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Online Journals as Virtual Bedrooms? Young People, Identity and Personal Space.

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Abstract

This paper considers the increasing importance of personal, individualized spaces in the lives and identities of young people through a comparative examination of the contemporary use of the physical space of the bedroom and the 'virtual' territory of the online journal. Particularly popular among those in their teens and early twenties, online journals constitute an interactive form of web log whose content tends to be dominated by reflections upon the everyday experiences, thought and emotions of their individual owner. We propose here that such online journals often take on for their users the symbolic and practical properties of individually owned and controlled space – something we illustrate through a comparison with young people's uses of the primary individual centred physical space in their lives – the bedroom. This discussion is informed by research by each of the authors, on young people's bedrooms and on the use of online journals respectively. The paper identifies and explores understandings and functions of these two spaces for young people, identifying a number of apparent similarities in their use. Through doing so, we illustrate the potential value of the bedroom as a prism through which to understand online journal use at the same time as helping to illuminate the general significance of personal space to the lives and identities of contemporary young people.

Keywords: youth; space; identity bedrooms; internet; online journals

INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of blogging, or keeping a web based log centred upon a frequently updated list of dated entries, has received considerable attention both among academics and journalists (Herring et al 2004). While much of this attention has been focused upon so-called 'serious' blogs, oriented towards matters of public interest, evidence suggests that the vast majority of blogs take the form of more personally oriented and inward looking genre of 'online journals' (ibid.). Such online journals, whose prevalence owes at least something to the emergence of user-friendly platforms such as *LiveJournal*, tend to be dominated by reflections on the everyday life and relationships of their author and are usually interactive (Lindemann 2005; Hodkinson 2007). As with the use of broader social networking sites such as *My Space*, *Bebo* and *Facebook*, the use of such interactive online journals is dominated by young people.¹

Studies of young people's online journals have tended to focus in detail upon content, often seeking to understand these personal texts through the prism of comparable written genres associated with youth, such as teenage diaries or letters (Reed 2005; Lindemann 2005). Such comparisons are valuable and inform some of our discussion here, but our key focus is the way in which online journals function as a form of personal space for their users. More specifically we suggest that the range of personal and social functions afforded by sites such as *LiveJournal* may render the 'virtual spaces' adopted by users comparable to the first individually oriented physical space in young people's lives, the bedroom. There is nothing new, of course, in seeking to understand internet use through the prism of spatial metaphors (Mitchell 1995; Walker 2000). Our particular concern here, though, is with the establishment and use by youth of predominantly individually owned and controlled territory as opposed to more public forms of space. Like the bedroom, we argue, the interactive and multidimensional space of the online journal offers a safe, personally owned and controlled space which is used as part of the negotiation of youthful transitions via marking out of territory, the exploration and exhibition of identity and the generation and living out of personal social networks.

We explore these uses of personal space through a comparative exploration of young people's use of bedrooms and online journals which draws upon elements of research by Hodkinson (2006, 2007) on the use of *LiveJournal* by members of a youth cultural group and by Lincoln on teenage bedroom culture (2004, 2005). Hodkinson's research involved ongoing online participant observation on the *LiveJournal* platform together with in depth face to face interviews with 15 users of the platform. The paper includes interview extracts and sections of text from actual *LiveJournal* entries (reproduced with the permission of their authors) involving individuals who were within their late teens or twenties. Most of those involved in the study were connected with a youth style group known as the goth scene (see Hodkinson 2006, 2007) but in this article, we focus on elements of the data concerning people's individual use of *LiveJournal* which we believe to have a broader relevance for young people. Meanwhile, the data presented here from Lincoln's research of young people's uses of bedroom space involves respondents between the age of 14 and 20 who were interviewed in mostly single-sex friendship groups of around 3-4 people. The

interviews were carried out within the bedroom of one of the participants, partly in order to enable the collection of visual as well as oral data. Some respondents were also asked to keep textual and visual diaries.

