

**GIRLS' ONLINE AGENCY: A CYBERFEMINIST EXPLORATION**

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## ABSTRACT

Cyberfeminist scholars have identified the Internet as a site where feminist issues are substantiated. This exploratory study investigates young women's lived experiences of agency within online social networking, also looking at the ways in which their assertion of agency is constrained. Analysis identified four biographically consistent identity narratives within which participants experienced online agency, each with a unique operationalization of agency, constraints upon agency, and role of a heteronormative boyfriend. Identity narratives tended to invoke socially- and media-entrenched representations of how to 'properly' perform 'girl' online, including stereotypes of girls vigilantly managing online risk or portraying themselves as professional, ethically sensible, family-oriented, or popular and celebrity-oriented. However, these representations were also inherently conflictual, presenting incompatible expectations that were difficult to simultaneously negotiate. In conclusion, this study recommends that future research and policy abandon patriarchal, neoliberal underpinnings in favour of deconstructing problematic stereotyped representations of femininity within online spaces.

## INTRODUCTION

### **Locating the Research: Research Questions, Cyberfeminism & Online Agency**

Cyberfeminists who first began to study the Internet in the 1990s (Haraway 1991; Hall 1996) conceptualized it as a utopian space that promised to unrestrictedly liberate women from gender limitations. However, later work questions this claim and identifies a number of limitations on women's interactions and agency – or, in the context of this study, “what, how and when [online content] is controlled by the person(s) whose images are circulated” (Koskela 2004:211; see section 1.2). This project seeks to explore girls' “real life” negotiation of online agency as conceptualized in this Koskelian context, and the ways in which agency is maximized or constrained in the course of young women's online lived experiences. Its primary research question, **How do young women experience agency online?**, conceptualizes virtual spaces as locales in which young women can and do experience agency. This study's supplementary research question, **How is agency constrained for young women online?**, firmly situates it in the critical cyberfeminist tradition of emancipatory research (see sections 1.1; 2.1), recognizing that young women online do face unique challenges and risks in the course of attempting to maintain an agential online presence. Its theoretical positioning ensures that this study is of criminological relevance: in taking a cyberfeminist stance it fundamentally focuses on issues of power, control and inequality in addition to issues relating to risk, particularly in the context of constraints upon gendered online agency.

Working definitions grounded in cyberfeminist literature provided a skeleton for major terms of interest in this study. These major terms are defined below:

**Agency:** The ability of young women to participate as active subjects in the circulation of their own online identities and actively assert control over when they are available and what can be seen (Koskela 2004; White 2003), as well as their internal role as agents who are freely able to make choices. Agency also lies in “what, how and when [online content] is controlled by the person(s) whose images are circulated” (Koskela 2004:211). This operationalization of agency does not include control over others’ responses to online content, since that need would make agents dependent upon others in a way that detracts from agency.

**Biographic Identity Narratives:** Narratives of self with a consistent feeling of biographic continuity over time (Rosas and Dhen 2011). In the context of this study, biographic identity narratives consider variations in self-disclosure online, discussions of privacy settings or differentiated friends lists, statements involving projection of self, and how or whether certain identities were communicated consistently online. Biographic identity narratives also reflect any identifiable goals associated with particular identities, identities’ offline contexts in terms of whether participants discussed similar strategies of differentiated disclosure offline as online, how or whether identity was communicated differently offline than online, and whether participant statements about online behaviour or identity aligned with statements about offline behaviour or identity.

**Constraint Upon Agency:** Anything that threatens or diminishes the ability of young women to participate as active subjects in the circulation of their own online identities or actively assert control over when they are available and what, how and when online content can be seen (Koskela 2004; White 2003).

**Cyber [Gender] Harassment/Cyber bullying:** Any instance where there is a power imbalance online favouring a perpetrator over a [female] victim;

perpetrators who are supported by a group of peers; subjects who are targeted and isolated from their peer groups; and deliberate, repeated and unwanted behaviour from perpetrators (Shariff 2008). Additionally, any instance perceived by a potential or alleged victim of such harassment as any of the above, continuing to follow the best interests of the young women under observation and ensure reflexivity.

**Online Risk:** any perceived negative consequences of maintaining an online presence, including any ‘real life’ aspects of these risks.

**Personal Information:** Any information about an identifiable individual, or any information that an individual believes could identify them. This lack of distinction between ‘identifiable’ and ‘perceived as identifiable’ ensures that participants continue to have an active voice in operationalizing research concepts.

**Self-Disclosure:** The act of revealing personal information.

**Shame:** The feeling of ashamedness that arises from consciousness of something perceived by oneself or by others as dishonourable, inappropriate, objectionable or improper. Distinguished in this study from shaming (notably in section 3.1, usually in the context of fear of shaming by others), which refers to someone causing someone else to feel shame.

**Social Networking:** Online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter on which social structures are made up of a set of actors and the ties between these actors. When relevant, specific social networking context will be specified during data analysis.

This study builds on the cyberfeminist claim, rooted in Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, that the Internet is a gendered space (Haraway 1991; Hall 1996; Gajjala 2000; Plant 2000; Munt 2001; White 2003; Clark 2007; Senft 2008). While some early cyberfeminist paradigms conceptualize online space as a widely accessible site of liberation that facilitates female self-empowerment by eradicating gender binaries (Hall 1996), I explore more contemporary perspectives (Allen 2000; Gajjala 2000; Shade 2008) that acknowledge that issues of online inequality are rooted in broader socio-political contexts. For example, Gajjala (2000:121) suggests that cyberspatial environments are culturally founded upon discourses that adhere to linear patriarchy. Rather than equalizing gender relations and leveling economic disparity, online spaces often extend colonial, male-dominated progress narratives (see section 1.1) and only permit a narrow performance of "girlhood" online.

Gajjala's suggestion that online spaces are not, in fact, inherently liberating for women and that 'e-quality' is a utopian myth precedes a range of scholarly literature that maps a variety of potential constraints upon agency and free expression for young women online. These plethoric constraints include: surveillance both by corporations and other online users (Phillips 2009; Chaulk and Jones 2011; Tokunaga 2011; Trottier 2012); potential sexualization (Peter and Valkenburg 2007; Dworkin and Lerum 2009; McRobbie 2008); privacy risks (Allen 2000; Shade 2008); concerns related to online self-disclosure, particularly in terms of future employment or higher education (Allen 2000; Shade 2008; Tokunaga 2011); reputational risks (Allen 2000; Shariff and Johnny 2007); miscellaneous threats to personal safety such as sexual advances from males in response to self-images that are projected online (Dodd 2011; Gonzales and Hancock 2011;

Moreno 2011); body image risks related to media representation (Clark and Tiggemann 2006; Manago et al. 2008; Brookes and Kelly 2009); and cyberbullying and cyber gender harassment (Senft 2008; Shariff 2008; Keats Citron 2009).

Business models on social networking platforms also link profit to mainstream advertising, ensuring that ideological messages continue to juxtapose the importance of celebrity and consumer culture with popular discourses surrounding what it means to be a girl online, and particularly within online social networks. Young women face pressures to live up to pop culturalized self-portrayals of popularity and unattainable appearance ideals, and ‘girl power’ is marketed as a direct result of these concepts (Thiel-Stern 2008), where consumption and engagement with celebrity and popular culture are presented as shortcuts to femininity and provide girls with social capital. Yet these consumer-oriented media discourses about femininity are founded upon patriarchal, capitalist ideals that continue to perpetuate gendered inequality under the guise of female empowerment: as Munk observes, “If you want to sell anything to the Girl Power crowd, you have to pretend that they’re running things” (1997:134).

At the same time as they face diverse constraints upon agency and free expression online, young women can also assert varying types and levels of agency, as scholars including Koskela (2004), Paasonen (2005) and Bailey (2009) suggest. The Internet can provide opportunities for the criticism of traditional tools of patriarchal surveillance; online, girls can play direct roles in the collection, portrayal and dissemination of their own images (Koskela 2004). Through experimentation with virtual identities, women explore potential offline identities before using them in-practice during daily life; online identities can also influence the performance of identity offline in positive ways such as

building self-esteem or providing social capital that can transcend virtual spaces (Koskela 2004). Online environments can also encourage girls to assert control over when and how they are presented, countering traditional patriarchal notions of what is public and what is private as it relates to gendered information that should and should not be self-disclosed (Bailey 2009).

Several academics opine that agency can also be gained through the process of online self-disclosure, such as that that occurs on social networking platforms like Facebook. Koskela (2004) argues that online photo sharing facilitates girls' participation as active subjects in the circulation of their own images. By posting photos online, girls engage in "counter-surveillance", a process through which they criticize traditional tools of surveillance used by potential oppressors, contrary to conventional resistance movements that oppose surveillance entirely. Via personal photo sharing, girls play direct roles in and assert control over the collection and distribution of their own visual depictions, "demonstrating ownership and reclaiming the copyright of their own lives" (Koskela 2004:199), making the active choice to present their private lives publicly.

White similarly contributes that regardless of whether girls design profiles and sites through which their bodies appear as erotic objects allowing an external gaze, either male or female, they are still actively asserting control over when they are available and what can be seen, transforming this allowance from a constraint upon agency to a facilitator of agency for young women (2003:16). In this way, girls are encouraging spectators to "enter" into their own personal environments and the posting of online content can be considered an assertion of personal agency, countering the Western assumption that "what goes on inside the home is private" (Bailey 2009:192).

Other scholars agree that simply because online photos can be used for potentially undesirable purposes such as control, surveillance, sexualization, slander, or other forms of exploitation, they should not automatically be interpreted as a loss of agency for girls. Colley praises the potential of photo messaging to maintain relationships between girls (2010:348), while Gonzales and Hancock have found that exposure to self-presentation on digitally mediated environments such as Facebook – for example, viewing one’s own profile – can have a positive influence on self-esteem, contrary to the findings of prior research (2011:79). Shade likewise assesses that positive identities and femininities can be asserted by posting personal profiles that contain pictures of non-traditional gender attributes and positive behaviours. Koskela agrees, writing, “The idea of empowerment is not dependent on the act of looking/seeing but the act of presenting” (2004:211).

In light of these discourses, I am interested in the ways in which the liberating potentials of online spaces have been impacted and are limited by patriarchal constraints and male-dominated narratives, particularly in terms of their intersections with young women’s experiences of agency and performances of identity online. It is clear that online space is gendered in such a way that girls face a greater array of potential constraints upon online agency than boys; it is therefore appropriate to place a focus on girls when investigating online agency. Despite an abundance of research on potential risks and benefits facing women online, however, few studies appear to have taken into consideration the perspectives, opinions and actions of girls themselves in the course of investigating these issues, instead theoretically focusing on a risk/benefit binary rather than acknowledging that online experiences can at once be risky and beneficial.

This study attempts to avoid this stark binary, adopting a flexible research design and focusing instead on girls' lived experiences of agency in online social networking. It analyses associated gendered online risks through this agency-focused lens by theoretically conceptualizing young women's behaviours as simultaneously risky and beneficial, not simply one or the other. The potential for future policy interventions to effectively address issues that are relevant to girls' use of online space will be greatly increased by considering online agency and associated risk as girls themselves view it: as the Internet continues to develop both in terms of commercial marketing and social networking, it is important to investigate online issues from the points of view of those involved in online interactions, ultimately using this research to inform future policy as it develops (Phillips 2009). This study also builds an exploratory Canadian context for girls' online agency. Interview and focus group participants are all from Ontario, ensuring that perspectives of Canadians continue to be included in emergent cyberfeminist research.

### **Mapping the Current Study: Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1 of this project entails a literature review addressing research on cyberfeminism and gendered online agency, discussing key themes brought to light in my own research findings and situating my own study through this review. I outline this study's critical cyberfeminist theoretical framework, contextualizing this framework by focusing on the patriarchal and colonial underpinnings of online spaces and broader gender inequalities that affect young women online. Following scholarly claims that young women can overcome gender inequality through establishing online agency via

control over their online self-portrayals, I establish a theoretical context for agency as control, based on research by Koskela (2004). I also investigate other Koskelian theory related to agency in a virtual context.

I then track self-disclosure, a key emergent theme from this discussion of agency, in terms of its junction with agency as well as its intersection with peer-to-peer surveillance, fear of online risk, and formation of identity, also considering the relationship of agency with each of these concepts. After this discussion of agency in the context of gendered self-disclosure and identity, I proceed to examine other literature involving gendered online identity, and then trace the relationship between identity, agency and media representations of femininity and celebrity, which arose as other key themes from this discussion. Finally, in consideration of the pressures and tensions that compel young women to abide by these mediated representations and ultimately contribute to conflict between young women online (see section 4.2), I conclude this review of literature by summarizing scholarly work addressing cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment. I investigate how these concepts are gendered and critique available literature and current policy initiatives for largely adopting patriarchal, neoliberal theoretical stances that responsabilize and blame young women for cyber bullying, rather than considering broader systemic factors that contribute to online harassment.

Chapter 2 details the methodological approach used in this study. I begin with a discussion of its epistemological orientation, where I situate this research in the emancipatory tradition of qualitative cyberfeminist research. I outline my research design, describing data collection and assessing this study's validity, and then provide an overview of my analytic strategy: qualitative thematic analysis. I describe in detail the

coding frame of this study and follow with a discussion of the challenges and problems that must be taken into consideration during web-oriented qualitative thematic analyses, moving forward to touch upon ethical issues encountered in this research design. I finish offering a personal commentary on the role of voice and personal reflexivity in emancipatory qualitative studies in general, and in my own cyberfeminist study in particular.

