In June 2001 the Pew Internet and American Life Project published a report titled “Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the Instant-Message Generation and the Internet’s Impact on Friendships and Family Relationships.” As a part of their research the project sponsored online discussion groups with teens. The following is from one of those discussions:

“The Net is an awesome thing,” wrote a fifteen-year-old boy in the Greenfield Online discussion group. . . . “Who would have thought that within the twentieth century, a ‘supertool’ could be created, a tool that allows us to talk to people in other states without the long distance charges, a tool that allows us to purchase products without having to go to the store, a tool that gets information about almost any topic without having to go to the library. The Internet is an amazing invention, one that opens the door to mind-boggling possibilities. As a friend of mine would probably say, ‘The Internet rules!!!!!!’”

In this quote it’s possible to “hear” the excitement many teens feel about the Internet and to gain insight into the Internet features that most appeal to teenagers—communication, shopping, and information gathering. Missing from the list, but still of interest to teens, is using the Internet to play games and download
music. This chapter looks at some of these Internet activities and functions, why they are popular with teens, and what the implications of these are for library service to young adults.

COMMUNICATION

It’s no secret to librarians that teens coming to the library like to use instant messaging (IM), chat, and e-mail. (Each of these technologies enables teenagers to communicate, in real time, with others around the world. See figure 2-1 for more information.) As a matter of fact, many librarians have said, “I often see two teens sitting next to each other at library computer workstations. Each

Chatting and instant messaging are common ways for people to spend their time. The question is, What are people doing when they spend time that way? To help answer that question, here’s a brief overview of what chat and instant messaging are.

Chat

When people refer to chat, they are usually talking about joining a discussion, in real time, with other people on the Web. Usually to do this people go to chat “rooms” organized around a topic of interest. For example, someone might visit Yahoo! chat and go to a room devoted to wrestling. In that room she’ll see the login names of the other people in the room and be able to take part in the conversation that’s taking place. Any messages she types in at the chat room will display instantly on the monitors of all of the people in the chat room at that time. (It’s also possible to take part in audio chat where what someone says into a microphone attached to the computer is heard by all the people—who have speakers or headphones—in the room.)

Instant Messaging

Instant messaging is a term used to refer to conversations people have, in real time, with a select group of people or a particular person. Instant messaging requires installation of software on the computer. Popular instant messaging software includes ICQ, AOL Instant Messenger, and Yahoo! Messenger. When the software is installed it can be set up to let the user know whenever her friends, family members, and so on are online and available to talk. The user sets up a “buddy list”—information about people with whom she wants to instant message. Then whenever someone on the buddy list is online the user is alerted and can communicate with that person at that time.

FIGURE 2-1
What are chat and instant messaging?
is using e-mail, IM, and chat. With whom are they communicat-
ing? Each other!” In other words, teens often use electronic com-
munication tools to talk to each other even when they can just as easily have a face-to-face conversation. Many librarians wonder why that is.

Some light is shed on the topic in the *Rolling Stone* article, “The Secret Life of Boys.” In this article the author, Jancee Dunn, begins by introducing readers to Joe, a fourteen-year-old in Edison, New Jersey. She writes:

> Hours can slip away as he Instant Messages friends on his list. “I’d say I’m online at least two hours a day probably,” he says. “I guess that’s a lot. But on the phone, you only have three-way. On AOL, you can talk to more people at once.” He and his online community talk about the usual stuff: how school “sux,” who likes who, the latest gossip.

> “He’s on a lot,” observes his mother, Donna, a pretty brunette. “At least four hours. He does it after school, then he eats dinner, then he gets back on, then I scream at him to go take a shower.”²

The conversations Joe and his friends, or the two teens sitting next to each other in the library, are having seem, on the surface, no different than face-to-face or telephone conversations. The difference lies in the capabilities the technology provides. The Internet allows teens to expand their social circle and community beyond those who go to their school or live in their town and to engage in conversations that include a sometimes disparate group of people.

