability that comes with expressing your feelings face-to-face.” The ability of technology to soften or even inhibit emotional growth and trust is definitely a double-edged sword. The effects of this technological innovation on the development of teens and larger society are clear and pervasive.

In previous decades, when there were no cell phones and no chat rooms, it was much more difficult to sustain a relationship – whether romantic or otherwise – without face-to-face contact. Vulnerability is inherent in human nature to some extent, but without the presence of a ‘virtual crutch’ most people learned to conquer their fears and adapt. Online communication essentially allows a relationship to form today without a real, if present at all, need for this. This fear of vulnerability, on one hand arguably a

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tenet of the adolescent experience, is heightened for many and definitely influenced by the uncertainty of today’s world, seen in movies, video games, and family structures and relationships. As stated by Karen Sternheimer, a scholar of sociology concentrating in youth and popular culture, “The media have come to symbolize society and present a clear picture of both social changes and social problems…what lies behind our fear of media culture is anxiety about an uncertain future.”\textsuperscript{61} Essentially, the media culture of today serves as both a mirror reflecting the values, attitudes, and state of affairs of the larger culture around and within it and a magnifying glass, able to zoom in on particular aspects and scrutinize them, for better or for worse.

The March 2007 issue of \textit{Seventeen}, brimming with spring colors and bold fashions for the upcoming Prom season, continues this trend of intertwining print and online cultures that was also seen in previous examples. This is to say that the print article’s topic is actually directly concerned with online space and interaction. This trend alone is interesting because of the propensity in today’s world and culture for these two distinct media to be blurred to show the immense penetration and influence that both are having on modern teen life. This again proves testament to the wealth of cultural shifts and changes that have taken place in these areas largely as a result of the evolution of mass media outlets. An article under the ‘love life’ section of this issue, titled “Decode his IM’s,” features internet-dating expert Roman Griffen to help explain certain nuances in word choice or jargon and style to help shed light on romantic outcomes or

undercurrents. Interestingly, the basis for this article boldly shows the essence of the cultural changes that have taken place as a result of changes in technology and the mass media. Much of the reason for why it was published here and even written stems directly from a cornerstone of the modern teen experience in today’s world: the inability to discern actual meaning from appearance and decide what is ‘real,’ as in actually meant, from what is hinted at or not intended at all. While it is easy to comprehend these miscommunications or lack of clarity in online interaction, it is especially interesting that this story is included in a print publication as a guide to help decode conversations taking place online. The second line below the title affirms this, “Read it three times and still confused? Let internet-dating expert Roman Griffen tell you what it really means.”62 The article features three scenarios with three couples’ stories or problems at issue. The format of the story is notable because it combines in essence the two mediums which it is seeking to correlate for better understanding. On the left side is a column with Roman’s assessment written out in clear language. On the right is a visual representation of an IM window with the actual text of the conversation had shown as it took place. This placement and design of the story is just as telling as the information the article contains. The article is tasked with attempting to decode online language to make it more understandable in actual words on a page. The result is ultimately a showcase of the differences between the print and online cultures, the misunderstandings that can take place between them, and ultimately renders a hybrid combination of both for the reader to become more aware of specific instances within the IM text that hint to true meaning.

62 Seventeen March 2007. P. 120.
For example, the first scenario in the article examines the plight of Megan and Kurt, although this is not his real name. The ‘problem’ comes from 16-year old Megan on Staten Island and is stated by her as ‘Kurt and I have hooked up for a couple weeks. Where do we stand?’ Aside from this being a very normal, common question typically arising in most relationships at some point or another, this scenario represents also the increased cultural incidence of ‘hooking-up’ without the pressure or need to define the physical contact momentarily, if ever. Although subject to argument, a large reason for the growth of this type of relationship could stem from the increased pressure and scheduling of teen life. However, the problem stands that Megan is eager to define their interaction and is interested in knowing what ‘Kurt’s’ true feelings really are. The text of the IM that jumps out in Roman’s analysis is this line by ‘Kurt’ after he is asked by Megan what he thought about the two of them, presumably their relationship. He responds, “uhh…I rele dont kno, cuz I don’t even kno wut I want ya kno?...so lyk itz weird, lyk im jus kinda goin wit it.”63 The abbreviated language and phoenetic spelling, trademarks of online conversation in general, is explained by Roman as a generalized thought about relationships overall, not his with Megan in particular. From this, Roman deduces that ‘Kurt’ is interested in non-committal relationships, and thus does not reciprocate the feelings Megan has for him as far as a potential long-term partner.

A second scenario from this story features another young heterosexual couple with a problem, Emily and Jeff. Emily is 18 from Modesto, California, and states her problem as ‘I dated Jeff before he moved; now he’s weird. What gives?’ To the right of

63 Seventeen, March 2007. P. 120.
the text column in the IM window with their online conversation, the initial line by Jeff to Emily, with improper capitalization and no punctuation, “How have you Been I Miss you” after a reciprocated statement back by Emily is followed by Jeff’s next line “Im Great. I decided its way better I moved. I’m way better off without you.” After this he goes on to tell Emily that she is not his style and that he is actually involved in a new relationship and would like the new girlfriend and Emily to meet soon. While at first glance the subtext of this conversation seems obvious, Jeff moved and is glad to be free of his former relationship and has clearly moved on, his tone is decidedly extreme and vacillates between civility and stark cruelty in his statements toward Emily. Roman’s assessment of this scenario is excellent. He says, “Switching from nice to nasty may be Jeff’s messed-up way of getting over you…even if he never played mind games in person, on IM he has time to be more conniving. He says ‘I miss you’ to manipulate your emotions, not because he really cares.”64 Here, interestingly, Roman’s assessment gives way to previous evidence and arguments made about the character of online interaction and culture versus that which exists in face-to-face contact and in verbal print media. The perceived ‘time’ that Roman speaks of as well as the freedom to be more manipulative and vindictive in an online setting in several ways ties in directly with the issues raised in the above article from the February 2007 issue about “Online Love.” Specifically, it addresses the ability of the online space to rid participants of emotional vulnerability and actual confrontation of feelings and emotions, which are decidedly much more difficult in a face-to-face interaction. At the bottom of the page is a link to an online quiz with which

64 Seventeen, March 2007. P. 120.
readers can ‘follow-up’ on the content of the article and have the opportunity to gain further information, entitled ‘Does IM rule your relationships?’ The article on “Online Love” from the previous month’s issue of Seventeen approaches the very same subject matter.

A story featured in a popular magazine for teenage girls highlights another aspect of the slippery slope of online behavior, and furthers the previous discussions about the entwining of print and online culture and space as well as its effect on teens in today’s mass media environment. CosmoGirl! Magazine, the teen component to Cosmopolitan is another widely read teen publication, boasting 8 million readers and whose distinguishing characteristic, as is noted on the Hearst Corporation’s website, is its position as “the #1 selling teen magazine at the newsstand [which] has the fastest growing readership among freshmen and sophomores on college campuses.”65 CosmoGirl! is a spinoff of the popular Cosmopolitan magazine, which has an over century-long history in American print culture. CosmoGirl! is intended to younger teenage girls, featuring many of the usual segments, fashion, beauty, nutrition and dieting tips, but the magazine largely focused on relationship information and advice, like Seventeen. Like all of the other publications included in this analysis, CosmoGirl! has an online counterpart, however it is unique from these others in that it also has a MySpace account for the publication itself, through which teen readers may post comments about current articles and issues as well as make recommendations for future changes and ideas for future stories. The presence of a MySpace page is a distinguishing characteristic of CosmoGirl! particularly because of the

evident knowledge of the popularity of MySpace and online networking and social websites among this young teen girl demographic. In an article entitled “The New Dating Rules: Forget your Mom’s Romance Advice. These are modern, up-to-the minute rules that CG’s like you live and love by every day.” The picture on the opposite side of the article shows a classic 50’s style couple embracing, with a small caption below reading, “He seemed taller on his MySpace page.”66 This shows the cultural hybridity and blurring that is taking place in numerous outlets in today’s society. Much of the appeal of this article is in its decidedly modern flavor, as well as a desire to differentiate oneself from the generation before, that of one’s parents. Also inherent in many of these publications is the overwhelming sense of increased maturity that is considered desirable among young girls in particular. The modern mass media brings with it such a vast omnibus of information without regard for geographic proximity, or even age, and also has brought with it a new kind of worldliness that was not present in the years and generations before it. This, too, has had profound effects on adolescent growth, socialization, and development in today’s world.

