As freedom shrinks, teens seek MySpace to hang out

By Jill Serjeant

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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - They paper their virtual walls with kittens and cartoon characters, give their address as Candyland, their age as 103 and announce they are yearning for true love.

Welcome to the secret, yet very public, world of young teens who are flocking to social-networking Internet sites both to chill with friends and to figure out the timeless adolescent question "Who am I?"

Although originally aimed at 20-somethings interested in independent music, Web sites like MySpace.com, which is owned by News Corp, have attracted an enormous following among middle school students, and cultural theorists say it's not hard to see why.

As the real world is perceived as more dangerous with child abductors lurking on every corner, kids flock online to hang out with friends, express their hopes and dreams and bare their souls with often painful honesty -- mostly unbeknownst to their tech-clumsy parents.

"We have a complete culture of fear," said Danah Boyd, 28, a Ph.D student and social media researcher at the University of California Berkeley. "Kids really have no place where they are not under constant surveillance."

Driven to and from school, chaperoned at parties and often lacking public transport, today's middle-class American kids are no longer free to hang out unsupervised at the park, the bowling alley or to bike around the neighborhood they way they did 20 years ago.

"A lot of that coming-of-age stuff in public is gone. So kids are creating social spaces within all this controlled space," said Boyd.

LIFE SUPPORT

The ranks of Santa Monica, California-based MySpace.com has swollen to more than...
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73 million members in two years, making it the second-biggest Web domain after Yahoo in terms of page views. Other popular teen sites are Friendster.com, Tagged.com, Xanga.com and Orkut.com.

Most MySpace members live in the United States but a British version was launched this year and Australia will be next.

More than half of 15- to 20-year-olds who are online are using MySpace, according to the company's research. They use the site's design technology to create personal "spaces" that resemble a cross between a high school locker and a secret diary.

Researchers say older teens and 20-somethings use the site more for friendship, sharing music and arranging meetings and parties.

The younger set use it to chill with known friends and work out their own identity. Some construct fantasy lives of vast wages, luxury cars and say they are searching for "live-in pimps." Others confess touchingly to being geeks, loving uncool movies like "The Sound of Music" or list their puppy as their lover.

"Building identity is a lot of what a teen-ager is. The majority feel they don't fit in," said networking consultant Ross Dawson, chairman of Future Exploration Network.

"This is the first generation for which it is entirely natural to socialize in a digital environment. Mobile phones, instant messaging, texting and being online really are their life support," Dawson said.

ADULT ALARM

Under-14s are not supposed to use MySpace but tens of thousands ignore that stipulation, inventing ages and high school careers still beyond their reach, and sometimes posting sexually precocious pictures.

To meet concern over possible sexual exploitation of children, MySpace hired a safety czar in April and requires under-18s to review safety tips before registering. It also restricts the profiles of under-16s to users they know.

It says it has deleted more than 250,000 profiles of under-14-year-olds since 2004 on the basis of tips by parents and algorithms that search the site looking for keywords and phrases that identify very young users.

"We are now deleting something like 5,000 under-age profiles a day," said Shawn Gold, head of marketing for MySpace.

Gold said the dangers should be kept in perspective. "If MySpace were a state it would be twice the size of California, but the crime associated with it would be a five-block area of New York City."

For all the adult alarm over the coarse language and provocative poses often seen on such sites, Boyd said teens are doing just what they have always done.

"Adults are not normally privy to these teen-age expressions. But when teens hang out in public they do these stupid things and they always have.

"Teens are trying to figure out their sexuality for better or worse. It's a problem for parents to pretend like it doesn't exist. If parents have an open mind and can hear their teens expressing themselves in all their ridiculousness, they can make sense of it and it
stops being so scary," she said.