YOUTH, IDENTITY AND SPACE

Youth has for some time been regarded as a liminal period of transition, characterised by insecurity, ambiguity and a state of 'not quite being' located in between childhood and adulthood, dependence and independence (Sibley 1995). Recent social theory, meanwhile, suggests that the disembeddedness and uncertainty of youth culture may be intensifying. During the 1960s and 70s, youth cultural scholarship tended to suggest that young people responded to the uncertainties they faced by forming committed attachments to spectacular subcultures rooted in class position, such as teds, mods and punks (Clarke et al 1976). Subsequently, however, many have suggested that 'structural' factors such as social class and community have declined at least a little in their significance as sources of stability and affiliation for young people and that there has been a simultaneous expansion in the significance of an increasingly individualised consumer culture (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Muggleton 1997; Jenks 2006). Consistent with general theories of risk (Beck 1992) and individualisation (Bauman 2001), many suggest that, rather than forming fixed collective groupings rooted in social position, young people today are more likely to respond to the enhanced uncertainties of youth in a more individual-centred fashion, by negotiating personal paths through a myriad of temporary and partial identities (Miles 2000; Bennett 1999). Although clear cut groupings are liable to remain important to some, many youth affiliations are partial, insecure and transitory. Arguably, then, an already uncertain period of the life-course arguably has become even more unstable.

Such instability and uncertainty have rendered space and territory of particular importance to young people, whether as the source of relative safety and stability, as a means of reflexively mapping and making sense of one's identity and transitions or as a facilitator of social networks. Hetherington (1998) rightly suggests that in these respects, young people's identities should be understood as a complex of 'identity spaces', both public and private. Of course, the significance of public and collective territory have been the subject of extensive and ongoing research for many years. Sometimes such research has focused on the appropriation of outdoor public spaces by collective youth gangs or subcultures (Whyte 1943; Hebdige 1979), while in other cases the significance of both publicly and privately run indoor spaces have been examined, including youth clubs, gig venues, rehearsal spaces and night clubs (Finnegan 1989; Cohen 1991; Shank 1994; Thornton 1995; Malbon 2000; Varner 2007). In either case, territory is regarded as crucial for the facilitation of social networks and for the marking out of individual and collective identities. And such themes also predominate in recent research among scholars of internet cultures, on the establishment and operation of public or collective virtual spaces, such as fan-based discussion forums (Watson 1997; Baym 2000; Chamberlin 2007) and multiplayer online gaming environments (Rutter and Bryce 2006; Crowe and Bradford 2007).

Rather less, however, has been written about the significance of the personal, private spaces in young people's lives. Some three decades ago, McRobbie and Garber (1976) suggested that the emphasis of post-war youth cultural theory upon male dominated outdoor gang or subcultural activities had led to a neglect of the significance, particularly to girls, of the private, domestic space of the bedroom, which was argued to provide the primary setting for a consumerist 'teeny bopper' culture. More recently, Lincoln (2004) has argued convincingly that the bedroom now holds extensive significance both for girls and for boys and that, more generally, this private youth cultural space is increasing in importance (also see McNamee 1998). For younger teachers, this may partly reflect the impact on parents of media 'panics' about the increasingly risky nature of public spaces, but it also has to do with the increasing presence of a range of technologies within the bedroom, something which has expanded the cultural appeal and flexibility of this personal space – and its significance as an identity space (Livingstone 2002; Lister et al 2003).

There is also evidence, though, that a retreat to personal space may be a more general response on the part of young people to an increasingly complex, insecure and individualised environment. Research in Tasmania by Abbott-Chapman and Robertson, for example, has suggested that young people are responding to the complexities of their youth by orienting themselves around personal spaces such as the bedroom which enable them to 'make meaning of the changes and challenges which surround them' (2001). The bedroom has significant appeal in this respect, comprising a discrete territory over which young people have significant levels of individual control and which, amongst other things, can act as a site for being alone, a space in which to spend time with personal friends or a canvas on which symbolically to explore and make sense of one's identity. The bedroom, then, offers a personal space of considerable importance to the reflexive project of the self (Giddens 1991).

It is our contention here that the importance of basing oneself within clearly demarcated personal space appears also to have manifested itself through recent developments in young people's use of the internet. In spite of the extensive academic 'virtual communities' literature, which focused upon the prevalence of group-oriented or 'public' discussion forums during the 1990s (see Jones 1995; 1997), it is clear today that the online facilities most popular among young people are those centred around individual-centred rather than shared or collective space, something illustrated by the massive recent success of News Corporation's aptly named social site My Space, as well as the popularity of longer-established interactive online journal platforms such as LiveJournal. In order to investigate the significance and the roles of such online personal spaces, we offer below an exploration of the ways in which young people's uses of the virtual space of the online journal are reminiscent of the role often played by the physical territory of the bedroom. Our analysis covers the symbolic status of both spaces as personal territory, their significance as the basis for the performance and mapping of young identities and their role as bases for social networking.