Another reason IM and chat appeal to teenagers is that these tools provide the chance to select whom they talk to by either ignoring messages sent by someone in a chat or IM session or by not including someone on their buddy list (a list of other users whom you want to know when you are online and available to talk). The Pew Internet and American Life Project discovered that teens are selective about whom they “allow” to join their IM conversations. Teenagers reported that they have different online personalities so that they can better manage their IM conversations. They make sure that only their best friends and close family
members know the usernames they use in chat and IM sessions, which guarantees their anonymity (and safety) online.

**What Does This Mean for Libraries?**

The question that one might now ask is, “Why is it important to know about IM and chat when serving teens in the library?” As you read through the examples in this chapter of how teens use chat, consider these points:

Knowing that teens look to IM and chat as a way to hang out with their friends and family, the library should consider how this supports the library’s role of providing a place for teens to congregate in order to do homework or simply spend time with their peers.

Since teens enjoy the possibilities IM and chat present for bringing friends and family together, the library should consider how they can use these technologies to bring teens from a variety of settings together to talk about books, reading, and so on.

The library should consider marketing the availability of IM, chat, and other online communications tools as a way that teens can communicate with their peers both near and far.

Since teens are sometimes selective about with whom they will communicate in IM or chat and sometimes take on “fake” personalities, librarians need to consider the impact on a library’s IM or chat service. Does everyone in the chat room have to be identified as who they really are?

Since most chat rooms require that one or more people in the room take the lead in order to keep chatters on topic, libraries should find ways to integrate chat as a means of helping teens learn leadership and facilitation skills.

The wide selection of chat rooms and discussion forums provides a model of the variety of content that teens want to talk about. Libraries should consider how they could vary their website content and provide a resource that teens will want to return to over and over again.
Librarians may want to (or should) lurk in these chat rooms to find out what teens are talking about, what they are interested in, and to get ideas about how they can support teen needs and interests in the library.

**Yahoo! Messenger, AOL Instant Messenger, ICQ**

When using IM teens are likely to use AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Yahoo! Messenger, ICQ (pronounced “I Seek You”), or an IM service provided by a specific website. Using each requires registering as a user of the IM system and may require downloading a piece of software. Once registered, a user receives the identification necessary (either a number or username) so others can add her to their buddy lists. When registration is complete she can also take part in conversations with other users, send e-mails, and send files and URLs to people with whom she is chatting.

Figure 2-2 shows the privacy settings and buddy list screens for AIM. Notice on the privacy settings screen that a user can specify if his information is available only to those on his buddy list and how much information about him is available to other “non-buddy list” users of the IM system.

Chat is different from IM in that chatters do not have the same level of immediate control over whom they chat with through their buddy list. However, many chat rooms allow visitors to send messages to specific individuals logged in at a chat room. It’s also possible to set a specific individual’s status to “ignore,” thereby not having to read (or sometimes hear) a particular person’s contributions to the chat session. As with IM most chat interfaces require the user to register to use the chat service. The username that is chosen in the registration process becomes the screen name used within the chat room.

**YAHOO! AND EXCITE CHAT**

http://chat.yahoo.com/

http://www.excite.com/

Yahoo! and Excite offer teen-oriented chat as a part of their larger chat offerings. At each of these sites teens can find chat rooms on everything from dating and friendship to goth lifestyles and from
chats specific to regions of the country to rooms devoted to a particular type of music or celebrity. (Sometimes these rooms are not within the teen-defined chat section and are instead within a chat area devoted to a type of music, and so on.)

If you visit one of the teen-oriented chat rooms (or any chat room, for that matter) you might notice that even though you are in a Backstreet Boys room or a World Wrestling Federation room the conversation isn’t always, or even often, focused on the specific theme of the room. Teens might (and that’s a big “might”) enter a chat room with the idea that they’ll talk about a topic of interest. However, what they simply want to do is to virtually talk and hang out with others with whom they have something in common—age, interests, locale, and so on. To stay on “task” someone in the chat room usually needs to take a leadership role. In that role she needs to facilitate the discussion, asking chatters specific
questions about the topic or throwing out ideas to get discussion going. This is no different than what is required for any kind of “good” conversation to take place. In virtual or “real” life someone needs to take the lead. However, if no one does take that lead, many teens are content to stick with a/s/l (see figure 2-3) and what some adults might consider conversations that lack focus.

