

# ADOLESCENTS' SENSE OF COMMUNITY ON MYSPACE AND FACEBOOK: A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

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*Communities are foundational to the field of Community Psychology yet they are difficult to define and measure. Once viewed as social groups with ties to geographical locations, online communities interact free of physical or face-to-face contact. This cyberexistence makes the study of communities more challenging. Social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook and MySpace, are referred to as online communities; however, research has yet to explore whether these sites engender a psychological sense of community (PSC) for users. This study reanalyzes focus group and survey data from high school and college students to investigate whether uses of SNS demonstrate key components of PSC (i.e., membership, influence, immersion, shared emotional connection, and an integration and fulfillment of needs). This mixed-method analysis synthesizes data through a top-down (confirming PSC categories) and bottom-up (identifying emergent patterns/themes) analytic procedure. Results suggest that typical adolescent uses of SNS represent networked individualism, rather than online communities. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

For many, the word *community* conjures warm feelings and positive regard. The term is used to describe things as small as a study group (e.g., book review club) or as large as the world (e.g., global community). Sociologist Abu-Lughod (1991) commented that “the concepts of community occupies a privileged place in the romantic symbolic lexicon of America, as significant as mother, apple pie, and democracy” (p. 269).

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Although the word *community* is quite familiar, there are few formal definitions of it and virtually no consensus on its structure. In the field of Community Psychology, decades of research and theorizing have focused on how community is conceptualized when it is tied to a place, shared interest, and/or emotional commitment. More recently, this focus has expanded to include online groups in which participants may never meet face-to-face. In exploring different types of human groupings, researchers have found that some groups in the same geographical location are not communities and similarly, not all groups of people that interact online are communities. Using focus group and survey data from high school and college students, this study explores typical uses of social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, by early and late adolescents and attempts to determine if these uses are indicators of individualized processes of communicating with others or the synergistic creation of online communities.

## DEFINING COMMUNITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Although efforts have been made to define community in many disciplines, there is yet to be a clear conceptualization of the construct. This lack of coherence was evident over 50 years ago when sociologist George Hillery compiled 90 definitions of community and found the only commonality across all these sources to be that they dealt with people (Fernback, 1999).

Within the field of Community Psychology, many definitions of community have been proposed with most noting interdependence, communication, and emotional connection being key components (e.g., Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001; Sarason, 1974). Furthermore, communities appear to be viable social structures with systematic ways of operating. Through the organization of people, resources, and processes, communities are able to function and persist. As Alinsky (1971) pointed out, “It is a contradiction of terms to use the two words “disorganized” and “community” together: the word community itself means an organized, communal life; people living in an organized fashion” (p. 116).

One of the challenges of defining community has been determining how location impacts its existence. Initially, communities were viewed as groups based in the same geographic location such as a town or commune. Thus, there was a physical space in which people interacted. Later, relational communities were acknowledged with connection and importance not being tied to a locality but based on a shared interest or purpose (Heller, 1989). Still, these initially studied relational communities had some physical interactions between members (e.g., sport practices, workplace meetings, support group sessions). However, with the expansion of the Internet, relational communities extended to no longer need face-to-face interactions. These newer communities were devoid of physical localities.

### *Are Virtual Communities Really Communities?*

Research on online communities has focused largely on shared interest groups that communicate online such as fan, self-help, and personal identity groups. These studies have found that the qualities and actions of these online groups are similar to offline communities. For instance, research on Swedish independent music fans has found that members are distributed throughout the Internet (rather than congregate at a single fan site). However, active fans often “bump” into each other on a variety of sites, which may foster a sense of connection akin to running into a neighbor or coworker at

the market or a neighboring town (Baym, 2007). Along these lines, a recent study of the Queer Sisters, an online queer/lesbian group in Hong Kong, found that many of the emotional benefits paralleled those found in face-to-face communities. Members used the site for such things as information, personal expression, social connections, communication, and a sense of belonging (Nip, 2004). In addition to social, behavioral, and emotional benefits being similar in online and offline communities, research has also found that like other types of communities, virtual communities develop social norms and connections as well. As an example, a participant-observer ethnography of the Whole Life Electronic Link (WELL) found that norms within the group were present and evolving and social ties were important and strong between members, with some connections spanning long periods (Rheingold, 2001).

While connecting in cyberspace, Internet-based communities have been described as “glocalized” in which they can have global and local connections where “worldwide connectivity and domestic matters intersect” (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 187). This glocalization has been demonstrated well with research on self-help groups in which users can interact with others, seek out information, and learn about local happenings for treatment and support. For areas of physical and mental illness, these online communities have proven beneficial to members’ health and wellbeing (e.g., Coursaris & Liu, 2009; Lieberman & Goldstein, 2005; Riper et al., 2008). Thus, online communities seem to have many of the characteristics of offline communities. As Fernback (1999) summarizes, “cybercommunities are characterized by common value systems, norms, rules, and the sense of identity, commitment, and association that also characterize various physical communities and other communities of interest” (p. 211).