In Chapter 3, I transition to my analysis of the empirical material in this study. I begin to weave together its basic themes, organizing themes and global themes (see section 2.3) that were extracted from the raw data, presenting these themes in the context of gendered identity narratives performed by my participants. Within each of these gendered identity narratives, I examine the role of agency, constraints upon agency, and the role of participants' boyfriends, each of which arose as "global themes" (Attride-Stirling 2001) encompassing principal narrative metaphors throughout the data. The first three narratives, the 'safe girl', 'professional girl', and 'family girl', are outlined in Chapter 3, grouped together since they were intimately thematically bound to the autonomous management of risk and maintaining a positive reputation or self-presentation as responsible, cautious or ethical virtual citizens, each drawing biographic continuity from these tropes.

I first describe the 'safe girl' identity narrative, where participants valued the appearance of managing, establishing control over and engaging with perceived online risk. I explore the 'safe girl' identity narrative in the context of Koskela's (2004) agency-related theoretical paradigms of the 'regime of shame' and 'regime of order', suggesting that contrary to Koskela's claims, fear appears to intersect more strongly than shame with

gendered online agency. I then focus on the ‘professional girl’ identity narrative, where participants were concerned with projection of professional online appearances to coworkers, potential employers, or those with whom they shared academic relationships. Although participants exhibited a high level of agency in regard to concerns and self-portrayals related to academic- and employment-related pursuits, their establishment of professionalism was gendered and involved a bracketing of femininity, where professionalism was attached to stereotypically masculine connotations. Chapter 3 ends with an overview of the third identity narrative performed by my participants, the ‘family girl’, where participants used strategies of controlled self-disclosure to maintain family relationships or ethically sensible ‘family professionalism’ nurtured offline, while simultaneously occupying other subjectivities that did not necessarily correspond to this ‘family girl’ image.

In Chapter 4, I continue my analysis of this study’s empirical material and turn to the final identity narrative that was performed by participants in this study: the ‘mediatized girl’ identity, which was thematically related to celebrity, mass media and popularity. Participants occupying this identity agentially mobilized online social networking to gain social capital from popularity, celebrity, friendship or positive attention. These participants experienced agential constraints when no popularity, celebrity, friendship or positive attention was gained, most often when their ‘mediatized’ online profiles were perceived by others as superficial, inauthentic, or ‘slutty’; agency was also constrained for participants performing this identity when social networking and maintaining an online presence became ‘addictive’ or all-consuming. I then examine the ways in which conflictual lived experiences of agency between all four identity narratives

and the confines of stereotyped representations of online femininity converged to cause confrontation for participants both on- and offline.

I examine through the lens of these collective agency-related identity narratives how confrontational behaviours can often be targeted towards ‘mediatized girls’, since the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative was situated in considerable contrast to expectations of privacy, safety and ethical sensibility of the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’ identity narratives. I also look at how negative judgment can be framed as self-reflexive criticism by young women of their own potential failure or fear of potential failure to adhere to rigid social expectations of normative gender role performance, also exploring the role of participants’ boyfriends across all four identity narratives collectively. I draw the conclusion that cyber bullying, contrary to popular media and policy discourses, is not exclusively related to character traits at the level of individual girls, but can also be related to broader patriarchal systemic frameworks that only allow girls to occupy these stereotyped, confining and inherently conflictual identity narratives. I implicate these identity narratives themselves in bringing about cyber bullying behaviours amongst young women, offering that instead of continuing to favour patriarchal, neoliberal theoretical frameworks that continue to entrench these limiting identity narratives in policy related to gender in an online context, future legislation could benefit from deconstructing media stereotypes involving the performance of girl online. I close this chapter by venturing that current cyber bullying policy that fails to engage in this deconstruction in fact impedes the establishment of gender ‘e-quality’.

Finally, the conclusion of this thesis provides an executive summary of the key findings of this study, restating its major outcomes and contributions to literature and

reassessing its consequences for policy relating to issues such as cyber bullying that intersect with agency for young women online. In closing, I also consider how these points of inquiry can be expanded in the context of future scholarly research. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to more thoroughly address questions of agency, gendered risk and online gender equality through the voices of young women, attempting to achieve emancipatory ends for these women based upon their lived online experiences.

## CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study adopts a radical cyberfeminist perspective rather than a liberal cyberfeminist perspective: as opposed to viewing cyberspace as a liberating site free of traditional gender binaries, it acknowledges the androcentric, coloniocentric, and pro-capitalist foundations upon which online spaces are constructed and function in practice during day-to-day life (Hall 1996; Gajjala 2000), with the hope of identifying ways in which young women are able to overcome or resist their associated constraints. With the patriarchal biases and the inescapable gendering inherent to online spaces in mind, it is pertinent next to turn to literature surrounding female agency and identity, in tandem with academic discourse more specifically discussing the constraints facing young women online, in order to better understand how these constraints potentially intersect with online female subjectivity.

First, I contextualize the theoretical stance of this study, providing a historical overview of critical cyberfeminism. I outline how my study is situated within this theoretical framework, focusing on the patriarchal and colonial underpinnings of online spaces and gender inequalities facing young women online. I explore the broader socio-political contexts of this inequality, also examining the concept of cyborg subjectivity as a gendered conflation of offline and online feminist identity. Given the patriarchal foundations of online spaces, I then shift the focus of this review toward the notion that young women can overcome gender inequality through the assertion of agency, establishing a theoretical context for agency as control, rooted in the work of Koskela (2004) and touching upon other Koskelian theory that relates to agency within online spaces.

I then turn to academic discourse surrounding self-disclosure, which emerges as a key theme from this contextualization of agency, considering the intersection of self-disclosure with agency in a broader context as well as the intersection of agency with peer-to-peer surveillance, fear of online risk, and formation of identity, situating each relationship in terms of its relation to online self-disclosure and online agency. Following this discussion of agency as it relates to self-disclosure and identity, I then examine other literature involving gendered online identity, particularly literature involving media representations of femininity and celebrity, which were major tropes running through young women's lived experiences of online agency and identity formation.

I review the impact of these media representations and celebrity culture upon young women's experiences of online agency and then, in light of the tensions and pressures that young women face to adhere to these culturo-societal expectations of femininity, summarize literature relating to cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment. I explore the gendering of these concepts, and finally close by suggesting that emergent policy and future research initiatives should move away both from initiating responses to cyber bullying and studying cyberbullying in contexts that either responsabilize young women to safeguard themselves against cyber bullying or blame them for attracting bullying, and instead should focus on the broader systemic factors that converge to cause conflict between young women within virtual spaces.

### **1.1 – Theoretical Background: Contextualizing Cyberfeminism**

Cyberfeminists generally conceptualize the Internet as a site where feminist issues are substantiated (Gajjala 2000:120). Scholars (Gajjala 2000; Munt 2001; Clark 2007)

agree that Donna Haraway's *Manifesto for Cyborgs* forms the backbone of cyberfeminist discourse, wherein Haraway conceptualizes a contemporary feminism that has moved beyond the traditional binaries and limitations inherent to popular gender and feminist politics. As Haraway writes, "The [theoretical] cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (1991:150), where human and machine have become fused figuratively in terms of conflated identity and often literally in terms of shared physical space. Cyborgs subvert traditional "informatics of domination" – militarized, commercialized technologies of advanced capitalism (Haraway 1991:161) – envisioning cyberspace as a place for unrestricted, transcendent experience free of gender-related constraints (Munt 2001:77). In addition to disrupting conventional patriarchal hierarchies and power interests, Haraway envisions cyborgs as also contesting the underlying ideologies of broader political structures that assume such power binaries are natural, as opposed to socially constructed (Clark 2007; Haraway 1991). Cyborg feminism involves critiquing the hierarchical logic underscoring current social binaries – particularly male over female, hetero- over homosexual, Caucasian over non-Caucasian, and human over animal – and restructuring these dualisms on a socio-political level to address the disparity between them (Clark 2007; Haraway 1991).

Young women like the focus group participants in this study who regularly use online social networking represent this cyborg subjectivity. They are simultaneously compelled to maintain online identities in tandem with offline identities, negotiating their offline self-presentations at the same time as their online self-presentations and thereby positioning themselves as inherently feminist subjects through their appropriation of the same virtual technologies used by men, despite the patriarchal foundations upon which

virtual technologies are constructed, which will be delineated shortly. This study acknowledges these patriarchal foundations and explores young women's identities in the context of this cyborg feminist subjectivity with the goal of critiquing patriarchal oppression. It considers the ways in which participants' online and offline identities intersect as well as the ways in which these identities are influenced by the patriarchal underpinnings of the virtual spaces they frequent, as well as how patriarchal offline and online structures such as popular media also regulate their self-portrayals.

Plant argues that traditional feminist activism does not suit the current social milieu in which the tools and machines of patriarchy have grown exponentially and unmanageably (2000:335). Plant agrees with Haraway that, "The Cyborg stands as a metaphor of feminist subject, a boundary figure that moves across the hierarchical categories of the natural and the artificial [...] without positioning technology as a masculine other of women and nature" (Paasonen 2005:8). Rather, cyberfeminists share a belief that women should attempt to empower themselves via the appropriation and control of the same virtual technology used by men in ways that continue to express their identities as females (Gajjala 2000:121). The focus on agency in this study's major research questions, since agency as it is operationalized in this study is strongly linked to this control (see sections 1.3; 2.6), establishes that this study is directly related to this belief. Plant shares the importance of young women experiencing such control in an online context: "Virtual worlds are not only important because they open spaces for women within an already existing culture, but also because of the extent to which they undermine both the world-view and the material reality of two thousand years of patriarchal control" (2000:325). It is therefore pertinent next to outline these material

realities of patriarchal control, considering the deeper historical and socio-political roots of patriarchy within online spaces and paradoxically also within cyberfeminism itself.

Notwithstanding that cyberfeminism is founded upon the work of critical scholars such as Haraway, contemporary cyberfeminist discourses often assume a Western, privileged, unified subject. This subject of these discourses has the agency to leave or overcome the media to which she is subjected as well as the ability to move within and act independently of community power structures. These constructions, however, assume a self that possesses the ability to exist independently of community structures, practices and ideologies; ultimately, women who do not fit this archetype are implicitly denied the opportunity to partake in organized cyberfeminist resistance (Gajjala 2000 p.121).

Issues of inequality, Gajjala (2000) likewise asserts, extend to broader socio-political contexts that impact the building of cyberspatial environments themselves on a cultural level, often furthering narrative discourses of linear progress within these constructions. Gajjala critiques cyberfeminism for framing constructs such as “third world” ignorance, identity, civility and ‘netiquette’ in Westernized, urban bourgeois terms and neglecting to accommodate alternative cyberspatial narratives (2000:121.). He offers that even online discourses encouraging the participation of women from traditionally disempowered racial or social positions are governed by an ideological benevolence that “allows” the speech of these “othered” groups. These cyberfeminist spaces therefore “extend colonial discourses and progress narratives which construct ‘third-world’ others as mere consumers of ‘first-world’ productivity, be it in the form of theory or technology” (Gajjala 2000:121), allowing for only a narrow definition of what it means to be a girl online.

Drawing from Haraway, Sandoval similarly elaborates that:

Colonized peoples of the Americas have already developed the Cyborg skills required for survival under the techno-human conditions, under domination, for the last three hundred years. [...] “Cyborg consciousness” has a long lineage sited in forms of opposition to domination. [...] The methodology of the oppressed [...] chimes with the Cyborg metaphor, since both represent differential or oppositional consciousness, and both suggest new ways of thinking, acting and living together” (1995:374-377).

Munt writes, however, that despite Haraway’s intentions, her *Manifesto for Cyborgs* was quickly appropriated by cyber-idealists as “the projection of a future untroubled by ambiguity and difference which reconciles mechanism and organism, culture and nature, simulacra and original, science fiction and social reality” (2001:77). In truth, cyberspace offers no such promises: this study seeks to underscore this assertion and illuminate the precise ways in which cyberspace fails to provide the liberation foretold by cyber-idealists, as well as the potential ways in which young women overcome the constraints this failure presents.

This study’s starting point, that online spaces are not inherently liberating, and my corresponding focus on the specific ways in which young women can overcome the patriarchal foundations of online spaces by asserting control and agency necessitate a discussion of academic literature relating to online agency. The following section will therefore examine how agency will be operationalized in the context of this project, outlining theoretical contributions from Koskela (2004) that underpin this operationalization as well as exploring other theoretical claims relating to agency that are relevant to cyberfeminist qualitative analyses involving online social networking.

## **1.2 – Agency: A Koskelian Perspective**

My project focuses especially on questions of agency in girls' lived online experiences. While several scholars have discussed whether young women's agency can be enhanced via the Internet and many have concluded that the Internet can facilitate greater agency for young women (Azzarito 2010; Bailey 2009; Koskela 2004), I draw on the operationalization of agency suggested by Koskela (2004). Its prominent focus on control best allows me to capture the cyberfeminist belief that women should attempt to empower themselves via control of the same virtual technology used by men in ways that continue to express their identities as females (Gajjala 2000:121), and also allows me to establish a relevant antonymic operationalization for constraints upon agency: namely, when this control is not possible or is otherwise lost.

Koskela reasons that online agency cannot simply involve who is looking at content posted online, since in presenting their private lives on the Internet, posters are aware that anyone may see this posted content. She argues that empowerment is found in the act of presenting, not in the act of being seen; further, she finds that agency is not dependent upon the form of media through which images are posted. Nor, she elaborates, can it depend solely upon whether content is posted voluntarily, since online surveillance can still affect voluntarily posted content, thereby decreasing the agency of those who posted it (2004:211). A partial answer, Koskela suggests, is that agency lies in "what, how and when [online content] is controlled by the person(s) whose images are circulated" (2004:211). This serves as the working definition of "agency" that this study will employ from this point forward: when participants experienced agency, under this definition, they were experiencing a moment of at least partial control. Similarly, when

they experienced constraints upon agency, they were experiencing moments when this control was at least partially lost.

