

CITATION: boyd, danah. (2011). "White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook." In *Race After the Internet* (eds. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White). Routledge, pp. 203-222.

## White Flight in Networked Publics? How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook

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In a historic small town outside Boston, I interviewed a group of teens at a small charter school that included middle-class students seeking an alternative to the public school and poorer students who were struggling in traditional schools.

There, I met Kat, a white 14-year-old from a comfortable background. We were talking about the social media practices of her classmates when I asked her why most of her friends were moving from MySpace to Facebook. Kat grew noticeably uncomfortable. She began simply, noting that *"MySpace is just old now and it's boring."* But then she paused, looked down at the table, and continued.

*"It's not really racist, but I guess you could say that. I'm not really into racism, but I think that MySpace now is more like ghetto or whatever."* – Kat

On that spring day in 2007, Kat helped me finally understand a pattern that I had been noticing throughout that school year. Teen preference for MySpace or

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Facebook went beyond simple consumer choice; it reflected a reproduction of social categories that exist in schools throughout the United States. Because race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status shape social categories (Eckert, 1989), the choice between MySpace and Facebook became racialized. This got reinforced as teens chose to self-segregate across the two sites, just as they do in schools.

After Kat told me that MySpace was *"like ghetto,"* I asked her if people at her school were still using MySpace and she hesitantly said yes. Her discomfort in discussing the topic was palpable and it became clear that she didn't know how to talk about race or the social divisions she recognized in her school.

*"The people who use MySpace -- again, not in a racist way -- but are usually more like ghetto and hip hop rap lovers group."* – Kat

In trying to distinguish those who use MySpace from those who use Facebook, Kat uses a combination of spatial referents and taste markers that she knows have racial overtones. While Kat does not identify as a racist, her life and social world are shaped by race. Her small school is divided, with poorer students and teens of color in different classes than the white students from wealthier backgrounds. Kat's friends are primarily white and her classes and activities are primarily filled with white students.

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Kat's use of the term "ghetto" simultaneously references spatial and taste-based connotations. On the one hand, *the* ghetto is a part of a city historically defined by race and class (Wacquant, 1997). On the other hand, *being* ghetto refers to a set of tastes that emerged as poor people of color developed fashion and cultural artifacts that proudly expressed their identity. Just as physical spaces and tastes are organized around and shaped by race and class, so too are digital environments.

This article explores a division that emerged between MySpace and Facebook among American teens during the 2006-2007 school year. At the beginning of the year, a common question in American schools was: "Are you on MySpace?" By the end of the year, the question had shifted to "MySpace or Facebook?" As Facebook started gaining momentum, some teenagers switched from MySpace to Facebook. Others joined Facebook without having ever been on MySpace. Still others chose to adopt both. During this period, MySpace did not lose traction. Teens continued to flock to the site, opting for MySpace in lieu of or in addition to Facebook. To complicate matters more, some teens who had initially adopted MySpace began to switch to Facebook.

Slowly, a distinction emerged. Those who adopted MySpace were from different backgrounds and had different norms and values than those who adopted Facebook. White and more affluent individuals were more likely to choose and move to Facebook. Even before statistical data was available, the language teens used to

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describe each site and its users revealed how the division had a race and class dimension to it. Given these dynamics and Kat's notion of MySpace as ghetto, one way to conceptualize the division that unfolded is through the lens of white flight. In essence, many of the same underlying factors that shaped white city dwellers' exodus to the suburbs – institutional incentives and restrictions, fear and anxiety, social networks, and racism – also contribute to why some teens were more likely to depart than others.

What distinguishes adoption of MySpace and Facebook among American teens is not cleanly about race or class, although both are implicated in the story at every level. The division can be seen through the lens of taste and aesthetics, two value-laden elements that are deeply entwined with race and class. It can also be seen through the network structures of teen friendship, which are also directly connected to race and class. And it can be seen through the language that teens – and adults – use to describe these sites, language like Kat's that rely on racial tropes to distinguish the sites and their users. The notion that MySpace may be understood as a digital ghetto introduces an analytic opportunity to explore the divisions between MySpace and Facebook – and namely, the movement of some teens from MySpace to Facebook – in light of the historic urban tragedy produced by white flight. Drawing parallels between these two events sheds light on how people's engagement with technology reveals social divisions and the persistence of racism.

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The data and analysis used in this article stems from four years of ethnographic fieldwork examining the role that social media play in the everyday lives of American teens (boyd, 2008). From 2004-2009, I interviewed and observed teens in diverse communities across 17 different states, spent over 2,000 hours observing online practices, and analyzed 10,000 randomly selected MySpace profiles. The quotes in this article stem from both online data and a subset of the 103 formal semi-structured interviews I conducted. I also use online commentary about this division, including blog comments and news articles. My argument is not a statistical one, although Hargittai (this volume) documented that a division is visible in statistical data. Rather, I illustrate how distinctions in social network site adoption and the perceptions teens – and adults – have about these sites and their users reflect broader narratives of race and class in American society.