Although online communities and groups are gaining more attention in research, this new generation of studies has also grappled with what makes online groups and sites communities. For instance, Jones (1997) has suggested that some online groups are virtual communities whereas others are virtual settlements, with fewer stable members, less frequent interaction, and fewer emotional connections. Similarly, some have proposed that greater online access and interactions can lead to networked individualism rather than community networks (e.g., Wellman et al., 2003). This networked individualism allows people to “remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Individuals switch rapidly between their social networks” (Wellman, 2002, p. 15) rather than remain in a group or community. As decades of research has shown, determining what is a community or not is difficult and this task is more challenging when interactions exist solely in cyberspace.

### ***Psychological Sense of Community***

Almost 40 years ago Poplin (1972) pointed out that the “multiple uses of the term community may be unavoidable, but they nonetheless make things difficult for those who seek to study communities as a distinct form of social and territorial organization” (p. 4). As such, research in and on communities has often relied on asking individuals how they feel about their social and/or physical group. The focus of research on psychological sense of community (PSC) provides useful ways to identify communities by exploring the aggregation of individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and connection to others. McMillan and Chavis (1986) described PSC as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a

shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9).

Research on PSC has identified four core components that help capture how committed and emotionally connected individuals feel towards their community. *Membership* is the notion that there are clear boundaries between those who are or are not part of the community. As such members identify themselves as part of the community. Members feel emotionally safe and a personal investment in the community. *Influence* describes issues of power in which members influence and are influenced by the community. *Integration and fulfillment of needs* are demonstrated by shared values within the community and the sharing of resources and satisfying of needs (whether emotional or material). *Shared emotional connection* offers positive contact between members, opportunities to share experiences, methods for honoring members and a sense of investment by members in the community as a whole. Research on PSC has found it to be a worthwhile area of study for understanding the characteristics and functions of communities as well as ways to facilitate participation and community development (e.g., Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991).

*Sense of virtual community.* In studying virtual communities, some have focused on a sense of virtual community (SVC) in which many of the core characteristics of PSC are applied to online settings. These studies have found evidence that many of the individual feelings, commitment, and perceptions are similar in online and offline groups (e.g., Blanchard, 2007; Nip, 2004). For instance, in a study of 172 members of 42 online groups, Koh and Kim (2003) found that PSC could be narrowed to three key characteristics within virtual communities: membership, influence, and immersion. The authors stressed that membership was strongly influenced by leadership within the online community, opportunities for offline contact, and enjoyability of interactions with other members. Along these lines, exploring multiple sport newsgroups (MSN), Blanchard and Markus (2004) also found that many of the key characteristics of PSC were reported by the users of MSN. However, the authors concluded that not all elements of PSC were as relevant to this online context and proposed a simpler model of SVC in which exchanging support, creating and making identification, and trust were most important. In another study of SVC, Blanchard (2007) identified exchanging support and identification as important aspects in addition to the typical areas of PSC.

Although research has begun to explore how individuals feel about their virtual communities, this exploration has largely focused on specific types of groups such as shared interest, identity, and health groups. To date, no studies have looked at sense of community on social networking site such as Facebook and MySpace. This is surprising given that these sites are exceedingly popular with an average of almost 200 million unique users in a given month (Compete, Inc., 2009). Furthermore, the bulk of the research on virtual communities has been conducted with adults rather than adolescents, even though teens and emerging adults are more frequent users and perhaps a more native group to online settings/interactions (Prensky, 2001).

To address this under-researched area, this study uses quantitative and qualitative data to assess whether teens and young adults feel a sense of community within their MySpace and Facebook networks. Specifically, this study explores whether typical uses of social networking sites by early and late adolescents are online community activities

that support psychological sense of community or whether these sites are simply populated by people networking with other individuals.

## METHOD

Social networking sites are often referred to as online communities in the popular press and some academic writings (e.g., Griggs, 2009; Jensen, 2006). As a community psychologist, reading these common references led to the question of whether these sites really engender community or just networked individualism (Wellman et al., 2003). Having studied high school and college students' use of the Internet over the past few years, I opted to combine previous studies of social networking sites to see if adolescents' self-reported uses and feelings about these sites suggested a psychological sense of (virtual) community. To do this, data were synthesized from four projects conducted in collaboration with colleagues in the UCLA/CSULA Children's Digital Media Lab. These studies were conducted to better understand how and why youth use social networking sites and explore the connection between online and offline peer networks. Two focus groups studies were included: one with 23 college students (see Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008 for details) and another with 10 high school students. These focus group studies explored activities and relationships on social networking sites as well as how adolescents' developmental needs were addressed through these online mediums. The focus groups were semistructured discussions with a facilitator and 3–6 same-sex participants per group. Data from two survey studies were included as well: one with 110 college students (see Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008 for details) and another with 251 high school students (see Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2009 for details). These survey studies involved in-person and online data collection in which youth detailed their typical online activities, their reasons for using social networking sites, and the degree of overlap between their online and offline friendships. Other than some differences in background questions, the surveys and data collection methods were identical for these two survey studies.

