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Teenage Insults, Scrawled on Web, Not on Walls

By **TAMAR LEWIN**

It is the online version of the bathroom wall in school, the place to scrawl raw, anonymous gossip.

[Formspring.me](#), a relatively new social networking site, has become a magnet for comments, many of them nasty and sexual, among the [Facebook](#) generation.

While Formspring is still under the radar of many parents and guidance counselors, over the last two months it has become an obsession for thousands of teenagers nationwide, a place to trade comments and questions like: Are you still friends with julia? Why wasn't sam invited to lauren's party? You're not as hot as u think u are. Do you wear a d cup? You talk too much. You look stupid when you laugh.

By setting up a free Formspring account and linking it to their Tumblr or [Twitter](#) or Facebook accounts, young people invite their hundreds of online friends to ask questions or post comments, without having to identify themselves.

In part, Formspring is just the latest place to hang out and exchange gossip, as teenagers have always done. But because of the anonymity, the banter is unvarnished.

Comments and questions go into a private mailbox, where the user can ignore, delete or answer them. Only the answered ones are posted publicly — leading parents and guidance counselors to wonder why so many young people make public so many nasty comments about their looks, friends and sexual habits.

“I'd never heard of Formspring until yesterday, but when I started asking kids, every seventh and eighth grader I asked said they used it,” said Christine Ruth, a middle school counselor in Linwood, N.J. “In seventh grade, especially, it's a lot of ‘Everyone knows you're a slut,’ or ‘You're ugly.’ It seems like even when it's inappropriate and vicious, the kids want the attention, so they post it. And who knows what they're getting that's so devastating that they don't post it?”

Users can choose not to accept anonymous questions, but most young people seem to ignore that option. And some Formspring users say it is precisely the negative comments that interest them.

“Nice stuff is not why you get it,” said Ariane Barrie-Stern, a freshman at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School in New York City. “I think it’s interesting to find out what people really think that they don’t have the guts to say to you. If it’s hurtful, you have to remind yourself that it doesn’t really mean anything.”

Ariane, who has more than 100 posts on her site, said she had not been terribly bothered by anything she has read so far, but she acknowledged that after one comment about a certain pair of leggings, she stopped wearing them.

Her father, Larry Stern, who like most other parents interviewed had never heard of Formspring until a reporter’s call, was aghast.

“It’s just shocking that kids have access to all these things on the Internet and we don’t even know about it,” Mr. Stern said. “And it’s disturbing that what goes on there will influence how somebody behaves. How do you block it? How do you monitor it?”

Even teenagers who do not set up Formspring accounts can peruse their friends’ accounts to see if they are mentioned.

Many families on Long Island became aware of Formspring after the March suicide of [Alexis Pilkington](#), a 17-year-old West Islip soccer player who had received many nasty messages.

Since it began in late November, Formspring has caught on rapidly. More than 28 million people visit the site each month, 14 million of them in the United States, according to Quantcast, a service that analyzes Web traffic.

The company, started in Indianapolis by John Wechsler and Ade Olonoh, recently raised \$2.5 million from a group of Silicon Valley investors and moved to San Francisco.

According to Formspring, more than three million questions have been asked and answered on the site. Mr. Olonoh said in an e-mail message that the company did not know what percentage of users were teenagers.

Formspring is not the first site to allow anonymous comments. Some schools say students have been demoralized by comments on Honesty Box, a Facebook add-on. And Juicy Campus, a college gossip site, caused so much grief that some colleges blocked it, and some state

attorneys general began consumer-protection investigations. The site shut down last year.

Formspring is one of many question-and-answer Internet sites that are widely used to find, say, the calorie count of avocados. But Formspring spread like wildfire among young people, who used it to for more intimate topics — or flat-out cyberbullying.

Many schools say they have seen students crushed by criticism of their breasts, their body odor or their behavior at the last party.

“There’s nothing positive on there, absolutely nothing, but the kids don’t seem to be able to stop reading, even if people are saying terrible things about them,” said Maggie Dock, a middle school counselor in Kinnelon, N.J. “I asked one girl, ‘If someone was throwing rocks at you, what would you do?’ She said she’d run, she’d move away. But she won’t stop reading what people say about her.”

In some schools, the Formspring craze may already be burning out.

“We all got Formspring about two months ago, when it began showing in people’s Facebook status,” said a 14-year-old from a New York City private school. “It’s actually gone down a little bit in the past few weeks, at least in my grade, because a lot of people realized it wasn’t a good thing, that people were getting hurt, or posting awful comments.”

Some young Formspring users say they strive for a light touch in answering questions about their relationships (hookups, that is, or “hu” in online parlance). Several said they admired friends’ skills at deflecting the often-asked question about how far they had gone, with answers like, “I’ve been to Morocco.”

One mother in Westchester County, N.Y., discovered Formspring when her daughter came to her, sobbing, after reading putdowns of her breasts and her teeth.

“She was very, very upset,” the woman said. “She’s always been self-conscious, and in a way this just flushed out what people might been thinking all along. She worked very hard on figuring out how to answer. But there’s a kind of obsessiveness to it. She still wants to read everything.”

Unknown to her daughter, the woman has learned her password, and occasionally checks her Facebook and Formspring accounts.

“The comments are all gross and sexual,” the mother said. “And yet, of course, this is coming from her friends. I wish I could just erase it, but all of her friends are online, and so much of their social interaction is online that I don’t think I could just take away her Internet access.

But I do think this whole online social media thing is a huge experiment on our children.”