

# Construction and Depiction of Identity in Young Adult Novels with Digital Communication Technologies

**T**eens' lives are permeated by their own digitally mediated participation in social worlds through the use of media such as Twitter®, YouTube®, Facebook®, text messaging, emailing, and social networking sites (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Livingstone, 2008; Williams & Zenger, 2012). The 2012 revision of the International Reading Association's (IRA) position paper on Adolescent Literacy recognizes the growing importance of digital media in the lives of teens and the ways those media are "transforming how adolescents use literacy to construct both their online and offline identities" (p. 7). These online social worlds provide today's adolescents with new ways of exploring and expressing their identities through evolving types of literacy practices. Teens' use of digital media should be conceptualized as part of their fluid and dynamic identity development in a world of networked technologies.

## **Young Adult Literature and Constructions of Identity**

In young adult (YA) literature, the exploration of identity development has always been a common trope. Today, increasing numbers of novels include digital communication within their narratives, either as snippets embedded within traditional narrative or as books comprised solely of digital messages (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010), reflective of the current influx of digital media in the lives and identities of adolescents.

The construct of identity development, so central to YA literature, is now being explored through characters using digital media as a part of their everyday lives. These novels depict characters' uses of digital media as venues for their identity play, construction, and development. They describe how adolescents position and present themselves as people, including how they develop online profiles and engage in online interactions, which also opens the door to exploring issues of reliability. Are individuals truly who they say they are online? Are they manipulating personal facts in order to be a better version of themselves? Are they pretending to be someone else? For what purposes are they creating their online selves?

As new literacies continue to impact the daily lives of teens, an examination of characters' in-text identity constructions is a way to encourage comparisons with teens' real-life identity explorations. Awareness of how these identity construction practices are represented in fictional literature can help teens critically analyze the types of digital media they use in their own lives and how online identity constructions are changing the ways people express and understand themselves and others in both off- and online spaces (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010; Bean & Moni, 2003). Although digital media is an integral part of many teens' daily lives, teens rarely are given the opportunity to actively discuss and unpack the significance of this in school, especially in regards to identity construction.

This article discusses intersections of adolescents' digital media and identity practices within YA literature by exploring the ways fictional characters, as portrayed in YA novels, construct their identities in online spaces. It presents a literary analysis of six exemplar novels that explore how fictional teen characters use online literacies, specifically social networking sites, chatrooms, and blogs, to construct and represent their online selves.

## Context of the Study

Youth identities, as constructed through representations of digital technologies in six realistic fiction YA novels published between 2007–2010, were analyzed as a way of identifying the identity constructs portrayed in the novels in order to ultimately share them with teens. Novels selected for this study were a part of a larger study looking at overall types of digital communications represented in YA novels with the intent of identifying which characters were using digital communication, how and why they were using it, and how digital communication was represented overall (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010). The larger study focused on the structure and types of digital communications included in the books, including the

organization of the novels, the writing conventions used, and the reasons the digital communication was used by the characters. The study aimed to present an overview of how digital media was being infused into YA literature.

During the larger study, in addition to the structure of the novels, the ways in which the characters were using the digital technologies to construct and present their identities stood out. Several meta-themes related to characters' digital technology usage and adolescent identity development began to emerge (Glaser, 1965), specifically teens using digital technologies to: a) maintain social status, b) position themselves as part of a group, c) find acceptance, d) find romantic relationships, e) hide one's true self, and f) be anonymous.

In order to examine more closely characters' identity motivations, as depicted by the novels, we selected six focal novels we felt exemplified these themes, given their primary plot emphases on the processes and implications of constructing identity via digital media. Also, novels written more recently were intentionally selected to best represent current adolescent literacy practices. (See Table 1 for a list of additional novels that incorporate themes of digital media and identity construction.) The six novels were

then analyzed by focusing on the interpersonal discursively constituted relationships in which the main characters engaged (Harré & Gillet, 1994). As Hobbs (2011) has written, "Issues of representation come into play when people use digital images of themselves and their peers to represent their personal and social experiences . . . . What we do online affects our identity, our self-esteem, our relationships, and our future" (p. 17).