In total, these studies provide data from 394 participants (133 college students and 261 high school students) between the ages of 13 and 29 years. Table 1 provides details about the participants. All four studies explored teens and emerging adults' uses,

**Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics**

	<i>Focus Group College</i>	<i>Focus Group High School</i>	<i>Survey High School</i>	<i>Survey-College</i>
Year of study	2006	2008	2008	2007
Sample size	23	10	251	110
Male	12 (52%)	3 (30%)	102 (41%)	55 (50%)
Female	11 (48%)	7 (70%)	149 (59%)	55 (50%)
Mean age	20.5	16.2	16.3	21.5
Age range	18–23 years	14–18 years	13–19 years	18–29 years
Race/ethnicity				
Latino	5 (22%)	1 (10%)	176 (70%)	56 (51%)
Caucasian	8 (35%)	6 (60%)	49 (20%)	7 (6.5%)
Asian	5 (22%)	3 (30%)	3 (1%)	22 (20%)
African Am	1 (4%)	0	3 (1%)	7 (6.5%)
Other	4 (17%)	0	19 (8%)	18 (16%)

activities, motivations, feelings, and impacts of use on social networking sites. It is worth noting that both of the survey study samples were predominately Latino and MySpace was their social networking site of choice.

### *Analytic Plan*

Previous efforts to determine if groups of individuals are communities have often relied on self-report about one's feelings about his or her group. These feelings of membership, influence, integration of needs, shared connection, and immersion have been useful in studies of virtual, shared interest, and physical communities. As such, data was mined from four studies for evidence of psychological sense of community and sense of virtual community. To do so, the key characteristics identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and Koh and Kim (2003) are used as a top down approach to the data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Transcripts and field note from the focus groups were mined for statements and interactions that demonstrate key aspects of PSC/SVC, while survey data were analyzed for the prevalence of characteristics that are core to these theories. Because the McMillan and Chavis (1986) conceptualization of PSC does not specify any need for physical interactions and because it is the more widely used theory for assessing communities, more focus is placed on identifying indicators of PSC. However, the inclusion of Koh and Kim's (2003) concept of immersion suggests a characteristic that may be unique to online interaction.

In addition to mining the data for support of these indicators of PSC/SVC, a bottom-up approach was used to allow relevant themes to emerge from the data

**Table 2. Confirmatory Topics for Psychological Sense of Community and Sense of Virtual Community**

	<i>Psychological Sense of Community</i>	<i>Sense of Virtual Community</i>
Membership	Boundaries Emotional safety Personal investment Sense of belonging and identification	General sense of membership  Shared identity
Influence	Influence on the community Influenced by the community	Influence on others in the community
Integration and fulfillment of needs	Shared values Satisfying needs and exchanging resources	
Shared emotional connection	Positive contact with members Sharing important experiences Investment by members in the community Honoring members of the group	
Immersion		Involvement/absorption in the community

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was done by reviewing transcripts, field notes, and open-ended survey items. To assess the trustworthiness of these interpretations, a peer debriefer reviewed the data and interpretations. Thus, this study is a mixed-method, post-hoc analysis using a confirmatory (top-down) and exploratory (bottom-up) approach. Table 2 lists the confirmatory topics utilized.

It should also be noted that when teens and emerging adults discuss their social networking site connections, activities, and feelings they are describing their experience with their personal network of friends, not MySpace or Facebook as one large unit. Therefore, this analysis is based on the social groupings that participants identify rather than assessing an entire social networking site as one (potential) mega-community.

## RESULTS

### *Membership*

The qualitative and quantitative data were explored for evidence of a sense of membership in these social networking sites (SNS) by the teens and emerging adults. Membership is conceptualized as people's feeling of belonging and connection to the group. General membership as defined by Koh and Kim (2003) describes the emotional ties and positive connection to the group and the sense of leadership within the group. Membership as defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986) denotes the presence of boundaries between who is a member and who is not as well as signs of membership offering emotional safety, requiring personal investment, and engendering a sense of belonging and identification.