### Teen Adoption of MySpace and Facebook

The first social network site was neither MySpace nor Facebook (boyd and Ellison, 2007), but these sites emerged as the two most popular social network sites in the United States. MySpace launched in 2003 on the heels of Friendster, an earlier social network site that was notably popular among 20-30-something urban dwellers in major urban U.S. cities. Although individual teenagers joined MySpace early on, teens became a visible demographic on the site in 2004. Most early adopter

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teens learned about MySpace through one of two paths: bands or older family members.

Teens who learned of MySpace through bands primarily followed indie rock music or hip-hop, the two genres most popular on MySpace early on. MySpace allowed teens to connect with and follow their favorite bands. Early adopter teens who were not into music primarily learned about the site from a revered older sibling or cousin who was active in late-night culture. For these teens, MySpace was cool because cool elders thought so.

Teenagers who joined MySpace began proselytizing the site to their friends. Given its popularity among musicians and late-night socialites, joining MySpace became a form of (sub)cultural capital. Teens, especially those in urban settings, tend to look to the 20 to 30-something crowd for practices that they can emulate. MySpace's early popularity among teens was tightly entwined with its symbolic reference to maturity, status, and freedom in the manner espoused by urban late-night culture. While teens often revere the risky practices of a slightly older cohort, many adults work to actively dissuade them from doing so. By propagating and glorifying 20-something urban cultural practices and values, MySpace managed to alienate parents early on.

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With little mass media coverage of MySpace before News Corporation acquired the company in mid-2005, many teens learned of the site through word-of-mouth networks, namely friends at school, church, activities, and summer camp, as well as from older family members. Given its inception in the Los Angeles region, West Coast teens found MySpace before East Coast teens, and urban teens joined before suburban or rural teens. The media coverage that followed the acquisition further escalated growth among teens.

Immediately after News Corporation bought MySpace, much of the media coverage focused on the bands. After adults began realizing how popular MySpace was with teens, news media became obsessed with teen participation and the potential dangers they faced (Marwick, 2008). This media coverage was both a blessing and a curse for MySpace. On one hand, some teens joined the site because media sold it as both fashionable among teens and despised by parents. On the other hand, some teens avoided joining because of the perceived risks and parents began publicly demonizing the site.

As MySpace simultaneously appealed to and scared off U.S. teens, other social network sites started gaining traction with different demographics. Most did not appeal to teenagers en masse, although niche groups of teens did join many different sites. In 2004, Facebook launched, targeting college students. Originally, access to Facebook was intentionally limited. Facebook started as a Harvard-only

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social network site before expanding to support all Ivy League schools and then top-tier colleges and then a wider array of colleges. Because of its background, some saw Facebook as an "elite" social network site. The "highbrow" aura of Facebook appealed to some potential participants while repelling others.

The college-centered nature of Facebook quickly appealed to those teenagers who saw college, and thus Facebook access, as a rite of passage. They were aware of the site through older family members and friends who had already graduated high school and gone off to college. Before access became readily available, college-bound teens began coveting entrance. For many, access to the social world of college became a marker of status and maturity. Even those who had MySpace accounts relished the opportunity to gain access to the college-only Facebook as a rite of passage.

In September 2005, Facebook began slowly supporting high schools. While this gave some teens access, the processes in place for teens to join and be validated were challenging, creating a barrier to entry for many potential participants. Those who managed to join were often from wealthier schools where the validation process was more solidified or quite motivated – typically because they wanted to communicate with close friends in college.



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Facebook finally opened access to all in September 2006. Sparking a wave of teen adoption, this is the origin point of teens self-sorting into MySpace and Facebook. The segment of teens that initially flocked to Facebook was quite different from those who were early adopters of MySpace. Yet, in both cases, the older early adopters shaped early teen engagement, both in terms of influencing adoption and defining the norms. As teens engaged, they developed their own norms stemming from those set forth by the people they already knew on the site.

While plenty of teens chose to participate on both sites, I began noticing that those teens who chose one or the other appeared to come from different backgrounds. Subculturally identified teens appeared more frequently drawn to MySpace while more mainstream teens tended towards Facebook. Teens from less-privileged backgrounds seemed likely to be drawn to MySpace while those headed towards elite universities appeared to be head towards Facebook. Racial and ethnic divisions looked messier, tied strongly to socio-economic factors, but I observed that black and Latino teens appeared to preference MySpace while white and Asian teens seemed to privilege Facebook.

In observing these patterns in multiple communities in the US, I found myself uncertain as to whether or not they could be generalized. Certainly, there were exceptions to each pattern. Still, I felt as the pattern was significant. This prompted me to write an essay on my blog where I mapped out what I observed (boyd,

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2007a). Thanks to coverage from the BBC and many popular bloggers, my essay went viral, sparking debate, outrage, and controversy. It also sparked researchers who were seeing similar patterns to approach me to share their unpublished findings.