ESTABLISHING PERSONAL SPACE

The bedroom is the first space young people are able to take ownership of and acts as a constant presence in their everyday lives throughout teenage years and often well into the twenties. Whether in the context of a parental home or a shared house or flat, this is a space over which young people themselves regulate access, allowing who they wish to enter the space and making boundaries clear to others. Many of Lincoln's respondents placed symbolic emphasis on this through engaging in the familiar practice of attaching decorations or signs on the outside of their bedroom door, asserting the identity of the occupier and sometimes explicitly stating 'do not enter!' or 'keep out!' (Lincoln 2004). Such boundaries were further established and marked out through decoration and arrangement of the bedroom space itself, something over which occupants exerted significant amounts of personal control. Of course, control in this respect is often not absolute, in that restrictions may be imposed either by landlords or parents over permanent forms of decoration such as the colour of bedroom walls, for example. Meanwhile, for those still living in the family home, parents may sometimes enter the space or may restrict the types of technology allowed in the bedroom. Yet Lincoln's research suggested that even where restrictions were imposed, the symbolic and practical boundaries of the bedroom often enabled young people to experience the space as one in which they could establish their own limits, as here:

... [Ben] said that he had ashtrays hidden in his bedroom and smoked out of the window so that his parents didn't find out. He also said that he drank alcohol in his room sometimes and that his parents knew about this... [research diary entry for interview group 1]

As a consequence of their considerable symbolic and practical control of the space, Lincoln's respondents often emphasised the importance of their bedroom as a safe place to escape, to spend time alone, to 'chill out', relax, daydream or be creative in an environment somewhat separated from the social pressures or rules associated with collective or public space such as school, college or work (also see Abbott-Chapman and Robertson 2001). The following comments were typical:

Kate: Sometimes I go up [to my bedroom] because i can't be bothered, just to get away, I just get into bed and start thinking...

Jonathan: Its an important space because its my space, everything i need is in my bedroom.

An emphasis on the perceived safety and individual freedom afforded by personally owned space is also of considerable importance to young people's use of online journals. Like the bedroom, they offer an individual space which offers greater levels of personal ownership and control than do more public or shared forms of space – something which, according to Hodkinson's respondents, partially insulated them from the constraints and pressures of collective expectations:

Stephen: ...on my LiveJournal, it is mine, where a post to a mailing list is not mine. So there's a lot more ownership. It's about ownership of space. My LiveJournal is my

space, I own it... I think a lot less about [what I write in my] LiveJournal because LiveJournal is safe space. It's my space, it's safe space.

It was equally clear that those who read and/or contributed comments to other people's LiveJournals were expected to behave as visitors or guests. Being over critical or unfriendly to your 'host' or otherwise showing insufficient respect for their personal space, tended to be frowned upon, something one respondent compared with her expectations of visitors to her bedroom:

Jill: ...if someone's coming into your bedroom and they say something horrible about your own bedroom then it's quite bad isn't it – it's your own domain... it's like someone's just barged into your own little world and it's horrible, you just don't expect it.

That online journals are regarded by young people as personal rather than shared territory partly replicates the symbolic status which has been accorded to the earlier internet format of personal homepages (see Chandler and Roberts-Young 1998; Walker 2000). Yet, there is a crucial difference. On basic homepages, formal restrictions on entry are usually non-existent, making content publicly accessible (Chandler and Roberts-Young 1998). In contrast, LiveJournal - like most social networking software - enables users to render content entirely private or to restrict readership to personally selected lists of other logged-in users. Hodkinson's respondents regularly utilised this 'friends-only' facility and in so doing exerted a control over entry and exit comparable with the personal boundary control exerted in the case of bedrooms. Indeed the 'friends-only' announcements posted on the public front pages of such journals were more than a little reminiscent of 'keep out' signs displayed on bedroom doors, as here:

FRIENDS ONLY

My journal is now entirely friends only. I am unlikely to add you unless I know you in real life, but please comment if you wish to read.

In some respects the degree of individual control in the case of online journals is greater than in the case of young people's bedrooms, which, as discussed, may be subject to partial restrictions or occasional intrusions from housemates, parents or landlords.

Yet, as in the case of bedrooms, such formal controls over entry and exit were no more important in respect of the claiming of space than the range of ways in which individuals decoratively marked out their virtual space as their own. In the same way that ownership of bedroom space is established via colour, decoration and organisation of space, so online journal space tended carefully to be customised through background colour, images, layout, text and font. And crucially, as well as serving to mark out space, such customisations highlight another similarity between the online journal and the personal bedroom. Both offer young people a means through which to exhibit, map and negotiate their developing sense of identity.