In her discussion of online agency, Koskela (2004) also describes two agency-related social paradigms that characterize digital society: the regime of order and the regime of shame. This study will explore these paradigms in section 3.1.1, questioning whether participants experienced agency in the context of these paradigms and investigating whether these paradigms could be re-operationalized to more accurately reflect girls' lived experiences. A regime of order refers to the ways in which society regulates individuals, gathers knowledge, surveils, and maintains control. Koskela suggests that as a response to this regime of order and being constant targets of increasingly widespread online surveillance, young women and online citizens in general seek to be subjects rather than objects, attempting to “reclaim copyright of their own lives” (2004:206) – in other words, to reclaim control over their online self-presentations and experience greater online agency.

However, this effort to maintain an active role in visual self-representation online can entail practices of self-censorship, where while online subjects do assert control over the circulation of their online images, this assertion itself entails adherence to practices of social regulation such as limiting ‘objectionable’ self-disclosure online. In the course of this adherence, Koskela argues that control over online self-presentation can be lost and agency constrained, since the nature of self-presentations is dictated by these practices of social regulation. This adherence, Koskela claims, can latently reinforce thematic underpinnings of and risks of negative judgment stemming from the second regime that she argues governs young women’s online interactions: the regime of shame.

The regime of shame includes the internalization that occurs as a result of this socially regulated control of self-presentation, having a basic inherent need for privacy, and enforcing a docile, meek and obedient female social norm (2004:207). Koskela describes that the regime of shame stems from a “judgmental gaze” (2004:207) that regulates everyday life, not only potential criminal acts. She suggests that the shame produced by this judgmental gaze works in tandem with fear, stemming not only from the potential consequences of being a target of negative judgment, but also of enduring negative consequences enculturated by the regime of order such as potential reputational damage caused by overt online self-disclosure. Koskela writes that, “The regime of shame keeps people meek and obedient as efficiently as any control coming from the outside. Rejecting it is unacceptable and immodest. [...] The combination of fear and shame ensures submissiveness” (2004:207). This study will therefore, in the course of considering the regime of order and regime of shame in section 3.1.1, also explore the role of fear and its intersection with participants’ online agency.

Scholars (Koskela 2004; Senft 2008; Bailey 2009) have theorized that the process of online photo sharing, a frequent context for academic discussions of young women’s online agency, can challenge both the regime of order and the regime of shame. The exhibitionism involved in posting photos in a quasi-public setting can liberate individuals from the need to hide that characterizes the regime of shame. Further, showing everything can be interpreted as a form of liberation since if everything is exposed, there is nothing left to capture. In this way, the surveillance goals of the regime of order can also be challenged (Koskela 2004). Women’s overt displays of their bodies can also function as rejections of “regimes of shame” (Koskela 2004; Senft 2008); further, they

can counter the unattainable female body image ideals projected ubiquitously throughout Hollywood media (Bailey 2009:191). This study will consider, then, the ways in which self-disclosure and publicness intersect with or are embedded within participants' experiences of online agency, in light of Koskela's claims that agency is directly facilitated by these concepts and that self-disclosure and publicness provide girls with a way to resist the patriarchal constraints they face in virtual spaces and empower them to gain greater control of their online self-presentations.

Koskela also describes that the regime of shame and regime of order have broader implications for young women's online privacy and online self-disclosure that may limit their capacity to experience resistance and attain greater online agency. She details that the regime of order places young women under constant surveillance and that this surveillance can make women more conscious of their online self-disclosure: since wider audiences are potentially viewing content posted online, a simple solution to avoid resulting negative judgment or unwanted appropriation of this content can simply be to avoid this disclosure at all (Koskela 2004). Moreover, Koskela suggests that the regime of shame can further render online self-disclosure unlikely: online subjects can internalize a wide variety of content as objectionable, and face a high likelihood of potentially negative judgments for disclosing subject matter that can potentially be evaluated as such by those viewing their online profiles. In the course of considering the ways in which self-disclosure and publicness intersect with participants' experiences of online agency, I will therefore also explore whether or not these intersections can take place in the context of agency being constrained as opposed to facilitated. I will also examine, in light of these findings, how or whether self-disclosure can prompt negative

judgment from others (see section 4.2.1; 4.2.2), the specific types of self-disclosure that can prompt this negative judgment (see also section 4.2.1; 4.2.2), and how this potential negative judgment relates to participants' experiences of online agency.

In line with the emancipatory goals of cyberfeminism's traditional epistemological framework (see section 2.1), Koskela (2004) explicitly states that concepts such as online self-disclosure should be operationalized by cyberfeminist researchers in a sense that allows girls the greatest possible agency, linking this emancipatory stance to rejecting her theoretical regime of shame: "This is precisely the point of the phenomenon: to reject the regime of shame means rejecting the traditional understanding of objectification. [...] When it comes to 'alternative' image production loaded with resistance, [practices of online self-disclosure] clearly have their potential" (Koskela 2004 p.211).

My own study, while recognizing the importance of conducting analysis that is in the best interest of my participants in line with this study's emancipatory research goals (again, see section 2.1) and recognizing that online self-disclosure may have liberating potential or facilitate young women's agency, diverges here from Koskela in the sense that it does not unduly frame self-disclosure as inherently liberating. Rather, as Koskela herself as well as other scholars (Allen 2000; Shade 2008; Tokunaga 2011, etc.) have also pointed out, online self-disclosure also has the potential to constrain agency for young women. Therefore, it is most prudent, while still adopting an emancipatory theoretical stance, to simultaneously allow participants' voices to articulate the ways in which online self-disclosure can be agential or inagential, and use their experiences of self-disclosure related inagency to help frame how agency could best be re-established through emergent

policy (see section 4.2.3). The following section will expand upon the role of self-disclosure in young women's online experiences and explore discussions in academic literature surrounding self-disclosure and gendered agency, investigating in greater depth the ways in which scholars have identified that self-disclosure can both facilitate young women's agency and simultaneously constrain young women's agency in a virtual context. It will also examine the role of self-disclosure in establishing and maintaining online self-identity, moving into a discussion of literature relating to gendered self-identity within online spaces.

### **1.3 – Self-Disclosure and Implications for Agency and Online Identity**

The widespread popularity of social networking has resulted in ubiquitous online photo and information sharing. Some scholars have associated online self-disclosure with a variety of constraints upon agency for young women, including surveillance concerns (Tokunaga 2011), privacy issues (Allen 2000; Shade 2008) and the conflation of “real-life” and online images both by posters and viewers of online content (White 2003). Others maintain, however, as illustrated above, that posting images and personal information online are agential expressions of self-control, where young women are empowered to explore various facets of identity and negotiate experimental selves (Senft 2008; Phillips 2009). The role of self-disclosure in either constraining or facilitating agency is a prominent trope throughout this study's data analysis (see sections 3.1; 3.2; 3.3; 4.1); therefore, it is pertinent to contextualize in greater detail the ways in which scholarly literature has looked at gendered online self-disclosure, particularly in terms of how this self-disclosure intersects with young women's agency.

Tokunaga first observes that online social networking can be used to facilitate relationship management and form new social connections; however, he cautions that sites such as Facebook are increasingly being used for purposes of surveillance, particularly in romantic relationships (2011:705). For the purposes of this study, the role of surveillance by corporations such as Facebook is less important than the role of lateral surveillance, or peer-to-peer surveillance, where online users surveil other online users. As Trottier (2012) outlines, lateral surveillance strongly impacts the construction of online self-identity and relates to online agency and control over self-portrayals, since users of social networking platforms are more or less likely to disclose certain information based on who is able to see them online. Interpersonal surveillance on social networking platforms is determined by age, gender, time partners spend on one another's profiles, prevalence of social networking in relationships' daily routines, and level of Internet/digital literacy (Tokunaga 2011:706). Female adolescents engage in more online surveillance of self and of others than adolescent males, establishing lateral surveillance as gendered (Tokunaga 2011) and an appropriate consideration in a cyberfeminist study such as this.

While lateral surveillance can potentially constrain agency by 'forcing' young women and virtual citizens in general to censor their online self-disclosures and decrease personal control by dictating the nature of online self-portrayals, it can also potentially facilitate agency by allowing controlled self-portrayals to reach a broad group of online peers and perpetuating the self-images that online users have constructed. This study will therefore broadly consider the ways in which experiences of agency are impacted by

participants' knowledge that they are being watched by others online, with particular regard to how practices of self-disclosure are affected by this knowledge.

Allen asserts that in addition to surveillance by their peers, women online are “particularly vulnerable to privacy problems because they are perceived as inferiors, ancillaries, and safe targets” (2000:1178). Women online may have their privacy “probed by others who implicitly assume that daughters, pregnant women, mothers and wives are more accountable for their private conduct than their male counterparts” (2000:1178). Additionally, online self-disclosure can solidify patriarchal ideologies where men hold unrestricted access to the bodies of females. At the same time, flouting privacy can be liberating for women, especially if it gains them other social capital (Bailey 2009:191). Privacy is a common trope throughout this study's data analysis: as all forthcoming sections will outline, the decision to keep information private or public played a key role in participants' experiences of agency, and their perceived control over their online self-portrayals and the social capital these portrayals granted was often directly linked to whether or not they were private or public.

In terms of risks of self-disclosure, young women note a variety of concerns regarding potential negative consequences of online social networking. Many fear future ramifications of posting incriminating content online in terms of future employment and higher education and are concerned about surveillance by teachers, potential employers and even parents (Shade 2008); these fears will be thoroughly explored in section 3.2 (and in terms of parental surveillance, section 3.3) and played a critical role in the experience of agency for many participants in this study. Others dislike Facebook's propensity for 'drama' stemming from others perceiving posted content as objectionable,

which will be touched upon in section 4.2.3, while others question the nature of ‘friending’ people on Facebook, problematizing the link between viewing strangers’ profile pictures, clicking a button, and referring to them as ‘friends’ in terms of the unwanted and potentially unsafe visibility it could potentially grant them (Shade 2008). These fears relating to danger stemming from visibility and the intersection of these fears with online agency will be contextualized in section 3.1.

While posting images or videos of parties, travel and friends is popular among girls online, girls tend to express surprise and even concern when controversial or sexually provocative images are posted online. These reactions have been attributed in literature to broader personal privacy issues (Shade 2008), although my own data will suggest that they are perhaps also or better attributed to the narrow confines of existing media representations of socially acceptable ways to perform ‘girl’ in online spaces (see section 4.2). In terms of limiting personal information online, many girls trust and rely on Facebook privacy settings, limiting who can view particular information by labeling photos, making photos inaccessible to strangers, and deleting public content. These strategies to minimize disclosure of personal information will help frame strategic initiatives of my own participants to control their online self-representations and thereby gain agency, particularly in sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.

Putting aside the aforementioned self-disclosure related fears, Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie have also described how girls can experience agency through online self-disclosure. They “found girls bending and switching gender to improvise nonconformist femininities and learning to express parts of themselves that they had been made to feel were taboo offline, [also] practicing initiative taking in heterosexual relationships”

(2011:22). Harris claims that this process of identity transformation becomes a performance in itself, displaying and publicly performing a somehow dysfunctional ‘old self’ (Mazzarella 2005). In the case of online webcams, this reinforces the notion that girls were “normal” until the advent of cameras into their lives, thereby constructing the virtual exposure of girls’ private selves as paths to success and self-realization (Dobson 2008; Senft 2008). This study’s exploration of young women’s self-disclosure in the course of experiencing online agency will build upon these claims, unpacking the ways in which identity performance is related to self-disclosure and looking in detail at the ways in which practices of self-disclosure either enhance or constrain agency according to the particular identity narratives young women are attempting to occupy.

Senft agrees that girls perform different identities online, describing how girls may display particular character attributes without personally identifying with the roles they are playing. They may also engage in “deep acting” and attempt to more strongly identify with the feelings/images they are trying to project (Senft 2008:9). Labels are not primarily the result of self-perceptions but are enacted by others; likewise, identity is not self-derived but is the result of various integrations from social networks (Senft 2008:52). Spivak thusly urges what she terms ‘strategic essentialism’, where individuals generate new names for themselves to promote feelings of shared empowerment and contestation in order to “reclaim” a particular identity. Underlying strategic essentialism is the notion that no label can ever fully describe one’s identity. My own data relies heavily upon this theoretical underpinning: participants occupied numerous identities in the course of their online interactions, often concurrently, and were never consistently ‘boxed in’ by one identity narrative specifically. I will investigate the contexts in which participants identify

with specific feelings, images and identity narratives at particular times (see all forthcoming sections, particularly section 4.2) and whether, as Senft claims, empowerment or agency was in fact derived from this flexible performance of identity.

Phillips, finally, submits that adolescence is a crucial time for the development and construction of identity, cautioning that a cultural shift towards surveillance is deeply impacting identity negotiation in technologized society. Increasing surveillance allows for individual members of society to be observed, monitored and recorded with the potential for these individual observations to be disseminated on a widespread basis, for example, to advertising agencies, policymakers, or media outlets. Statistical norms produced through these observations are then enforced upon individuals who are subsequently labeled and treated according to their relationships with these manufactured normative standards (2009:308). Essentially, then, surveillance and media representations “alter both the structure of visibility and the structures of meaning making. [They] render us visible [...] in relation to the norms [they] produce” (Phillips 2009:308). Manago et al. share Phillips’ sentiments, noting that the public nature of virtual self-presentations generates labels and introduces feedback mechanisms by which adolescents legitimize images as aspects of identity (2008:446). This study will therefore consider visibility in online social networking and the labels to which young women feel compelled to adhere within online spaces, examining the intersection of this labeling with the performance of virtual identity and associated online agency, in addition to media representations that help produce these labels and in turn their impacts upon agency and identity performance.