Analysts at two unnamed marketing research firms contacted me to say that they witnessed similar patterns with youth at a national level but they were unable to publicly discuss or publish their finding, but scholars and bloggers were more willing to share their findings. In a parallel study, Eszter Hargittai (2007) found that parental education as well as race and ethnicity were significant predictors of social network site choice when analyzing survey data collected from a freshman class at a diverse Midwest college. White and Asian students as well as those whose parents had higher levels of education were overrepresented on Facebook while Hispanic students and those whose parents did not have a high school degree were more likely to use MySpace. African-American college students were not more likely to use Facebook or MySpace. While Hargittai's findings with college freshman reflect a similar trend to my observations with high school-age teens, it is important to note that college participation itself is shaped by racial and socio-economic inequalities and that Facebook was initially a tool for college students. Thus, Facebook may well be overrepresented in Hargittai's data and college-age populations not attending college may have different preferences. Taking a different approach, blogger Chuck Lam (2007a; 2007b) examined the social network site habits of students from 15

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schools in San Francisco based on their rating at GreatSchools, finding that students from higher ranked schools were more active on Facebook while those from lower ranked schools were more active on MySpace.

Two years later, marketing research firm Nielsen Claritas reported that wealthy individuals are 25% more likely to use Facebook while less affluent individuals are 37% more likely to be on MySpace (Hare, 2009). In the same year, S. Craig Watkins (2009) published his qualitative and survey data with college students, revealing a racial and ethnic division in preference as well as anti-MySpace attitudes by collegiate Facebook users that parallel those of high school students. While there is no definitive longitudinal statistical data tracking the division amongst teens, these studies provide a valuable backdrop to the perceptions teens have about the sites and their users.

## The Organization of Teen Friendship

There's an old saying that "birds of a feather flock together." Personal networks tend to be rather homogeneous, as people are more likely to befriend those like them. Sociologists refer to the practice of connecting with like-minded individuals as "homophily." Studies have accounted for homophily in sex and gender, age, religion, education-level, occupation, and social class, but nowhere is homophily more strongly visible in the U.S. than in the divides along racial and ethnic lines

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(McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001). The reasons behind the practice of homophily and the resultant social divisions are complex, rooted in a history of inequality, bigotry, and oppression and stemming from the complexity of the political economy and structural constraints in American life.

Youth often self-segregate by race, even in diverse schools (Moody, 2001; Thorne 2008). While it is easy to lament racial segregation in friendships, there are also social and psychological benefits to racial and ethnic clustering. Tatum (1997) argues that self-segregation is a logical response to the systematized costs of racism; connecting along lines of race and ethnicity can help youth feel a sense of belonging, enhance identity development, and help youth navigate systematic racism. Still, as Bonilla-Silva (2003) has highlighted, people's willingness to accept and, thus expect, self-segregation may have problematic roots and contribute to ongoing racial inequality.

When I asked teens why race defines their friendships, they typically shrugged and told me that it's just the way it is. As Traviesa, a Hispanic 15-year-old from Los Angeles, explained,

*"If it comes down to it, we have to supposedly stick with our own races. ... That's just the unwritten code of high school nowadays."* – Traviesa

Race was not an issue only in major metropolitan communities. Heather, a white 16-year-old in Iowa, told me that her school was not segregated, but then she went on

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to mark people by race, noting that, "*the black kids are such troublemakers.*" This conflicting message –refusing to talk about race explicitly while employing racial language in conversation – was common in my interviews as well as those of other scholars (Pollock, 2005). While there was no formal segregation in Heather's school, like the de facto residential segregation that continues to operate in many American cities, the black teens in her predominantly white school stuck together socially and were stereotyped by the white teens.

Another way of looking at teen friendships is through the lens of social categories and group labels. Many of the teens I interviewed had language to demarcate outcasts (e.g., "*gothics,*" "*nerds,*" "*Dirty Kids,*" etc.) and identify groups of peers by shared activity (e.g., "*band kids,*" "*art kids,*" "*cheerleaders,*" etc.). Often, labels come with a set of stereotypes. For example, Heather explained:

*"You've got the pretties, which are the girls that tan all the time. They put on excessive makeup. They wear the short skirts, the revealing shirts, that kind of things. Then you've got the guys who are kind of like that, dumb as rocks by the way."* – Heather

Youth subcultures can be seen as an extension of social categories; what differentiates them typically concerns identification. While teens often identify with particular subcultures, social categories are more frequently marked by others.

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Social categories serve to mark groups and individuals based on shared identities. In her seminal text on the topic, Penelope Eckert (1989) highlighted that membership in social groups is not random. Social categories develop in ways that reproduce social distinctions. While Eckert focuses her analysis on the class distinctions embedded in the labels "jocks" and "burnouts," work on children and youth in schools also reveals that racial divisions in schools are also marked through labels and social categories (Thorne 2008). Unlike class, race and ethnicity are often made visible – albeit, blurred – in the labels youth use. In my fieldwork, I found that clearly dominant racial groups went unmarked, but labels like "*the blacks*," "*the Chinese people*," "*the Hispanics*," "*the Mexicans*," "*the white people*," and so forth were regularly employed to define social groupings. In other cases, and in part because they are aware that using such categories could be perceived as racist, teens used substitutes that more implicitly mark race and class-based difference. For example, the word "*urban*" signals "*black*" when referring to a set of tastes or practices. Similarly, some of the labels teens use have racial implications, such as "*Dirty Kids*," "*gangstas*," and "*terrorists*". While not all Dirty Kids are white, not all gangstas are black, and not all terrorists are of Middle Eastern descent, they are overwhelmingly linked in teens' minds. Race and class are also often blurred, especially in situations where the logic of stratification may not be understood by teens but appears visible through skin color.

