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Summary of the Study

## Identity Formation and the Construction of Social Space in Media Practices on Social Networking Services

as part of the research project "The Internet as a Reception and  
Presentation Platform for Adolescents" commissioned by  
the Bavarian Regulatory Authority for Commercial Broadcasting  
(Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien BLM)

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A complete presentation of the study's results can be found in  
the following publication:

Wagner, Ulrike; Brügger, Niels (Hg.) (2013):  
Teilen, vernetzen, liken. Jugend zwischen Eigensinn  
und Anpassung im Social Web.  
Baden-Baden: Nomos (BLM-Schriftenreihe Band 101).

For further information on the study, please refer to  
[www.jff.de/studie\\_identitaet](http://www.jff.de/studie_identitaet) (German only)

Media and media content play an important role in the identity formation of children and adolescents. Extensive research has been done on the relevance of mass media content for the formation of identity in particular. This research shows the potential as well as the impeding effects of the processing of media content in the phases of development of a conscious relation to one's self and the world. Social networking services not only offer adolescents content landmarks, they also provide structures for exchanging ideas with others and they open up new possibilities to present oneself, e.g. in the creation and publishing of their own works. In the context of this modified framework of media practices, our research attempts to outline, in what way adolescents appropriate these new media worlds and how, as a consequence, the relevance of these media structures and the content dealt with therein is changing the context of identity formation.

## 1 Purpose and Methodology

The study "Identity Formation and the Construction of Social Space in Media Practices on Social Networking Services" presented here<sup>1</sup> focuses on identity-related activities of teenagers between the age of 13 and 17 in social networking services. It researches the question as to how teenagers connect identity formation and media practices under the present conditions, in the context of the meshing of reception and interaction opportunities in the social web. The study is based on the premise that the relevance of media practices in social networking services for the identity formation of adolescents can become apparent in various ways. The following areas of interest can be identified:

- **Topical aspects of the media practices:** How are media practices of adolescents guided by their interests? Which age-specific developmental tasks can be identified in in-depth analyses?
- **Action repertoire:** How do adolescents integrate the social networking into their everyday life actions?
- **Media practices as a perspective on social spacing:** How do adolescents transform socio-spatial relations in their media practices? What characteristics of mediatized social spaces are relevant for identity formation processes?

This approach reflects the fact that the appropriation of social reality today is, on one hand, pursued via the media and its content, and on the other hand, through the interaction in mediatized social spaces.

As an empirical basis for this study we conducted 16 individual in-depth interviews, performed as computer-based guided interviews with adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 years.<sup>2</sup> The social networking service used as the focus for the interviews was *facebook*. This social networking service was discussed in the interviews based on the accounts held by the participants. In addition, a research workshop was held with eleven male and female students between 13 and 16 years<sup>3</sup> over a period of six weeks. In this workshop we used methods of topical active media work as well as thematically focused interviews and reflection sessions.

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<sup>1</sup> This study is the fourth study in the research project „The Internet as a Reception and Presentation Platform for Adolescents“ commissioned by the Bavarian Regulatory Authority for Commercial Broadcasting (Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien, BLM).

<sup>2</sup> Eight boys and eight girls were interviewed in this survey. Eight of the adolescents had a lower level of formal education (general secondary school (Hauptschule)) and eight of the adolescents had a higher level of formal education (intermediate secondary school (Realschule) or high school (Gymnasium)).

<sup>3</sup> The participants were six girls and five boys from an intermediate secondary school (Realschule).

The study focused on the following research questions:

- How do adolescents appropriate social networking services?
- In what way are online media practices and identity formation interconnected?
- What is the role of the media framing for media practices relevant to identity formation?
- What challenges are the subjects facing in their identity formation within mediatized social spaces?

## 2 Summary of results

The comprehensive analysis of the individual surveys reveals different emphases in the media practices of the adolescents as well as the various ways in which the social networking service *facebook* is relevant to identity formation in adolescents.