In the following section, I will pursue this thread of generation of labels related to identity, which scholars (Clark and Tiggemann 2006; Levine and Murnen 2009; Becker

et al. 2011) have outlined can also arise from media constructions and representations of adolescent femininity. I will explore literature that has identified prevalent media constructions relating to femininity, briefly outlining the ways in which mass media and celebrity culture can introduce the labels and feedback mechanisms to which young women often feel compelled to adhere in the context of their online self-portrayals and through which young women can legitimize aspects of identity, in addition to the ways in which these media representations can theoretically facilitate or constrain online agency, much like labels and feedback mechanisms introduced by peers.

#### **1.4 – Media Representation, Celebrity and Identity**

Various scholars have asserted that media representations of femininity can intersect with identity performance, often relaying conflicting messages about what it means to perform ‘girl’. Media representations can demonize perceived articulations of sexuality by young women and stress the importance of cautious, private or ethically sensible self-portrayals on one hand, while simultaneously emphasizing public engagement with celebrity culture, emulation of celebrity body image ideals, and consumption of appearance-focused media on the other (Clark and Tiggemann 2006; Senft 2008). Senft explores the conflicted intersection of cyberfeminism and mediated representations of celebrity in the context of online webcams, where girls explain in one instant that they are dissimilar to television stars yet simultaneously insist that by opening their lives to public scrutiny and adhering to media-promoted body image ideals, they are also not “ordinary” girls (2008:26). The Internet is a means through which girls may simultaneously distance themselves from and bring themselves closer to aspects of

celebrity, such how many hits a profile or webcam receives or how many friends a girl has on Facebook. According to Senft, “On the web, popularity depends upon a connection to one’s audience, rather than an enforced separation from them. Most people in technoculture know full well that they aren’t really celebrities. [...] In fact, this anxiety about not being known, this tension between the conviction that one is known and not known, is a key component of the celebrity mode of subjectivization” (2008:26). This study explores the intersection of online identity, celebrity and popularity (see section 4.1) and investigates how this intersection relates to agency by considering whether the act of bringing themselves closer to celebrity – or distancing themselves from celebrity – grants young women greater or less control over their online self-portrayals, control over the way they are perceived by others, and greater attainment of popularity and social capital within online spaces (see sections 4.1; 4.2).

Numerous scholars identify a contemporary “consumer-media culture”, primarily concerned with celebrity, sexually suggestive clothing, obesity, eating disorders and overall body image, that has become a powerful influence in self-formative processes of adolescents (Brookes and Kelly 2009; Manago et al. 2008). This consumer-media culture is also underscored by a competitive discourse in advertising, where girls are encouraged to conceptualize themselves as winning competitions with their peers, particularly in terms of attaining body ideals such as being prettiest or thinnest. This discourse is reflected not only in print media but across other forms of media as well (Hellman 1998). According to Thiel-Stern, girls rely upon media and this consumer-media culture to gain authoritative knowledge to mark how young women are “supposed” to be. Girls can interpret fictionalized symbolic boy-girl interactions as realities to which they should

aspire; however, these interactions are often unrealistic gender portrayals, resulting in idealized and internalized social roles that young women are typically unable to fulfill (2008:9). In the process of negotiating these unattainable female ideals, Thiel-Stern mentions that girls may invest themselves in the cultural constructions of the “perfect” girl, the “mean” girl, or the girl who uses sexuality to get what she wants (2008:9).

My project attempts to deconstruct this ‘celebrity mode of subjectivization’, exploring how tensions to adhere to consumer-media ideals relate to identity and online agency, and also exploring how these tensions and media ideals themselves can contribute to conflict between young women online, which was a recurring theme within my data (see section 4.2). The final section of this review therefore outlines scholarly literature on this conflict, investigating cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment, how these concepts are gendered, and how experiences of cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment impact experiences of agency for young women in online spaces.

### **1.5 – Cyber Bullying and Cyber Gender Harassment**

Cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment present a final potential constraint upon agency (Senft 2008; Shariff 2008) for young women online. Cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment are particularly relevant to this study, due to its focus on agency within online social networking and its ultimate conclusions regarding how contradictory lived experiences of agency within socially acceptable frameworks of how to perform ‘girl’ online can collectively cause conflict between young women (see section 4.2). Within social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, members can instantly upload photographs and videos or post textual comments that could

potentially have a negative impact upon their subjects, and can then share this media between large cohorts of friends, completely outside the control of the subjects who appear within them. This lack of control when one is being cyber harassed by others necessarily implies a loss of agency, directly relating cyber harassment to the central research questions of this project.

Cyber bullying is gendered and girls are more likely to be the perpetrators – as well as the victims – of online harassment (Shariff 2008:15). Cyber bullying entails the following: a power imbalance favouring the perpetrator over the victim; perpetrators that are supported by a group of peers; targeted subjects that draw negative attention and are isolated from their peer groups, particularly when this exclusion strengthens the power of the perpetrator(s); and deliberate, repeated and unwanted behaviour from perpetrators (Shariff 2008:20). Cyber bullying, particularly in online social networking, can involve a much larger support group than traditional bullying: an entire homogenous friend group, for example, can instantly and easily reinforce the harassing posts of a group leader. Negative consequences of cyber bullying are diverse. Victims of bullying show increased psychological distress, tend to seek out deviant peers, report poorer self-concepts and describe greater overall social dissatisfaction, potentially resulting in school avoidance and substandard school functioning (Shariff 2008:20-25).

Girls tend to partake in covert, psychological bullying (Shariff 2008:2). The booming popularity of social networking has made cyber bullying by and of girls increasingly more commonplace because girls are more likely than boys to engage in online communication and as many as three quarters of pre-teen girls use online chat applications (Shariff 2008:40). Girls may not be more likely than boys to engage in cyber

bullying, but since they spend more time than boys in online social environments, they represent a growing majority of its perpetrators. Scholars have attested that reasons for potential targeting by online bullies are diverse: appearance, dress, ethnic background, religion, and economic standing have all been identified as primary contributors (Keats Citron 2009:373) as well as girls who are “hard workers” or overachievers, offering that “cleverness” of victims can motivate students to bully until as late as grade 11 (Keats Citron 2009). However, research on cyber bullying has invariably adopted a patriarchal, neoliberal theoretical stance, problematizing characteristics of girls themselves for leading to cyber bullying behaviours. Academic research generally either responsabilizes girls to self-protect against bullying or recommends that governments or school boards protect girls through legislative initiatives, rather than critiquing the potential underlying social structures that cause conflict between girls, problematically tending to blame girls themselves for cyber harassment. My own study attempts to re-orient literature on cyber bullying, moving away from this patriarchal, neoliberal framework to critique through a cyberfeminist lens the systemic frameworks that can also contribute to online harassment (see section 4.2, particularly 4.2.3). In doing so, I move away from a patriarchal critique of characteristics of young women that could potentially precipitate this behaviour and avoiding blaming young women for being targets of cyber bullying.

Keats Citron describes that cyber bullying can take the form of cyber gender harassment, establishing that the victims of cyber gender harassment are female and that this harassment is usually targeted towards particular women. Moreover, gender harassment “invokes the targeted individual’s gender in sexually threatening and degrading ways” (2009:378). Keats Citron describes that cyber gender harassment

“inflicts the most direct costs on targeted individuals [and] harms society as well by entrenching male hierarchy online” (2009:375). This study, approaching tropes of cyber bullying from a cyberfeminist perspective, is particularly concerned with cyber gender harassment due to its strongly gendered overtones. In order to maintain the focus on agency that has run through this literature review, it is therefore important to finally look at scholarly literature on the ways in which young women’s everyday agency can be undermined through the experience of online gender harassment.

In cases where women feel pressured to hide their gender online, harm can be inflicted upon women’s identities as women. Even girls who present themselves as female may engage in stereotypically masculine behaviour as a strategy to avoid online abuse. Girls online may downplay stereotypically feminine attributes while exaggerating stereotypically masculine attributes in order to deflect Internet-based attacks (Keats Citron 2009:13). This project will therefore touch upon the ways in which young women suppress stereotypically feminine attributes while embellishing stereotypically masculine ones, not only in the case of cyber gender harassment as Keats Citron (2009) has outlined, but also in the course of their general experiences of online agency (see section 3.2.2; 3.2.3; 4.2.2).

Online sexual threats, Keats Citron has described, can “literally, albeit not physically, penetrate” (2009:13) women’s bodies, exposing their sexualities and promoting messages that harassers are in control of the physical safety of targeted women. This loss of agency and control can transcend online spheres, invoking imagery of the cyborg (Haraway 1991), where offline life intersects with virtual technology. For example, one young woman “stopped going to the gym because her anonymous harassers

encouraged her law school classmates to take cell phone pictures of her and post them online” (Keats Citron 2009:13). This loss of agency can perpetuate the loss of autonomy that females experience in retail and economic spaces, resulting in women’s continued inability to attain professional goals. Women’s work may also be impaired directly by cyber gender harassment, for example, via the hacking of feminist websites or the online encouragement of employers not to hire women (Keats Citron 2009:386). This intersection of cyber gender harassment with both online and offline agency is particularly relevant to this study: not only do cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment have a potentially direct impact upon online agency, but academic literature also implies that this impact bridges the online-offline divide, implicating Haraway’s concept of cyborg subjectivity in a cyber bullying context and thereby implicating cyber bullying in the cyborg identity as a “metaphor of feminist subject” (Paasonen 2005:8).

Finally, it is also relevant to point out that some recent research has suggested that cyberbullying may not be as gendered as previous research has suggested. Witnesses before the Senate Human Rights Committee hearing on cyberbullying “expressed conflicting positions with respect to the involvement of boys and girls in bullying and cyberbullying” (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights 2012:35). While one witness testified that boys were less likely than girls to be involved in online bullying, another witness testified that boys were catching up to girls in rates of cyberbullying and yet another suggested that gender differences were minimal with respect to cyberbullying. However, a third witness testified that while more girls said they had been both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying, boys were more likely to have reported being perpetrators only.

## 1.6 – Concluding Comments

This chapter has explored the theoretical framework of cyberfeminism and cyborg subjectivity, establishing that virtual space is constructed upon patriarchal, colonial foundations and solidifying gendered online agency as a theoretical pursuit worthy of further investigation. I have outlined the Koskelian theoretical underpinnings of this study's operationalization of agency and constraints upon agency, linking these concepts to young women's experiences of control, particularly over their online self-presentations, and exploring Koskelian theory related to agency, including her paradigmatic regimes of order and regimes of shame. As self-disclosure was a key emergent theme from scholarly debate surrounding the concept of gendered agency, I proceeded to highlight literature addressing self-disclosure and its intersections with agency, establishing that there is disagreement amongst academics regarding whether online self-disclosure is more conclusively agential or inagential for young women and that agency in the context of online self-disclosure raises interesting intersections with peer-to-peer surveillance, fear of online risk, and formation of identity.

I moved from discussions of identity into other literature related to gendered online identity formation, notably, literature reviewing media representations of femininity and celebrity, and discussed how media representations and celebrity culture potentially impact young women's experiences of online agency. Finally, since this study also explores the tensions young women face to adhere to media representations and celebrity culture in terms of how they can converge to cause conflict between girls online, I then explored literature on cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment. I examined how these concepts are gendered and found that available research on cyber bullying is overly patriarchal and neoliberal, suggesting that scholarly research should

attempt to deconstruct the systemic factors that converge to cause conflict between young women in order to best address the inequalities they face within virtual spaces.

In concluding this chapter, it is also necessary to draw attention to the limitations of the previous studies explored in this literature review for informing my own current study. First, while many studies have explored the intersection of online agency and gendered self-disclosure (Allen 2000; Senft 2008; Shade 2008; Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 2011; Tokunaga 2011), few studies appear to have addressed the relationship between online agency and gendered privacy, which is a related but not antonymic concept. Therefore, the role of privacy in establishing or constraining online agency cannot be assessed. Second, many studies were conducted in non-Canadian contexts or by non-Canadian researchers (Allen 2000; Koskela 2004; Senft 2008; Keats Citron 2008; Tokunaga 2011), and despite having a comparatively relevant American context, some may not be able to speak to experiences of populations in a Canadian context. Finally, since virtual spaces and social networking platforms in particular are in a constant state of rapid technological change, research addressing virtual issues that is even comparatively recent (Gajjala 2000; Koskela 2004; Senft 2008, etc.) could still prove to be dated. This thesis therefore seeks to add a contemporary account of the experiences of Canadian young women to existing studies addressing gendered online agency, drawing on these young women's current lived experiences to update or validate existing findings while broadly contextualizing participants' general gendered experiences of agency in an online context.

## CHAPTER 2 - METHODOLOGY

### **2.1 – Epistemological Framework**

As established above, cyberfeminist perspectives like that of this study conceptualize the Internet as a gendered space (Haraway 1991; Gajjala 2000; Senft 2008), acknowledging that cyberspatial environments are culturally founded upon discourses that adhere to linear patriarchy (Haraway 1991; Hall 1996, Gajjala 2000; White 2003; Senft 2008). Epistemologically, critical and feminist research is traditionally included in the emancipatory tradition (Lather 1994; McCotter 2001). McCotter has described that emancipatory studies usually adopt a value-oriented approach to research, addressing social issues such as power, culture and human agency (2001:6). Emancipatory research focuses on hegemony, or the sustained leadership of dominant groups over subordinate groups. Additionally, emancipatory studies focus on power relationships, discussions of subjecthood and agency, and potential avenues for resistance and contestation of these power differentials (McCotter 2001).