*General membership and boundaries.* In looking across the four studies for indicators of membership in general, little evidence was found. Although being a registered user of a SNS suggested membership, youth without accounts still visited the sites, either as an observer or with a registered friend, which allowed them access to read, post, and comment on others' profiles. From the survey studies, about half of high school (43%) and college students (56%) without an account visit SNS regularly. Thus, having a profile on these sites was not a sufficient criterion for membership. Although some users were part of Facebook and MySpace groups online, they did not view their typical use as exclusive. As such, there was no core group(s) identified on these sites and there was also no evidence of leadership within the groups or sites.

Although participants in all four studies reported having large friend networks (up to 793 with an average of about 150), almost all noted that many of their "friends" did not know or were friends with the same people in their own networks. As such, no core group could be identified. One reason for the low amount of overlap between friend networks was that many of the college (82%) and high school (84%) students surveyed reported mainly using social networking sites to keep in touch with friends and family. Many of the friends with whom participants maintained contact were from different schools, cities, states, and/or countries. As such, their social networks were large and relatively unique.

When asked about why participants had a SNS profile, common answers were to keep up with friends from out of the area (e.g., "see what friends have been doing since I cannot visit them"), or friends that participants had lost contact with and/or do not see in-person (e.g., "to keep in touch with people that are in different states, it's

good for time-zones, I've gotten in touch with people that I lost their number, and I just typed in their name, then I found their page, and I could talk to them again.”). Sometimes, the connection was viewed as impersonal, yet participants liked having some sort of connection.

There's a lot of friends from back home that, like, the only contact I have with them is MySpace, so it's just kind of a “hey, what's up? Remember that time when we knew each other?” and then that's about as far as it gets, you don't really go out and hang out with the person. (College male)

Focus group discussions and survey results suggest that SNS users have large networks of connections with people with little overlap of their friends and others' friends. As such, no clear perimeter or boundary was identifiable to determine who was a member or not.

*Emotional safety.* For PSC, feeling emotionally safe within the groups is another component of community membership. One of the survey questions asked of participants was whether their SNS use had caused problems or helped fix problems with a friend. Twenty-five percent of high school and 21% of college students reported that something on a SNS had caused problems with their friends. In analyzing their open-ended responses, several themes emerged. The most common problem was *drama*, in which rumors were spread and infidelities were discovered. The second most common problems were *misunderstandings* in which friends felt excluded and romantic partners interpreted comments by others as signs on infidelity, when none had occurred. The third most common problem was the *aggravation of problems* due to the asynchronous interaction and indirect uses of power features. For instance, changes to top friends lists (formerly top 8) and divulging of private information in a public space through comments.

Discussions in the focus groups also suggested that these sites could be emotionally unsafe. For instance, one adolescent girl described her experience with a Facebook application:

Girl: There was this honesty box where your friends could leave honest info about you anonymously. I was so excited at first, to hear what people think. It just made me cry and I removed the app [application] the very next day.

Facilitator: Did they write mean things?

Girl: My “friends” (fingers in the air in a quotation mark) said horrible things about me! I guess its what they really think of me. It was just awful.

Other participants had tried and deleted the honesty box just as quickly.

Some survey respondents noted that their SNS use had helped fix a problem with a friend (19% of high school and 11% of college students). The three most common themes that emerged from the open-ended responses were that the SNS provided a safe space to “talk” out problems, offered evidence of what was really “said” when a misunderstanding occurred (because the comments are printed on the profile) and offered a medium for maintaining friendships and keeping in touch. Some of the focus group data supported this as well, in which people rather “message than talk” when a problem arose.

In all, there is evidence of some emotionally safe and unsafe activities for youth on these sites.

*Personal investment.* Another aspect of membership in a community is that participants have a sense of personal investment in the group. In all four studies there was ample evidence of a large time investment in SNS. For instance, high school participants admitted to going online “right when they got home” because “everyone talks on their MySpace after school.” In fact, 83% of high school and 67% of college students surveyed reported being on the site every day. This frequent, if not daily, use supports Koh and Kim’s (2003) notion of *immersion* in the site in which users feel a strong need, if not compulsion, to use the site.

Although time investment was high, emotional investment seemed low. As a 16-year old girl admitted, “I don’t talk to 3/4 of my friends (online)...most of those people I wouldn’t leave anything on their wall, we’re acquaintances.” Rather than a strong emotional need to visit these sites, participants frequently admitted to using SNS as a way to combat boredom. As college students noted, “It’s something to do when you’re bored, you just kinda look at everyone’s page, something different.” “It’s something to do when you don’t have anything else to do or you just, like, don’t want to read anymore so just go on MySpace and check my profile.” The high school and college student survey data supported these findings as well. When asked about the most common reasons for using SNS, 63% of high school and 52% of college students answered to “fill up time/not be bored.”