An article within the March 2007 issue of *CosmoGirl!* also addresses MySpace accounts, and social rules or norms it, as an example, is inciting and helping to create which have larger implications on the evolution of teen culture on the larger stage. Titled ‘The Do’s and Don’ts of MySpace profiles,’ author Mindy Lavergne aims to investigate what particular characteristics of online social profiles are alluring and attractive to potential online suitors or romantic partners when attempting to make contact with teen

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girls. The story achieves its stated objective through the actual opinions and comments of
 teenage boys. When asked to explain what it is about a particular girl’s profile that would
 make them want to look at it more closely, or instead firmly decide to stay away. At the
 outset, this article is significant in the face of the collection of other stories analyzed in
 this section because it employs actual teen feedback and opinion to attempt to define and
 explain nuances of the cultural revolution the online space is bringing about.
 Additionally, the continued inclusion of such articles, centering around stories referring
 to online interaction, communication, and culture, in print magazines such as this one,
 serves to affirm earlier suppositions. Particularly, the prevalence of the blurring of the
 two forms of media, print and online, and the kind of hybrid culture and systems of
 meaning and values that they are coming together to help create. Interestingly, the
 majority of teenage boy comments in this article state qualities of honesty, creativity, and
 ‘showing what you’re really about’ as the main selling points a teenage girl’s MySpace
 page. Interestingly also, many of the boys whose comments are included in this article
 happen to be slightly older, even in their early twenties. For example, Kaelin, 21, of
 Columbus, Ohio, states, “I like profiles that display who you really are and what you’re
 really into.” Ellijah, also 21, of Summerville, South Carolina, echoes these remarks.
 “What catches my eye about a girl on MySpace is her creativity and honesty…in short,
 be truthful about yourself and don’t be someone you’re not.” These comments are
 especially telling in light of previous claims and examples of online interaction and

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68 Ibid, 85.
behavior among teens because they exhibit a sincere desire for honesty, and for the ability to be able to take others at face-value and assess them for who they are rather than who they seem to be. These statements are critically important here largely because of the allure and ability of the online space to foster experimental identities, falsification of personality and to in short, do exactly the opposite. These comments by Kaelin and Elljah both show these characteristics of online culture and interaction to be true in that many teens DO lie about their appearance, personality, or hobbies, in the clear preference of these boys for other online teens to represent themselves truthfully in online space. This sincere quest for truth and honesty shows in this instance both sides of the online culture’s double-edged sword. The forum is more open to anonymity and experimentation, but also more open to falsification and dishonesty. These claims are clearly communicated in the comments included in this article with their search for honesty on one hand, and on the other intense suspicion of others online for not being so truthful, as can be seen in the above analysis of one teen girl’s experience about lying online for attention included in February 2007’s issue of Seventeen magazine.

Although it is clear then that the two media of print and online space are often blurred in today’s culture, it is also clear that teens are multitasking far more often and are incessantly juggling regular lives with online personas, extracurricular activities with hobbies, and are constantly rushed and busy. This is another aspect of the teen culture that is dramatically changing, enabled chiefly by the mass media and technological innovation, and demonstration of which can be found in the number of articles and features written on this subject in a variety of teen print publications as well as large-
scale newspapers, such as *The Washington Post*. The following grouping of print articles all center around this general theme and address this important aspect of the teen experience amidst the mass media apparatus.

*Teen* magazine, published by the same company as *Seventeen*, addresses many of the above issues which hold significant importance in the daily lives of modern teenagers. This is evident by the frequent and vast inclusion of similar subject articles in a variety of teen print magazines, such as *Teen, Teen Vogue*, the teen companion to *Vogue* magazine, which received increased readership in recent years with the ending of publication of *YM* (Young & Modern) magazine, and *Discovery Girls* magazine, published bimonthly by Discovery Girls, Inc.

A by-product of the expansive growth of modern mass media culture is the effect such innovations and changes have had on the daily lives of average teens nationwide, correlating in several ways to generational characterizations and suppositions made about the current generation of young people, dubbed such things as ‘The Multi-tasking Generation’ or ‘The Entitlement Generation’ or even ‘Generation Me.’ More than ever, young people are pressured to juggle more tasks within their daily lives as parents have become busier and more youth autonomy and responsibility has thus ensued, and there is also a much greater wealth of information and possibility as well as realms for socialization and interaction than ever before. The largest places where this is evident is in the changing cultures of the print and ‘face-to-face’ world versus the online space,

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where virtual identities and interactions may or may not align with physical realities form a critical aspect of the teen experience. This increased sense of pressure and busy schedules and activities is the subject of a number of stories within the above three teen print magazines, and all address this particular issue in a variety of different ways. This section sheds light on this crucial part of teen life and also serve as evidence for how all of the selected articles and stories here come together to correlate with the pervasive influence of print culture on teenage girls as well as the changing character and culture of growth and perceptions of teenage girls in today’s world.

*Teen’s* March 2007 issue features a reader quiz entitled ‘Are You a Go-Getter?’ Do you make the most of every chance you’re given, or do you let the opportunity pass you by?’ Even from the title, there is a direct insinuation that prevailing cultural attitudes dictate that it is ‘better’ to not miss anything, chances, experiences, or the like, at the risk of a perceived feeling of missing out or being left behind on some front. The three results in which the reader’s responses fall depending on their scoring of points through answers include the top category, ‘Go-Getter Girl’ followed by ‘Mildly Motivated,’ and ending with ‘Miss’d Opportunities.’ This quiz alone is useful in highlighting the overall attitudes which many teens are feeling but which are also being communicated to teens by individuals and institutions around them. This quiz also speaks volumes about the American cultural values which underpin it and in several ways propel and encourage teens to feel the need to be go-getters, take advantage of everything, and distinctly fear missing out. This theme is continued in an article featured on the cover of the February/March 2007 issue of *Discovery Girls* magazine, self-dubbed as “a magazine
created for girls by girls.” The story is titled ‘Growing Up…or Barely Keeping up?’ and, much like the quiz in Teen the title also reveals larger cultural trends and attitudes. In the beginning of the article there is a run-down of a typical teen day with the various activities included, such as music lessons, sports practices, walking the dog, homework, and household chores. Following this comes the lead-in for the text to follow, along with the chief purpose of the article itself:

“For years, you kept telling the adults around you not to treat you like a little kid—well, congratulations, it looks like they finally listened! Between chores, homework, sports and activities, it’s clear that your parents, teachers, and coaches expect more from you today than ever before…leaving you feeling stressed out…So does growing up really have to be like this?”

The article then proceeds to lay out, in very organized fashion, practical steps to managing these different activities and stresses, with the goal of helping teens to feel more relaxed and at ease with their daily lives.

Organization, prioritizing, and time management are the definite buzzwords of this story, and all give critical insight into the lives and inner feelings that many teens are experiencing, many of which could easily lead to anxiety, fear, depression, and substance abuse. These sentiments also tie into the interrelationship between family and the media because in this case in particular, both sides are effectively able to both create and somewhat resolve many of these stresses and situations in which large numbers of teens find themselves today. Increased competition and pressure to succeed academically is

71 Ibid, 20.
then coupled with changing and in many cases deteriorating or unstable familial relationships and running constantly throughout, there is the presence of the media and its strong influence on teen life, particularly that of girls, with a central role in identity-construction, consumer behavior, self-perception, and self-assessment. All of these factors relate to the larger goals this chapter addresses in that they lie behind much of the inner depression, pressure, and fear of vulnerability that so many teenagers within the current generation are experiencing in the modern age.

A third and final article which addresses these issues of pressures and inner lives of teens that are prevalent and represented with increased frequency in a variety of teen print publications comes from the March 2007 issue of *Teen Vogue* magazine. Titled “The Young and the Restless,” the header for this article, while at first undoubtedly intended to conjure images of soap opera episodes and storylines, actually refers to something else entirely. The story’s author, Leigh Belz, uses personal experience and memories with which to preface the text to follow. Her own recollections of feeling overwhelmed and unable to achieve quality and lengthy rest at night are coupled here with additions made by current teens all achieving the same overall assessment: that teens are not getting the sleep their bodies need largely as a result of stress, overburdening, and increased responsibility and tasks. The lead-in to the article states the chief issue: “With too much to do and not enough time to do it, many teens find that getting a full night’s rest is an elusive dream.”72 The pressure to be motivated, to be a go-getter, as the quiz in *Teen* magazine puts it, is huge and intense in the lives of today’s teens, and Belz’s article

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aims to highlight this as well as attempt to investigate the reasons for why this phenomenon may be occurring in the first place.