KIWIBOX AND MADHIVE

http://www.kiwibox.com/
http://www.madhive.com/

Kiwibox and Madhive are two sites that cater to teens and sponsor topic-oriented chat rooms as well as chat events. Some of these sites also host chat events that push the capabilities of the technology. For example, for Valentine’s Day Kiwibox (a site with a primarily female audience) and Madhive (a site with a primarily male audience) sponsored a Valentine’s Day “dance.” Teens who logged onto the chat on Valentine’s evening selected a room based on their musical interest—alternative rock, hiphop, and so on. The appropriate music was streamed into each chat room and teens could “give cyber hugs, kisses—even buy [virtual] flowers for a date” while they chatted.3

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So you visit a chat room and you realize you don’t have a clue what the chatters are saying. First someone writes “a/s/l.” Then someone writes “BTW.” And all of a sudden you read ^5 on the screen. You are completely lost.

Don’t worry, chat has a lingo all its own—it has to since part of the appeal of chat is its fast-moving conversation. If chatters had to spend time writing out full words and worrying about spelling all that appeal would be gone. All you need to do is bone up on some chat lingo and you’ll be all set. A good place to start is Chatropolis at http://www.chatropolis.com/chat_dictionary.html/.

BTW (that’s “by the way”) a/s/l = age, sex, location and is used to find out the vital statistics of other chatters. ^5 = high five and you can probably figure out how that’s used.

FIGURE 2-3
What are they saying?
BOLT

http://www.bolt.com/

Bolt is a website for teens that offers chat, but it also offers many other ways teens can communicate with each other. These include discussion forums, tagbooks (personalized discussion forums), e-cards, and notes. Each of these gives teens a chance to tell others what they think on a topic—from dating to art and writing and from health to college.

Teens visit Bolt by the thousands. The main page of the site includes information on how many Bolt members are currently signed onto the site. On one summer afternoon more than 7,000 members were logged in. What is it that brings all these teens to the Bolt site? It’s certainly not the high-tech design. If you look at figure 2-4 you’ll see that the look is straightforward and somewhat cramped. So the look isn’t what draws teens in. Instead, it’s the content: good information written for teens by teens and opportunities to communicate with peers about issues that are important.
Creating Personal Chat Space

Most websites that currently provide chat also allow visitors to create their own chat space. For example, a teen might log onto Bolt and enter the chat area. Once there, instead of entering one of the predefined chat rooms he might decide to create his own chat space just for the group of people he wants to chat with at that time. All he has to do is decide on a name for the room and let the people he wants to join him in the room know it’s available and what it’s called. (Sometimes an official invitation is required to join the personal chat room, and sometimes all that’s needed is the name of the room.) The personal chat space exists for the amount of time that chatters are in the room. In most cases, once everyone leaves the personal chat space the room no longer exists.

SHOPPING

Marketers and retailers are aware of the fact that many teens have large amounts of disposable income. (It’s estimated that in 1999 teens spent $125 billion.) They also know that teens are using the Internet to find information in order to make smart purchasing decisions as well as to buy clothing, music, electronics, and so on. “Generation Y’s power goes beyond their spending. Napster showed how young people who aren’t tied to old business models and values can take control of what’s marketed to them and exploit the Internet to change the rules of commerce.”

When selling to teenagers, marketers exploit technology as much as they can. This includes combining e-mail and web technologies to inform teens of good deals and limited-edition items. Here’s an example:

Using e-mail distribution service from @once, Giles [of Vans—a popular brand of teen shoes] sends his most loyal or promising customers messages offering limited-edition sneakers. . . . The shoe changes color when exposed to the sun’s ultraviolet rays, something Giles thought could be demonstrated better online than in Vans’ indoor retail stores. An e-mail included a 3-D, rotating picture of the sneaker changing color and a note promising that the first batch of shoes was being saved for online customers.
Vans.com saw a 20% click-through [the number of people who actually went to the site to look at the product via the link on the e-mail ad, which is extremely high for this medium as] promotion-rates of 2% to 5% are considered successful e-mail marketing. “We’ve created a very loyal consumer on Vans.com,” Giles says. “We’ll make a shoe that’s available only online and only for a month so that the people who buy it have their own style of shoe.”