*Identification.* Another aspect of membership is whether individuals identify with the community. In looking across all four studies, there was no evidence that adolescents and emerging adults had a sense of a MySpace or Facebook identity or a sense of empathy, connection, or unity with the others on the site. However, there was lots of evidence that youth use these sites for identity expression, especially to present a favorable representation of oneself (e.g., “try to be impressive by putting up certain things on their profiles” (high school female), “try to show themselves more than what they really are, kind of like advertise themselves and market themselves” (college male), “guys are trying to present more, like, an image about everything else around them like, ‘oh look I’m at a club and there’s, like, eight girls around me. Let’s take a picture” (college male). Participants report spending a lot of time modifying and updating their profile, selecting flattering pictures (and even using Photoshop to remove blemishes and acne), and adding links to cool clips and images. Although all participants acknowledged this desire for an attractive and favorable portrayal of one’s self, there was concern that these representations were insincere or not authentic. “I would say that everyone’s trying to put a little bit better than they actually are, and there are definitely some people that take it too far” (college female).

Although using SNS for identity exploration and expression was commonplace in all four studies, none of the data suggested that users had an identity based on their SNS use or SNS network connection or a sense of identifying with other users in their friend networks.

### ***Influence***

McMillan and Chavis (1986) and Koh and Kim (2003) conceptualize influence as the ways in which members influence and are influenced by others. At its core, influence is a bidirectional display of power between members. This does not mean that power is

equivalent between all members, but that there are opportunities for members to have an impact on the group and for the group to affect the individual.

In looking at how influence is distributed across SNS, it appears that individual users hold the bulk of the power. That is due to their ability to add, block, or delete friends, edit and remove comments, and untag photographs. These uses of power were commonly exercised within all four studies with 71% of high school and 64% of college students reporting that they had deleted a friend and almost half of high school (47%) and a third of college (34%) students having blocked a friend. In this way, individual users have unilateral power to allow access and/or interaction. For instance, on Facebook, once deleted, former friends cannot visit the profile, leave messages, or video chat. If blocked, the former friend cannot search for the user at a later point, send a friend request to reestablish the connection, read anything written by the user on another friend's profile, or receive status updates of any activity by the user on any mutual friend's profile. When asked specifically why youth block or delete friends, common reasons were annoyance ("They piss me off"), restricting privacy ("I don't want the whole world to see my page"), lack of contact ("people that I never ever talk to on MySpace, I'll just delete them"), a break-up ("ex-girlfriend was crazy"), or a simple preference ("I just delete people because I feel like it").

On MySpace, another display of power is the ordering of friends on one's profile. Formerly known as the "Top 8," in which users' top eight friends' profile pictures and user names are on display on the individual user's profile, has since been relaxed to hide this feature or allow any number of top friends. Although this feature was intended to be a quick link to profiles the user visits or interacts with often, the feature offers a method for displaying importance and a tool for dropping or elevating friends' status. Throughout the focus groups, MySpace users noted the political aspects of this feature. For instance, one college female described this feature as a way a friend punished another friend, "like she's kind of mad because one of our friends wrote something mean on one of her pictures, like something like, 'oh, you look weird' something like that. She got mad, changed it [the comment], and changed her Top 8 and stuff." A male college student described his reasons for deleting this feature, "Um, I actually took my Top 8 out of my profile. It just got way too stressful. You see someone and you're like, 'hey homie' and they're like, 'no we're not homies anymore, I'm not even in your Top 8.'"

Across the four studies, it appears that individual users maintained a lot of influence over others' access to the user. However, there was little evidence that others had much influence on the individual users.

### ***Integration and Fulfillment of Needs***

Another component of a sense of community is the feeling that one's needs are met by participating in the group. These needs may be tangible, material items or intangible wants such as emotional connection and support. Often, these needs can be viewed as things that are valued and desired (Royal & Rossi, 1996). McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe these as shared values, a satisfying of needs, an emotional connection, and an exchanging of resources.

*Shared values.* Within the survey results and transcripts of the focus groups there is little evidence of shared values for these online groups. However, in participating in the focus groups and reading the field notes, there was clearly agreement about the norms for using SNS. For instance, focus group members laughed at the same comments,

nodded often when participants discussed activities on these sites and agreed with many of the comments of their fellow group members. Although these responses do not explicitly identify group norms and values, these nonverbal reactions imply that some shared values and norms exist on these sites.

In addition to these subtle behaviors, focus group participants did report working together with others on SNS for a common purpose. This shared purpose may indicate an underlying common value. However, often these collaborative endeavors were manipulative in nature and frequently involved romantic pursuits. As a college female described:

My friend, when she had just broken up with her boyfriend, she and her other best friend, they would leave each other comments saying, 'oh, like it was so much fun at this other guy's house the other night!' But it was all lies and I would ask her about it, I would be like, 'Christie, what is this?' and she's like, 'Oh we're just making it up so we can make him jealous.'