A study included in the story conducted by the National Science Foundation contends that 75% of teens surveyed were not getting the advised number of hours of sleep on a nightly basis. As Jenny, 16, from Philadelphia responded, “I take what sleep I can get…there are some weeks that are so stressful, I won’t get to bed until 4:00 in the morning and then I have to get up at 6:30 to get ready for school.” Belz’s article continues to outline the array of potential risks that can accompany persistent lack of sleep, such as decreased immunity, exhausted driving leading to more teen traffic accidents, as well as the obvious psychological effects that such a lifestyle is exerting on the average teen. This article, while in many ways more prescriptive and scientific in tone, is valuable in this discussion of teen lifestyle particularly because it examines not only the social and academic repercussions of this pressured existence, but also the physiological and psychological ones as well. The instance of being busy and stressed is somehow directly related to being successful as an individual it seems, through cultural messages manifested in part in these print articles. The pressure to succeed is now not simply a matter of personal pride or yearning for achievement, but has taken on an almost required, absolutely necessary aspect of living in today’s world. These sentiments are clearly highlighted by this collection of print articles which show these cultural messages for what they feel like to teens themselves. The title of this article, too, means quite literally what it says, in that it addresses the young, as in young people or teenagers, and

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73 Ibid, 238.
the fact that many of them are actually more ‘restless’ than ever before, arguably as a result of the intense pressures to succeed, packed schedules, and ever-increasing expectations, seemingly culturally-defined and either self-or parentally-enforced.

IV. Conclusion: Showcasing the Evidence

More than ever, teen publications are sending the message that there is a pressure to grow up more quickly, to do one’s best whenever possible to get into quality colleges and differentiate oneself from the hoarding masses in competition with you. There is an increased sense of youth sexualization as well coming along with this, chiefly driven by media outlets. Much of this also ties back to Dr. Ilana Nash’s arguments about the evolution of teenage girl culture in print media stated earlier, particularly those relating to Nash’s discussion of beauty pageants, Shirley Temple, and other aspects of culture that yearned for images of overly sexualized but unaware young girls. The Flirt book series is a wonderful example of the combination of both of these. Published by Grosset and Dunlap, a division of the larger Penguin Group, the Flirt books are intensely popular among teenage girls.\textsuperscript{74} One of the series, entitled “Write Here, Right Now: Copy That - California Girl Hits the Big Apple with Stars in her Eyes and her Powerbook Juiced,” follows the story of a 16-year old girl who wins an internship for a summer at Flirt magazine and immediately becomes swept up in the whirlwind of the New York City fashion, publishing, and social worlds. The character, named Melanie, works in a real magazine company office, drinks champagne on airplanes, parties at exclusive nightclubs and bars with older men, and in the majority of cases, acts well beyond her years.

\textsuperscript{74} \url{http://us.penguingroup.com/static/html/aboutus/youngreaders/grosset.html}
Another character that Melanie befriends during her internship is Kiyoko, who represents the flirtation and sex appeal coupled with the knowledge of the manipulation of men, who wins the underagers alcoholic beverages and behaves with a forward, adult attitude to sex and relationships. Numerous statements made by Kiyoko to her friends, such as “those guys so want me…” and “I’m going to show those guys who’s a ‘little girl’ …I’ve got a bartender to tease mercilessly,” promote the message to teen readers, in this particular case, that outward appearance and sex appeal scores points in older men’s attentions and free/illegal drinks, and that this is a positive thing. Kiyoko’s character is instantly portrayed as cool and worthy of emulation for her desirability by older men as well as her ability to throw caution, money, and the legal system to the wind.

The characters have a good time, are never caught, and are essentially praised for their overly mature behavior. There is also little or no mention of the potential for danger, abduction, rape or abuse when a young girl puts herself in such a position. Melanie’s life is what could best be described as nothing short of fabulous and constantly fun. The most obvious criticism here is the point that it is a fallacy to believe that at the tender age of 16 one’s life could be so radically changed, immediately chic and rich, and perpetually exciting. This publication, as well as several others to follow, are examples of one of the most devastating consequences of mass media culture on adolescent development – the intense pressure and competition coupled with the common expectation of highly unrealistic goals.

Another serial publication, the *Gossip Girl* novels by Cecily von Ziegesar and hailed as a #1 *New York Times* bestselling series, is described by *Teen People* magazine as ‘Sex and the City for the younger set.’ In a particular novel entitled *Nobody Does it Better*, the main characters are wealthy Upper East Side teenagers whose main activities involve attending an exclusive prep school, college applications, seemingly non-existent parents who are often less mature than their own children, and teen sex. The characters, all underage, have free reign over their parents’ homes, money, and social lives, and much of their time is taken with stealing boyfriends, awaiting acceptances from Ivy League institutions, and investing in couture. As the synopsis on the back of the book cover describes, “Welcome to New York City’s Upper East Side, where my friends and I get everything – and everyone – we want. Snagging the latest Marc Jacobs bag or your best friends’ boyfriend isn’t always pretty, but it’s always hot.”\(^7\) Clearly, the appeal of these books is strong from the standpoint that most teens would love to live such seemingly ‘charmed’ lives, rife with money and high-status college choices with such small problems as gossip and boyfriends.

However, these books, along with the above magazine publications, help to show an attractive, influential, and potentially harmful aspect of the mass media culture for growing teens. As these as well as the popular and well-known *Friends* or *Sex of the City* programs often show, the characters live in massive spacious city apartments with designer clothing and constant time for shopping, lunches, or coffee hours but seem to

have no realistic regard for jobs or working at all. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be true. Jobs are something fun to have, more like an accessory than a way of life. If one of them has a bad day or dislikes their boss, quitting is a very easy option with minimal consequences. However, the apartments and clothing and lunches would, for most, not be possible without said employment. The messages these types of cultural media send to teens in particular, who have yet to officially enter the workforce or decide on a career is that glamorous rewards can and should be redeemed with minimal amounts of actual work or time. While these storylines make for entertaining publications and programming, they are far from realistic and set into motion false expectations and goals in the minds of adolescents experiencing and observing them.

One of the most critical aspects of the online communication experience, also resonant in the above evidence stemming from print culture, is the emphasis on the ‘real.’ It is a word that frequently accompanies discourse on the subject of chat rooms, instant messaging, and social networking websites. Much of the fascination, it seems, is derived from the inability to clearly delineate what is real, what constitutes reality, and the dichotomy between virtual reality and the physical. The comment made by the mother of one of the girls in the above stories featured in Seventeen magazine, to the effect that since her daughter didn’t ‘know’ her friends online, implying that because she had never interacted with them face-to-face, she didn’t ‘know’ them, then they could not be considered her friends. This begs the question, are virtual friends inferior to those who exist in one’s face-to-face life? This central issue is at the core of the debate over media influences and culture, particularly the online landscape. A chief part of online interaction
and communication is the difficulty in delineating or distinguishing anything at all. As is true of many conceptions of the family that exist in today’s society, a similar statement could be made about the mass media culture encompassing nearly every aspect of adolescent life. Clear answers are increasingly difficult to obtain and at the core of this struggle for understanding and clear lines between online and physical interaction is the different character of the interactions themselves as well as the rules of conduct that govern them. It has long been agreed that the majority of human communication is non-verbal. This implies, then, that the vast majority of human interaction is largely dependent upon other cues, such as body language, tone of voice, or facial expression in order to convey meaning and engender understanding.

With mediated forms of communication, such as text messaging, email, instant messaging, chat rooms, and social networking forums, there is a clear absence of these cues that are present and critical to face-to-face interaction. In place of this, these forms of communication have had to evolve their own schema and criteria for the governance and evaluation of social contact. In several cases, the mediated forms have become increasingly attractive to teens, as is seen in the above article from Seventeen detailing the romantic relationship between two high-school students conducted nearly solely online. It is perceived by many, as was stated by the girl from that story, that such forms of communication involve less emotional vulnerability and awkwardness than actual face-to-face contact does. In several ways this chief difference begs a value judgment about which form is ultimately more valuable and rewarding. However, none such categorization may be made. While vulnerability is understood to be essential to true
connection and growth of understanding and trust between individuals in society, it is very telling that so many adolescents are expressing increased interest in mediated communication forms that demand less of it. In this sense, this is a clear indication of numerous social changes and cultural developments that have taken place within which technology and the mass media play a part.
CHAPTER 2
Online Space and Adolescent Culture

I. Online Space as a form of Mass Media Prevalence in Teen Life

The central focus of this chapter surrounds death and the cultural values and traditions associated with funerals, construction of memorials, and the grieving process. These examples are intended to serve as indicators of a way in which online space, by virtue of its innovative qualities as well as its prevalence in the lives of adolescents is evoking larger cultural shifts as a result. The arguments put forth here build on previous claims in the preceding chapter about family structure and change, teen print culture and its influence of teen girls, and the resulting effects that these are exerting on adolescent growth and development. This chapter will argue that all of the above are products and instruments of the mass media machine, and all engender insight and understanding into the new face that youth is taking on, as seen in the current generation of teenagers.

One of the largest advantages of online forums is their ability to bring individuals together around a common issue or interest, regardless of geographic proximity. The anonymity and seeming ‘passive’ nature of online involvement is a large part of its appeal, particularly for young people. Adolescence has traditionally been understood to be a time of confusion, in which many young people are searching for an identity and purpose. The Internet can facilitate a teen who may be ‘trying out’ different names, interests, or even representing themselves as someone completely different online. Amanda Lenhart, Lee Rainie, and Oliver Lewis note in a study on “Teenage Life Online,” published by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, that 56% of online
teens held more than one email or instant message account, 24% masqueraded as someone other than themselves while communicating online so as not to be recognized by peers, and 33% of these say they have been given false information about their identity or interests in an email or IM format. 77 This chapter seeks to examine the experience of American adolescents in online space, and its resulting pitfalls and possibilities.