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As much of the literature on youth in educational contexts has revealed (Thorne, 1993; Eckert, 1989; Perry, 2002), social categories and race-based labels are also used to mark physical turf in the lunchroom and beyond. Often, this becomes a way in which youth self-segregate. Keke, a 16-year-old black girl in Los Angeles, described in detail where students in her racially diverse school physically gathered during lunch and between classes:

*"The hallways is full of the Indians, and the people of Middle Eastern decent.*

*They in the hallways and by the classrooms. The Latinos, they all lined up on this side. The blacks is by the cafeteria and the quad. ... Then the outcasts, like the uncool Latinos or uncool Indians, the uncool whites, they scattered."* – Keke

Each ethnic and racial group had its gathering spot, but only one had a name:

"Disneyland" is an area in the public yard where "the white people" gathered. While Keke is probably unaware that Disneyland is, as Avila (2004: 3) puts it, "the archetypical example of a postwar suburban order," the notion that students in an urban Los Angeles school label the turf where white people gather by referencing the Orange County suburban theme park known for its racial and ethnic caricatures is nonetheless poignant.

Like the school yard, online environments are often organized by identity and social categories. In some cases, this is explicit. Social network sites like Black Planet, Asian Avenue, and MiGente explicitly target audiences based on race and ethnicity. Many who participate in these communities struggle with what it means to be in a

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public space driven by race, what boundaries should exist, how to manage racism, and other race and ethnicity-driven dialogues (Byrne, 2008). While neither MySpace nor Facebook are explicitly defined in terms of race, they too are organized by race. Most participants self-segregate when connecting with their pre-existing networks without been fully aware of the social divisions that unfold. Yet, when teens are asked explicitly about who participates where, racial terms emerge.

### **The Network Effects of MySpace and Facebook Adoption**

Like school lunchrooms and malls, social network sites are another space where youth gather to socialize with peers (boyd, 2007b). Teens joined social network sites to be with their friends. Given social divisions in both friendship patterns and social spaces, it is unsurprising that online communities reflect everyday social divisions. Yet, unlike prior genres where teens collectively used similar tools but segmented their interactions, their engagement with social network sites spanned two sites – MySpace and Facebook.

Teens provide a variety of different explanations for why they chose MySpace or Facebook. Some argued that it was a matter of personal preference having to do with the features or functionality. For example, Jordan, a biracial Mexican-white 15-year-old from Austin prefers Facebook because it allows unlimited photos.



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Conversely, Anindita, an Indian-American 17-year-old from Los Angeles values

MySpace's creative features:

*"Facebook's easier than MySpace but MySpace is more complex... You can add music, make backgrounds and layouts, but Facebook is just plain white and that's it." - Anindita*

Teens also talked about their perception of the two sites in relation to their values and goals. Cachi, an 18-year-old Puerto Rican girl from Iowa uses both MySpace and Facebook, but she sees them differently:

*"Facebook is less competitive than MySpace. It doesn't have the Top 8 thing or anything like that, or the background thing." - Cachi*

Safety – or rather the perception of safety – also emerged as a central factor in teen preference. While teens believed Facebook was safer, they struggled to explain why.

Tara, a Vietnamese–American 16-year-old from Michigan said,

*"[Facebook] kind of seemed safer, but I don't know like what would make it safer, like what main thing. But like, I don't know, it just seems like everything that people say, it seems safer." - Tara*

Teens' fear of MySpace as 'unsafe' undoubtedly stems from the image portrayed by the media, but it also suggests a fear of the 'other.'

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By far, the most prominent explanation teens gave for choosing one or the other is the presence of their friends. Teens choose to use the social network site that their friends use. Kevin, a white 15-year-old in Seattle, explains:

*"I'm not big on Facebook; I'm a MySpace guy. I have a Facebook and I have some friends on it, but most of my friends don't check it that often so I don't check it that often."* – Kevin

When teens choose to adopt both, what distinguishes one from the other often reflects distinct segments of their social network. For example, Red, a white 17-year-old from Iowa has a profile on both sites, but

*"the only reason I still have my MySpace is because my brother's on there."* – Red

Even teens who prefer the features and functionality of one site use the other when that's where their friends are. Connor, a white 17-year-old from Atlanta, says that he personally prefers MySpace because there's *"too much going on"* on Facebook.