EXHIBITING IDENTITY

The ongoing decoration and arrangement of the bedroom tends to be intimately connected to the identity of its occupant. An ever-shifting mixture of practical and symbolic content on this three dimensional canvas enables young people to tell stories about their social and cultural interests and hence to exhibit the various facets of their identity. Notably, this manifests itself in the form of posters of various kinds, whose subject matter may include celebrities, bands, films, DJs or sports personalities. Postcards and flyers also were prominent in the bedrooms of Lincoln's respondents as were personal photographs, in which affiliation to particular friendship groups was exhibited, often through depictions of collective holidays or nights out. Additional wall decorations would typically include lights, mirrors and framed pictures, while the arrangement of other objects such as ornaments or collections such as teddy bears - perhaps badges from childhood - through to magazines or music collections was equally important in that as well as offering a particular exhibition of identity in the present, they served to construct a selective historical narrative of identity. Through means of such arrangements, young people reflexively establish and work on their identity, at the same time as creating a carefully crafted exhibition of self for the benefit of potential visitors.

The evolution of the arrangement and decoration of bedroom space can relate closely to transitions and rites of passage for young people. The uncertainties and changes of youth are negotiated and marked out through the arrangement and rearrangement of bedroom space, enabling young people to place and replace themselves, with respect to interests, affiliations, networks of friends and a range of other factors. In the case of one respondent, Natasha, this manifested itself via a move into a room previously occupied by her brother because he was leaving home to go to university. About to take important exams and to take on the role of oldest sibling in the household, moving into and arranging her new space acted as a means of establishing a new phase of Natasha's youth. The objects and decorations she chose were designed to reflect a maturing of her cultural tastes as well as the personal significance of the rite of passage represented by her impending exams. As well as establishing physical space devoted to her work, she made a series of decisions regarding decoration of the space, one example of which was that she decided to dispense with what she regarded as 'teeny' band posters, swapping them for more discreet postcards:

Interviewer: Have you got any posters up?

Natasha: There won't be in my new room, there is in my old room

Bethan: Just a little picture of Sisco

In the case of many other respondents, periodic rearrangements, additions or replacements to the array of objects in existing bedrooms performed a similar role and, here too, the association of particular objects with different life stages was clear. Sometimes items symbolic of a previous period of life were discarded, while in others they were retained in a less prominent location. Natasha, for example, decided that when she moved to her new room, she would no longer display her collection of teddy ornaments but nevertheless was unwilling to dispense with them entirely since they had acquired a symbolic importance within her personal narrative.

Use of bedroom arrangements in this manner demonstrates the importance of individual space to the reflexive project of the self for young people, whose decorative decisions involve what Tia Denora refers to as 'elaborating and substantiating oneself as social agent' (2000: 46). For young people going through a period of particular uncertainty, exploration and transition, such ongoing attempts to map, to affirm and to exhibit one's identity through bedroom space are of crucial importance. This single space is used to piece together the various facets of identity, to construct some degree of coherence with respect to one's shifting place in the world. As we will now demonstrate, many young people appear to be doing comparable sorts of identity work via the personal spaces of online journals on the internet.

The analogy of a physical room was directly used more than once by the users of online journals interviewed by Hodkinson. In the following case, the metaphor was used to emphasise the particular importance of an ability to manipulate and adapt the room consistent with the respondent's sense of self. In particular, this respondent contrasted what she took to be the highly personal significance of the customisation of her own LiveJournal space with the rigid collective norms associated with collective territory such as the discussion groups she had previously taken part in which were oriented to fans of goth music:

Kate: It's like being given a room – and you can furnish it the way you want and paint it the way you want – and you make it your room. As [with] if you're going to a goth pub or goth club, with a mailing list, the walls are already painted black.

Consistent with this, users typically spend considerable time creating a unique overall look for their online journal, through the use of a range of images, symbols and background designs symbolic of different facets of their identity. And as in the case of bedroom decoration, affiliations to particular types of music or to subcultures may be clearly discernable in some cases, but nevertheless tend to form only part of an overall display which - even in the case of committed subcultural members - brings together symbols of a range of interests and foci for identity of significance to the individual. The mixture of colours, styles and images which form the semi-permanent look of the journal are supplemented by additional features such as the 'user info' page, which on LiveJournal provides a mostly text-based outline of the personality in question, including a biography, a list of 'user interests' and a 'friends-list', comprising links to the journals of a carefully selected group of other LiveJournal users with whom the host is happy to be associated. Comparable to the 'links pages' on web sites, the 'friends list' plays a key role in identity performance, fitting in nicely with Miller's observation; 'show me what your links are, I'll tell you what kind of person you are' (1995: 4). There is also, of course, a clear parallel here with the importance of photographs and other symbols of friends and friendship on the walls of bedrooms – something which is likely to become even more pronounced as it becomes easier for users to use digital photographs and other forms of multimedia decoration on their user info page, instead of text.