The role of the adolescent both within the family structure and the larger social one, has long roots in both developmental psychology and social science. Adolescence, as it is commonly known and understood, hearkens back to a time of rebellion, identity construction, confusion, sexual identity and realization, and the overarching desire to fit in with peers. Many would say that their adolescent years were some of the most tumultuous and difficult of their entire lives. Part of the reason for this is that, beginning in the twentieth century when child labor laws had been largely abolished in the Western world and as a result, lives of children and lives of adults became increasingly separated and distinct, adolescence “also became an important stage in an individual’s biography – a recognized, intermediate period of being neither a child nor an adult.” 78 This ‘limbo’ feeling can bring with it lapses in personal confidence, and the ever stronger desire to construct a picture of themselves independent of their families that will help them to determine what they hope to resemble upon reaching adulthood.


It is generally acknowledged that family values and dynamics of interaction between parents and siblings serve as a powerful model for young people as they grow up. This has strong influence on the personal values and belief systems they will develop individually and either perpetuate the pattern or become determined not to repeat it when they are adults with their own families. In this sense, families have a critical role in nurturing these early values and establishing sense of identity, confidence, and need for respect. With so many families undergoing structural changes and alterations in dynamics, it stands to reason that this will undoubtedly have a corresponding effect on the children growing up and the type of society they will form upon reaching adulthood themselves. The importance of role-modeling on developing children or teens has long been popularly accepted as a crucial aspect of growing up. It is becoming increasingly common, however, with more dual-earner households and the uncertain and transitional character to many families, that the media is becoming an ever stronger force serving not solely as an informational or entertainment source, but itself a role-model to which teens may vicariously observe or relate. Peer groups and friends have always been critical aspects of the adolescent experience, seemingly even more important than the nuclear family itself, but in a situation where the stability of the family is uncertain or volatile, it is only logical that many adolescents would place an even stronger influence on their respective peer groups in the hopes that they could help to fulfill the human necessities for intimacy, emotional support, companionship, and confidence that may not be being met by current familial structures.
Scholar of sociology specializing in families, David Newman, argues “parental influence over child rearing is also limited by the fact that many of the socializing functions that families provided in the past now commonly occur in other social settings: in school, with peers and friends, in front of the television.” This supplanting of this evolving peer culture over parental influence during the adolescent years has become ever more acute in the modern mass media society. This is largely because as growing numbers of parents are both spending more time outside the home, their children have more time without their constant and explicit influence, giving them more time to spend with peers, in front of the television, or on the Internet. The raising of a child does not occur in a vacuum. It is largely the product of social and cultural context, and takes place amidst the preconceptions, feelings, and values accepted and reinforced by a particular society or culture. These factors, in turn, have significant and lasting effects on these children, due to their families but also as a result of the prevailing cultural values that surround their developmental process.

Depression, vulnerability, identity establishment, fear or rejection, and desire for social acceptance all in part come to mind when conceiving of adolescence. Today’s teens, in contrast to the generations that have come before, have had a fairly peaceful existence overall, with no drafts, no real threats of nuclear annihilation, and no turmoil such as accompanied the race riots during the Civil Rights Movement. The adolescents and young people of today have grown up in a time where there has been an overall

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concentration on and celebration of the individual, the person, whose feelings and insecurities as a group are given more credence than ever before by society. Generation Me, as coined by scholar Jean M. Twenge in her book of the same name, comprising those born in the 1980’s and 1990’s, are coming of age in a society that is more open and comfortable with diversity than any one before it. The focus of today’s society is largely centered on individual goals, successes, and happiness accompanies an overarching emphasis on the informal, with a sort of modern variation on the theme of the 1960’s era ‘do what you feel.’ This generation has also been called ‘The Entitlement Generation’ which exposes the rather nasty side of this self-centric ethos, and ties in with the above discussion of the differences in what young people have been raised to expect of their own lives through examples given through media outlets and programming, and what is actually realistic.

As Twenge describes, “This is the downside of the focus on the self – Generation Me has been taught to expect more out of life at the very time when good jobs and nice houses are increasingly difficult to obtain. All too often, the result is crippling anxiety and crushing depression.” With the general uncertainty of family relationships and a perceived lack of control, coupled with the decline of parental role-modeling and involvement, the media has grown stronger in its importance as a medium for teens to seek that modeling, and observe behaviors in order to gain cues for how they, too, should act. Further, peer relationships also gain increased significance in an adolescents’ life. Romantic relationships take on heightened importance and levels of seriousness, largely

because of the decreased nature of the family. The transient and overly precarious nature of family situations provides a strong impetus for the propensity of teenagers to shy away from emotional vulnerability, trust and physical connection, which further encourages adolescents to turn to online communication and mediated observation from which to form human connections and gain insights about life and death.

Today’s young people have much more self-esteem with more people who believe in them and support them, but along with these they are also deluged by an extremely competitive college application process and larger workforce that is not so forgiving and willing to praise them for simply being alive, which many young people have come to expect, as found in analyses of generational trends and norms.81 While this may seem to contradict claims made in the previous chapter, it actually exists as just that: in some part a contradiction, but overall a part of the paradoxical situation facing many young people in America. One one hand, young people are told from very early ages how wonderful and unique they are, and how many successes they can come to expect in their lives. These sentiments are mirrored in popular culture as well. On the other hand, when these young people grow up these expectations are still all around but it seems more and more clear that many of them are unrealistic and even largely unattainable. It can at first glance, then, seem surprising that there has been a marked increase in teen depression rates in recent years, particularly among members of this generation. However, at second glance the reasons become more clear. While having no draft and overall more concern

paid to what you may think as a young person initially seems like a positive development, the expectation of young people to receive this nurturing and tender loving care is extremely strong as they grow up and mature, which often results in making the stakes for success seem that much higher and more important, and failure that much sharper and depressing.

II. The Psychology of Mass Media Culture in Online Space in the Lives of Teens

Following on from this, the fear of trusting others, or emotional sharing and the vulnerability associated with it, along with the pressures that come with living and surviving in today’s high-achievement oriented society is reflected in the current mass media culture and also feeds directly into teen depression. An analysis of numerous books published for teen audiences give critical insight into these issues from a teen-centric point of view. Teen resource publications, such as Dr. Joel Block and Dr. Susan Bartell’s Stepliving for Teens: Getting Along with Stepparents, Parents, and Siblings seek to address not just changes in the familial landscape, but also confront insecurities and fears that accompany them that all too often lend themselves to depressive states. This particular source was compiled from actual conversations with teens in stepfamilies, in order to get a sense for the common fears and attitudes surrounding familial changes that often have larger social impacts with operational task-oriented ways to deal with the emotions coming with these changes. In a colorful and youth-friendly font, the book addresses each worry or fear and accompanies each with a statement made by a teen, given by name, on the subject. For example, “My mom says this new stepfamily will be great, but why will this family work when our first one didn’t?” and the answer given, by
a teen named Danielle, is “My mom will say anything to convince me everything is fine but it’s totally bogus. Our first family got messed up and so will this one.” This feeling of an overwhelming loss of control over one’s own life is a very powerful aspect of teen culture, also a chief incident in depression with regard to family situation. Another publication, entitled High School is Not Forever, was created for teens with the majority of information coming from over 2,000 teens across the country. It helps to put into perspective the growing importance of peer and school groups in the construction of identity and the struggle to gain social acceptance, and the role that these often play in teen depression. The authors describe the context for their work as ‘the high school reality,’ and in so doing touch upon a critical aspect of teen psychology and development with regard to the influences of the mass media. There have always been those who hated high school, those who simply grinned and bore it for the necessary years and then rejoiced upon graduation, and those who truly had a good experience.

Psychologically, the teen years have become synonymous with angst, confusion, anger, experimentation, and a sense of immortality, among others. Coming of age amidst the current cultural and media environment, it seems, has had both positive and negative effects on teen psychology. Positively, the vast nature of the mass media, with its ability to provide access to a wide array of information and resources has clear advantages for many teens that may otherwise feel adrift and isolated. Declines in parental involvement as well as increased pressure to perform, socially, romantically, and academically, have

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rendered the Internet in particular as a popular location to join groups, connect with others around similar interests, gather information and social acceptance. Websites such as [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org), which offers parent, kid, and teen pages with age-specific information and advice columns, [www.healthyplace.com](http://www.healthyplace.com) features a wealth of resources and support for homosexual teens, entitled “Gay is Okay!” who have either come out, or are seeking ways to do so and feel comfortable self-actualizing. The website features a chat/forum interface that can enable conversation and socialization among visitors to the site. Like many online forums and networking services, the anonymity they provide is extremely attractive to teens who are exploring certain aspects of their identity for their own reasons, or for curiosity. In the absence of such a situation, a teen who may be attempting to come out, for example, would instead more likely have to engage in face-to-face interactions with parents, friends, or school counselors, which is for many a very humiliating and scary experience, from which discrimination and bullying can result.