This study investigates the ways in which young women define and negotiate the aforementioned online risks that are unique to their online experiences while focusing on how young women simultaneously gain empowerment from their virtual presences. Its primary and supplementary research questions firmly situate it within the critical feminist tradition of emancipatory research, recognizing that young women online do face unique challenges and risks in the course of maintaining agential online presences; its theoretical framework recognizes the importance of reducing these challenges and risks while simultaneously maximizing young women's potential for agency in online spaces. This study therefore considers the systemic constraints that impede young women's assertion

of agency online and restrict their performance of identity, ultimately offering suggestions to build policy that deconstructs these constraints on a macro level with the goal of reducing gendered online inequalities.

Emancipatory feminist research favours a reflexive, introspective process and focuses on issues that primarily affect women (McCotter 2001). This study, like its precursors, will therefore examine online risk from a perspective that acknowledges the reality of online hegemony – namely online patriarchy – and whenever possible adopt a perspective that aligns with the best interests of the women it studies. Resistance is also important to emancipatory feminist frameworks (Lather 1987; Ribbens 1990). McLaren describes resistance as “the process of actively contesting the hegemony of dominant culture” (1994:210). In feminist research, a major goal related to resistance “is to challenge patriarchal structures that bring about some kind of social change, however conceived” (Maynard 1994): this study adopts these emancipatory goals, seeking to challenge the patriarchal structures that restrict girls’ assertion of agency online. This study further acknowledges that women’s online responses to what they perceive as risky situations can demonstrate that they “are not passively accepting the ideology or ascribed roles of society, sometimes [successfully allowing] people to create roles which were not formerly part of their [milieu]” (McCotter 2001:7).

McCotter has discussed the importance of also considering hegemony within emancipatory paradigms. She offers that hegemony, or “the oppressive system of the dominant culture” (2001:6), is an organized collection of meaning that pervades daily life, where a dominant group oppresses a minority. Discussions of hegemony, McCotter suggests, should also be sensitive to historical context. Critical perspectives can benefit from being inclusive of historico-cultural roots in order to relate them to future tendencies and understand the broader socio-cultural contexts of patterns and events

(2001:6) Drawing from Haraway, Sandoval explains the importance of considering these roots in cyberfeminist research, writing:

Colonized peoples of the Americas have already developed the Cyborg skills required for survival under the techno-human conditions, under domination, for the last three hundred years. [...] “Cyborg consciousness” has a long lineage sited in forms of opposition to domination. [...] The methodology of the oppressed [...] chimes with the Cyborg metaphor, since both represent differential or oppositional consciousness, and both suggest new ways of thinking, acting and living together (1995:374-377).

Following these discussions of hegemony in emancipatory research, this cyberfeminist study acknowledges that cyberspatial environments are culturally and historically founded upon linear patriarchal discourses. Rather than equalizing gender relations and leveling economic disparity, online spaces can therefore extend colonial, male-dominated progress narratives (Gajjala 2000:120). Cyberfeminist perspectives have been critiqued for framing constructs such as “third world” ignorance, identity, civility and “netiquette” in Westernized, urban bourgeois terms and neglecting to accommodate alternative cyberspatial narratives (Gajjala 2000).

Even cyberfeminist discourses encouraging the participation of women from traditionally disempowered racial or social positions can fail to recognize that they are governed by an ideological benevolence that ‘allows’ the speech of these ‘othered’ groups (Gajjala 2000). Such cyberfeminist discourses can thereby continue to “extend colonial discourses and progress narratives which construct ‘third-world’ others as mere consumers of ‘first-world’ productivity, be it in the form of theory or technology” (Gajjala 2000:121), allowing for only a narrow definition of what it means to be a girl online. In order to be truly emancipatory, then, this study acknowledges this historical narrative and is epistemologically sensitive that online interactions are hegemonically

structured in a way that often allows men, and particularly coloniocentric men, to define women's experiences.

Hall (1996) has identified two opposing camps of cyberfeminists within emancipatory studies: radical cyberfeminists and liberal cyberfeminists. Liberal feminists, largely influenced by postmodern concepts of gender fluidity, view cyberspace as a liberating agent free of traditional sexual/gender binaries; radical cyberfeminism, on the other hand, is founded upon a framework that acknowledges the reality of male-initiated Internet-based harassment and patriarchal frameworks that underscore the construction of online space despite these utopian promises (1996:148). Western cyberfeminists have traditionally adopted liberal views, stressing the potential of the Internet to equalize gender relations and level economic disparity due to alleged low cost.

Gajjala cautions, however, that such perspectives “reduce the problem of inequality in relation to Internet technologies and cyberspace to a problem of material access to equipment, wiring and technical training [when] the issue of inequality [does] not stop with questions of material access and technical training” (2000:121). In other words, liberal cyberfeminist studies are not truly emancipatory. Issues of inequality extend to broader socio-political contexts that impact the building of cyberspatial environments themselves on a cultural level, often furthering the narrative discourse of linear progress within these constructions (2000:121). This study therefore adopts a radical as opposed to liberal perspective, acknowledging the reality of these linear patriarchal progress narratives upon which online spaces are constructed and ultimately considering these progress narratives in terms of how they constrain girls' agency online.

Contemporary cyberfeminist discourses likewise often assume a Western, privileged, unified subject. This subject of these discourses has the agency to leave or overcome the media to which she is subjected as well as the ability to move within and

act independently of community power structures. These constructions, however, assume a self that possesses the ability to exist independently of community structures, practices and ideologies; ultimately, women who do not fit this archetype are implicitly denied the opportunity to partake in organized cyberfeminist resistance (Gajjala 2000:121). While the girls in this study may or may not have had this agency to leave or overcome negative online stimuli, this study recognizes that not all girls enjoy such privilege.

Emancipatory feminist research, as McCotter has stated, is a “reflexive, introspective process” (2001 p.6). In order to remain reflexive and historically sensitive, it is important to consciously ensure that an ethnocentric or gender bias does not occur during data analysis, especially given that I, the primary researcher, am a male, Western, comparatively privileged subject. By considering girls’ own voices in cyberfeminist assessments of gendered online risk and avoiding situating girls’ online experience within a rigid risk/benefit binary, my own research remains reflexive and introspective. The selection of qualitative thematic analysis as a method of data analysis, as I will illustrate, ensures that concepts like risk and agency are open to redefinition and reinterpretation through the voices and recurrent biographic narratives of girls themselves, adding another layer of perspective to scholarly cyberfeminist debates that often lack this lens. An important part of ensuring reflexivity in academic discourse is considering the voices of populations of interest when addressing issues specific to them; in this case, reflexivity is ensured by talking to girls themselves when investigating gendered online risk. Additionally, a flexible data analysis process allowed for the potential emergence of additional ways to contextualized lived experiences of agency or constraints upon agency that were not necessarily pre-identified in scholarly literature.

Adopting the best interests of traditionally oppressed groups – in this case, young women online – is also characteristic of emancipatory research. This study is interested in

framing participants' perceptions of online risk through their lived experiences of agency, and particularly through the ways in which they experience this agency being constrained. In the course of delineating these experiences, current website design and Internet policy can potentially be evaluated and future website design and policy potentially impacted, with the exploratory groundwork generated by this study transforming young women's own perceptions and lived experiences into 'real' change (Burns and Walker 2004; Miller 2000).

## **2.2 – Research Design: Data Collection and Assessing Validity**

A transcript of a focus group of eight young women forms the data source for this study. In 2010, a focus group was held at the University of Ottawa for the *eGirls Project*, a cyberfeminist research study exploring, like this study, gendered experiences of young women in online social networking. As the research assistant for the *eGirls* initiative, I oversaw recruitment of participants and was present during the focus group itself. Eight female, English-speaking Ottawa women between the ages of 18-22 were selected for participation via recruitment forms posted on public bulletin boards at the University of Ottawa. All eight participants were avid users of social networking and received a \$50 honorarium for their participation.

Since this sample relied on available participants – those who were available on the date of the focus group, spoke English, and responded to the recruitment form – it was a convenience, or availability, sample (Berg 2009). Berg cautions that studies employing convenience samples “must be evaluated for appropriateness of fit” (2009:50). All focus group participants were active users of online social networking and were female young adults: an appropriate fit for this cyberfeminist, youth-oriented study has

therefore been established. Participants were asked to discuss their online social networking habits, preferences, concerns, and perceptions of online risk using an open-ended discussion guide; this discussion guide is attached (see Appendix I).

The focus group proceeded as a round table discussion, where participants first took part in a general discussion of the types of social media they used, how they used them, and why; their perceived benefits of social media in general; their perceptions regarding stereotypical public female Facebook profiles; the relationships they perceived between mainstream media images and the images and text used in such Facebook profiles; and the potential negative consequences of such online self-representations. As a research assistant who was present during focus group proceedings, I am able to comment on the transcript as an event I have observed as opposed to a transcript I have merely read; however, since I was not the associated study's primary researcher, I did not write the discussion guide for this focus group nor did I moderate or participate in the focus group discussion.

Berg cautions that researchers, especially inexperienced researchers, can fall victim to a variety of problems when conducting focus group interviews. Some of these problems, including being too vague about the objectives of the focus group interview, using over-reaching focus group questions, using too many participants, having too much or not enough moderator influence, and a lack of professionalism (Berg 2009), have been overcome in this study by having an experienced moderator, Dr. Valerie Steeves of the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa, lead the focus group discussion and supervise recruitment. Dr. Steeves has overseen similar focus groups in the past and her current cyberfeminist research goals align with those framing this study, ensuring that such pitfalls were avoided.

Exploratory research studies such as this initiative are used when a subject is in a preliminary stage of investigation. Exploratory studies seek to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. Their goal is to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations (Schutt 2001), using a flexible research approach that addresses research questions of all types, including “what”, “why”, and “how” (Babbie 1989). The methodological approach of this study shares these aims, remaining flexible and open-ended. The focus group was semi-structured, using a flexible discussion guide that lent participants considerable influence in guiding the narrative of the focus group. Qualitative thematic analysis, the analytic strategy of choice for this study (see section 2.3), also ensures a flexible, more inductive research approach.

Berg cautions that using too few participants or focus groups can compromise the external validity of focus group research. Due to its small sample size of only one group of eight participants and its geographic specificity since all participants lived in greater Ottawa, the external validity of this study is limited (Berg 2009; Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2002). It cannot be generalized beyond the focus group participants; however, as an exploratory study, the primary goal of this research is not to generalize findings to broader populations. Rather, it primarily investigates relationships and explores these relationships’ meanings (Marshall and Rossman 2011), as opposed to making causal assertions or broad generalizations. Therefore, while a lack of external validity is noted, external validity is not essential to the broader goals of this study as exploratory research studies are, as Schutt (2001) and Babbie (1989) have explained, generally not concerned with external validity. A lack of external validity does not, however, imply a lack of other types of validity: this study cannot be criticised, for instance, for a similar lack of internal or construct validity (Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2002).

### **2.3 – Analytic Strategy and Coding Frame: Qualitative Thematic Analysis**

This study employs qualitative thematic analysis as its primary method of data analysis, also borrowing select elements from web-based critical discourse analysis (Rosas and Dhen 2011) to supplement this analytical approach. Attride-Stirling writes that qualitative thematic analysis is a multidisciplinary research strategy that summarizes the main themes constituting a piece of text: thematic analyses “seek to unearth the themes salient in a text at different levels” (2001:387), often borrowing “guiding principles, broad structures and specific steps [that] can be easily found in many other analytic techniques” (2001:387). Qualitative analyses are inherently subjective processes, whose purposes are to illuminate the richness, meaning and contexts of subjective experiences of social life (Altheide and Johnson 1994). Since, as Saussure (1974) and Grbich (2004) have outlined, meaning can only be understood within social contexts, the notion of objectivity is omitted from qualitative research. This rejection of objectivity produces analyses that transcend positivistic worldviews (Denzin 1994): the value of qualitative research lies in its subjective and non-linear exploratory and explanatory power (Attride-Stirling 2001).

Attride-Stirling (2001) offers that a useful way to organize thematic analyses and facilitate the depiction of salient themes is via thematic networks, or web-like networks of themes at work in a text. These thematic networks include systemized extractions of basic themes, categories of basic themes organized together to summarize more abstract principles, and global themes that summarize principal thematic metaphors in a text as a whole and encompass the collective basic themes and organized groups of basic themes. Attride-Stirling (2001:389) explains:

A thematic network is developed starting from basic themes and working toward a global theme. Once a collection of basic themes has been derived, they are then classified according to the underlying story they are telling and these become the

organizing themes. Organizing themes are then reinterpreted in light of their basic themes, and are brought together to illustrate [...] conclusion[s] or super-ordinate theme[s] that become the global theme.

The thematic analysis employed in this study adopts this use of thematic networks as an analytical tool to identify and organize major recurring themes in the data.

The data source – the focus group transcript – was initially coded for basic themes. Basic themes, as Attride-Stirling describes, are “simple premises characteristic of the data, and on their own say very little about the text [...] as a whole. In order for a basic theme to make sense beyond its immediate meaning, it needs to be read within the context of other basic themes” (2001:389). In this initial coding process for basic themes, an open-ended reading of the text allowed for the most salient characteristics of the data to be accurately identified without the rigid constraints of a more grounded, or categorical, approach. During this open-ended reading, Gill (2000:178) has established that critical thinking should frame questions such as “Why do some things get said and others do not?”, “How are things said, how do they relate, and what are their possible implications?” and “What is absent from the discourse?” The rigor of an open-ended reading lies in this flexibility, ultimately allowing for the emergence of complex relationships between discursive and social structures. Gibbs and Taylor (2005) note, however, that even when approaching data coding with such an inductive, open-minded approach, researchers do typically have at least some skeletal codes already in mind and are looking for additional thematic ideas that arise from the data. These ‘a priori’ ideas can be based on previous research or theory, questions or topics from interview schedules, key concepts of major research questions, or even gut feelings about data or the research setting.