### **The action repertoires of the participants are determined by the subjects' individual media use according to personal interests and motives.**

Differentiated perspectives on the ways in which teenagers form the facets of their identity formation can be obtained by observing the *facebook*-related action repertoires. These vary in scope, regardless of gender and educational background, i.e. the participants make use of the various action options on *facebook* in varying ways and prioritize individual options according to their own interests.

What becomes apparent is the enormous importance that all participants attribute to the interpersonal communication with their peers. Many conversations with their friends are happening in the media, as well as various discussions relating to the organization of everyday life. For this, the adolescents mostly use chat functions, or create specific *facebook* groups, which deal with plans in the peer group, school-related issues or the organization of sports-related activities in and outside of clubs or associations (e.g. sharing information on soccer practices). In these cases, *facebook* is used to coordinate online what happens offline. The interests of adolescents draw recognizable orientation lines in the media practices on *facebook*. These lines can be identified in different ways: in their own articulations<sup>4</sup>, in the information they post on their *facebook* profile page, by the fan pages they subscribed to or through interaction with others.

### **The topical perspectives in adolescents' self-representation are closely related to their self-image and the challenges they face in their lifeworlds.**

From an adolescent's perspective, their online activities, self-representation, as well as the way they interact in the social web, should be authentic. For the most part, they want to present themselves to others the way they 'really are'. For this, they make use of various medial expression and interaction possibilities available. The findings of our survey make it clear how identity formation can present itself as a way of overcoming challenges posed in their individual living environments and/or biographies on *facebook*, and how topical interests, personal characteristics and, in particular, self-reference in the media practices interplay in this development.

### **Adolescents' identity formation is closely linked to converging media offerings and content in the social web.**

Mass media content and its traces can be found in the media practices of the participants in various ways. They become intertwined with the personal content created by the teenagers themselves as well as by others. In the profiles of the boys and girls participating in our survey we

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<sup>4</sup> Medial articulations on *facebook* are for instance photos, videos or written status updates.

found user-generated content from their contacts as well as mass media or advertising content. Frequently, the source of the content and who is responsible for it cannot be ascertained clearly. Mass medial relations in self-representation, sharing via mass media sources, as well as the multiple reference structures across the social web play an important role in the media practices of youths. Almost all teenagers identify with certain mass media content or content they mainly receive via mass media, and they demonstrate this in their profiles. This is achieved for instance, by including clips from the video platform *YouTube* in their communications on *facebook*. At the same time, posts containing mass media references inform teenagers about what others like, thus allowing orientation and social delimitation. Challenges and problems for the youths arise from the publication and reference structures, in which their interests might be used for example to spread (even inappropriate) content, as well as from their own actions, when legal violations are embedded in their media practices.

**Media practices related to the social space are closely connected to adolescents' identity formation.**

In the course of their appropriation of mediatized social spaces, teenagers also acquire social relationships and position themselves in the society and 'the world'. Thus, the media practices related to social space are closely connected to their identity formation. Media practices identified with this focus are called 'modes of socio-spatial media practices'. They comprise modes of 'projection' of socio-spatial relations, which focus on how (consciously) teenagers create socio-spatial relations on *facebook*. There are also modes of 'scaling' of socio-spatial relations, which focus on the ways in which teenager vary the size of their social space. Specific challenges arise for youths from the different modes.

The '**projection**' of socio-spatial relations shows that the participants (want to) perpetuate such relations on *facebook*, and use the conditions of the platform in various ways.