In a time in society where parental involvement and stability is largely on the decline, many teens become involved further with school and peer groups, both of the physical and virtual natures. The online environment can be very non-threatening and help teens to express themselves for all purposes and establish a sense of their identity, whether it be an experimental one or the actual, in a forum where they feel free to do so without judgment.

Modern culture has a strong emphasis on competition, performance, results, and success, as well as immense personal pressure that has been applied to the individual during all or most of the current generation of teenagers’ lifetimes. Evidence of this was
seen in the previous chapter with the articles from several teen publications about being barely able to keep up, and feeling constantly stressed and sleep-deprived. Venues where teens can socialize and interact with one another in free and safe ways has been curtailed and the technology of the Internet has been leading the charge for change in this aspect. Today’s generation of young people as a group are on the one hand seeing many parents divorce and families struggle, but on the other hand, are also grappling with increased opportunity, privilege, and stress than was the case in prior generations.

These same pressures are prevalent in the selected print articles analyzed in the previous chapter, and continue to be present. Journalist and reporter Laura Sessions Stepp addresses this very issue. “The perfection machine of high school has performed admirably, its levers and wheels kept oiled and running by the parents, teachers and coaches who have cosseted and corrected the wunderkinder from birth. The machine runs 24-7, encouraging success, not balance or introspection.”83 Here, from a popular and journalistic standpoint, Stepp touches on a critical aspect of adolescence in the modern age, which carries ramifications for teen psychological development as well as social maturity and pressures with roots in the technology and mass media culture of today’s world. Stepp continues her arguments, leading up to her central point: “They've [teens] discovered the flaw in perfection: If they're always improving, do they ever reach the point where they're satisfied with who they are?”84 The constant drive for more community service hours, more AP courses, more friends and social contact, sports and

84 Ibid.
activities and an impressive college selection leaves many of today’s teens stressed at the very least and pressured, unhappy, and constantly unsure of themselves at the very most. This environment makes the online environment that much more attractive to the teen contingent as well, for the freedom and anonymity it allows its visitors. Such ‘personal latitude’ to express oneself is no longer hailed or encouraged, it seems, unless that expression is in service of a higher goal for success. Much of this newfound pressure is a result of cultural factors, but is also largely rooted in economic matters. With time, standards of living change, prices and currency values fluctuate, and within and around them, so do the resulting culture and technology. Within the teen experience, all of these factors are evident.

The following sections will address the primary focus of this chapter, an analysis of death and funeral customs in American culture throughout history and in the current age, in an attempt to highlight the vast prevalence online space holds in teen life and culture as well as the ability of online space to evoke cultural changes on a larger scale in American society.

III. A History of Death, Rituals, and the Grieving Process in America

Death, funeral and burial customs, as well as afterlife speculation and mysticism have long been mainstays in human relations and culture, from ancient eras to the present. The ways in which different cultures and societies experience, cope with, and reflect upon death and the grieving process are telling indicators of other larger cultural norms. Every living being experiences death eventually, and it has been the basis of many religious teachings and beliefs, spurring on the need of humankind to believe in some sort
of larger power to which they go when they die. Throughout history, different cultures have held divergent views about burial customs, memorial services, and funerary rites, and these have become traditions that have been passed throughout the ages. Societal shifts and changes that come with time are often evident in other aspects of cultural practice. In this case, a brief history of death and funerary ritual in America over the last century is useful in highlighting the changes that have taken place in the larger American culture – particularly at the teenage level. The following section on mydeathspace.com reveals an interesting shift in cultural priorities particularly as they impact conception of death, grieving, and loss as it forms a community in virtual forum through which teens can mourn deceased friends in spaces they created themselves in order to feel closer. This section will examine the evolution of death culture in America over the last century. It will focus primarily on the treatment and importance of memorial sites, such as epitaphs, tombstones and cemeteries, the grieving process, and coping with loss in order to show the differences taking place in this aspect of teen culture in online space.

The processes of grieving and mourning that often accompany death are largely products of the cultures in which they originate. Anthropologist and scholar of psychology with a focus on grief and loss in families, Paul Rosenblatt, in a study of 78 different societies conducted in 1976, was able to conclude that “…there is no one grief theory or one psychology of ego defenses that applies to everyone…Western cultural concepts such as ‘dying’ and grief originated in the context of its culture…it now seems
that realities differ so greatly from culture to culture…”\textsuperscript{85} In this sense, it is clear that like
other trappings of culture, such as language, manners, or dressing style, death and the
ceremony and reverence which surround it is also a product of the larger culture.

Death is interesting as a cultural concept specifically because, while it clearly
affects the individual who passes away, the majority of actual contact and experience had
with it is by those left behind. Herein exists my overall purpose in this examination of
death customs, particularly with regard to the grieving process and memorial ritual. The
stages of the grieving process that are most commonly known in American culture come
from a study conducted by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross of terminally ill patients. Upon
receiving the news that they did not have long to live, Kubler-Ross tried out her
theoretical responses to impending death on the patients, which have since become the
traditionally-recognized phases of the grieving process. “(i) denial and isolation, (ii)
anger, (iii) bargaining, (iv) depression and (v) acceptance.”\textsuperscript{86} These stages of the process
which friends and families commonly go through in some part upon the death of a loved
one, have become an integral part of American culture as it relates to and conceives of
death.

Although the above phases of grief laid out formally in Kubler-Ross’ well-known
study in the latter part of the twentieth century, it can be argued that they have been
present in some form in the decades dating back to the early 1900’s. An examination of

\textsuperscript{85} Rosenblatt, Paul. Cross-Cultural Variation in the Experience, Expression, and Understanding of Grief,
in D. Irish, K. Lundquist, and V. Nelson (eds), Ethnic Variations in Dying, Death, and Grief: Diversity in
memorial sites and ‘death-style’ in America helps to highlight cultural norms and beliefs during certain eras in history, helping to give some broader context as to the current state of mourning, grieving, and memorial as it turns less from the physical and more to the virtual for many American teens. Jacqueline S. Thursby, a scholar of English with a specialization on folklore studies, has conducted research on the cultural aspects of funerary customs and mourning rituals, lending further credence to Rosenblatt’s above view that death and grieving are primarily culturally-specific activities that vary. In the prologue to Thursby’s book, she cites evidence of funerary customs from ancient eras, stating that “how the dead are treated is a hallmark of civilization.”

Thursby’s title, including the phrase ‘festivals’ is telling of her arguments as to the influences of culture on death and ritual. America, as she says, is a country that is vivacious and young with a focus on life as opposed to the dark nature of death.

As she discusses the tradition in America of funerary customs, this ‘American youth’ and focus on life comes out in the generally celebratory tone that many services take on. She notes that “Americans…lean toward the belief that death is not necessarily the end, but rather, it is a time of change.” This conception is evident in many of the postings made by friends on the MySpace pages of the deceased that are to follow. Many of the statements refer to meeting again in the future, even insinuating in some cases that the deceased friend is continuing to live ‘up there’ doing many of the traditional teenage activities they likely did on earth, such as partying. It seems as though, whether

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88 Ibid, 33.
consciously or not, many young people whose grieving process is now posted on the
Internet, do feel that death is not an abrupt ending, but a change to another phase of some
sort. In this sense, it is clear to see how such a belief, which has been prevalent in
conceptions of death dating back to ancient civilization, has continued to hold true. It
seems to make death and loss more palatable and understandable to those left behind to
imagine life continuing somehow. Thursby also notes changes in American conceptions
of funerary custom and increases in perceived freedom of form with respect to what a
memorial site or service must contain, with which she credits the media and higher
education rates nationwide than in previous decades.

Traditions of memorials, wakes, and epitaphs have changed throughout the ages
as American culture has grown and evolved. The wake, for example, still present in some
form in many services today, and for many viewed as a cultural element, likely had its
origins in slightly more practical necessities. Most importantly, in earlier years before
many advances in the scientific and medical fields had been made, many worried about
being buried alive. Images from the Victorian era in the early 1900’s of what were
commonly known as coffin alarms, with the bell above ground that was tied to the
deceased’s finger that would ring should the dead individual awake, stand testament to
this phenomenon and reasonable fear. The concept of the wake, many believe, originated
from the need to ensure that the perceived deceased was actually dead before burial
would take place.\textsuperscript{89} From this, in the years since, wakes have come to take on a more

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 61-62.
individualized, even amusing character, with funny stories told and open bars available, with the aim being to celebrate the dead the way they would have wanted.