In this analysis, we focused on identity construction, or how characters position, present, and represent themselves through forms of digital technology as purposeful types of people and how these representations impact the way teens see themselves and idealize themselves within their social worlds. We also focused on issues of online truth telling and identity

**Table 1.** Additional YA titles with digital communication technologies

Title	Author	Copyright
<i>Butter</i>	Lange, E. J.	2012
<i>Exposed</i>	Vaught, S.	2008
<i>Little Blog on the Prairie</i>	Bell, C. D.	2010
<i>Miss Fortune Cookie</i>	Bjorkman, L.	2012
<i>My Invisible Boyfriend</i>	Day, S.	2011
<i>My Life Undecided</i>	Brody, J.	2011
<i>serafina67 *urgently requires life*</i>	Day, D.	2008
<i>Seth Baumgartner's Love Manifesto</i>	Luper, E.	2010
<i>Something to Blog About</i>	Norris, S.	2008
<i>thejuliangame</i>	Griffin, A.	2010
<i>This Girl Is Different</i>	Johnson, J. J.	2011
<i>Tweet Heart</i>	Rudnick, E.	2010
<i>Unfriended (Top 8 - Book 3)</i>	Finn, K.	2011
<i>Want to Go Private?</i>	Littman, S. D.	2011
<i>What Boys Really Want</i>	Hautman, P.	2012
<i>What's Your Status (Top 8 - Book 2)</i>	Finn, K.	2010

manipulation in the novels, recognizing that an important part of identity development is the manipulating of personal facts to present different possibilities—either idealized projections or some degree of substitution—for offline selves. A closer examination of the novels allowed each theme to be unpacked in depth and in turn. In the following sections, each of the six themes is explored through one of the focal novels and is contextualized with research on adolescents' digital media usage.

### Reasons to Construct and Online Identity

Digital communication as a particular, but integrated, practice of characters' daily lives was reflected in all

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titles, much like digital technologies are integrated into real adolescents' lives and identities (Leander & McKim, 2003; Lewis & Fabbos, 2005). This analysis examines how teen characters communicate digitally, thus constructing dynamic, networked, and social personal identities, and how they test the very meaning of identity by creating online personas to meet and communicate

with friends and unknown others.

#### To Maintain Social Status

As one part of their identity-building repertoire, teens often negotiate and maintain social status via social networking websites (Cox Communications, 2012). On such websites, the acts of posting status updates, keeping up a personal profile page, sending and receiving comments, and assembling an acceptable friend list are key components of a teen's relationships and social status. This ritualized focus on social networking sites as a way to maintain social status was a central part of the plot in the novel *Top 8* (Finn, 2008).

Popular girl and main character Madison relied on her Friendverse page as a part of her social life and offline social standing. As she stated right in the beginning of the book, setting the stage for the im-

portance of the social networking site Friendverse in her social life, "Friendverse was crucial. . . . Friendverse was a necessity" (p. 13). She took great care in her profile picture, her top 8 friends, and her shared personal information. As described by Stone (in Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), "the construction of an identity is . . . a public process that involves both the 'identity announcement' made by the individual claiming an identity and the 'identity placement' made by others who endorse the claimed identity" (p. 188). The presentation of self on a social networking site influences how a person is perceived and classified in the social network.

A key part of Madison's identity-announcing practices was her ability to be visible on Friendverse by posting comments, photos, and private jokes on her personal page and on those of others in her network of friends. Who was in her network was critical and signified her popularity, replicating in fiction the importance of a teen's online profile page and one's social standing (Williams, 2008). Comments and posts were crucial, too, as the act of sending a comment was carefully crafted with the knowledge that others would read it. Private jokes were outwardly shared to show the closeness of a friendship, comments were left to cause drama, and romantic notes were posted as a sign of affection and ownership. Friends and significant others were expected to read, post, and comment, and offense could be taken if such reactions to posts were not provided (Cox Communications, 2012).