As previous qualitative thematic analyses have established (see Corbin and Strauss 1990; Bryman and Burgess 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994; Ritchie and

Spencer 1994), codes are applied to dissect textual data into meaningful yet manageable segments such as passages, quotations, and single words (Attride Stirling 2001). This dissection can also consider implicit speech acts, such as gaps in discussion, whether participants seem unwilling or less willing to answer certain questions or talk about certain subjects, whether participants are ridiculed or criticized for expressing certain viewpoints, changes in tone of voice or demeanour, or sarcasm (Rosas and Dhen 2011). The consideration of implicit speech acts during coding is particularly relevant for this study, since cyberfeminist perspectives argue that women's voices may often be silenced in online interactions (Gajjala 2000).

Codes must also not be redundant and should focus explicitly on the object of analysis (Attride Stirling 2001); the codes used in this study are deliberately structured in accordance with these guidelines. During the preliminary stage of coding to identify basic themes, this study primarily favoured an open-minded approach, although skeletal a priori ideas of the key themes outlined in the review of literature in chapter 1 were kept in mind since they were likely to underscore salient concepts in the data. From this stage of coding emerged a variety of basic themes that recurred throughout the focus group transcript. These themes included: safety, resiliency, fear, risk, professionalism, employment opportunities, appearing like an 'adult' online, family relationships, projecting 'ethical sensibility', popular culture, celebrity and popularity.

Following this initial stage of coding to identify basic themes, Attride-Stirling (2001) writes that categories of basic themes should be grouped together into broader 'organizing themes' to summarize more abstract principles that link together related basic themes. Organizing themes are "clusters of signification that summarize the principal assumptions of a group of basic themes, so they are more abstract and more revealing of what is going on in the texts" (Attride-Stirling 2001:389). For the purposes of this study,

it was useful to operationalize these organizing themes in terms of biographical narratives, borrowing, as Attride-Stirling suggests is desirable in thematic analyses, aspects of an analytic technique from a different yet related methodology. Rosas and Dhen's (2011) adaptation of van Dijkian critical discourse analysis (van Dijk 1998; 2003) provided a useful framework that was complimentary to my own, stressing the importance of considering biographic narratives in research involving data sources with an online context, particularly when this research has a focus on identity.

Rosas and Dhen (2011) stress that online self-identity involves the ability to sustain a narrative of self with a consistent feeling of biographic continuity over time (see also: van Dijk 2003; Fairclough 2005; Facer 2012). On social networking sites like Facebook, this concept of biographic continuity is particularly relevant, since social networking users often self-present using biographically consistent identity narratives and biographic continuity can even be presented literally, for example, in a biographic Facebook profile, 'timeline', or an archived history of online interactions and postings (Rosas and Dhen 2011). Rosas and Dhen (2011) argue that research investigating online self-presentations or data sources with online contexts – as my own study clearly investigates – should acknowledge the functions and differences of perspectives involved in presenting or understanding identity and establishing such biographically consistent identity narratives. For the purposes of this study, it was particularly prudent, then, to integrate Rosas and Dhen's (2011) consideration of how users biographically consistently articulate, represent and communicate their identities on- and offline, and strategically reflect particular goals or interests depending on perceived relevance in given interactional contexts.

In light of Rosas and Dhen's (2011) recommendations, the second round of coding in this study sorted the aforementioned basic themes into recurring biographic

narrative constructions in order to simultaneously organize these basic themes (Attride-Stirling 2001) and consider how participants represented biographic continuity in what they communicated about their online identities. Biographic narrative constructions, in this context, were inclusive of variations in self-disclosure online, discussions of privacy settings or differentiated friends lists, statements involving projection of self, and how or whether certain identities were communicated consistently online. Biographic narrative constructions also reflect any identifiable goals associated with particular identities, identities' offline contexts in terms of whether participants discussed similar strategies of differentiated disclosure offline as online, how or whether identity was communicated differently offline than online, and whether participant statements about online behaviour or identity aligned with statements about offline behaviour or identity.

From this second round of coding emerged four different biographical narratives, or four different 'organizing themes' (Attride-Stirling 2001). These four subjectivities included: (1) the 'safe girl', who focused on risk, safety, fear and resiliency, (2) the 'professional girl', who prioritized school, employment, future job opportunities, and maintaining an 'adult' persona, (3) the 'family girl', who concentrated on parents, family members, and family relationships or family dynamics, and (4) the 'mediatized girl', who concerned herself with popular culture, mass media, celebrity, and popularity. Participants moved back and forth between all of four of these biographically consistent identity narratives, sometimes occupying multiple narratives simultaneously: these narratives therefore bled into one another, as opposed to representing static, rigid categorizations of archetypal subjectivities.

Finally, the last step in establishing a thematic network, Attride-Stirling describes, is to code for global themes, or "super-ordinate themes that encompass the principal metaphors in the data as a whole" (2001:389). Global themes are concluding or final

tenets that generate assertions about given issues or realities. As Attride-Stirling continues, “They are macro themes that summarize and make sense of clusters of lower-order themes abstracted from and supported by the data. Thus, global themes tell us what the texts as a whole are about within the context of a given analysis” (2001:389). These global themes should offer conclusive insights that relate to a study’s major research questions; in the case of this study, how girls experience agency online and how this agency is likewise constrained.

Each established identity narrative was thusly coded for three global themes, using a combination of a priori and open-ended codes. Each narrative was coded using two a priori codes representing global themes relating to this study’s major research questions; first, for its operationalization of agency, or the ability of participants to participate as active subjects in the circulation of their own online identities and actively assert control over when they are available and what can be seen (Koskela 2004; White 2003), also inclusive of “what, how and when [online content] is controlled by the person(s) whose images are circulated” (Koskela 2004:211). Each identity narrative was then coded for constraints upon agency: how, within each identity, participants could fail to have control over what, how and when their online content was circulated, could fail to actively assert control over their online presences, or experienced negative consequences resulting from their online presences.

In order to avoid too narrow a risk/benefit binary since online risk and benefit are not necessarily mutually exclusive and could overlap between identity narratives performed by participants, as well as to directly align with its primary research questions, the a priori coding in this study focused on differentiated conceptualizations of agency and constraints upon agency within each identity narrative. After coding for agency and constraints upon agency, notions of online risk and benefit naturally derive from and can

be more fully contextualized by these categorizations, with their nuances and interrelations more thoroughly understood through this agential lens. Each identity narrative was then coded for an emergent theme that evolved from an open-ended reading of the data: its corresponding operationalization of the role of ‘the boyfriend’ since a heteronormative boyfriend represented a major recurring thematic element of each biographical narrative identified in this study.

Sections 1-4 of this study’s data analysis simultaneously explore these three global themes – agency, constraints upon agency, and role of boyfriend – within the context of each identity narrative compiled from the basic themes identified in the initial phase of coding, examining the assertions about reality made by each global theme for each unique biographical identity narrative. Collectively, participants’ lived experiences of these global themes within the context of each identity narrative provided a useful lens through which to consider a final constraint upon agency for young women online (see section 1.5): cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment. All identity narratives collectively intersected to produce an insight that was directly relevant to these issues, namely, that available identity narratives converged to cause conflict between young women online. Section 4.2, then, considers all four identity narratives simultaneously through the lens of their juxtaposed global themes, in terms of how they collectively produced conflict and confrontation between participants. I offer policy recommendations for initiatives related to cyber bullying and cyber harassment (see section 4.2.3) based upon the ways in which each identity narrative’s own unique ‘global truths’ intersected with those of other identity narratives in conflictual ways. Cyber bullying and cyber harassment can thusly be viewed as a universal motif that cohesively links together the thematic networks of collective global themes, organized thematic identity narratives, and basic themes upon which these narratives are founded.

## **2.4 – Web-Oriented Qualitative Thematic Analysis: Challenges and Problems**

When virtual technology is an aspect of qualitative research, researchers are presented with unique challenges, particularly when this research is emancipatory in nature. In order to ensure a reflexive and historically grounded research process (McCotter 2001), it is necessary to frame the thematic analysis of this study's focus group discussion through a theoretical lens that acknowledges young women's broader online experiences and challenges faced in maintaining agential virtual presences. Although data analysis is of a focus group transcript, the social practices under observation are web-based and the interview questions posed to participants focused on their online experiences. It is necessary, then, to consider some of the challenges to web-oriented qualitative research.

Conceptualizations of virtual versus 'real' space complicate virtual analyses. In the early stages of web development, the Internet was considered separate from 'real life' environments, perhaps exaggerating differences between real and virtual discourses (Sveningsson 2004). Today, however, the Internet is increasingly positioned as an inherent part of the social landscape and the distinction between 'real' and virtual discourses is not necessarily apparent (Beddows 2008), as Haraway (1991) had earlier predicted. This conceptual concern of operationalizing offline and online realities is problematic in social research like qualitative thematic analysis that requires methodological and analytic reflexivity (Ograd 2005). In order to meaningfully study sociocultural relations online with the goal of working towards social change, as McCotter (2001) has stressed, researchers must consider the historical context in which social interactions take place: when virtual and non-virtual identities are conflated, this becomes difficult since the histories of these identities can become similarly convoluted.

Qualitative thematic analyses can address this problem by acknowledging that the conflation of virtual and non-virtual space is commonly encountered in research dealing with online content. In this study, a thorough review of relevant literature has helped to identify historical nuances related to offline and online identity; additionally, an open-minded and flexible coding and analysis process ensures that as many layers of meaning as possible frame data analysis (Ograd 2005).

Web-oriented qualitative research studies must additionally be conscious of the tendency of technological infrastructures to privilege industrialized nations (Gajjala 2000). Even within industrialized societies, disparate levels of 'e-literacy' (Martin 2003) can result in a 'digital divide' where online agency is relative to social class, age and gender (Kendall 1999) and is more commonly experienced by those coming from comparatively privileged socioeconomic echelons, even within groups that are traditionally oppressed or marginalized (Martin 2003; Gajjala 2000; Kendall 1999). Organizing, categorizing, identifying and selecting sources, as well as developing and identifying themes during data analysis, can therefore be difficult, since online voices often experience a degree of privilege even if they belong to an otherwise stigmatized group (Mautner 2005). Researchers can overcome this problem by situating thematic analyses within context-specific historico- and sociopolitical frameworks in order to assess communicative intent (Mautner 2005), as this study has considered in its choice of theoretical framework and completion of a thorough literature review. In addition, researchers conducting web-oriented qualitative studies should recognize that external validity in these studies is often limited and that research findings frequently cannot be generalized to broader populations (Berg 2009; Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2002): this study acknowledges its limited external validity, and makes no such generalized claims.

## **2.5 – Ethics**

Original ethics approval for the focus group at the University of Ottawa and for recruitment of participants was obtained before the focus group was held in 2010. Approval was obtained from the University of Ottawa Social Sciences and Humanities Research and Ethics Board, in line with the tenants outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (1998) on ethical guidelines for conducting research with human participants. The 2010 focus group did not involve any participants below the age of 18 so parental consent was not required; participants faced no obvious negative consequences from their participation in the focus group and signed consent forms before participation. All names and identifying personal details were anonymized in the final focus group transcript to prevent identification of participants; original audiorecordings have since been destroyed and were never copied. Participants were informed that while their identities would be anonymized, complete privacy would not be possible since in a focus group, other focus group members are privy to any information divulged. Participants were for this reason asked to keep the focus group discussion confidential. All participants were compensated for their time with a \$50 honorarium.

Since a new focus group was not held, the current study required only an ethics application for research based on secondary use of data. This secondary ethics approval was granted on 19 June 2012 by the Office of Research Ethics and Integrity with the Social Science and Humanities Research and Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa, file 06-10-20B (see Appendix II). The anonymized focus group transcript is stored on a password-protected laptop to which only I have access; this electronic transcript will be

preserved for five years following the completion of the focus group, after which time it will be permanently deleted.

## **2.6 – Voice and Personal Reflexivity**

Emancipatory studies (McCotter 2001) and cyberfeminist studies (Gajjala 2000) both consciously side with the young women they study and frame experience through a lens that acknowledges the patriarchal historical context shaping women's experiences, both off- and online. These research studies – including this research study – are “biased, and proud of it” (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Grbich (2004) outlines that the notion of voice refers to the positioning of the researcher, sharing that while positivistic frameworks believe that researchers present truth, critical frameworks like that used in this study acknowledge that participants, not just researchers, are also experts. Researchers speak on behalf of a population and give voice to those they are studying: personal accounts are affected by demographic nuances and presentations of voice provide oppressed populations a medium through which to speak (Grbich 2004).

Saussure (1974) and Grbich (2004) discard the idea of objectivity, offering that researchers ultimately pick those who are granted a voice, holding the power to silence certain voices while providing a platform for others. Fine (2003) notes the distinction between speaking about and speaking for others, cautioning that personal bias can intrude upon data analysis. While Alcoff (2009) argues that researchers should retreat from speaking about or for others altogether since one can only know one's own truth, other scholars (Grbich 2004; Fine 2003) recognize that such withdrawal is not always practical, desirable or possible. Fine (2003) suggests that to improve credibility, transcripts of

interviews or focus groups should be provided to participants so they can ensure that their true voices are reflected. While providing transcripts to participants was not possible in this study since focus group participants were anonymous, findings were corroborated with Dr. Valerie Steeves, who moderated the focus group and is familiar with critical cyberfeminist discourse analyses. This corroboration ensures that credibility was maintained and that findings provided as beneficial a voice as possible to participants.