The click-through rate shows that teens responded well to this marketing technique. They liked getting a look at something that was being sold in a limited edition, and they also liked that they were specially targeted to receive the e-mail with the Vans information.

**What Does This Mean for Libraries?**

Knowing about teen shopping behaviors and how marketers are using technology to grab the teen consumer can give you some insight into how libraries can use the same techniques to promote their programs and services to the age group. Consider these as you read through the examples of teen online shopping behaviors:

Teens are interested in making sure they get a good deal. Libraries should use this interest to their advantage by providing teens with information that tells them about the deals libraries provide. This might include a tool by which teens could compare the price of purchasing a book at an online store versus checking it out of the library, or it could be that a library provides charts that show teens the “deal” they are getting by using library resources versus paying for them at stores or through database vendors.

Libraries should consider how they could use e-mail marketing techniques and special offers for “good” customers with the teen audience. Not only will this keep the library on the mind of the teens, but it will also help to ensure that teens become loyal customers.

As teens like going to websites that not only sell them something but also provide them with information and things to do, libraries should find ways to develop websites that provide teens with a place to hang out online along with a resource for finding information and tools to use in research.
Teens use technology to hunt down the best deals. This means they might use sites like Shopper.com or MySimon to find out who offers the best price. It also means that they will look for companies to provide comparison charts that show why their product is better, or perhaps different, than that of the competitor.

The focus of Shopper.com is technology while the focus of Yahoo! Shopping and MySimon is broader and provides pricing information on a wide variety of topics—books, clothes, sports equipment, and so on. On each site all a teen needs to do is type in the name or type of product she is interested in purchasing, and a list of stores and prices for that product is generated. Then it’s possible to compare item costs, shipping and handling costs, and delivery time in order to determine the best deal.

Many websites aimed at teens combine shopping with gossip, articles, chat, discussion forums, and so on. “Platform and other sites, like Alloy.com, iTurf.com, http://www.iturf.com/, and Hottopic.com, http://www.hottopic.com/, have risen to the top of online apparel sales partly because their sites attract young consumers by other means.” In other words, once a site brings teens in to read about celebrity gossip, life as a teen, and so on, they find reasons for looking at what’s being sold in the site’s online shopping area. Retailers are always looking for ways to keep the customer in the store as long as possible. On the Web, that’s accomplished by providing more than a site that’s only useful for making purchases.

While Alloy’s front page includes a link to shopping in their main navigation bar at the top of the page, the information on shopping comes below the highlights of quizzes, surveys, and celebrity information. In other words, shopping isn’t a hard sell at
the site—at least not obviously—instead, the main promotion is for fun things teens can see, read, and do on the site.

The shopping section of the site is easy to use. Teens either look for items by a particular brand, category (shoes, glam, books, etc.), style (“Beach Babe,” “Clean and Classic,” etc.), or by SKU number or keyword. It’s also possible to track the order once placed. The merchandise at Alloy certainly has the teen in mind with everything from bedroom lightbulbs to shirts, dresses, and jeans. Major brands are available, and if a teen isn’t sure what to get there’s a section with “Editor’s Picks.”

INFORMATION GATHERING

Often, I’ve heard librarians who work with teens say, “I don’t know what to do, all the kids will use when they are searching is Yahoo! or Ask Jeeves. I can’t seem to get them to use some of the other tools that are better for finding what they are looking for.” That statement always reminds me of a line from an article written by Sara Weissman. In the article she wrote, “Search engines are pets. People just want to have one they can love.”7 For teenagers, Yahoo! and Ask Jeeves are pets that they are loyal to and that they think are loyal to them.

What Does This Mean for Libraries?