When describing the importance of how her friends were presented on their personal pages and their correlation with their relationship status, Madison stated, "My friends and I took our Top 8s seriously. It had been a big deal when I'd moved Justin to my number one spot . . ." (Finn, pp. 29–31), signifying that they were in a serious relationship and that she put her boyfriend above all others. This was an important convention in the "rules" of Madison's social network and a key identity announcement. Her status and page updates were carefully scrutinized by her peers, and significant changes were noticed. For example, shortly after Madison updated her page moving her boyfriend in her friend rankings, a friend commented, "You changed your status! And I see you updated your Top 8—and put Justin in the number one spot! I guess this means you two lovebirds are official!" (p. 3). As a result of the importance and

close scrutiny social networking site updates signified, Madison took care to present herself as the popular girl she was and wanted to remain. She was conscious of following social norms, because the “goal [of the careful creation of a personal social networking page] is to look cool and receive peer validation” (boyd, 2006, para. 1), a crucial component of maintaining social status.

When Madison went on vacation, someone hacked her Friendverse page and wreaked havoc on her relationships due to jealousy over Madison’s popularity status. Her friends and classmates quickly accepted the falsified hurtful posts as truth, knowing the importance and careful thought behind each post. They assumed information provided by an individual was reliable, as they knew the person behind the posts. In other words, such announcements, authorized or not, were endorsed by others. Because of their existence on the Web, they are permanently stored, existing into perpetuity—pasteable, postable, and judgmental. As one “friend” wrote in the comments soon after Madison was hacked, “Okay, Mad, we’ve been friends for a long time. So what’s up with writing about the TOTAL MISTAKE I made at camp last summer that you swore you’d never tell anyone about? Apparently, that didn’t include BLOGGING about it. Thanx a lot, Mad. Really” (p. 27). No attempt was made by this friend or others to consider that Madison was not the person behind the posts. If it was on Friendverse, it was truth.

When she returned home, Madison needed to face the consequences of the fabricated posts, attempt to repair friendships, and reclaim her social status. Group status can be fragile, and online perceptions can color offline relationships. It took offline conversations, a Friendverse bulletin, and an online group apology, but ultimately, fictional Madison and her friends realized the power of how one can be represented in an online profile, how the truth can be twisted, and how to learn when to trust that what is shown online is also true offline.

### **To Position Themselves as Part of a Group**

Feelings of belonging are a crucial part of adolescent identity development (Mazarella, 2005; Thiel, 2005). Teens want to fit in and be accepted, and group affiliations help to define identity. In *Top 8*, Madison defined her group via her network of friends on a

social networking website; others find different types of online social networks from which to find self-validation. Many teens seek offline groups to belong to, such as school or religious groups; in fact, some young people situate their identity building in deep involvement with one group, such as being a member of an athletic team. For teenagers, membership in such social groups can be tenuous.

Breaking into groups can be difficult. Group membership implies that others recognize and ratify a potential member as legitimate, that they

“place” that person in the group. Such placement by others makes clear the dialogic and discursive nature of identity work.

The novel *The Rule of Won* (Petrucha, 2008) tells of an enigmatic new student who forms an almost cult-like group called “The Crave,” based on a controversial self-help

book that promotes the power of positive thinking. The group presented itself as all-inclusive; its initial members were those who wished to be a part of something but who belonged to no other school group. By joining The Crave, these fictional students who felt on the fringe of their social worlds quickly found themselves an integral and accepted part of a group.

Although membership was initially open, the group members began segregating themselves in order to feel special, even elite—a new feeling for many of the group members. The leader of the group created an online blog as a venue for group members to be involved. Participants in the blog shared their offline identities, but used the online space to position themselves as members of the group and establish their social standing. “I’ve set up a private message board. Sign in with the password, real names only, and please don’t share it with anyone outside the Crave” (Petrucha, 2008, p. 22). The blog became a tool for segregation, identity, and status. Through the blog, people began claiming membership in the elite group, and friendships and feelings of belonging emerged in the online and offline world.