Similar discussions occurred in other groups in which males would ask attractive female friends (or vice versa) to leave flirtatious comments on their profiles to appear more attractive to others. Below is one of these conversations with a college female.

Female: Like my roommate, she has a crush on this guy and she'll ask all her guy friends to post comments on MySpace so like maybe he'll see and get jealous.  
Facilitator: Is it working?  
Female: Yea, a little bit (laughing).

Although these discussions may not exemplify the typical interdependence displayed when working towards common values and goals, they do show collaborative efforts that may suggest shared values for the functions of these sites and the ways they influence others.

*Satisfying needs.* In exploring how teens and emerging adults might use SNS to satisfy their needs, the data overwhelmingly suggest that these sites address a need for connection with others. People report wanting to be connected and know what is happening in their friends' lives. Participants reported using SNS "to keep track of people, maybe, see what they're up to just by looking at their pictures" (female college). Frequently, the online interaction offered another way to stay connected to offline friends. As a college female states, "I feel like I know people better from looking at their page, by looking at what they say to people and you get to know one side of them [in person] and you get to know another side [online]." In the survey studies, 35% of high school and 20% of college students felt that their SNS use had made them closer to their friends. Furthermore, on these surveys, adolescents' most frequent activities on these sites were very social in nature. For instance, "send/respond to messages/invites" (48.5% of high school and 44% of college), "write comments on other peoples' page/wall" (34% of high school and 39% of college), and "browse my

friends' profiles/walls/pages" (26% of high school and 47% of college) were listed as the top three activities on SNS.

*Exchanging resources.* Throughout the focus group transcripts, there is evidence that SNS provided a way for users to "keep in the loop," which was viewed as an added social resource. For instance, in discussing the benefits of SNS, one college male enthusiastically recounted, "Oh my god, I would have never even heard about that but suddenly this event pops up and it's like some of my friends are going to this, and it's like, wow, I need to go to this event and I wouldn't have even known about this if it hadn't been for this [wall post]!"

Users also reported using SNS as a way to share interests and media resources as well as promote issues, local happenings, and artistic endeavors. Users of social networking sites frequently posted such things as video clips, links to bands, and pictures of artwork. Those trying to pursue music careers provided mp3 files of their songs on their profile and listings of local gigs. As one college male described, "I had a friend make a CD, and he was able to like, link a couple songs on his MySpace... You don't expect to get a record deal off it I guess, but it's still kinda cool you can do that."

On the whole, there appears to be support for integration and fulfillment of needs by using SNS to stay abreast of current happenings and for users to share interests and talents.

### ***Shared Emotional Connection***

A fourth component of PSC is feeling a shared emotional connection with others. In exploring the four studies, there is a mixture of both shared connections and feelings of isolation reported by participants.

*Positive contact.* Participants in the focus groups frequently discussed how MySpace and Facebook offered ways to build and maintain connections to others. These connections were typically viewed as beneficial. As a college male admitted, "if I hadn't had a MySpace, I feel like I probably wouldn't have known as many people outside of my school and my social network, outside of my close community I guess." Similarly, a college female mentioned, "like if I went to a party with people from other schools, and then you go there, go to their MySpace and say like 'hey, what's up, is there another happening?' or something, and then you kinda just like mesh with other schools, people."

Although there was an acknowledgment of the increased contact, there was concern that logging on might reduce one's likelihood of picking up the phone or visiting a friend. As one college male noted, "but it's definitely a good social utility like, yea, it's true, you realize that, yea, you stay in touch with—even people you are close with. It's like, 'hey what are you doing?' 'Oh not much, just homework.' Which is OK, but um, it's definitely not a substitute [for face-to-face contact]."

Some participants acknowledged that they liked the contact online but often felt it was insincere. As one college male stated, "Yea, like in a very superficial way but you can know where they are at and you kind of feel a little bit informed or connected." For the high school students, it appeared that online connections did not imply any sort of offline relationship. One female teen complained that, "everyone's friends with these people, but they're not really friends. You just see them at school—When you see them, they don't even say 'hi.'"