- *There are overlaps in the mediatized social spaces of most youths.*  
The mode of this (unintentional) 'overlap' in the media practices becomes apparent in the media practices of most teenagers. Via their *facebook* profile they are in touch with people from various social spaces, e.g. their friends from school, their family members, and acquaintances from their leisure activities. However, they do not restrict their profile contents in a manner to limit the respective contexts. This leads to the relatively uncontrolled visibility of contents and life aspects across the different social spaces and thus – as a consequence of the continued mediatization of other areas of their lives – to a convergence of social spaces.
- *Interweaving only happens to a certain extent and only with actual topical reference points.*  
The 'interweaving' mode, i.e. the conscious creation of connections between different social spaces on *facebook*, happens mostly in relation to individual experiences and events, which the teenagers want to share with as many people as possible. This mode also occurs when social spaces themselves are fragmented and distributed. Thus, interweaving becomes only apparent in media practices with actual topical reference points.
- *The technological framework is rarely used to separate social spaces.*  
Only a few of the participants rely on the technological environment of the platform for the 'separation' of social spaces. However, many of the teenagers show a tendency to differen-

tiate between their contacts. This becomes obvious in their responses to the question of how much they care about items from the News Feed<sup>5</sup> and if they would react to these posts. Here, the personal relationship to the person who has made the post is of importance: A close friend can mostly expect a response, whereas the positioning towards a post from a not so close friend is influenced by the social framework and the established rules within the given social space.

The '**scaling**' of social spaces makes clear, that *facebook* is used mainly to expand contacts. Equivalent to a 'virtual youth club'<sup>6</sup>, the platform corresponds to the developmental task of adolescents to create and maintain social relationships outside and independent of their families.

- *The expansion across friends' friends is important.*

As is typical for adolescence, the expansion of the individual's circle of friends is also very important on *facebook*. There is plenty of evidence for the vital role social networking services can play in this. Our survey provides additional support for this perspective and focuses on the teenagers' perception of various platform functionalities available for these activities, e.g. automatic displays of new friendships in the News Feed, which animates others to decide whether this new contact might be an interesting person to be friends with.

- *Supplementation follows topical aspects.*

The 'supplementation' mode, i.e. the establishment of relationships to other users that have not yet been part of the expanded circle of friends, could be found in the survey only with two male subjects. Both boys show a topical reference to one particular interest, which underlines that 'supplementation' does not occur independently of topical reference. Indeed, *facebook* offers a spatial structure to further develop certain interests.

- *Limitation allows intense interaction.*

The 'limitation' mode to restrict a selection of socio-spatial relations could be found only with one female participant in the survey. The girl restricted her *facebook* contacts to current and former friends and classmates and is not interested in expanding her network but rather in maintaining her existing close friendships.

### **3 Restrictions and Expansions in Media Practices Related to Social Space**

The findings of our survey make it clear that the media practices on *facebook* are relevant for the identity formation of adolescents in various ways. The action contexts of teenagers have to be analyzed with regard to their being embedded in transformation processes of society, as well as with regard to the continuing convergence of media technology and content and in a context of the mediatization of an increasing number of activity fields of everyday life. In this context, we can focus and reflect on the restrictions and expansions in the socio-spatial media practices of the youths and their relevance for identity formation.

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<sup>5</sup> The News Feed is part of the personalized homepage of each user. It displays the contacts' latest posts, activities, applications, etc.

<sup>6</sup> This is how one of the survey participants described the social networking service *facebook*.

**The transformation of the media world is perceived as an extension to the action options available.**

According to the participants in our survey, the current media world offers a variety of action options. Most boys and girls associate social networking services with growing contact possibilities with friends and more frequent meetings with peers but also with better access to all kinds of interesting mass media content, semi-professional offerings and creative works published by other users. With this positive evaluation of current media trends they do not only focus on themselves but also on other groups of individuals. Contrary to this basically positive estimation, the participants also deal with a perspective which makes their media practices more problematic: They assume that parents and teachers associate mainly problems, risks and dangers with the media practices of the young. They realize that a space important to them and relevant to their identity formation is seen as mainly problematic and associated with fears by the adults they relate to.