A final aspect of voice and reflexivity is the effect of the research process upon researchers and the role of the researcher's own voice within this process. Thematic analyses are not simply a summary of textual messages: these analyses also repeat on researchers, whose thoughts and actions can be affected by their objects of study (Grbich 2004; van Dijk 2003), and vice-versa. This is particularly relevant to this study and to my own role as a primary researcher: as a male conducting feminist research, self-reflexivity is crucial to ensure my own experience as a Caucasian, educated, comparatively privileged male does not unduly frame the ultimate findings of this study. To counter arguments that a male should not be conducting feminist research because his gendered lived experience will undesirably frame ultimate research findings, I suggest that the opposite is true. That there is a distinction between myself and the populations I study is obviously apparent: so apparent, in fact, that it necessitates heightened reflexivity in order to proactively counter criticisms that by virtue of my gender I am not qualified to conduct feminist research. For this precise reason, my research must have rigor. With the importance of this reflexivity and rigor noted, it is pertinent to be forthright with my own theoretical preconceptions: while I generally tend to view more agency (as opposed to less agency) as something positive and that to have greater choice is generally better than

to have less choice, I am not making a claim that every exercise of choice is necessarily positive. Rather, since my operationalization of agency involves a girl's internal role as an actor who can make choice and exert control, I theoretically perceive that compelled choices by definition aren't agential, since they do not involve choice.

Secondly, as Tarrant (2009) has illustrated, prevailing social norms do not allow for alternative models of manhood that resonate with maximizing female liberty and minimizing constraints upon gender, class, race or sexuality. For this reason, it can be difficult to reconcile images of masculinity with images of feminism. Feminism, however, is a moral belief that is not restricted to one gender (Tarrant 2009). Feminism involves the "common sense to believe in egalitarian values, to care for all people and to bring about a better world, [and to think] critically about gender, race and unearned privileges as a heterosexual white male" (Tarrant 2009:1). In being conscious and critical of the differences that distinguish me from my research participants, in addition to subscribing to the emancipatory ideals delineated in section 2.1, my identity as a feminist has been firmly established. Despite my gender, the emancipatory goals of my research remain the same: to generate positive change in favour of more equal gender relations.

### CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS, PART ONE - THE 'SAFE GIRL', 'PROFESSIONAL GIRL' AND 'FAMILY GIRL'

#### **Introduction**

I now turn to the analysis of my participants' narratives. The focus group under analysis took place at the University of Ottawa and featured eight Caucasian female participants (Amber, Danni, Jenna, Natalie, Parvati, Sandra, Tina, and Vecepia) between the ages of 18-22, many of whom were first year undergraduate students and all of whom attended the University of Ottawa. Participants were from both Anglophone and Francophone backgrounds, although the focus group was conducted in English. All participants were avid users of online social networking; specifically, all participants used Facebook, and some participants used other online social networks including Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr and Reddit.

While some participants had more subdued personalities and were less vocal during focus group proceedings (Natalie, Parvati, Sandra, Vecepia), others (Amber, Danni, and particularly Tina) were comparatively more vocal and tended to lead discussion and initiate responses to questions. Jenna, although she was more vocal during the beginning of the focus group, became quiet after other participants began criticizing her for the way she chose to present herself online; after this criticism took place, she remained silent until the end of the group discussion.

Initially, the focus group transcript was coded for basic themes, which allowed for the most salient characteristics of the data to be brought to light (see section 2.3). Following this open-ended reading, basic themes were aggregated into four biographically consistent identity narratives that were performed by my participants. The

‘safe girl’ is associated with narrative threads of risk, safety, fear and resiliency; the ‘professional girl’ emphasizes school, employment, future job opportunities, and maintaining an ‘adult’ persona; the ‘family girl’ concentrates on parents, family members and family relationships. Finally, the ‘mediatized girl’ concerns herself with popular culture, mass media, celebrity and popularity. Focus group discourse was coded into these four biographically consistent categories of self-presentation.

The research participants occupied one or more of these identities, often moving back and forth between these identity narratives depending on the context of their online interactions. This is in keeping with Baron et al.’s finding that identity, particularly adolescent identity, can be flexible, layered and in a constant state of change: it is “a dynamic process rather than [a] static entity” (2012:468). Identity narratives emphasize coherence and amalgamation over a multiplicity of subjectivities and perspectives, where identity is an “integrative life story providing some degree of unity and purpose” (Baron et al. 2012:468). Under this framework, rather than identity being one singular sense of sameness or continuity in personality over time, it is a multi-layered collection of biographically continuous narratives. My data supports the position that these narratives can overlap and are not necessarily mutually exclusive; the participants in this project simultaneously occupied multiple biographical narratives and indicated that they alternated the narratives that they occupied throughout the course of their online interactions. As the following analysis will demonstrate, participants were not restricted to merely one archetypal identity; complex biographic narratives were established by drawing upon multiple identities, often concurrently.

Following these two initial rounds of coding, a third round of coding grouped each biographical narrative according to its consistently articulated subject matter, or its 'global themes' (Attride-Stirling 2001). Each identity was first coded for its operationalization of agency, or the ability of each performed identity narrative to participate as an active online subject in the circulation of her own identity (Koskela 2004). Markers of agency included the ability to assert control over when the participant was available and what, how and when her content was circulated or seen online, as well as how she established this control and what specifically she was interested in controlling (Koskela 2004). Next, each identity was coded for constraints upon agency, or those instances in the biographical narrative where the participant failed to have control over what, how and when her online content was circulated, failed to actively assert control over her online presence, or encountered a negative consequence resulting from her online presence. Each participant recurrently discussed her current or ex- boyfriend, whose role changed according to the particular identity she was performing; the data was therefore finally coded for its corresponding operationalization of the role of 'the boyfriend' because it was a recurrent element of each biographical narrative.

Lastly, I considered all four organized biographical identity narratives in terms of how their various lived experiences of agency and constraints upon agency intersected in conflictual ways. Cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment are best discussed in the context of this study following a discussion of the four identified biographical identity narratives, since thematic truths and ultimate conclusions relating to cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment were influenced by all identity narratives' operationalization of agency, constraints upon agency, and role of 'the boyfriend'. Analysis will show that

available identity narratives converged to cause conflict between young women online; therefore, this conflict will be examined in its own section.

I begin with the three identities that were intimately thematically bound to the autonomous management of risk and maintaining a positive reputation or self-presentation, each drawing biographic continuity from these tropes. Scholars (Gilligan 1982; Kerpelman and Smith-Adcock 2005) have suggested that adolescent girls' relationships with others are of the utmost importance in the establishment of identity, highlighting the role of peer feedback mechanisms in creating standards of conduct and regulating identity performance, also outlining that these mechanisms play a crucial role in maintaining individual well-being. Reputation moderates behaviour and self-conceptualization, also impacting offline conduct: "How the adolescent believes [...] others will see [her] will exert a powerful influence on the choices the adolescent makes" (Kerpelman and Smith-Adcock 2005:180). The 'safe girl', 'professional girl' and 'family girl' are each markedly concerned with reputation, drawn together by their meticulous focus on self-presentation and perception by others as responsible, cautious, or ethical virtual citizens. While each is concerned with portraying a slightly different biographically consistent identity, all three identity narratives have in common the importance that they place upon others investing in these deliberate biographic constructions as 'virtually virtuous'.

First, I outline the 'safe girl', who values the appearance of critically managing, asserting control over and engaging with online risk. I walk through the ways in which my participants appropriated gendered fears relating to Koskela's (2004) 'regime of order' as an agency-granting milieu and establish that fear, in a departure from Koskela's

(2004) findings, could also have a key intersection with online gendered agency. I then turn to the ‘professional’ girl and those elements within my participants’ narratives that were concerned with projecting a professional online appearance to coworkers or potential employers. I illustrate that participants occupying this identity were concerned with academic- and employment-related pursuits and exhibited a high level of agency in this regard, although this establishment of professionalism entailed a bracketing of femininity, where professionalism entailed overtones that were inherently stereotypically masculine. Participants performing the ‘family girl’, meanwhile, employed strategies of controlled differentiated self-disclosure to maintain family relationships or ethically-sensible ‘family professionalism’ cultivated offline, while simultaneously embracing alternate subjectivities that did not necessarily correspond to this ‘family girl’ image.

The remaining performed identity found in the data, the ‘mediatized girl’, was thematically related to celebrity and popularity. While participants performing this identity also displayed a reliance on peer feedback mechanisms and a focus on reputation, this identity is discussed in consideration of its own unique thematic tropes and alongside a discussion of how all identity narratives, but particularly the ‘mediatized girl’ narrative, were accompanied by constraints and contradictions that resulted in participants criticizing and bullying or harassing other girls. For this reason, the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative will be examined in the following chapter, together with a discussion of this inherent conflict between identity narratives. Policy initiatives dealing with the regulation of gendered issues like cyber bullying within online spaces will also be considered in the following chapter.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that self-disclosure as female appeared to be an inherent, necessary component of participants' online social networking profiles, regardless of the particular identity that they were performing. Amber recounted that having a gender-free Facebook profile "is kind of difficult, with a picture and a name. You can put a different picture [but cannot easily post a fake or gender-neutral name]". Jenna explained that, "With me it's just so obvious, like, people know I'm a female. [...] If anyone on my Facebook doesn't know if I'm male or female, there's a problem." Tina also summarized that while disclosure of sexuality is not necessary in an online social networking profile, "I think everyone knows if they're male or female."

In fact, for some participants, failure to disclose gender on Facebook profiles actually reduced or negated the perceived benefit of having a Facebook profile at all, indicating that gender neutrality, far from being a liberating agent for oppressed females as early cyberfeminists (Haraway 1991; Hall 1996) have theorized, can be oppressive in its own right. As Jenna outlined:

If you don't show your gender, you're essentially going to have no pictures; you're going to have some sort of made up name; you're not going to have a display picture. Your likes and interests can very easily lead people [to realize whether you are male or female]. Like, you don't have Facebook, really.

Gender disclosure in online social networking profiles was perceived by many participants as important, notwithstanding the aforementioned risks of being – or appearing to be – a girl online, and the importance of this gender disclosure continued to be upheld despite participants having a clear awareness of the alleged risks of doing so. This implies that, as Paasonen (2005) offers, female identity is a crucial aspect of women's use of virtual technology.

Being a girl appears to be inseparable from a presence in online social networking, generating imagery of girls as cyborgs – or as simultaneously human and machine, fused figuratively in terms of conflated identity and even literally in terms of shared physical space, for example, when a girl is positioned behind a laptop screen, cultivating her online social networking profile. Yet girls are certainly not cyborgs “in a post-gender world” (Haraway 1991:150), as Haraway has claimed. Gender, it seems, is an active aspect of girls’ cyborg subjectivities and is permanently encoded in their online data doubles (Los 2006). Cyberspace, in this sense, is not the place for unrestricted, transcendent, gender-free experience and cyborgs are decidedly not gender-neutral entities, contrary to some scholarly claims (Haraway 1991; Munt 2001). Rather, as later cyberfeminists (Gajjala 2000; Paasonen 2005) have suggested, cyborgs are metaphors of feminist subjects, where technology is not positioned as a masculine other of women and nature: women attempt to empower themselves via the appropriation of the same virtual technology used by men in ways that continue to express their identities as females.

### **PART 3.1: THE ‘SAFE GIRL’**

The ‘safe girl’ identity performed by my participants was associated with narrative threads relating to risk, safety, fear and resiliency. Participants occupying this identity were concerned with establishing themselves as ‘responsible’ virtual citizens who were able to critically analyse and autonomously manage a variety of online risks, using online social networking to establish self-portrayals that conveyed their resilience to potential online dangers and proactive responses to culturally engrained gendered fears within online spaces. Within this identity, participants’ potential to experience agency lay in appearing to critically engage with online risks, asserting knowledge of these risks, and articulating that they possessed the control to effectively mitigate these risks or that these risks were not truly risky. Agency was constrained for these participants when online risks could not be mitigated or addressed autonomously, or when this appearance could not be conveyed to their online social networks. Like the related two identity narratives of the ‘professional girl’ and the ‘family girl’, details of relationships with boyfriends of participants occupying this identity were kept strictly private, as opposed to being publicly displayed.

#### **3.1.1 – Agency**

Participants performing the ‘safe girl’ were well aware that young women face a variety of online risks with varying degrees of severity, ranging from experiencing unwanted privacy invasions to being sent targeted advertisements to becoming victims of stalking, harassment, or even property crime. Expressions of online risks from participants performing this identity were plentiful and diverse, demonstrating a

considerable level of awareness regarding potential online gendered dangers and implying that these participants had been socialized to internalize and fear these risks as habitual threats to their online presences. Participants performing this identity found agency in asserting their awareness of these risks and conveying that they were critically engaging with the dangers they could potentially encounter online: in other words, in asserting that they were in control of managing the online risks that they perceived.

Sandra described that she feared online stalking: “Whoever wants to stalk you can go out there and be obvious about it.” Vecepia warned that online location disclosure could lead to property crime, cautioning that, “If [because of location disclosure] somebody knows you’re not home, they can go and break in to your house.” Parvati demonstrated an understanding that there are few protective measures in place to guard against potential misuse of personal information online, worriedly explaining that, “If you put it out there, I think people can do anything. I don’t think there’s much to protect you.” Tina was concerned about identity theft, explaining that, “A lot of times [there] are scams, with people who are trying to get your information.”

Location-based services, which Jenna characterized as “like a GPS, almost,” were another source of stress for participants performing the ‘safe girl’. Parvati elaborated:

It’s a safety thing with that, I think. Like, just, okay, there’s certain- you know, you grow up, and your parents are like, “Don’t tell anyone we’re not home.” Very basic things, which make sense. And now, suddenly, you’re 18 and everybody on the Internet knows where you are, then? It doesn’t really line up very well.

