

## Research on adolescent cyber networking earns OSU-Tulsa student national award

Amanda Williams, a human development and family science graduate student at OSU-Tulsa, received the Wesley Burr Paper Award from the National Council on Family Relations for her study on adolescents' online conversations.

by Katie Butler, OSU Communications

(TULSA, OKLA -- March 31, 2008) -- Facebook and MySpace, two of the fastest growing websites on the Internet, have generated millions of online conversations, but social scientists are just beginning to study the ways online interaction is transforming classic communication. An Oklahoma State University student has been awarded a national honor for researching the implications of this cyber trend for adolescents. Amanda Williams

Amanda Williams, a human development and family science graduate student at OSU-Tulsa, received the Wesley Burr Paper Award from the National Council on Family Relations. Her study, "A Review of Online Social Networking Profiles by Adolescents: Implications for Future Research and Intervention," was judged on criteria including strength of literature review, soundness of research methods and clarity of linkage between research and application.

Competition for the award is open to undergraduate and graduate students. Although she is now pursuing a master's degree, Williams was recognized for her work as a human development and family science undergraduate at OSU. She began researching adolescent online social networking and wrote the paper for her honors thesis, a requirement to earn a bachelor's degree with a Departmental Honors Award from OSU's College of Human Environmental Sciences.

"In Amanda's case, an undergraduate honors thesis project has benefited her beyond the experience of completing the requirements for an honors award," said Michael Merten, assistant professor of human development and family science and Williams' faculty adviser. "She came up with the idea, took the initiative and collected all the data. The project was a sort of first step in some of the research she's doing now and will do in the future."

Williams conducted a content review of adolescents' online social networking profiles using a mixed-method research strategy. She observed 100 profiles from undisclosed social networking websites and monitored them for one semester. Williams then created a "code book" to apply numbers to the data she recorded so no personal information would be revealed.

She found nearly half of the adolescents in her study disclosed personally identifiable information. However, Williams also was surprised to discover a great number of positive interactions taking place, given the negative publicity these sites often generate. For example, teenagers often talk about their friendships and made positive references to their parents, such as "my mom is my hero."

Another unexpected finding of Williams' research involved messages sent to one of the subjects who died during the course of the study. As part of a follow-up analysis, Williams identified online social networking profiles of 20 teenagers who died from suicide, homicide or by accident. She reviewed online postings to those profiles that spanned the course of one year and found that as time went on, friends continued to post messages to the deceased.

"It was profound to read the intense emotions teenagers continued posting to their deceased peers' websites," Williams said. "This form of online communication could potentially benefit the coping process for many grieving adolescents."

While picking up the Wesley Burr Award, Williams had the opportunity to give a presentation at the National Council on Family Relations conference.

"When I received the award, I felt overwhelmed. I was sitting with faculty from many different universities who have all done amazing things," Williams said. "It was validating to learn these researchers I admire actually enjoyed reading my paper."

Williams, who is a Tulsa native and 1998 graduate of Edison High School, earned an associate's degree in psychology at Tulsa Community College before receiving her bachelor's at OSU-Tulsa. She plans to complete her master's and a doctorate at OSU before pursuing a career in academia.

According to Merten, she is quickly building a scholar's résumé. Williams' award-winning paper has been selected for publication by a journal, and a second paper she has written based on her study is being reviewed by another for publication. She also is co-author on two more works.

“Amanda is very driven and motivated, and her achievements are impressive for a student who has yet to complete their first year as a master’s student,” Merten said. “This honor, as well as others she has, has given tremendous recognition to OSU in terms of the quality of students we have.”

Williams credits her success to the OSU-Tulsa faculty.

“The faculty on the Tulsa campus are incredible and without their continued guidance and support, I would not be in a position to win anything.”