Thursby extends this discussion to the text and occasional humorous elements often found in epitaphs. Many draft their preference for their epitaph themselves before death, because it is viewed as such a critical aspect of the way in which one is remembered by others for posterity. Thursby also notes a unique point with marks a shift from previous decades and centuries, where epitaphs possessed a more formal and lengthy character overall. “For many families, the cost of having lengthy epitaphs engraved…is prohibitive; therefore [they] have become more a legacy from the past than a contemporary practice.”90 In a sense, this line of reasoning, here primarily economic, could in part also relate to the value placed on the individual and personal achievement that the modern age and culture exerts, including norms that permit bars to be placed at a wake if requested and short, even joke-like statements to adorn an individual’s tombstone for generations to come. In this vein, the MySpace pages of the deceased exist as a modern counterpart to the physical reminders which are adorned by epitaphs. In several ways, these pages, created by the individuals themselves, have become such popular sites for grieving and remembrance by others because of these characteristics they possess. These virtual pages and posting boards have, in a sense, become the modern equivalents of the epitaph and gravestone, both of which still exist in physical form for many. These changes in custom and attitude toward death in general are indicative of larger cultural shifts taking place in American society today. This will continue to be evident in the

90 Ibid, 71.
following section on mydeathspace.com, which presents an entirely new, technology-driven spin on the grieving process and remembering deceased loved ones.

Douglas Davies, scholar of theology and religion and a recognized expert in the history, sociology, and theology of death, uses the term ‘death-style’ to refer to the modern conception and attitude toward death and memorial ritual. In several ways this idea corresponds with Thursby’s discussion of personal preferences and requests for how the dead wished to be remembered and celebrated by loved ones upon their passing. Davies notes, “as increasing numbers of people no longer believe in traditional ideas of resurrection and heavenly life, and as churches no longer hold a place of unquestioned influence in society at large, it is expected that individuals whose lives are increasingly grounded in ideas of personal choice should extend that choice from simple commodities to the welfare realms of life and death.”\(^9^1\) This statement by Davies directly correlates with the analysis of MySpace profiles of deceased American teenagers that are to follow in the next section. These profiles are particularly interesting because while they represent clear cultural shifts, the most obvious of which being the increased centrality of the Internet and online space in teen life and death, but they also fit into the history of death rituals and constructions of memorials and sites where loved ones may commune with the spirits of those they have lost. The difference here being that traditional epitaphs and memorials, gathered together in cemeteries, have existed as physical reminders of the dead for the benefit of those still living, while online mourning as it is shown on MySpace posting boards of deceased young people accomplishes very much the same

goal, in virtual space. It is the transition between physical space and memory and the new
trends in the process of grieving and coping with death as they appear in the online realm
that denotes cultural changes, a new face of death and the mourning process, as well as
the integral role of technology within this.

IV. The Modern Face of Grief: mydeathspace.com as Modern Nexus of Teen Death
Culture and a Critical Element of the Grieving Process

Along with the positive ramifications that accompany teen psychological
development, there are numerous downsides as well, the largest being immense
depression, isolation, loss of trust, and sadness. The anonymity of the Internet, with its
instant messaging and chat room capabilities for social networking, can leave many
feeling even more alone and disenfranchised as a result. It can make it much harder to
accept others online at face-value, because of that anonymity. In this sense, the
anonymity is both an advantage and a trap, which can be a blurred and difficult obstacle
for teens to grapple with, causing in many furthered anxiety and fear. Adolescence is also
well known for its propensity for depression, and while teens are able to find numerous
resources both in books and magazines as well as online for information on safe sex,
relationships, mental health issues, and school advice, these do not take the place of the
deeper face-to-face interactions and more stable family structures that came before.

More teens than ever are depressed in today’s current culture, for many of the
reasons set forth above. Much of the angst stems from the uncertainty of life in today’s
world, particularly from the standpoint of a teenager. Feelings of a loss of control,
whether it be over one’s living situation with parents divorcing and stepfamilies ensuing,
or grades, or a place in a top college, or even just being happy and feeling connected are all intensified as a result of the very technologies that are created in large part to bring us closer together. A large marker in the cultural changes that the online environment and communities have brought about in this area is the archival website, www.mydeathspace.com. Created by a private individual with no affiliation to the social networking venue, MySpace.com, mydeathspace serves to connect the publicly available user profiles of recently deceased MySpace members with obituaries and statements published in current news stories. Through the website also is a link to the deceased’s MySpace profile. This website is a telling cultural artifact for a number of reasons. Firstly, it shows the unavoidable prevalence of mass media culture in today’s world, particularly among teens, as the vast number, if not nearly all, profiles listed are teens and individuals in their early 20’s. This website is also influential in the popularity it achieves from its compilation of MySpace member information. MySpace is what could rightly be termed a cultural experience in and of itself. Extremely popular with teens as well as slightly older young adults, its ever-increasing number of members fluctuate somewhere around 80-100 million. It is also the third most popular website in the United States. Even more importantly, mydeathspace shows the all-pervasive nature of online interaction and the virtual world as it directly intersects and exists within the physical one. Many of the profiles listed have become their own social networking forum even in death, as is described by reporter Kristal Seeden of The Orange County Register. “You can order pizza online. You can date online. Now you can mourn online. In an age where
everything is digitized, a new trend has arisen- visiting a grave site on the Internet.”92 Visitors to the site can scroll through over 60 pages of dead MySpace members, each with a picture from their profile and the accompanying news story of their demise. Interestingly, when one clicks on the link to the deceased’s MySpace profile, the message boards provide testament to the fact that this forum has become a strong and verifiable way for friends and family to mourn, express their love for the individual, and talk very much as one would when visiting a physical grave.

Sites like mydeathspace.com are also critically important for their exemplification of the Internet’s unprecedented ability to facilitate new forms of community-building, whether it be for mourning purposes, as in this example, or for other causes, such as civic engagement. The profile analysis that follows is important and worthy of inclusion here because it offers considerable insight into the intense prevalence that online forums and space hold in teen life and culture. Additionally, mydeathspace and MySpace both serve as salient examples of the Internet’s unique ability to bring individuals together around a cause or common interest, even, in these examples, a person or friend. For example, the profile of Jordan Scudder, 18, of Palm Coast, Florida, who died in a high-speed car crash on October 26, 2006. The link to his MySpace profile includes entries from his mother on January 30, 2007: “Hi Jordan, I really miss you. I still would like it if you would come home, everyday it gets harder and harder. Love you forever, your Mom.” A friend, Lauren, also writes often on Jordan’s message board. From January 31, 2007: “Hey

Jordan, Gosh, I miss you. I’ve had a rough week…Never a day that I don’t talk about you. I love you so much and just wish I could hug you. Forever and always, Lauren.”

Both of these sets of comments are reminiscent of a conversation that might otherwise take place at a physical gravesite. It is this critical aspect, among others, that makes the concept of virtual mourning that is so evident on many of these MySpace posting walls of deceased friends’ profiles. In Jordan’s case as well as the vast majority of others, both websites, though separate, enable mourners to express their grief and feel ‘closer’ to their deceased friend or loved one. This is a pattern that runs continuously throughout the other profiles selected, analysis of which follow, and makes unavoidably clear the prevalence of online space in teen life as well as the cultural shifts that have taken place in recent years enabling this change in the grieving and mourning processes in modern society.

One of the most chilling emotions that can be taken from many of the adolescent profiles posted on mydeathspace.com are the ways in which the majority of deaths occurred. While a handful of deaths are due to illness or disease, the overwhelming majority stem from car accidents, alcohol, and suicide – or permutations of all three. This initial observation itself helps to bring into sharp focus the depth and breadth of adolescent depression and vulnerability, in this forum starkly juxtaposed with the mass media and online presence. The grouping of teen profiles whose analysis follow all fall into this disturbing category, speaking volumes about not simply the modern teen experience on a daily basis, but also to highlight the enormous role media culture, particularly online forums and interaction, play in their lives as well as their deaths.
The story of Joseph Crockett Wise, a seventeen-year-old high school student from Florida, touches upon a major aspect of the overall amplification of ‘normal human emotions’ in the teen experience, failure to see a road through the despair and sadness, and the lack of support, whether real or perceived, from those around them. In several ways, Joseph’s story connects with many preceding arguments put forth in the print chapter, particularly those made by Dr. Twenge, about the trend in modern teen culture for romantic relationships, often of short duration and at such a young age, to be exaggerated and made to feel like the center of a teen’s world. This then results in absolutely crushing disaster when they do not end up working out, which is often the case at such young ages. Joseph’s story is sadly all too common. After a heated argument with his girlfriend one day, he felt he no longer had a reason to live and took his own life with a gun to his head at his home. He was involved in numerous activities and clubs, and had what seemed to be a close family. Before his death, he sent two friends messages to their MySpace accounts as a way to say goodbye to them. His MySpace page, seemingly largely as he left it, is eerily melancholy, with pictures of himself and his girlfriend streaming across the screen in a slideshow fashion and his own personal section still present as if nothing had changed. In the months following his death in early September, 2006, his friends have faithfully and continuously posted on his MySpace page, including his once-estranged girlfriend, who calls herself ‘yourdork,’ apparently a nickname shared between the two of them.