Information seeking is not solely associated with using search tools like Yahoo! and Ask Jeeves. It includes topic-specific sites and even the use of Internet communications tools. When libraries consider teen information-seeking behaviors and their impact on programs and services to young adults, they should consider:

If search tools are a teen’s pet, then librarians need to allow teens to keep their pet loyalty while at the same time finding ways to help teens find other pets to which they can be loyal. This means that a librarian shouldn’t force a teen to use another search tool until he or she has seen that his or her own favorite can’t do the job.
Librarians should remember that information can be gathered from a wide array of websites and that search tools are not the only means for finding out about where to find a particular piece of information. Teens respond to “specialty” sites that help them to navigate to the information they are seeking without too many clicks.

Library websites for teens should be intuitive in look and feel. Teens shouldn’t have to hunt through several layers to find what they are looking for, nor should they have to try and figure out what the labels used for searching and links really mean.

As noted in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, teens are bypassing the library entirely to find information that meets their research needs. Librarians need to consider teen information-seeking behaviors and determine how they can meet the needs of those behaviors even if the teenager never comes into the library.

**YAHOO! AND ASK JEEVES**

http://www.yahoo.com/

http://www.aj.com/

What is it about Yahoo! and Ask Jeeves that creates loyalty among teenagers? It’s the fact that both are seemingly easy to use. All a teen needs to do is type in the terms or question that needs to be answered and information of some kind appears. Even if the results aren’t exactly what the teen is looking for, a teen has the feeling that she knows what to click on to try again or to find the information for which she is looking. For teens, it seems that using these tools does not require advanced or critical-thinking skills.

When teens visit the Web to look for information, they are looking for a tool that doesn’t require that they learn a new skill in order to find the information. They are looking for information now, not after they learn how to search, so the tool has to be intuitive in how it is used. This doesn’t mean that teens are not willing to learn how to use search tools, but when they are in the mode of finding information to meet their needs or a specific purpose, they want to go in and out quickly.
Consider the shopping sites mentioned above. At Shopper.com, a teen simply types in the name of the product he is planning on purchasing, and instantly he receives all the necessary information about the best price and the best deal. It doesn’t require going through several levels in order to find the information needed. If the teen knows the name of the product, then in most cases only one or two clicks are required to find the information he is seeking.

It’s important to remember that while teens do look for information electronically to support their homework needs, they also seek out information to meet recreational interests including music, movies, games, and hobbies. When teens look for this information they either go to trusted “pets” such as Yahoo! or Ask Jeeves, or they’ll access tools specific to the content for which they are looking (Allgame.com for games, Ultimate Band List for music, or E! Online for Hollywood news and gossip). These, and other sites like them, are important sources of information for teens.

**ALL GAME GUIDE, ULTIMATE BAND LIST, E! ONLINE**

http://www.allgame.com/

http://www.ubl.com/

http://www.eonline.com/

These topic-specific sites are similar to the shopping sites discussed earlier in this chapter. When visiting any of these sites teens can either select links in order to browse through content on a particular topic, or they can type in a specific search to find information on the topic in which they are interested. The sites are straightforward in design and focus. The look is appropriate to the audience and purpose of the site. For example, E! Online uses celebrity photos to draw visitors in while All Game Guide has a somewhat dark and stark look that is reminiscent of the colors and design used in some online games. Each of these sites also has built a loyal following and is a trusted resource of topic-specific information for teens. They are some of the sites that could be classified as the Yahoo! and Ask Jeeves of their subject areas.

Each site’s search tool gives a teen the opportunity to search within a particular field. At E! Online she can search by names,
titles, new features, or products. At All Game Guide she can search by character, game, person, company, or platform. Ultimate Band List allows for searching by artists, songs, albums, and labels. These search tools enable teens to simply and easily hone in on the information that they are looking for. There’s not a lot to figure out. And even if a teen doesn’t select the appropriate field for his search, he is still likely to pull up information of value and not too much of it, so he will feel he’s been successful in his quest.

**SUMMING UP**

Ultimately, the most popular sites and resources for teens combine the Internet features that are the most compelling. For example:

- Bolt mixes communications tools with information of interest to teens
- Alloy integrates chat with shopping and celebrity news and gossip
- Yahoo! provides chat, comparison shopping, search tools, and so on.

As libraries consider what they need to do to provide Internet-based services to teens, finding ways to integrate these different tools is an important first step in creating high-quality programs and services.

**NOTES**

5. Ibid.