

SUBCULTURE FRAGMENTATION OF TEENAGE E-SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

E-Society has been discussed and theorized with metaphors ranging from the electronic village (McLuhan), the Old West or “the technically hip” (Barlow) to the space behind the screen (Gibson cited in Gozzi). Regardless of the metaphor of choice, teenagers across the world have embraced the Internet and the World Wide Web by dividing their e-Society into distinct subcultures. In a Northeastern, residential school (n=84) with an average age of 16.3 and male and female balanced at 52:48 percent, subculture fragmentation occurs. In previous studies on this group, n=66, onsite researchers (Brown, Barter, Mason, et. al.) examined the intense participation in gaming. Current studies indicate, although gaming is substantial, it is only one of five major subcultures present in teenage e-Society. These subcultures are examined and discussed through observation, surveys, and day-to-day interactions.

KEYWORDS

e-Society, computer-mediated-communication, subculture, teenager

1. INTRODUCTION

Early and current researchers (McLuhan, Barlow, Gibson cited in Gozzi) have applied metaphors to represent the Internet. Irreverently, teenagers roam the Internet and dominate the virtual landscape. Their domain becomes a loosely bound culture. Observable and researchable subcultures identified are the explorers, socializers, gamers, publishers, and transporters. In a residential school in the Northeastern United States composed of a student body balanced between males and females (52% to 48% respectively) and a mean age of 16.3, it is indicated that, although subcultures may briefly overlap, students have a primary subculture where they spend the greatest amount of time.

Students in this residential school come from homes and sending schools from as far away as seven hours driving time to as close as a five minute walk, not to mention the diverse socio-economic status ranging from high-income to severely depressed. Despite these vast differences, DSL or Cable Broadband remains the choice for home Internet usage (54.76% of the student body). It is observed that students settle into one of the subcultures roughly within thirty days of arrival at the school. Subcultures have discrete boundaries with only occasional blending. Students sometimes change subcultures as a result of new interests or tiring of their previous subculture. Interpersonal experiences appear a cornerstone of the subculture phenomena and have been at the forefront of computer usage since the early days of mainframes (Kiesler, Kraut, Cummings, et. al.).

2. BODY OF PAPER

Survey items indicate that students are emotionally and socially linked to their use of the Internet and fragment into observable subcultures of the surrounding cyberspace. These subcultures are identified by their primary engagement activities. Students spend a major portion of their time while in cyberspace in one of these modalities and integrate it into their day to day existence, while using the Internet specifically for their benefit (Kiesler, Kraut, Cummings, et. al).

From a survey receiving 141 responses, primary engagement was reported as 37.6% explorers, 35.4% socializers, 14.9% gamers, 10.7% transporters, 1.4% publishers. Through observation, surveys and interviews, the following definitions were produced: (See Figure 1.)

- explorers: those who gather information (academic, entertaining, technical, etc.); and
- socializers: those who interact socially in cyberspace (chat rooms, forums, messaging, etc.); and
- gamers: those who are involved in online gaming (first-person shooters, role-playing games, multi-user dungeons, etc.); and
- transporters: those who download files (audio, visual, programs, etc.); and
- publishers: those who upload and provide content (weblogs, websites, personal content, etc.).

According to Kavanaugh (2005), geographical proximity combined with high Internet usage results in magnified communication among already existing groups. The Internet interaction that occurs due to this closeness increases subculture stability. It is not unusual to find gamers talking gaming on and offline, transporters discussing the day's downloads, explorers sharing new and exciting websites, socializers critiquing the current status of the school, and publishers thinking over their next upload. Examples of subculture discussions in real life include food, games, school administration, website structure and forums, risqué jokes, homework, teachers, relationships, personalities, et. al. In other words, the regular teenage rhetoric finds its way into the cyberspatial subcultures and resonates back to real life.

Interviews were held to determine respondent interaction to the subculture groupings. The process continues in ongoing work to define the subculture in which students should be primarily placed. The next step in the process is to produce a query tool that will allow expeditious subculture placement.

Examples of interview and Internet responses are: "I downloaded 2.32 gigs of [a classic rock group]". "I downloaded Batman vs. Dracula". "The whole alcove is on the Falling Sand Game". "I get all kinds of weird, random things from IRC". "F cups". "Your GD right, it is my birthday! 18 bitches – mmmm – So Nice – Off to buy porn and Lottery Tickets".

3. CONCLUSION

It is postulated that the identification of measurable subcultures with corresponding nomenclatures will result in better understanding of teenage interaction on the Internet. In a group that is geographically proximal and continues to interact strongly within cyberspace, pertinent and specific data may be obtained that provides rationales for cyberspace – reality intermixing. Future studies may provide a connection between personality types and the subcultures into which teenagers are placed. It may be concluded that an individual is of the explorer, the socializer, the gamer, the transporter, or the publisher personality type.

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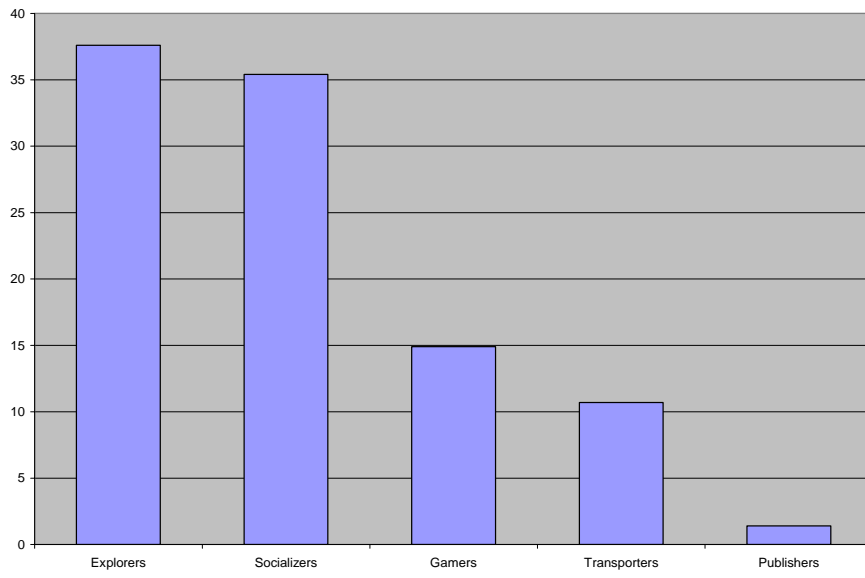


Figure 1. Percentage of student body, by primary engagement