Some of the postings are especially interesting in this examination of how the online cultural environment has evolved in teen life to the point that it is possible, and
popular, to mourn online – where many MySpace pages have now become a type of virtual tombstone through which old friends can still feel ‘close’ to their deceased friend. The perception of closeness is especially interesting here, and some of the comments left by Joseph’s friends clearly demonstrate this. Nearly every entry expresses love, and tells him how much he is missed by everyone, and that it ‘doesn’t feel real’ and they wish he could come back. One particular female friend of Joseph’s uses his page as a place to feel close to him once more, similar to the reasons compelling individuals to visit graves of their loved ones. Comments by her, such as “I really need your help. Help me please, I can’t stop crying.”93 Another friend expresses similar emotions. “I really don’t know what to say…but all I know is that I’m going through a really rough time right now…my grandpa isn’t doing well at all…here’s part of a song that I want you to hear [followed by song lyrics].”94 This type of response from friends of a deceased teenager are prevalent, whether the individual committed suicide, died in a car accident, or in another way. Profiles such as Joseph’s really help to show the immense influence that the online environment has had and continues to have on their lives, even during periods of highest emotional trauma and stress, such as the death of a close friend or loved one.

It is interesting in reading many of these that it often feels like the friends who post on MySpace walls of those who are deceased have a way to connect with them still, in some other way, which in several ways helps to indicate some further idiosyncrasies of online interaction, and how it differs from physical, face-to-face contact. In some ways,

93 http://mydeathspace.com/go.aspx?back=%2fApp_Errrors%2f404.aspx&go=http%3a%2f%2fprofile.myspace.com%2findex.cfm%3ffuseaction%3duser.viewprofile%26friendID%3d25544168
94 Ibid.
this feels strange, because a dead person is not going to check their MySpace account any
more than be able to return to Earth and carry on a conversation with friends, but in some
way this mode of communication feels that much more lasting to many teens in today’s
society, demonstrated again and again by the deluge of postings that last months and even
years after the death occurred.

Continuing in this vein are two other profiles which have been selected carefully
because they show the power of online interaction and its role in the everyday life (and
death) of the American teenager. Profile analysis is so interesting largely because when
one looks at another person’s page, someone whom you have never, and likely will
never, meet in person, even someone who is now deceased, you still come away with a
sense of how each individual chose to represent themselves in online space, as well as
who that individual is/was in their own eyes. In some part, while, as is similarly stated in
the previous chapter, a critical aspect of online representation is that one may choose to
present oneself a certain way, that may or may not be aligned with reality. As a result,
when observing these teen profiles, it is important to remember that some of the
individuals present may be trying out different parts of their identity. I also have to
constantly remind myself that I never knew these people or their friends but a part of me
still cannot help but want to mourn right along with them. The power of identity
construction and development of self in these online locales runs deep and in this sense.
The analysis I have performed to this point helps to contextualize this, through a
decidedly dark and melancholy subject, to show the immense power the online space has
in teenage life, as well as the prominent position it holds.
Analysis of profiles of dead teenagers, while in some part morbid, is useful in this quest to gain a sense of the evolution of teenage life, its current situation, and likely future direction. The scenarios above and those that will follow show the long-standing and continuing impact of those online interactions even after death. This serves a sort of larger purpose here, the most significant of these being that continued posting on a dead friends’ page helps those friends to vent about their emotions and to feel somehow as if they are heard, which is a very powerful need particularly among the teen population.

The stories of Nikkole Taylor and Tyler Murray, at first glance, could not be more different. While both were involved in fatal automobile accidents, one was under the influence of alcohol, while the other was simply the victim of bad luck and timing. One was a girl, the other a boy. One came from the Midwest and the other, the East Coast. However, they are strikingly similar in several other respects. Both were high school students, with caring friends and family members. Both died relatively recently, so their pages reflect many of the initial emotions shared by friends. Both also continue to show this pattern in teen culture of the prevalence of online communication and socialization in everyday life.

Nikkole Taylor was a bright-eyed, 18-year-old cheerleader from Kenosha County, Wisconsin. She died in the family car along with her mother, cousin, and dog. Their mini-van, driven by her mother, lost control on a snowy road and crashed into a snow plow, resulting in the car being cut in half and all individuals inside it losing their lives. While there is no doubt that it was an unfortunate accident, as so many car-related deaths are, she was also a teenager, a senior in high school, with a boyfriend, lots of friends, and
a future ahead of her, clearly more than your average teen death statistic. Her MySpace page, which does not appear to have been edited since her death, was last visited by her the day before the accident on February 23, 2007. With a black and white photo-inspired, collaged background filled with images of human hands forming a heart shape and the letters spelling ‘love,’ it is easy right away to get a sense of the bright spirit that Nikkole once was. With constantly-streaming pictures of her friends, boyfriends, proms, and parties, it almost feels, when reading her friends’ wall postings, that she is on a trip, and will be coming back any minute.

Nikkole’s profile is unique in that her page has not been transformed into a memory or commemoration; it instead appears as it had when she last saw it, excepting of course the posted comments in the weeks since. Her friends, however, continue to demonstrate the experience of mourning online, and come largely in the form of daily updates, and just sharing and venting about the day. One friend says this, “Yesterday was so hard, I saw you in the casket and I cried for like an hour straight…you looked so beautiful, and I have asked myself everyday since you died, why was it her and I wanted to save you…if I had a choice I would give up my life just for you…this wasn’t meant to be.”95 Several other friends posted updates about cheerleading competitions and other activities that have occurred since Nikkole’s passing, and many have a lasting sense of faith that they will be together again, and that Nikkole is watching over them. Another friend writes, “hello love…dance was so hard, but when I watch that part when you,

Manda, and Megan do the leap thing I see you there… but you have wings and a halo…I miss you so much…and say hi to your mom, I miss her too!"  

Nikkole’s death, while unexpected and tragically accidental, shows a previously very intimate glimpse into the grieving process among her friends and peers.

This exists in contrast to mourning rituals and processes from decades before in America, stated in the previous section of this chapter. She continues to live for them in the sense that they have found a way and a forum to keep her alive in their thoughts. In the days right after her death, many of her friends shared special memories with her, things she did that enriched their lives, very similar to speeches given at funeral services. In some sense, they come together to form her ‘online funeral.’ Many of her friends have since altered their MySpace names to include ‘RIP Nikkole’ or some other commemorative phrase. Nikkole’s profile, in this way, is especially notable because of its relatively untouched nature, but also because of the obvious loving and caring ways in which people continue to care for her. This pattern is far from unusual, and is a striking parallel which all of the profiles selected here share. In this sense it seems as though while her physical life has ended, her online existence still continues in some part, and in so doing, creates an invaluable look at teen culture in the mass media age and the integral part it plays in the prevailing culture.

Tyler Murray was a 16 year-old, very recently deceased in a car accident in rural Maryland. Alcohol is believed to have played a role in the accident. Tyler was in the

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passenger seat of the car when it hit a tree, and the car’s driver is now left in critical condition. His MySpace page has been edited since his death, although many parts of the text within it seem to be left unchanged. His profile is interesting primarily because of its very recent nature, which helps to make clear the initial reactions associated with the grieving process and acceptance of loss among his friends. Also, going along with this, Tyler’s 17th birthday came just a few days after the accident, compounding a lot of emotions and resulting in several salient postings. One from his birthday on March 14, by a female friend of Tyler, reads, “happy birthday ty…at 12:00 this morning ic, Katie, and I were all holding hands and singing happy birthday to you…I hope you realize how many people care about you big guy…your birthday cake is very yummy, I must say….you’re an amazing boy, Ty, the most amazing I’ll ever know.” Other birthday wishes accompany this one, along with the common memory-sharing and statements of loss and wishes that what occurred never had in the first place.

Another observation from Tyler’s profile is the language used by his friends and the way they talk about and to him. In several cases, the present tense is still used, indicating perhaps the phases of the grieving process and maybe also hinting at the ways, even probably unbeknownst to his friends themselves, in which they conceive of him still when they are talking to him in an online-mediated space. This rather small detail in and of itself could be an indicative factor in helping to explain and understand the ways in which teens see themselves, their friends, and even the world through online interaction.

http://mydeathspace.com/go.aspx?back=%2fApp_Errors%2f404.aspx&go=http%3a%2f%2fprofile.myspace.com%2findex.cfm%3ffuseaction%3duser.viewprofile%26friendid%3d77273396

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Also worthy of note is the ways in which many of his friends refer to Heaven, the Afterlife, or any conception of the like, which help to show how they are conceiving of where he might be now, whether he is watching over them, etc. In several cases on Tyler’s page, many friends refer to it as a party, where statements such as “I hope you’re havin’ fun and I know you’re getting’ crunk, so be safe big guy!”98 This, while again, at first seeming like a minor detail, is important in an analysis because it is telling of not simply how death is perceived by young people but also how perhaps where a dead friend has gone begins to take on a definition such as a party, because it is an understandable, common experience that helps friends to identify and contextualize his death in a way that they can comprehend it. This, in many ways is indicative also of the larger human need to understand our world, even the world of death, perhaps especially the latter one because of its mysterious and fearsome reputation and persona. Like Nikkole and many of the other profiles of deceased teens, many of his friends have added a commemorative phrase, or ‘shout-out’ to Tyler in their MySpace identifying name.