In respect not just of friends list links but also the other semi-fixed or background characteristics described, online journals are reminiscent in their implications for the performance of identity, of the earlier format of the personal homepage. Indeed, theorists such as Walker (2000) and Chandler and Roberts-Young (1998) have

characterised homepages as spaces occupied by individuals in order to exhibit statements of identity through carefully selected amalgamations of themes, images, designs and colours. For Chandler and Roberts-Young, this prompts a brief comparison with young people's bedrooms:

the comparison [of the teenage bedroom] with personal homepages is striking because of the frequent presence in both of such features as publicity images of idols from the worlds of music and sport, personal memorabilia... (Chandler and Roberts-Young 1999).

The semi-fixed features of online journals are also comparable to homepages in respect of periodic decisions to update them in ways that serve to map out and exhibit shifts in identity. Consistent with the use of the bedroom as an evolutionary space, then, many of Hodkinson's interviewees utilised the static parts of their journal as a means of expressing and reflecting upon the transitions and changes in their lives from one year to the next. The updating of the photographs or biography section on one's main 'user info' page, or the altering of the overall appearance and layout of one's online journal space would play a role strikingly similar to the redecoration of bedroom walls - marking out transitions and changes in priorities or affiliations over a period of time and making sense of one's current place in the world in relation to previous times. And if some of Lincoln's respondents reflected upon the significance of moving into new bedrooms, then a minority of users in Hodkinson's observational research abandoned previous journals, replacing them with entirely new ones. In so doing they created a decisive break from the past by creating a new blank canvas to be decorated from scratch according to current priorities and affiliations.

The key difference between online journals and personal homepages, of course, is that, while both involve relatively static features which - like bedroom walls - are updated only periodically, in the case of online journals these act as merely the background for a constantly updated journal entries section. As in the case of the bedroom, then, the relatively static general design of the space creates a setting for more variable forms of everyday behaviour within it, in the form of the posting of entries and interactions with visitors. Shortly, we will focus upon the fluctuating and interactive qualities of this everyday behaviour within the space and compare this with social behaviour within the bedroom. Firstly, however, it is important to acknowledge that on LiveJournal, entries and interactions also functioned to reinforce the overall presentation of self created by the user info page and the design of the space. Therefore, in spite of daily fluctuations of mood and topic, consistent themes often could be discerned over a period of time in respect of overall tone, personality traits and the display of likes and dislikes, whether through the posting of reviews, links, polemics or statements of enthusiasm in relation to films, musicians, clothes or events. And the way in which entries and comments are archived on online journals offered the means to reflect upon previous priorities and performances and to make sense of transitions and changes. As well as having obvious connections to the use of traditional diaries, this compares to the way in which Lincoln's respondents 'archived' objects symbolic of their past identity within boxes or cupboards. The following extract from one of Hodkinson's respondents illustrates the point:

Scott: its about what you're doing or where you're headed at that particular point in time. And I've found myself sort of checking back through Live Journal... what was happening and what I was thinking at certain times...

The difference between online journal and bedrooms in respect of such archiving, of course, is that in the case of the former what is recorded is not previous objects or symbols through which the space itself was decorated, but rather the actual behaviour of the user within their space. Nevertheless, both cases illustrate the importance to reflexive identity work of the storing behind the scenes of past priorities, tastes and interests.

Crucially, though, as well as serving as a medium term exhibition of self and as a means to map out and make sense of general shifts and transitions of identity, LiveJournal entries and comments consist of ongoing reflection by individuals upon a variety of daily activities and events. Apparently consistent with an established expectation among bloggers that individuals should 'type as they think or feel' (Reed 2005), Hodkinson's respondents claimed they often felt able to explore and reflect upon the most mundane elements of their everyday lives:

Jill: ...people just blather on about themselves and most of the time they don't restrict it in any way... they don't have to worry about keeping on topic or keeping something that well appeal to the masses – they find something to write about themselves.

Embedded in the minutia of everyday life, then (Schaap 2004), online journal entries display moods, priorities and thoughts which - like everyday social behaviour in physical spaces - fluctuate daily according to events, subject matter and perceived audience. Indeed, as well as describing their experiences, responses and feelings in words, users can convey symbolic indicators of mood and atmosphere. The update system on LiveJournal, for example, specifically encourages users to identify their 'current mood' (displayed through an emoticon) and their 'current music'. In the case of the latter, a sense of mood and atmosphere can be created for the reader which is somewhat comparable with the use of music within the bedroom (Lincoln 2005). As Lindeman observes:

If the reader is familiar with the music, the [current music] tag line functions to make present an absent soundtrack, an imagined or recalled tune playing in the background of the post (Lindemann 2005: 362)

It is worth noting that this goes one stage further on the My Space platform, which enables an mp3 file to begin playing as soon as visitors enter an individual's space.