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Initially all seemed to be going well. One school loner began to blossom, “I really want to thank everyone for saying hello to me whenever they see me; it really lifts my spirits! After being so unpopular for so long, I’m so happy to have a bunch of new friends . . .” (p. 96). But after initial friendships developed, the group took on a life of its own and started to grow. The initial members started to lose the feeling of being special, and their sense of belonging was com-

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promised. “It’s great that the club is getting big and all, but for some people it makes it really hard to talk about certain people because now those certain people are members and listening in. So, I’m wondering if we can limit the membership or maybe have a separate meeting just with the original Cravers?” (p. 135). The use of a private, password-protected blog as a way to claim membership in and position oneself as a member of a group was reliant on the group remaining small and exclusive. When the group became too large, posts on the blog switched from being primarily positive messages celebrating group belonging to negative messages complaining about other group members, particularly those newer to the group. The blog became the antithesis of its original intention. Private online content impacted offline social standings and group memberships. What initially began as a means for finding a group in which to belong ultimately transitioned into an unsafe place where many did not feel accepted.

### **To Find Acceptance**

As discussed above, group belonging is a crucial part of a teen’s identity. Many teens, in particular those with few friends and relationships, feel alone, unable to become part of real-life offline groups. In *The Rule of Won*, teens joined online groups where they knew the other group members in their offline worlds. A common alternative to that is joining online affinity groups where the teens do not already know the members. Going online to find friends or others who

feel similar to oneself is a natural extension of teens’ digital worlds and a way to find acceptance. Online chatrooms are one venue used to find others in similar mental or social states. Chatrooms are online social forums based on common interests, and in such spaces, “a socially constructed and shared culture develops” (Borzekowski, 2006, p. 5). The sites are not used for popularity status, but as a way for teens to connect with others and to find peer validation.

The Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) found that 18 percent of “discontented teens” (those who were lonely, had few friends, or were frequently in trouble) used online media, such as chat rooms, to reach out to similarly minded people. Teens go online to find unknown others as a way of making connections and to help them feel that they are not alone, as depicted in the novel *Crash into Me* (Borris, 2009).

In *Crash into Me*, four depressed teens who were contemplating suicide because they felt alone and misunderstood found one another in a suicide chatroom, formed a tenuous group, and created a suicide pact. By keywording “suicide. mspace friends” (p. 53), the teens found peers to connect with and confide in about sensitive and personal matters. Online, they were able to interact in ways impossible in their offline lives. “It’s so much easier to talk to people on the computer. You don’t have to look at their faces. You can walk away. You can write whatever you want and then turn the computer off. I like it that way. Farther away from people” (pp. 3–4), yet closer to others at the same time.

Finding peers to connect with in an online, semi-anonymous manner allowed these fictional teens to share and even boast about some of their suicidal thoughts; it acted as a means of finding peer validation and then friendship. They bonded over their perceived causes of depression and isolation, including negative family situations: “my father is so demanding and i can’t do anything right . . . at least your dad wants something for u. mine left when i was 2” (p. 64). It was accepted, a way of establishing a connection, to discuss if and how others had actually tried committing suicide. “[H]ow serious of a suicide attempt did u make w/pills, Owen? . . . y do u ask? . . . b/c i think i really almost died. i wanted to know if anyone else did too” (p. 66).

Once their initial group was established, they were able to reach out and share that they felt alone and to see if others felt the same way, “ever feel really close to someone? . . . not really . . . that’s what i want. what’s missing in my life” (p. 107). The remoteness of each person’s connection to the online space created a context in which identity announcements could be made safely and, perhaps, be validated and returned. By bonding over their aloneness and death wishes, they became a group.

The online space provided a contained place for participants to take on identities as members of the “suicide club” (p. 60) and, in doing so, allowed them to meet offline, ostensibly to take part in their suicide pact. When one member attempted to go through with their plan, the teens realized that they had made a connection over the Web and that they were no longer alone. One character realized he did want to live and that “I want my *friends* [emphasis added] to live” (p. 255). The Web was used by fictional teens to find and become part of a group for bonding, finding friendship and acceptance, and ultimately finding the will to live.