Tyler’s page, like all of the others that come before it, is of course, largely interesting and notable here because of its tragic element, but also for its human element, and the insights he and all of the other individuals whose stories are told here, give in attempting to further understand and demonstrate the character and influence of online communication and media on teenage life (and death). This ties directly into the overarching arguments governing this chapter, primarily the prevalence of online space in teenage life and death. Additionally, these arguments are relevant to another main focus

98 Ibid.
here, the cultural shifts that have taken place in modern society that have enabled online space and the ‘virtual connectedness’ it evokes in many individuals to hold such a prime role in modern adolescent life.

One of the most prominent and overwhelming aspects of the online culture of interaction is the power of online forums to build and maintain support networks. In this particular case, these networks often take the form of ‘a shoulder to cry on’ or others with whom memories can be shared of the deceased person in order to help the grieving process along. However, as this as well as the next section will show, online space has one of its largest advantages in its ability to bring people together over common interests, mutual friends, or a variety of other factors. These profiles help to show the power of online communication in the lives of teens but also the characteristics it carries along with it in its ability to form such an expansive and strong support system, particularly useful in times of loss or stress. These networks also commonly take the form of gathering support for social or political causes, working for change in some way, getting the word out about parties or functions, or even career networking purposes. Other social networking sites, such as Facebook or Friendster also include many of these factors. In today’s world, such websites have become so popular among people of all ages, and the reasons behind this, as well as the vast utilities they offer users, correlates directly to the critical aspects that online forums possess that make them unique and decidedly prominent to daily life, especially among adolescents.

This highlights a significant aspect of the online cultural experience as a whole as well as the seeming paradox that underlies much of the mass media experience in today’s
world – the shifts in interaction and the culture of mediated communication particularly. In a recent article for the Associated Press, mydeathspace.com is mentioned and viewed through the eyes of several friends who have lost loved ones. A senior researcher at the Pew Internet and American Life Project was quoted as explaining, “These are places where people in many ways lived their lives online…and what better way to grieve or mourn a person than in a space they created.”99 The article goes on to explain that online forums of this nature are in a sense communications processes unto themselves, and exemplify significant aspects of online interaction as they are explained throughout. For example, Bennett Leventhal, a scholar at University of Illinois Chicago’s Institute for Juvenile Research is quoted in the article as agreeing that “mourning on MySpace is a natural extension of a society where handwritten notes have given way to e-mails and text messages…The Phoenicians had to chip it into tablets, this is just another form of communication…of public grieving.”100 As a result, the online aspect of these types of communication and interaction among friends and family hold a type of intimacy and closeness which is accompanied by a distancing at the same time, similar to the above story of online dating. The online venue affords little or no face-to-face contact, which eliminates much of the vulnerability and exposure that comes with it. Instead, it offers a vast network with a closeness of its own. While online forums and chat rooms can allow communication as never before, both instantly and regardless of geographic proximity, there is also an emptiness and distance that accompanies them at a more insidious level.

100 Ibid.
The third most telling aspect of mydeathspace.com as it relates to teen psychology in the mass media age is the prevalence of teen suicides in general as a phenomenon and the roles families and other role models play in the development of the teen psyche. As Dr. Jean Twenge explains in her book, *Generation Me*, “almost half of GenMe has seen their parents divorce…this has a clear link to the rise in depression. The sadness of being alone is often the flip side of freedom and putting ourselves first.”

Bev Cobain, the cousin of the late Kurt Cobain of the grunge rock band Nirvana, who committed suicide in 1994, in her book entitled, *When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens*, creates a resource designed for teen audiences, to attempt to educate them and encourage them to seek help and an outlet for their emotions before they get out of control through the telling of real-life stories and the provision of websites and phone numbers of further resources. Her main message to teens is that “suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem,” and insists that most teens who may feel depressed do not really want to kill themselves. At the beginning of one of her chapters she includes a statement by a 17-year old girl, “I knew if I didn’t get help, I would die. I went to a trusted teacher.” This again shows through primary source material what the earlier-mentioned secondary research suggests, particularly that of Theresa Chandler Sabourin—that in several cases teens are reaching out to people for critical moments in their growth.

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103 Ibid, 87.
process who are not biologically related to them, but with whom instead they share an intimate relationship of some kind, particularly a teacher. 

The mass media culture of today brings with it numerous repercussions on adolescent socialization, psychology, and overall experience. The cultural environment of today’s society has also had significant influence over the changes in family structures and interactions as well, with direct effects on the life of American teens and the process of growing up. All of the above issues, coupled with the changing sociology of the family and interpersonal relationships in today’s world, correlate to the increased teen depression levels, the increased sexuality and overly mature character of many teenage relationships, in place of the deteriorating intimacy and safety once found in the family, as is made clear from a close analysis of the history and present state of print sources aimed at teenage girls and online sources intended for both young girls and boys, all coming together, enabled and encouraged by the mass media culture, to ultimately shape the teen developmental experience in today’s society which have influences on the larger society of America and the world, particularly in the areas of civic engagement, political socialization, and community-building. The online space, then, regardless of whether its usage engenders positive or negative purposes, is innovative both as a technology and a communications medium, and has brought about an entire new culture of its own in its unprecedented ability to bring those together who would never otherwise come into contact. This characteristic has sparked new waves of social networking, information sharing, and community-building, all with new characters, rules, and modes of operation. A clear example of this comes from an investigation into and analysis of youth civic
engagement patterns and socialization processes as a way to showcase both the significance of the online space in adolescent culture as well as the influence and power it holds.
CONCLUSION

At its most general and overarching level, this project aims to explore modern adolescent culture and investigate some of the primary areas where the profound influence that the media exerts on teen life can be seen, print and online space. The evidence and analysis presented within it, divided by medium, all come together to give insight into the life and experience of an adolescent currently coming of age in America.

I argue throughout, supported by evidence from both print and online sources, that teen life and culture is saturated with media influence, and that it is an all-pervasive element in their lives on a daily basis. Further, I argue that issues related to changing structure and dynamics of the family, coupled with innovations in technology, have helped to encourage this increased presence of the mass media in teenage life. Mediated communication and interaction have become defining characteristics of modern adolescent life and experience. Throughout all of this, much of the evidence presented supports the supposition that this pervasive influence of the media and its central position within teen culture is a growing part of the modern adolescent experience. The prime example of this discussed in second chapter, regarding the examples of death and funeral traditions and the popularity of public mourning on social networking websites such as MySpace, is a clear indication of the central presence of the media in the lives of teens, affecting the way they see the world, interact with others, and approach life-changing events.
In terms of an agenda for future research, the issues this project has opened up and brought to the fore will continue to be explored and studied as the mass media society continues to innovate and evolve, and correspondingly shifting American culture along with it. As today’s young people continue to grow up, the centrality of online space and interaction in both life and death pursuits, the issues associated with what many feel to be hallmarks of the online experience, such as a perceived feeling of closeness it offers, while at the same time permitting a simultaneous feeling of removal from the vulnerability that face-to-face interaction can incite. Some suggestions for future research that could help to further and enhance the issues presented in this project include working with teenage focus groups in an attempt to discern some more intricate aspects of the draw to the online environment. Among these, other contributing factors such as those discussed here, family sociology, for example, could be explored that may help to shed light upon some more latent facets of modern culture. The overall goal of this project has been to highlight some of the changes in American society that have taken place as a result of recent technological innovations and particularly, how this specifically impacts young people within it. Further, this project aims to examine how many of these shifts exert larger ones which in turn have effect on the larger American society as a whole. Future study could also select any of these aspects, whether they be adolescents in online space, popular culture, or civic engagement patterns.

An overall goal for future research as it would relate to this project would assign itself to the examination, at either the macro or micro levels, of how technological or sociological evolutions help to bring about changes in the world at large, particularly with
respect to culture and traditions. Finally, another task future research could undertake as an extension of this project would branch out of the cultural focus and turn attention to other aspects of American life and society. This would help to explore in turn the ways in which the current generation of young people will evolve as they grow, attend colleges and universities, enter the workforce, all the while changing the ways in which society and culture function, especially the ways in which humankind will interact, relate, and reflect on itself, with obvious implications for generations to follow.
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