The notion of online journals as a site for the living out of everyday life, complete with fluctuations of mood and atmosphere, is further reinforced by the thoroughly interactive and social quality of the behaviour they host. Hodkinson's respondents repeatedly emphasised that, when reading and/or posting comments on somebody's LiveJournal, they experienced a distinct sense of co-presence, something deemed by one respondent to be reminiscent of spending time together in a physical space:

Liz: It's like you're all sitting together. Because you can read each other's comments, see each other's points of view, comment on each other's point of view and it's as if you've got yourself a little forum...

Crucially, as well as comprising an important difference between online journals and largely static personal home pages, the way in which online journals came to form a setting for everyday social behaviour acts as a further factor in illustrating the similarities between young people's uses of these virtual spaces and the role of the physical space of the bedroom in their cultural lives. It is the facilitation by both online journals and bedrooms of everyday social interactions that we investigate further in the final section of this article.

PRIVATE SOCIAL SPACE

On the face of it, the use of online journals or other forms of social networking software offer considerably greater scope for communication and interaction than the space of the bedroom. Unlike bedrooms, online journals are rarely used as a space in which to be entirely alone and although it is possible to render entries entirely private, use of this function among Hodkinson's respondents was rare. Indeed, interviewees were unanimous in indicating that, in spite of its importance as a means to exhibit and develop their medium and long-term sense of self, LiveJournal was every bit as important as a base for ongoing, everyday social interaction with their friends. As well as hosting such conversations within their own space, this involved visiting, reading and taking part in conversations within the territory of others, something which often involved socialising not just with the host but with other visitors to their space:

Claire:...one of the good things about LiveJournal is reading other people's [journals]... Sue writes something and you think 'oh that's really funny I'm going to comment on it' and then you go in and you see all the other comments and you end up commenting to all the comments.

As a result of the ease and speed with which conversants may move between one person's journal space and another and the asynchronous format of the medium, considerable numbers of people are able to interact with one another during a short space of time. Hodkinson regularly observed instances, for example, in which a single individual would take part in various conversations on the journal spaces of a range of different friends over the course of an hour. Users could also be indirectly connected via chains of 'friend-of-friend' links, to broader clusters of individuals with particular shared interests. The personal journals of Hodkinson's respondents, for example, formed part of an ad hoc network of users, most of whom were associated in some way with goth culture (Hodkinson 2006; 2007). For those who wished to, such networks, alongside the ability to search for other users by interests, offered the potential to expand ones social networks by searching for and establishing contact with new 'virtual' friends. As a consequence of such features, LiveJournal should be understood to facilitate a form of communication which looks and feels less restricted than physical interactions within the bedroom. Nevertheless, in some respects, the interactions on personal online journals observed by Hodkinson, retained a distinctly

private, and individual-centred feel – and it is clear that this was of considerable importance to the young people using the platform.

Firstly, as a result of the personal status of each user's online journal space and its embeddedness in individual everyday life, the majority of conversations tended to be focused upon personal events and emotions, with matters of public or community importance discussed more intermittently. Respondents contrasted this tendency with interactions within public online spaces:

Scott: LiveJournal was – it was a more personal expose of things – and you could get to find out a lot more about people on LiveJournal than you would on the web pages or on the newsgroups...

Interviewer: So why do mailing lists not do that?

Scott: There's more of an emphasis on information and things like that – the trivial things don't really get... just the trivial mundane day to day things... you get much more of that on LiveJournal – because again it's a personal forum.

In spite of the relatively high number of potential conversants, then, interactions tended to have a tone and feel akin to an everyday conversation between small groups of friends.

Secondly, there was a clear relationship between the tendency to focus upon everyday personal issues within LiveJournal interactions and the ability of authors to rigorously control the boundaries of their virtual space. Like many others, Andy used the 'friends-only' function to ensure that only a select group of friends could partake in what he regarded as personal reflections and interactions:

Andy: I think the whole thing, bottom line, for me, comes down to the fact that my LiveJournal is, to an extent, personal and I want control over who sees it and who doesn't... I don't want some random person who I've never met at all on my LiveJournal.