**The relevance for identity formation is justified mainly in that the various areas of adolescents' lives are interconnected via *facebook*.**

Social networking services like *facebook* are characterized by the fact that they can be used for a remarkable variety of motives. The results of the study show that the significance of *facebook* for the identity formation of the young lies in this variability. This relevance is enhanced by the fact that the use of these services expedites the mediatization of more and more areas of our lives. These latest findings follow up on earlier studies on media-related identity formation in adolescents (e.g. Wegener 2008 or Würfel & Keilhauer 2009). However, they also show new trends, for instance in the identification of teenagers with media personalities or in their modeling themselves on medial examples. The results show that these forms of identity formation are embedded in communicative contexts. This proves that not only media content is converging. The identity formation via media use is also related to formerly separate areas of media entertainment and mediatized communication forms. Based on this, adolescents perceive the social networking service *facebook* as the action structure to deal with challenges of their lifeworld. In this sense, they use *facebook* to span geographical distances between them and their attachment figures or to deal with questions of gender identity.

**The individualization of media practices runs parallel to the reconnection with collective practices.**

Like few other media platforms, *facebook* symbolizes the progressive individualization of media practices. Users get access to an individual mix of information and content – posts by fan pages they subscribed to and apps they installed, as well as posts by their friends. However, the results of the study also underline that this individualization is accompanied by collective media practices and those which promote a sense of community. The mass media content continues to provide collective reference points to implement social delimitation and signal social affiliation. The orientation in the multitude of information and content in the social web also clearly shows collective practices. The maxim here is: 'If it has lots of clicks, it is important.' When the participants scan their News Feed, they refer to the resonance it has already received from others as a benchmark. Another influential factor in the assessment of content found in the social web is the relationship the user has with the writer of the post. The analytical perspective on socio-spatial media practices shows: socio-spatial affiliations are reconstructed in *facebook* via collective practices.

**In the perception of adolescents, the variety of access to content poses opportunities and risks.**

The participants appreciate that the social networking services provide access to those parts of the variety and multitude of content which are relevant to them. Even though the youths cannot always fully trace the origins of the content they use in the social web, it provides access to a pool of information, which allows them to follow and strengthen their interests. They do however also perceive the problems in this dichotomy, and name for instance the confrontation with disturbing or legally problematic content, illegally published content, or embarrassing photos published of them. The problems and risks named by the youths can be located in already developed systemizations of content, contact or conduct-related risks (cf. Livingstone et al. 2010, YPRT 2009).

**Some of the problem areas that become apparent in the interviews with the adolescents are not identified as such by the youths, they are however relevant from a media pedagogical perspective.**

In addition to the problem areas indicated by the participants, further challenges became apparent, which were not identified by adolescents, but are important from a media pedagogical perspective. Three aspects are important:

- Firstly, gender-specific action types become apparent. While boys show quite offensive media practices to delimit their social positions through the use of insider codes, girls in particular want their self-representations to be clean and free of misunderstandings. It is mostly boys who demonstrate self-assertive media practices and focus on their own interests in their self-representation. With social fairness in view, we have to question the extent to which adolescents online feel pressure to adjust to gender stereotypes. The media practices described by girls in particular seem to be rather defensive and inhibited. This raises the question as to whether *facebook* provides a fair basis "for the best personal development and self-dependency" (Spatschek 2012).
- Secondly, the technological environment of the platform undermines the possibilities for self-determined action of adolescents. The users of *facebook* have, for instance, no influence on and no insight into the internal data mining functionalities analyzing user activities. These functionalities determine, amongst other things, the presentation of their News Feeds. Thus, the platform sensitively intrudes into the users' possibilities for making contacts and interferes with the construction of the social spaces of the youths.
- Thirdly, in the self-portrayal of the adolescents and their interaction with others a certain (self-) mediatization becomes obvious. Resonance games<sup>7</sup> on *facebook*, which are popular with some teenagers, show for instance, how adolescents obtain affiliation, social integration and recognition. Within those games it becomes clear, how far the mediatization of almost all areas of young lives has advanced. In particular, it becomes clear how medial attention factors and resonance mechanisms influence every day interaction patterns and relationships of adolescents.

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<sup>7</sup> An example of these resonance games is '*facebook Dare*' or '*facebook challenge*': A person posts: "I will do XY, but only if I get YZ likes for this post." All their *facebook* contacts then have to decide, if that person should be made do XY by providing sufficient resonance.

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