

Profile of an Avatar: Teens and Online Identities

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Profiles never tell the whole story. The word "profile," in its pre-web definition, *meant* "the outline or contour of the human face, esp. the face viewed from one side." Fast forward to now, when most young people in the U.S. and elsewhere maintain at least one "profile" online. Maybe it's a Facebook profile; maybe it's on MySpace. Maybe it's somewhere else. But imagine being able to create an avatar of yourself from scratch—a two-dimensional version of you that amplified what you considered to be your best features, and hushed the parts you weren't so fond of. In fact, that's exactly what many teens on social networking sites do every day: manage their avatars, the "profiles," or artificial outlines, that act as vessels for their online identities

It can be intoxicating. It can be empowering. It can also be confusing.

A [new study](#) by OTX Research and the Intelligence Group reveals that

"Teens tend to be happier with how they look online (e.g., their MySpace profile) than with their actual looks — 78 percent vs. 68 percent."

That statistic may not seem huge, but that's actually a full 10% of teens who responded that, while they were *not* happy with how they looked in real life, they *were* happy with how they looked online.

These "profiles"—the way teens look online—are necessarily full of artifice. That's not because they're false, but simply because they're completely constructed. A Facebook profile is a collage: of photos lifted from your own camera and the cameras of others, quotes and bands and movies you liked and want others to know you liked, applications that you choose to display, and other people's affirmations of your identity in the form of public Wall posts. And yet, it is allowed to stand in for identity.

This isn't necessarily a terrible thing. But the ways that teens manage and manicure their online profiles are worth paying attention to. If you ever want to really get to know someone—not just the outline, the profile, the side-view—ask him to take you on a tour of his favorite profile. All of the decisions that go into creating that image speak volumes about the fears, desires, and beliefs of the person behind the profile. We constantly create and recreate avatars of ourselves; sometimes, avatars we prefer to the genuine article. That's not something to condemn, but it *is* something to interrogate.