As a consequence of this, although audiences and conversational participants sometimes were considerably larger than the average number of people one might accommodate within a physical room, individuals were nevertheless able to limit those with whom they communicated on their own space to a hand-picked individual network of friends (see Wellman and Gulia 1999). In contrast to participation in public online communities then, the personal space of the online journal encouraged a style of everyday interaction partially consistent with what has been termed 'networked individualisation', in the sense that each individual journal acted as the centre-point for its own distinct set of fellow conversants (Castells 2001; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002).² And contrary to occasional media panics about the potential for young people to be exposed to infinite numbers of strangers on such sites, Hodkinson's respondents tended to ensure that the majority of visitors to their spaces were people they had known for a considerable period of time. Combined with the aforementioned ethic of respect for one's host on LiveJournal, this control over entry ensured that social interaction took place in a largely non-public environment which felt safe and secure for the host. While the potential for exposure to a large scale audience and for expansion of one's networks is considerable, then, in practice

the largely personal content, tone and atmosphere can create greater similarities with the physical private social sphere of the bedroom than one might expect.

If online journal social networks and interactions can, in spite of their primary role as facilitators for socialisation, have a somewhat private, personal and individualised feel to them, then it is equally important to recognise that the private physical space of young people's bedrooms often acts as a crucial forum for social interaction. Thus, in spite of sometimes being used as a safe space for young people to lock themselves away from parents, siblings or housemates, the contemporary teenage bedroom is far from an isolated space (Brown, Dykes, Steele and White 1994, Lincoln 2004).

Famously, for McRobbie and Garber (1976), the bedroom acted in the 1970s as a primary leisure site for teenage girls, who spent much of their leisure time indoors, in the presence of small tight-knit friendship groups, listening to music, reading magazines, trying on makeup and exchanging gossip. And it is clear that the bedroom continues to facilitate everyday personal contact with a personally selected and limited set of invitees, outside the gaze of parents, housemates or broader social networks. Indeed, we contend, consistent with Lincoln (2004), that the social importance of the bedroom may be broadening. Thus, while McRobbie and Garber's emphasis is upon the significance of this domestic space as a meeting point for teenage girls as a result of their particular exclusion from public or outdoor space, Lincoln's research demonstrates that, as a result of a variety of factors - including parental fears about public space and the increasing presence of leisure technologies in the bedroom - the social importance of the space now extends to both sexes. And although such socialisation frequently involves individuals or groups of the same sex, there has also been a relaxing of taboos and restrictions against the presence of members of the opposite sex, including boyfriends and girlfriends, within bedroom space (Lincoln 2004).

Examples of the use of bedroom space for social activities by both male and female respondents were plentiful in Lincoln's research. In one typical case, two best friends, Becky and Naomi, explained that they spent extensive amounts of their free time hanging out in Naomi's bedroom, listening to music, watching television and DVDs as well as gossiping, chatting and generally just 'chilling out'. Similarly, another respondent, Nathan, said that he often had a select few of his friends round especially during the evening at weekends – often because they didn't tend to have enough money to go out. Instead they would sit around drinking 'beer and vodka', chatting and listening to music within the private social space of the bedroom. Such examples of bedroom-centred interactions have similarities with the social interactions observed by Hodkinson in the case of online journals, in the sense that they take place within the private space of one individual or another and involve personalised interactions between a selected group of friends.

Whilst the two examples above illustrate the use of the bedroom for discrete social events, bedrooms also are used by young people as a setting for social activities which precede or follow events within public space. Thus, within the bedroom of one or other party, young people associated with various different types of youth culture indulge in private bedroom-based going out rituals (Hollands 1995) involving select individuals trying on outfits, putting on makeup and listening to suitable music in order create a mood suitable for an evening out. Although physical co-presence is

clearly of importance to such going out rituals, it is worth noting that Hodkinson observed examples of individuals using their LiveJournal space as a means to involve selected friends in their excitement about going out and their decisions about what to wear. On more than one occasion, for example, individuals sought the opinion of any friends who happened to be online with respect to what clothes to wear through the posting of digital photographs of the different options. Later on, the night's events within public space may be 'folded' back into private space. Small groups may return home to the bedroom of one or the other, have a final drink and reflect back on the evening's public events (Lincoln 2005). Or, to draw upon Hodkinson's research, individuals may return home alone and promptly discuss reflections upon their night out with friends on their online journal, as in the following journal entry:

got dressed up and went to [name of pub] :) there was dressing up and jolliness. i enjoyed. we left quite early as there was a lift going and i was wearing kinky boots with 4 1/2 inch heels. need some beauty sleep. wore ... UV nailvarnish :) it wa pretty. having crumpets with cheese on top, and going to bed

Such examples illustrate that, as well as having a significance in their own right, private interactions within individual spaces (both physical and virtual) may often form an integral part of activities which often are regarded (and studied) as purely public youth activities in shared spaces.