*Sharing important experiences.* Participants overwhelmingly report using SNS to share what is happening in their lives and see what others are doing in theirs. Experiences are documented frequently through such things as status updates, profile changes, posted pictures, relationship status, and comments. When asked about the most frequent activities online, survey respondents reported that they “read/respond to comments on my page/posts on my wall” (70% of high school and 81% of college students) and “edit my profile and update my status” (38% of high school and 20% of college students). In the focus groups, the topic of sharing life events was commonplace. When discussing what types of things people read and share on MySpace, a college male responded with:

When you're just browsing through and you see a picture of your friend jumping out of a plane or something like that, you're gonna go to their profile and be like 'Wait, did he really just do that?' you know... it's just really easy to get updated from people and stuff like that. Just through what they're putting on their page you can see what they're doing and what they've been up to and if they have a girlfriend, boyfriend, or if they're playing some new sport or have a new hobby, it's really easy to get up on it because they're probably going to update their MySpace about it.

*Investment by members in the community.* Another aspect of shared emotional connections is the sense that members are invested in the group. Throughout all the focus group data there was clearly a large time investment on these sites but not much evidence that there was an emotional investment. As one college male noted,

Um, I feel similarly to how he does. For the most part, it's nice to have a connection of some sort but a lot of times I doubt how useful it [SNS] really is and how sincere it really is. So I think if it were to disappear it might take a little bit of adjustment time. (pause) I don't think it would take me very long to just like, to adjust to its absence.”

On the whole, participants believed that they would be upset if they were banned from the site and their friends continued to use it. However, none reported that they would be bothered if the whole site disappeared. Thus, there seemed to be an investment to connections with others but not necessarily in the social networking site as a community.

Say MySpace went out of business, were to no longer exist, I wouldn't really care... I feel that I'm gonna lose contact with many friends, but if something else were to happen out of my reach then it wouldn't, I mean, it wouldn't bother me. (College male)

Even though users spend large amounts of time on these sites, only 6% of the all the focus group participants believed that they would be disappointed if the social networking site went down or would recreate a profile if their current one were somehow deleted.

*Honoring members of the group.* Evidence that users honored other members in the group is provided by the use of pictures and comments on friends' profiles. The use of comments seemed to be an especially common way of acknowledging other users. For instance, a college male described being excited by positive feedback. "I put, like, a bunch of clips on my page, you know. I got like so many comments like, 'dude this is tight, thanks for this.'" This enjoyment of positive comments was echoed by a college female who stated, "When you get more comments, you feel more special." High school females also noted that they were more likely to comment on a friend's page if her status was "sad." Interestingly, these girls opted to use the public comment feature, rather than send a private message.

On the whole, there seems to be support for a shared emotional connection on these sites. Although there was little evidence of investment beyond time, users felt connected to others and used site features, such as comments, as a way to acknowledge feelings and honor members.

## DISCUSSION

This post hoc, mixed-method study of the psychological sense of (virtual) community aspects of social networking sites found some, but not strong, evidence that typical teen and emerging adult uses of MySpace and Facebook represent online communities. From the focus groups and survey studies, there was little support for membership in general or any of the specific membership characteristics identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) or Koh and Kim (2003). Users' networks were large and expansive with little evidence of overlap or boundaries. Power appeared for the most part to be unilateral, with profile creators adding, blocking, and deleting "friends" at will. As such, the purposes and benefits of these online settings varied from person to person without any interdependence for use or purpose. Thus, evidence of influence was found for users influencing the group but not the reverse. Support for integration and

**Table 3. Characteristics of Psychological Sense of Community and Sense of Virtual Community**

	<i>Strong Evidence</i>	<i>Some Evidence</i>	<i>Little to No Evidence</i>
Membership			X
Boundaries			X
Emotional safety			X
Personal investment		X	
Sense of belonging and identification			X
Influence		X	
Influenced by the community			X
Influence on the community	X		
Integration and fulfillment of needs		X	
Shared values		X	
Satisfying needs		X	
Exchanging resources	X		
Shared emotional connection		X	
Positive contact with members		X	
Sharing important experiences	X		
Investment by members in the community			X
Honoring members of the group		X	
Immersion	X		

fulfillment of needs was mixed. No direct evidence supports the notion of shared values and needs, but there were indications of this in the nonverbal behaviors during the focus groups and the manipulative ways users conspired for specific purposes. The data suggest that these sites support a feeling of shared emotional connection. Users reported sharing important experiences often, having positive contact with others and honoring members at times. However, investment in the sites' continuation and existence was low. On the whole, immersion as described by Koh and Kim (2003) was high with users visiting these sites frequently, if not daily (see Table 3 for details).

### ***Online Settlements or Communities—Does the Term Matter?***

Community Psychology is focused on studying communities because it is this synergistic grouping of people that creates values, resources, structure, and support. Although the word *community* is commonplace in our vernacular, it is more than just interconnected individuals. Communities transcend pure individualism and allow for greater understanding, intervening, and promoting of social justice and wellbeing. They provide important context, collective power, and social structure for their members (Dalton et al., 2001). It is for these reasons that Community Psychology in the United States diverged from its clinical and individualistic roots (Angelique & Culley, 2007). Given that communities are such unique and vital entities, it is important not to apply the term to groupings that have not yet matured to the level of synergy.