### **To Find a Romantic Relationship**

In addition to using digital media to position oneself as a part of a group or as a representation of one’s popularity, characters in some YA novels go online to find romantic relationships using online dating or social networking sites. Research has found that youths actively explore identity online to overcome shyness or to make friends and facilitate social and romantic relationships (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Online dating has become commonplace, and using social networking sites to expand one’s social circle is socially acceptable (Matsuba, 2006; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). *The Girlfriend Project* (Friedman, 2007) depicted such use of online media and the creation of an online persona as a venue for finding a significant other.

In this novel, main character Reed blossomed the summer before senior year from “dork” to “hottie,” but his shyness and lack of self-confidence prevented him from interacting with girls face-to-face. His friends encouraged him to create [www.thegirlfriendproject.com](http://www.thegirlfriendproject.com), a website designed for him to elicit dating advice and find a girlfriend in his offline world. For Reed, and other real-life teens, being online can be less threatening than talking to a romantic interest in

person. Creating an online profile and interacting with others online can allow one to be oneself without the immediate fear of rejection. The website was “. . . perfect! You get the answers you want, and you possibly get more dates out of it too” (p. 67).

Reed was straightforward about who he was and positioned himself as a teen boy looking for relationship guidance. “Reed Walton, Ultimate Nice Guy . . . needs your help. Answer these questions so he can become an expert on dating. Maybe he’ll even pick you to be his girlfriend!” (p. 67). Through the website, he gained multiple perspectives about perplexing dating questions such as “Would you kiss or date someone you didn’t like? . . . Would you ever date someone you work with?” (p. 67) . . . and “Should girls ask out guys?” (p. 101). In the process, he grew into his new self, gained confidence, went on dates, and just possibly found true love. Reed used the Internet as an extension of his offline world, a safe way to learn about dating, explore his developing sense of identity as a potential romantic partner, and as a safety net from in-person rejection. Using the blog, he could present himself in ways fluid and continuous with his offline identity behind the safety of the computer screen. This allowed him to experiment with his self-representation without the burden of rejection. To those who did not know him, these announcements about himself allowed others to endorse, or place, the person he was unable to share face-to-face.

### **To Explore Different Representations of Self**

One danger of going online to meet new friends or find a relationship is that one never knows how one’s online and offline identity announcements will be endorsed by others (Stone, in Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Many novels include discussion of how easy it is to shift representations of one’s identity when solely communicating through digital media. One can create different representations of one’s identity throughout the course of an online communication, either by intentionally posing as someone else or by omitting major aspects of one’s own life (Livingstone, 2008).

In *The Kingdom of Strange* (Klinger, 2008), lonely girl “Thisbe” hoped to find a female friend during a class email-based pen pal assignment. She incorrectly assumed her partner “Iphis,” was a girl. Iphis did nothing to correct this misconception, as he was

also looking for a friend, and a growing friendship was shattered and repaired as secrets were revealed. After their initial exchange, Thisbe, assuming she was interacting with a girl, says, “Oh my gosh. Someone actually posted. She seems nice. She seems normal, i.e., slightly weird. And is she a *she*? Must be. I don’t

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**Thisbe processed why the gender of Iphis (aka Jason) actually mattered. She realized that one can read into others’ online communications what one wants to read.**

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see any boys liking that dance” (p. 28). She wrote subsequent posts referring to Iphis as her “Lady-in-waiting” (p. 50), and Iphis never wrote anything to dissuade her, implicitly endorsing an identity as a girl. Thisbe also often set text apart using asterisks, with text including female pronouns inside reflecting what she was doing at the time—“\*she speaks in a

tiny, tiny, small voice\*” (p. 50). In all communication, Iphis, even when using asterisks, never used pronouns, and instead typed gender neutral responses—“\*looks attentive and sprouts a few extra ears\*” (p. 50).