*"It's like hug me and poke me... what does that even mean?"* – Connor

Yet, Connor signs into Facebook much more frequently than MySpace *"because everybody's on Facebook."*

Social network site adoption took the form of a social contagion spreading through pre-existing peer networks. For some teens, the presence of just one friend was enough of an incentive to participate; others only joined once many of their friends were present. Once inside, teens encouraged their friends to participate. MySpace and Facebook have network effects: they are more valuable when more friends

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participate. Some teens went so far as to create accounts for resistant friends in order to move the process along (boyd, 2008). As word of each site spread, adoption hopped from social group to social group through pre-existing networks for teens. In choosing to go where their friends were, teens began to self-segregate along the same lines that shape their social relations more broadly: race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, education goals, lifestyle, subcultural affiliation, social categories, etc.

### Tastes, Aesthetics, and Social Status

For many teens, embracing MySpace or Facebook is seen as a social necessity. Which site is "cool" depends on one's cohort. Milo, an Egyptian 15-year-old from Los Angeles, joined MySpace because it was "*the thing*" in his peer group but another girl from the same school, Korean 17-year-old Seong, told me that Facebook was the preferred site among her friends.

What is socially acceptable and desirable differs across social groups. One's values and norms are strongly linked with one's identity membership. When working class individuals eschew middle class norms in preference for the norms and expectations of their community, they reproduce social class (Willis, 1981; Gaines, 1998). The idea that working class individuals should adopt middle class norms is fundamentally a middle class notion; for many working class individuals, the

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community and its support trump potential upwards mobility. Norms also differ across racial and ethnic groups and are reinforced as people of color seek to identify with their racial and ethnic background (Tatum, 1997).

While what is seen as cool can be differentiated by group, there is also a faddish nature to the process. Seong preferred Facebook because it was "*exclusive*." She moved from Xanga to MySpace to Facebook as each new site emerged, preferring to adopt what was new rather than stay on a site as it became widely embraced. Conversely, white 15-year-old Summer from Michigan rejected the idea of switching to Facebook simply because it was new. She preferred to be where her peers were, but she noted that the "*designer class of people*" in her school joined Facebook because they felt the need to have "*the latest thing*." In this way, subcultural capital influenced the early adoption of Facebook; it was fashionable to some simply because of its newness.

The construction of "cool" is fundamentally about social status among youth (Milner, 2004). Teenagers both distinguish themselves through practices of consumption, fashion, and attitudes and assess others through these markers (Shankar, 2008; Hebdige 1979). Yet, neither tastes nor attitudes nor cultural consumption practices are adopted randomly. Race and class shape practices and the social agendas around race and class also drive them (Crane, 2000). Taste also

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serves as a mechanism and marker of distinction, and people's tastes are rooted in class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984).

While both Bourdieu and Hebdige argue that those from lower social positions are defining their tastes in opposition to hegemonic structures, what constitutes "cool" is also localized, differing across social categories, geography, and groups.

Consumption practices and fashion that denote high status in some groups may be meaningless elsewhere. In this way, teens often traffic in what Sarah Thornton (1995) calls "subcultural capital" even when they themselves are not subculturally identified. Markers of status can be locally defined and may have more to do with information access or media consumption than consumption of physical goods.

Furthermore, discussions of and connection to those with access to valued consumer objects may also be valuable in and of itself, resulting with what Shankar (2008) calls "metaconsumption." Online, status markers take on new form but in ways that are reminiscent of offline practices. For example, the public articulation of connections on social network sites is a way of visibly marking oneself in relation to others and their status (Donath and boyd, 2004).

In an environment where profiles serve as "digital bodies" (boyd, 2008), profile personalization can be seen a form of digital fashion. Teens' Facebook and MySpace profiles reflect their taste, identity, and values (Donath, 2007). Through the use of imagery and textual self-expressions, teens make race, class, and other identity

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markers visible. As Nakamura (2008) has argued, even in the most constrained online environments, participants will use what's available to them to reveal identity information in ways that make race and other identity elements visible.

In describing what was desirable about the specific sites, teens often turned to talk about aesthetics and profile personalization. Teens' aesthetics shaped their attitudes towards each site. In essence, the "glitter" produced by those who "pimp out" their MySpaces is seen by some in a positive light while others see it as "gaudy," "tacky," and "cluttered." While Facebook fans loved the site's aesthetic minimalism, others viewed this tone as "boring," "lame," and "elitist." Catalina, a white 15-year-old from Austin, told me that Facebook is better because

*"Facebook just seems more clean to me."* – Catalina

What Catalina sees as cleanliness, Indian-American 17-year-old Anindita from Los Angeles, labels simplicity; she recognizes the value of simplicity, but she prefers the "bling" of MySpace because it allows her to express herself.

The extensive options for self-expression are precisely what annoy some teens.

Craig Pelletier, a 17-year-old from California, complained that,

*"these tools gave MySpacers the freedom to annoy as much as they pleased.*

*Facebook was nice because it stymied such annoyance, by limiting individuality.*

*Everyone's page looked pretty much the same, but you could still look at pictures*

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*of each other. The MySpace crowd felt caged and held back because they weren't able to make their page unique."* – Craig

Craig believes the desire to personalize contributed to his peers' division between MySpace and Facebook.