Up until this point, we have focused on the importance of the bedroom as facilitator of social activity based on physical co-presence as opposed to the online journal as facilitator of a kind of virtual co-presence. In practice of course, things are less simple than that. As well as enabling individuals physically to spend time within one another within a private physical space, the bedroom increasingly is a multimedia space and as such can also act as the base point for electronic communication. We have already suggested that part of the reason for the increasing significance of the bedroom in young people's lives is that the space is increasingly characterised by a variety of media technologies, many of which afford some form of communication with the world outside (Livingstone 2002). And as well as engaging with public mass media such as television or radio, young people also are able to use the bedroom as the base for personal social interactions with friends via technologies such as the mobile phone (which unlike the landline is individual rather household centred) and the internet. And here the privacy afforded by the walls of the bedroom combines with the level of control enabled by the technologies themselves (such as the ability to block emails or reject calls) to enable significant individual leverage by young people over who has communicative access to them and the nature and content of any such interactions. Therefore, such technologies expand the capacity of the bedroom to act as a private form of social space – a base point for selective, individual centred and controlled networks of personal interaction.

It should be noted here that whilst many young people in Western countries have their own mobile phones, stereos and televisions, the presence of internet-ready computers within the bedroom is as yet some way from being ubiquitous (Livingstone 2002; Lincoln 2004). Nevertheless, for the gradually increasing number who are able to access the internet from their bedrooms, the virtual spaces provided by online journal software such as LiveJournal and by social networking software such as My Space,

may prove to be important examples of the sort of electronic communication facilities for which the bedroom can act as physical base. This suggests that at the same time as learning from the comparisons we have outlined between the uses of online journal space and bedroom space by young people, it is important to recognise that in practice the two do not necessarily operate in parallel and may in some cases intersect with one another directly. The bedroom, then, may increasingly come to act as the ideal safe personal physical context in which to 'spend time' within the virtual individual space of the online journal.

CONCLUSION

The nature and significance of such intersections between physical and virtual space for young people should, we believe, be regarded as an important area for further academic research and attention but this has not been our primary objective in this paper. Rather, in the context of a body of academic literature on youth which has tended with notable exceptions to focus on public space, we have sought to illustrate the importance of individual spaces to young people's lives and identities with reference to a comparison between the longstanding example of the bedroom and more recent trends in the use of online journals. Needless to say, there are all manner of differences between these two spaces – not least that the bedroom unlike the online journal has considerable importance as a practical setting for essential activities such as sleep and work, and that online journals offer considerably more potential than the physical space of the bedroom for direct multi-participant social interaction. Nevertheless it is our contention that core elements of the symbolic and practical use of both spaces by young people render their comparison instructive and help to illustrate the role of individual space in young people's identities and social lives. We believe, then, that the bedroom may offer a useful prism through which to understand young people's use of platforms such as LiveJournal – and that the comparison may also have some currency in the case of individual centred social networking sites such as My Space and Bebo.

More generally, however, the common features identified here help to illustrate and explain the general significance to young people of personal space and the uses to which it is put. In this respect we have been able to demonstrate the apparent significance in the case of the bedroom and the online journal of three key themes. First, the importance of marking, claiming and occupying safe space of one's own, something which contrasts with the status and role of family, household or collective space. Second, the use of personal space as a means to reflexively map out, make sense of and exhibit a sense of self-identity during a time of fluidity and uncertainty. And third, the use of individual space as a safe facilitator of private interaction with selected peers and a base for limited, individual-centred social networks. Such uses illustrate the more general point that personal space – whether physical or virtual – can play a central facilitating role for young people in the symbolic and practical establishment social identity at a time when this period of life is arguably as complex, insecure and uncertain as ever.

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NOTES

¹ LiveJournal's own visual graph on the profile of its users, for example, demonstrates a heavy concentration of users between the ages of 14 and 25 (LiveJournal accessed July 2006).

² Elsewhere, Hodkinson has explored in greater depth the interaction between such personal networks and broader youth groupings, emphasising the facilitation by such software of identifiable networks of users associated with particular subcultures, such as the goth scene (Hodkinson 2006; 2007). It is notable, however, that even for those connected to such a broader community, the primary appeal of LiveJournal concerned the ability to limit direct communication on their own space to a personally hand-picked set of individuals, as we have described here.