### ***Why So Few Indicators of Community?***

Social networking sites are frequently described as online communities, yet these data provide little support for these sites engendering a strong sense of community. Why? One possible explanation is that the typical individual use by teens and emerging adults lack a common purpose. In physical communities, there are collective needs and wants for the group (Heller, 1989). Residents are interested in such things as community safety, visual appeal, property values, recreational activities, and access to roads, stores, utilities, etc. In shared interest communities there is a common interest that connects members. Whether people are fans of the same kind of music, play the same sport, live with the same lifestyle choices, or share the same social oppression and injustice, there is a commonality that attracts and connects people to the group. As such, it is quite feasible that Facebook and MySpace groups have these characteristics of communities, but individual uses do not appear to. Furthermore, physical and shared interest groups also have a distribution of power (Etzioni, 1994), in which no one individual member can sever another's access to the group without others knowing. For online groups, a webmaster or administrator could hold more power to manage interactions and membership but their power, if abused, can be noticed and questioned by others. For instance, in Baym's (2007) study of Swedish independent music fans, members interacted on a variety of sites, which limits the power any one person could hold over others. If members of the community are blocked on one site, they can meet on another site instead. Individual SNS users do not share power the same way as they can edit, delete, and block on their profile without other users' knowledge. It is feasible that having a shared interest/common purpose and a distribution of power may be key to engendering a greater sense of interdependence and as such create a sense of community for users.

Although SNS groups may be communities, these data found that typical individual uses do not appear community-like. However, individual uses of SNS may

be tools for supporting other communities. For instance, church youth groups or cheerleading squads may interact on SNS, which could strengthen their connections to these communities. Members might be friends with others on these sites and these contacts may intensify their emotional connection to one another and their commitment to the offline group. Imagine a chess club in which members post on their profiles book suggestions, chess strategies, and pictures of games as well as use a chess application that enables users to play each other online. These chess club members may feel a stronger sense of community due to their community membership in the chess club and the way that the SNS promotes enjoyable online interactions. Some recent research on the uses of MySpace and Facebook support its use as a tool for connecting to different groups. For instance, Graham, Faix, and Hartman's (2009) recent study in library science found that although the purpose of creating the Kimbel Library (a university library) Facebook Group was to connect to the university's students, the group provided access and connection for individual librarians to colleagues at other universities. Thus, individual librarians could connect to their local library community (of students, staff, and other librarians) as well as their professional community (of librarians and libraries at other universities). In such situations, SNS use could be a valuable tool for promoting and supporting connections to a variety of other communities. However, this does not mean that typical uses by individual users are in and of themselves, online communities.

### ***Limitations***

Like all research, there are limitations to this study. First, these data were gathered for other purposes and assessing psychological sense of (virtual) community was not a primary goal. Using a normed instrument such as the Sense of Community Index-2 (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008) may have provided a more direct assessment of PSC. However, this mixed-method approach may offer more detailed and richer data than a standardized measure. Furthermore, the use of qualitative data to assess PSC is not uncommon (e.g., Brodsky, 1998). Second, these studies only explored individual uses of SNS and did not collect data on Facebook and MySpace groups, which may be more community-like. Along these lines, there may be subsets of users with small, overlapping peer networks. These users may feel a stronger sense of membership, influence, and connection than typical users with vast and diverse friend lists. Lastly, participants in the survey studies were largely Latino and mainly users of MySpace. Thus, their responses may not be applicable to other ethnicities and SNS users. However, their inclusion provides information about users who are typically under-represented in Internet research. Future research should explore sense of (virtual) community with more nationally representative samples.

### **CONCLUSION**

Uses of social networking sites are pervasive with hundreds of millions of unique users each month. Although these sites are often referred to as online communities, these data suggest that individual uses support networked individualism rather than reflect a sense of community. This networked individualism allows for numerous connections, but at the individual rather than group level, in which users operate as switchboards, connecting others and helping form intricate webs (Wellman, 2002). Teens and emerging adults clearly use these sites to maintain connections with others (especially

with people from different geographical regions and aspects of their lives), share important experiences, and exchange resources. However, there is little evidence of membership, shared influence, and a bidirectional distribution of power.

As a field that studies communities and people's feelings about those communities, we should be more selective in how the term is used and what that entails. Understanding how these online resources may support other types of communities will be more worthwhile than simply describing such individualized processes as communities. Social networking sites appear to be prominent aspects of adolescents' lives but their uses of these sites do not seem to be communities, rather they appear to be a way for individuals to be networked with other individuals online.

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