In choosing how to express themselves, teens must account for what they wish to signal. Teens are drawn to styles that signal their identities and social groups. Due to a technical glitch, MySpace enabled users to radically shape the look and feel of their profiles while Facebook enforced a strict minimalism. To the degree that each site supports profile personalization in different ways, identity and self-presentation are affected. While some are drawn to the ability to radically shape their profiles to their liking, others prefer an enforced cleanness.

Teens who preferred MySpace lamented the limited opportunities for creative self-expression on Facebook, but those who preferred Facebook were much more derogatory about the style of profiles in MySpace. Not only did Facebook users not find MySpace profiles attractive, they argued that the styles produced by MySpace users were universally ugly. While Facebook's minimalism is not inherently better, conscientious restraint has been one marker of bourgeois fashion (Arnold 2001). On the contrary, the flashy style that is popular on MySpace is often marked in relation to "bling-bling," a style of conspicuous consumption that is associated with urban black culture and hip-hop. To some, bling and flashy MySpace profiles are beautiful

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and creative; to others, these styles are garish. While style preference is not inherently about race and class, the specific styles referenced have racial overtones and socio-economic implications. In essence, although teens are talking about style, they are functionally navigating race and class.

Taste is also performed directly through profiles; an analysis of "taste statements" in MySpace combined with the friend network reveals that distinctions are visible there (Liu, 2007). The importance of music to MySpace made it a visible vector of taste culture. Youth listed their musical tastes on their profiles and attached songs to their pages. While many genres of music were present on MySpace, hip-hop stood out, both because of its salience amongst youth and because of its racial connotations. Although youth of all races and ethnicities listen to hip-hop, it is most commonly seen as a genre that stems from black culture inside urban settings. Narratives of the ghetto and black life dominate the lyrics of hip-hop and the genre also serves as a source of pride and authenticity in communities that are struggling for agency in American society (Forman, 2002). For some, participating in this taste culture is a point of pride; for others, this genre and the perceived attitudes that go with it are viewed as offensive. Although MySpace was never about hip-hop, its mere presence became one way in which detractors marked the site.

Taste and aesthetics are not universal, but deeply linked to identity and values. The choice of certain cultural signals or aesthetics appeals to some while repelling



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others. Often, these taste distinctions are shaped by class and race and, thus, the choice to mark Facebook and MySpace through the language of taste and aesthetics reflect race and class.

## A Networked Exodus

After posting my controversial blog essay about the distinction between MySpace and Facebook, teens began to contact me with their own stories. Anastasia, a 17-year-old from New York, emailed me to explain that it wasn't simply a matter of choice between the two sites; many of her peers simply moved from MySpace to Facebook. Until now, I have focused on the choice that teens make to adopt MySpace or Facebook. But Anastasia's right: there is also movement as teens choose to leave one social network site and go to the other. By and large, teens did not leave Facebook and go to MySpace. Rather, a subset of teens left MySpace to go to Facebook. This can be partially explained as an issue of fads, with teens leaving MySpace to go to the "new" thing. But even if this alone could explain the transition, it does not explain why some teens were more likely to switch than others.

Anastasia argues that, at least in her school, who participated can be understood in terms of social categories:

*"My school is divided into the 'honors kids,' (I think that is self-explanatory), the 'good not-so-honors kids,' 'wangstas,' (they pretend to be tough and black but when you live in a suburb in Westchester you can't claim much hood), the*

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*'latinos/hispanics,' (they tend to band together even though they could fit into any other groups) and the 'emo kids' (whose lives are alllllways filled with woe). We were all in MySpace with our own little social networks but when Facebook opened its doors to high schoolers, guess who moved and guess who stayed behind... The first two groups were the first to go and then the 'wangstas' split with half of them on Facebook and the rest on MySpace... I shifted with the rest of my school to Facebook and it became the place where the 'honors kids' got together and discussed how they were procrastinating over their next AP English essay."* – Anastasia

The social categories Anastasia uses reflect racial, ethnic, and class divisions in her school. Anastasia's description highlights how structural divisions in her school define what plays out on MySpace and Facebook. Movement from MySpace to Facebook further magnifies already existing distinctions. In California, 17-year-old Craig blogged about the movement in his school, using the language of taste, class, and hierarchy.

*"The higher castes of high school moved to Facebook. It was more cultured, and less cheesy. The lower class usually were content to stick to MySpace. Any high school student who has a Facebook will tell you that MySpace users are more likely to be barely educated and obnoxious. Like Peet's is more cultured than*

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*Starbucks, and Jazz is more cultured than bubblegum pop, and like Macs are more cultured than PC's, Facebook is of a cooler caliber than MySpace."* – Craig

In his description, Craig distinguishes between what he sees as highbrow and lowbrow cultural tastes, using consumption patterns to differentiate classes of people and describe them in terms of a hierarchy. By employing the term "caste," Craig uses a multicultural metaphor with ethnic and racial connotations that runs counter to the supposed class mobility available in U.S. society. In doing so, he's locating his peers in immutable categories and tying tastes to them. While Craig may not have intended to imply this, his choice of the term "caste" is nonetheless interesting.