Once the secret was discovered, Thisbe processed why the gender of Iphis (aka Jason) actually mattered. She realized that one can read into others’ online communications what one wants to read. Thisbe wanted to believe the person she confided to on the other end of the computer screen was a girl, and until the truth was revealed, the hidden identity was assumed. “You can’t always believe what you see, hear, feel. I didn’t hear what Iphis was trying to tell me for weeks. There were so many clues” (p. 244). In the end, Thisbe and Jason had to renegotiate their identities with each other, “Thisbe, it’s me, Jason. New ID, same person as before, different person from the one you imagined” (p. 265). Identities online are multilayered, constructed through semiosis, which is always partial. In this way, Iphis can inhabit two identities at once, the offline identity as a boy who makes gender-neutral identity announcements, and the online identity as a girl who is endorsed by others.

**To Be Anonymous**

When teens are struggling to figure out who they are and where they fit into the social structure, they

may need to try on new identities and explore what it might be like to be someone else, or even just a cooler version of themselves. As discussed above, they may project an online identity by omitting aspects of their offline selves. Conversely, in some cases, such as blogs, teens are more truthful about themselves in their online communications than they might be in real life (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005), or they might mask their offline identities to share secret information in an anonymous way. Creating an online blog and presenting a different image or persona is one way to “safely” experience the idea of being someone else.

In *TMI* (Quigley, 2009), protagonist Becca had a tendency to overshare and got in trouble with her friends by revealing too much personal information to others. She needed an anonymous outlet, so she created a blog portraying herself as the glamorous Bella, reinventing an ideal fantasy life in her mind. “I could start my own blog. The blog would be the perfect platform to cater to my oversharing needs. I could freely dole out too much information while sparing my [loved ones] the obvious burden of listening. What’s more, the blog would give me a chance to reinvent myself as someone far more sophisticated. . . .” (pp. 54–55). Becca created Bella, and Bella told it like it was, or maybe just embellished everything a little bit.

Through her blog, she explored the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate sharing, and figured out how to remain true to herself while protecting her own and her friends’ secrets. Or so she thought. When her blog was discovered and her secret identity revealed, Becca was mortified that her intimate thoughts were revealed to those who knew her, and that she had shared some extremely private information that would hurt people she knew in real life. She deleted all of her previous blog posts and posted a new one in the hopes that people she knew in real life would read it and begin to understand why the blog was created.

“Bella had an interaction today that has left her quite anxious. She’s afraid that someone she knows has discovered this blog . . . . Bella knows that the Internet is simultaneously public and anonymous, which is what makes it so exciting and interesting. However, Bella fears her identity is not as well hidden as she initially thought. This blog was meant to be a tool to help Bella share her secrets in a healthy way . . . . So what is to be done? If anyone out there reading this actually knows Bella, she urges them to show her a little compassion.” (pp. 203–204)

In the end, she was surprised at the support of her loved ones who respected her decisions and her personal online explorations. A family member who read the blog told Becca, “You don’t need to be embarrassed. I really respected your decision to try to change. I figured that your blog was a positive outlet for you” (p. 233). This sentiment was likewise expressed by Becca’s friends who, although upset, were able to see why Becca created the blog and appreciated the attempt at anonymity. Ultimately, Becca learned that nothing online can ever truly be anonymous, and that she needed to be accountable to the offline identity endorsements that were more consequential to her everyday life than her blog

## Discussion

In our initial textual analysis of YA novels that incorporated digital communication technologies, we noted that digital media is used by characters in novels to position themselves as certain types of people. We identified the structural ways in which digital technologies were being infused into YA literature and the language practices being used by characters. This provided an opening for discussion of the types of digital media used by teens and the ways they write digitally to different people in their lives. This analysis looks past the structure and overall content and examines, specifically, characters’ identity motivations and explored constructions.

Through the examples above, we explored the different ways fictional teen characters in six YA novels used digital media to maintain social status, position themselves as a part of a group, find acceptance, find a romantic relationship, explore different representations of self, and be (or not be) anonymous. *Top 8*, *The Rule of Won*, and *Crash into Me* depicted how social networking, blogs, and discussion board groups can confirm a user’s popularity, group belonging, and feelings of acceptance; *The Girlfriend Project* portrayed how one can use the Internet to find a romantic relationship; *The Kingdom of Strange* considered not knowing who is on the other end of an online communication, and how omissions and identity portrayals are not always what they seem; and *TMI* discussed how people can use the Internet as a mask to share information while remaining anonymous. These examples underscore the ways digital communication

technologies can provide today’s adolescents with new ways of expressing, exploring, and asserting their identities. For teens who have grown up in a world surrounded by digital communication technologies, these identity-forming activities are a logical part of their budding exploration into different identities.