These two accounts provide insight into who left, but they don't account for why. To get at why, we must start by considering how MySpace's cultural position shifted during this period. The following is a descriptive portrait of a series of relevant events that contributed to teen departure. It is an oversimplified account based on my fieldnotes during that period.

MySpace was once a cultural center for youth culture. As it grew increasingly popular, a moral panic emerged over the potential risks of sexual predators (Marwick, 2008). While the risks were overblown (Shrock and boyd, 2009), fear spread. Involved parents – typically from more educated and wealthier communities

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– began looking closer and they didn't like what they saw. While my examination of MySpace profiles revealed that more teens referenced God, Jesus, bible quotes, and other religious symbols than uploaded scantily clad self-images, parents typically assumed that the latter dominated MySpace and this upset them. Furthermore, these parents were often horrified by the practices of the urban 20somethings, especially those from different cultural backgrounds who appeared to have different moral codes. The media helped produced a techno-panic, often by leveraging adult fears of urban black signals such as bling and hip-hop.

Even though most teens were primarily socializing with their peers, some parents feared that the presence of and potential exposure to different and, presumably, deviant practices might corrupt their children. In short, they did not see MySpace as "safe" and they did not want their children communing with people they would not approve of them associating with elsewhere. Fear drove some parents to banish MySpace. Teens who were forced to leave were more likely to come from households where their parents were involved in monitoring their kids' online behaviors but were not themselves on MySpace. They were less likely to have siblings, cousins, and other family members present in MySpace. In short, the teens who were forced to leave tended to come from more privileged backgrounds. Their disappearance fractured their friends' networks, reducing the value of MySpace.

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Amidst this, MySpace failed to address the problems presented by spammers and scammers. Teens started receiving an onslaught of friend requests from scammers and their accounts started getting hacked due to security flaws introduced when users started copying and pasting layout code into profile forms. Given their penchant for vibrant profiles and willingness to track down code, youth were especially vulnerable. Because of the widespread technopanic, many of the teens I interviewed who left MySpace read these security attacks as proof of the presence of sexual predators and other "creepy" people. Those whose friend networks on MySpace were already fractured were most inclined to leave.

The emergence of Facebook hastened this process. Many parents saw Facebook as a "safe" alternative to MySpace, primarily because it was not possible to make a profile truly public. (Arguably, making a profile visible to everyone in a geographic region is akin to being public.) Adults did not see the same signals on Facebook that frightened them. Many reinforced the spatial and racial distinctions by demonizing MySpace and embracing Facebook. Countless teens who were not allowed on MySpace were permitted to join Facebook. Teens who had friends in college were especially quick to join. With an alternative in place, many who were doubtful of MySpace or whose friends had departed switched.

Concerns about MySpace and safety were widespread, but how people responded varied. Many teens made their profiles private or friends-only, but others left or

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were forced to leave because of the fear. As they departed, their friends were more likely to go as well because of the importance of social cohesion. Many of those who left joined Facebook. The same network effects that motivated teens to join MySpace hastened their departure. The early departers were not evenly distributed across the network. The factors that prompted or forced some teens to leave and the factors that minimized their incentives to stay affected certain groups of teen more than others. In short, teens from privileged backgrounds were more likely to defect. This helped create the impressions that Anastasia and Craig described.

### **MySpace: A Digital Ghetto?**

One provocative way of reflecting on the networked movement from MySpace to Facebook is through the lens of "white flight." The term "white flight" refers to the exodus of white people from urban American centers to the suburbs during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This simplistic definition obscures the racial motivations of those who left, the institutionalized discrimination that restricted others from leaving, and the ramifications for cities and race relations (Kruse, 2005). Many who left did so to avoid racial integration in communities and schools. Not everyone could leave. Although the suburbs were touted as part of the "American Dream," families of color were often barred directly explicitly by ethnically exclusive restrictions on housing developments or indirectly by discriminatory lending practices (Massey & Denton, 1998). Suburbs were zoned to limit low-income housing and rentals, thereby

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limiting who could afford to move there. What followed was urban decay.

Governmental agencies reduced investments in urban communities, depopulation lowered property values and shrunk tax bases, and unemployment rose as jobs moved to the suburbs. The resultant cities were left in disrepair and the power of street gangs increased. Through "white flight," racial identities were reworked as spaces were reconfigured (Harris, 2007; Avila, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1998).

Given the formalized racism and institutionalized restrictions involved in urban white flight, labeling teen movement from MySpace to Facebook as "digital white flight" may appear to be a problematic overstatement. My goal is not to dismiss or devalue the historic tragedy that white racism brought to many cities, but to offer a stark framework for seeing the reproduction of social divisions in a society still shaped by racism.

Consider the parallels. In some senses, the first teens to move to the "suburbs" were those who bought into a Teen Dream of collegiate maturity, namely those who were expressly headed towards dorm-based universities and colleges. They were the elite who were given land in the new suburbs before plots were broadly available. The suburbs of Facebook signaled more mature living, complete with digital fences to keep out strangers. The narrative that these digital suburbs were safer than the city enhanced its desirability, particularly for those who had no interest in interacting with people who were different. Some teens were moved because of the policies of

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their parents. Early settlers incentivized their friends to join them. While formal restrictions on who could move lifted in September 2006, the more subtle network-based disincentives did not. Those teens whose family and friends were deeply enmeshed in the city of MySpace were less inclined to leave for the suburbs.

Those who left the city often left their profiles untended and they often fell into disrepair, covered in spam, a form of digital graffiti. This contributed to a sense of eeriness, but also hastened the departure of their neighbors. As MySpace failed to address these issues, spammers took over like street gangs. What resulted can be understood as a digital ghetto.

Needless to say, the frame of "white flight" only partially works, but the metaphor provides a fertile backdrop to address the kinds of language I heard by youth. It also provides a fruitful framework for thinking of the fear and moral panic surrounding MySpace. Fear of risk and perception of safety are salient in discussions of ghettos. Many whites fled the city, believing it crime-ridden, immoral, and generally unsafe. While outsiders are rarely targets of violence in the inner-city, the perception of danger is widespread and the suburbs are commonly narrated as the safe alternative. The same holds for MySpace. Fears concerning risks on MySpace are overstated at best and more often outright misunderstood. Yet, they are undoubtedly widespread. In contrast, Facebook's origin as a gated community and



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parents' belief that the site is private and highly monitored reflect the same values signaled by the suburbs.

The network segmentation implied by a "digital white flight" also helps explain why, two years later, news media behaved as though MySpace was dead. Quite simply, white middle-class journalists didn't know anyone who still used MySpace. On May 4, 2009, the New York Times ran a story showing that MySpace and Facebook usage in the U.S. had nearly converged (with Facebook lagging slightly behind MySpace); the title for this article was "Do You Know Anyone Still on MySpace?" Although the article clearly stated that the unique visitors were roughly equal, the headline signaled the cultural divide. The New York Times staff was on Facebook and assumed their readers were too. This article generated 154 comments from presumably adult readers. Some defended MySpace, primarily by pointing to its features, the opportunity for connecting, and the cultural relevance of musicians and bands. Many more condemned MySpace, bemoaning its user interface, spam, and outdated-ness. Yet, while only two MySpace fans used condescending language to describe Facebook ("*Facebook is very childish*" and "*Facebook is for those who live in the past*"), dozens of MySpace critics demeaned MySpace and its users. Some focused on the perception that MySpace was filled with risky behavior:

*"MySpace become synonymous with hyper-sexual, out of control teens, wild partying 20-somethings, 30-40somethings craving attention, sexual predators on*

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*the hunt, and generally un-cool personal behavior from a relatively small, but highly visible number of users."*

Others used labels, stereotypes, and dismissive language to other those who preferred MySpace, often suggesting a class based distinction:

*"My impression is that Myspace is for the riffraff and Facebook is for the landed gentry."*

*"Compared to Facebook, MySpace just seems like the other side of the tracks – I'll go there for fun, but I wouldn't want to live there."*

*"my impression is [MySpace is] for tweens, high school kids that write emo poetry, and the proletariat. once the younger demo goes to college, they shift to facebook. the proletariat? everyone knows they never go to college!"*

Just as those who moved to the suburbs looked down upon those who remained in the cities, so too did Facebook users demean those on MySpace. This can be seen in the attitudes of teens I interviewed, the words of these commenters, and the adjectives used by the college students Watkins (2009) interviewed. The language used in these remarks resembles the same language used throughout the 1980s to describe city dwellers: dysfunctional families, perverts and deviants, freaks and

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outcasts, thieves, and the working class. Implied in this is that no decent person could possibly have a reason to dwell in the city or on MySpace. While some who didn't use MySpace were harshly critical of the site, others simply forgot that it existed. They thought it to be irrelevant, believing that no one lived there anymore simply because no one they knew did.

To the degree that some viewed MySpace as a digital ghetto or as being home to the cultural practices that are labeled as ghetto, the same fear and racism that underpinned much of white flight in urban settings is also present in the perception of MySpace. The fact that many teens who left MySpace for Facebook explained their departure as being about features, aesthetics, or friendship networks does not disconnect their departure from issues of race and class. Rather, their attitude towards specific aesthetic markers and features is shaped by their experiences with race and class. Likewise, friendship networks certainly drove the self-segmentation, but these too are shaped by race such that departure logically played out along race lines. The explanations teens gave for their decisions may not be explicitly about race, ethnicity, or class, but they cannot be untangled from them, just as fear-based narratives about the "ghetto" cannot be considered without also accounting for race, ethnicity, and class.

In some senses, the division in the perception and use of MySpace and Facebook seems obvious given that we know that online environments are a reflection of

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everyday life. Yet, the fact that such statements are controversial highlights a widespread techno-utopian belief that the internet will once and for all eradicate inequality and social divisions. What unfolded as teens adopted MySpace and Facebook suggests that this is not the case. Neither social media nor its users are colorblind simply because technology is present. The internet mirrors and magnifies everyday life, making visible many of the issues we hoped would disappear, including race and class-based social divisions in American society.

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