Young people announce identities for themselves online and offline in different ways. Their announcements, how they are endorsed by others, and how they endorse others online matter for how they live their lives offline. The networked, potentially anonymous, and layered dimensions of online communication offer ways for young people to announce themselves in particular ways—as members of affinity groups and as types of people. In most of the examples from the novels, online social worlds were extensions of offline worlds, and online identity announcements had serious repercussions for offline interactions. Yet, the remote and semi-self-contained attributes of online affinity groups and the cover of blogs meant that characters could make identity announcements they would not safely make offline.

Young adolescents often experiment with identity announcements online in emergent ways. Since identities are socially constructed and fluid, literacy educators and their students are encouraged to discuss how these identities are being constructed, manipulated, and expressed through online and offline interactions. Examining these activities can help teens understand how online identity constructions are changing the ways people express and understand themselves and others within the larger social context. How is the fictional characters’ digital media usage similar to their own usage? Young adult literature is a springboard for such discussions. (See Table 2 for a list of discussion questions correlated to each YA novel and theme.)

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**The networked, potentially anonymous, and layered dimensions of online communication offer ways for young people to announce themselves in particular ways—as members of affinity groups and as types of people.**

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**Table 2.** Discussion questions per YA novel/theme mentioned

Theme	Questions
Top 8: To maintain social status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think about when you make or add to your profile page? What choices do you have to make?</li> <li>• How do you decide who and what to respond to on social networking sites?</li> <li>• How can negative posts and comments impact how a person feels about him or herself?</li> <li>• How can negative posts or comments impact how a person is seen offline?</li> </ul>
<i>The Rule of Won</i> : To position themselves as part of a group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you write, read, or comment on blogs? If so, what types? If not, why not?</li> <li>• Do blogs connect to your offline lives?</li> <li>• Are the blogs you read, write, or comment on open to all or exclusive to members of an offline group?</li> <li>• What does a person's blog say about them?</li> </ul>
<i>Crash into Me</i> : To find acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is writing for a computer screen different from talking to someone in person?</li> <li>• What types of topics are easier for you to write about and share online than discuss in person? Why?</li> <li>• Where do you find friends? Are there stigmas associated with finding friends online?</li> </ul>
<i>The Girlfriend Project</i> : To find a romantic relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever met someone online?</li> <li>• Do you think it is okay to date someone you meet online?</li> <li>• Have you ever flirted with anyone online you never met face to face?</li> <li>• Would you send someone you didn't know a picture of yourself?</li> </ul>
<i>The Kingdom of Strange</i> : To explore different representations of self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What choices do you make when representing only parts of yourself to others?</li> <li>• Are you ever misleading anyone by the way you portray yourself, either intentionally or unintentionally?</li> <li>• Is it easy to change who you are online? Do you need to keep the lie going to keep the relationship going?</li> <li>• How are these choices different when meeting someone face-to-face rather than online?</li> </ul>
<i>TMI</i> : To be anonymous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you present yourself differently when you have a known versus an unknown audience?</li> <li>• When and where online should you share information about yourself and your families or friends?</li> </ul>

Through reading and discussing these novels, young adolescents can examine the ways they present themselves and explore their real-life identities in their online worlds. The depiction of these technologies in YA novels provides a way to examine how these constructs are being used as fictional teens form identities both on- and offline; after all, we know that teens often look to books to relate to characters and explore how others might grapple with issues and events similar to ones they are experiencing in their own lives in ways that locate questions of identity (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010; Bean & Moni, 2003). Building on Bean and Moni's discussion of how teen readers of young adult literature can use the characters in literature to "better understand how they are being constructed as adolescents in the texts and how such constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identities" (p. 639), this article extends

the discussion of identity in YA literature to include the impact digital technology communication has on many modern teens' identity development.

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