Risks of location-based disclosure were clearly gendered, where participants performing the ‘safe girl’ feared being tracked by males. Tina worried that, “If you put where you are, some guy’s going to seek you out. That’s really freaky. Because, what do they want from me?” Vecepia tied irresponsible disclosure of location to her

aforementioned fear of property crime, directly citing popular media reports as proof that her concerns were valid:

You know, like, everyone in university has a laptop that's probably, like, sitting there. Something that's valuable, like, right there. So people post their exact addresses on Facebook and anybody can just go in and see that. I know it's been, like, in the news and stuff: people with status updates [disclose their location to would-be robbers] and then they go and rob their houses and stuff.

Some participants described mitigating the risk of location-based disclosure simply by ensuring they did not post their location online or disabled applications that posted their location automatically, while others described asserting control over location-based disclosure by limiting the number of people they approved as friends on Facebook: "I don't think I have anyone on Facebook who would want to come and, like, mug me in the middle of the street, who would care that much. I don't keep that many distant people," Amber explained. For participants performing the 'safe girl', then, the choice not to post a personal location online was an agency-granting expression of personal responsibility and personal control over self-disclosure of location. As Tina supposed, "Maybe a less cautious person might be more into something like that".

Vecepia and Tina both feared the prospect of inappropriate advances from males online: "We joined a group about walking in bare feet, and I got so many messages from foot fetishists; it was the creepiest thing," Tina recounted, while Vecepia disconcertedly related that, "A [customer] found me out of, like, ten thousand people in [a work Facebook] group; it creeped me the hell out". Natalie was similarly apprehensive of males, particularly older males, appearing in young women's social networks: "I know a guy my age or older, he coaches girls' soccer at the high school level," she offered. "I

don't think it's appropriate to have your soccer girls on your Facebook, because they can see everything and you're significantly older than them. I just think it's inappropriate.”

Manago et al. (2008) have explored the ways in which online gender role constructions of females as affiliative and attractive and males as strong and powerful can inhibit agential or ‘safe’ disclosure of gender online. They have submitted that in online spaces, females can face pressure for sexual objectification and routinely encounter intensified social comparison – especially sexual social comparison – with accompanying potential negative impacts upon free expression and identity development. These gender role constructions and pressures can result in young women experiencing increased fear or malaise regarding disclosure of gender online, where this disclosure is associated with a risk of inappropriate advances from males: such disclosure, Manago et al. have argued, “will draw comments and attention from the [online male] public” (2008:455). Participants performing the ‘safe girl’ exemplified these fears, worrying, as Tina, Vecepia and Natalie did, that their mere participation in online spaces shared by males could solicit such unwanted and potentially malevolent interactions.

As highlighted in Chapter 1, mainstream public narratives also establish the Internet as an inherently risky place for females, particularly for young females. Public perceptions of women as inferior or ancillary contribute to women online being viewed as ‘safe targets’ for invasions of privacy, held to a higher standard of accountability for private conduct than their male counterparts (Allen 2000; Shade 2008). Girls are repeatedly made aware through popular culture and mass media that social networking can facilitate obsessive relational intrusion – in its most extreme form, stalking – and are specifically problematized for irresponsible self-disclosure and failing to secure their

online security and privacy, publicly perceived as more likely to experience unwanted intrusions into these spheres (Chaulk and Jones 2011). Vecepia and Tina's performance of the 'safe girl' identity support this literature, where a fear of such gendered invasions of privacy were a part of their lived experience of online girlhood.

In terms of specific content that participants performing the 'safe girl' internalized as potentially inviting such unwanted advances, images that were revealing or sexualized were most commonly cited, aligning with mass media conceptions that these types of images prompt harassment or unwanted attention from males. While some participants felt that overtly sexually provocative images were inappropriate, several participants also refused to post photos from the beach, classifying these images as undesirable or denying that they took these photos at all. "I haven't put any [beach pictures] up," Jenna stated. Sandra likewise insisted, "I don't take beach pictures. I guess it just didn't happen," before qualifying, "I wouldn't want to put beach pictures on my profile, personally." Amber, the lone participant who did admit to taking beach pictures, justified her decision to leave these pictures online because she was doing so 'safely', qualifying that her choice was valid "because I'm only sharing with certain people [...] and my profile's all private". The subtext was clear: beach photos, generally taken in bikinis, were too revealing to be considered 'safe' for public display.

Baumgartner, Valkenburg and Peter (2010) have described that females online are traditionally sexually solicited more often than males and correspondingly take fewer online sexual risks than their male counterparts in part due to their consciousness of the potential negative impacts resulting from these risks. Perceived risks and fears of negative consequences of sexual online behaviour are generally high amongst young

women, while the perceived benefits of sexual online behaviour are low (Baumgartner, Valkenburg and Peter 2010). Participants performing the 'safe girl' reinforced these gendered normalized perceptions of sexualized online behaviour, similarly characterizing sexualized behaviour in negative or risky terms or describing that they took care not to engage in potentially sexualized online conduct and that they were in control of the way they were presented online.

That participants occupying the 'safe girl' identity described such a diverse array of online risks opposes pop cultural, popular media, legal, and even some scholarly discourses where girls have been described as naïve virtual citizens who are in need of protection, censorship or governance (Arcabascio 2010; Humbach 2010). On the contrary, my participants were very conscious of the potential negative consequences of their online interactions, whether as a result of direct experience, witnessing the experiences of friends or acquaintances, or exposure to prevalent discourses in popular media. As Amber shared, "It's culturally engrained that we need to stay safe."

Modern media constructions often, as Thiel-Stern (2008) has suggested, portray social networking as an inherently risky specific and often sexual threat to young women and adolescent girls. These constructions form part of a broader 'regime of order' surrounding girls' self-expression, where under a 'judgmental gaze' that maintains adherence to normative standards of femininity, girls' "everyday life is regulated, not only potential criminal acts" (Koskela 2004:207) like stalking, property crime or identity theft. Girls' behaviour is routinely problematized in popular media when posting self-revealing photos and videos on the Internet, conveying the threat that female participation in public spheres can lead to inappropriate advances from males, regardless of whether

they are wanted or unwanted (Thiel-Stern 2008). Social networking sites have been specifically identified as places where girls can ‘get into trouble’ by articulating sexuality or engaging in practices of self-disclosure (Thiel-Stern 2008). Girls rely upon media to gain authoritative knowledge to mark how young women are ‘supposed’ to be (Thiel-Stern 2008), and media reports are clear: women should be vigilant, non-sexual, and inherently private in their online self-presentation; girls should guard against potential online risk and retain control of their online self-presentations. In short, girls online should be ‘safe’.

Participants performing the ‘safe girl’ identity perceived the need for online safety as gendered, as media and pop cultural narratives have suggested. Males were perceived by participants occupying this narrative to be less conscious than females of online risk, whether because they believed the same online risks did not apply to males – in other words, because males were perceived as inherently safe and females were seen as inherently at risk – or because they believed that there were unwanted social repercussions if males appeared too concerned with online risk. Amber summarized: “I would assume that guys don’t really think about safety as much as girls do. I think it’s just...they’ll get made fun of.” She continued to explain her belief that males face social constraints inhibiting their ability to appear concerned with online safety:

A lot of guys I can see – especially, you know, sort of the tough ones – [not] being worried about saying where they are. I can see their friends seeing [this potential worry] as a way to be like, “Oh, what are you scared of?” You know, “Are you scared that somebody’s going to come and [...] rob you?” You know, they’re kind of macho; [they] don’t want to seem scared of anything.

Tina recounted that males do not need to worry about unwanted advances from strangers online, while she personally feared this risk. “I don’t think [males] are worried,”

she described. “They think [self-disclosure] is fun. Whereas someone told me, ‘If you put where you are, some guy’s going to seek you out’ – that’s really freaky.” Amber reinforced this perspective, offering that, “If [a random friend request] happened to a guy, [he] wouldn’t care. [He] would be like, ‘Oh, cool. A girl noticed me.’”

This conceptualization of males as more ‘macho’ and facing inherently less online risk also provided participants performing the ‘safe girl’ with more leverage to assert their individual responsibility by establishing that males do not deal with online risks in a similarly deliberate and labour-intensive way. In operationalizing males online as not exerting the same level of labour as females to manage their online identities, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ established that women online have to ‘do more’ and are inherently more proactively attentive to online risk, as well as that this management was inherently more agential by nature of the fact that there was more for them to manage and more risks over which to assert control. As Amber succinctly stated, being a girl online “is harder”.

Agency for participants performing the ‘safe girl’ identity lay in expressing that they had adhered to expectations of safety and had actively exercised the control required to manage or mitigate online risk, adhering to cultural expectations of young women needing to stay safe online. Paradoxically, however, this operationalization of agency borrows tropes from Koskela’s regime of shame (2004), where individuals internalize and are inherently disempowered by the control and inherent need for privacy put forth by the regime of order (see also Senft 2008). Koskela writes:

The regime of shame keeps people meek and obedient as efficiently as any control coming from the outside. Rejecting it is unacceptable and immodest. Further, these controls coming from outside and from inside are most effective

when functioning together. The combination of fear and shame ensures submissiveness (2004:219-220).

While participants who performed the 'safe girl' identity can be characterized as submissive in their adherence to these cultural expectations of online safety, these participants did differ from Koskela's 'regime of shame' hypothesis in one important aspect: there is no evidence that they felt shamed by 'unacceptable' or 'immodest' online conduct. However, participants did appear fearful of online risk in general and of the potential risk of being shamed by others as a result of such 'objectionable' behaviour, as evidenced by the previous statements where participants expressed worry about the negative consequences, whether in terms of safety or in terms of negative judgment, of doing so.

I suggest Koskela's 'regime of shame' can be more accurately re-operationalized as a 'regime of fear', where young women feel self-responsibilized to control and proactively respond to internalized and feared risks including but not limited to potential shaming, yet do not necessarily actively feel shame as an intrinsic component of their lived online experience. That participants performing the 'safe girl' identity did feel fear regarding online risk does not imply that their online experiences were inagential. Rather, agency for these participants worked in tandem with fear: instead of being oppressed by the fear that they felt in online spaces, participants performing the 'safe girl' identity mobilized and simultaneously combatted this fear to consistently establish that they were proactively in control and responsibly managing perceived potential online dangers and risks stemming from this fear. In this way, fear was re-conceptualized as something that was agential rather than inagential, since without fear, there would be less perceived online risk against which to proactively guard and fewer opportunities to establish this

proactive 'safe' identity and associated control over online risk. As opposed to fear constraining agency, then, it provided participants performing the 'safe girl' with the foundations to establish that they were proactively addressing a greater amount of online risk, and better establish that they were even 'safer' young women online.

In line with this 'regime of fear', participants were vigilant in removing potentially objectionable content and ensuring that their online profiles were kept at least partially private. Amber defined online privacy as "allowing people to have information that you want them to have but not have information that you don't want them to have. Like, controlling what you put out there." Tina echoed this emphasis on controlled disclosure, stating, "Whatever I put on here, I'm going to try do to my best to control who sees it," but simultaneously noting that, "You just kind of come to terms with the fact that [...] it is on the Internet, so [anyone could potentially see it]." Participants performing the 'safe girl' were aware that the Internet was a public forum where unintended audiences could potentially see any disclosed content, and acknowledged that controlled disclosure was ideal but not necessarily always possible. Therefore, participants performing this identity believed that strategic action and strategic methods of control were necessary to mitigate their fears of the potential risks of unintended audiences seeing undesirable or incriminating content and losing control over their online self-disclosure.

As Amber related, "I took down some pictures and things that I thought would incriminate me, like, unacceptable social things. [...] I keep it private. You can't search me. I 'Googled' myself and nothing really comes up. [...] My friends can't tag me [in photos]." Other participants performing the 'safe girl' employed similar strategies of setting more restrictive privacy controls as opposed to maintaining the default 'open'

Facebook privacy settings that are in place if users have not specifically altered them. Danni described that, “I go in and opt out. A lot of people do.” Jenna likewise detailed, “I [have] really high privacy settings [...] and I up them anytime [Facebook staff] add anything new.” Sandra shared that, “A lot of people [set their profiles so] you can’t really see much of anything. A lot of people just have a profile picture and the city they’re in, and a name. Like, in order to really see their information, you have to be a friend with them.” Other participants maintained differentiated levels of disclosure in order to maintain their online privacy, such as multiple friend lists or profiles that were only accessible to an exclusive network of friends.

As a similar strategic method of limiting online disclosure in public search results, some participants performing the ‘safe girl’ exercised control over disclosure of their names on Facebook, using aliases or middle names in their Facebook profiles. Many participants performing this identity similarly did not post a personal photo as their Facebook profile picture, opting instead to post non-personally identifying photos such as cartoons or animations in public search results. Sandra explained that this limited unwanted self-exposure, usually to strangers or “random people”, but also potentially to former significant others or other unwanted searchers: “If somebody searches my name, they have no idea which one is me, you know? [...] My security’s so tight. I don’t want to let anyone just kind of get that information.”

Christofides, Muise and Desmarais (2012) have established that young women performing ‘safe’ online identities engage in such strategies of limiting online disclosure in order to lessen potential risk online and to avoid potentially undesirable or scary outcomes; additionally, those who have had direct experience with negative outcomes

tend to exhibit more precautionary behaviour. They argue that “using the privacy settings [on Facebook] constitutes a controllable element of the risks involved in sharing online,” (2012:726) and that “a generalized lack of trust motivates adolescents and emerging adults to maintain their privacy” (2012:726). Further, youth who think about the future consequences of their online disclosure or who fear negative consequences, whether as a result of direct negative experience or internalization, may also take greater steps to protect their online privacy (Christofides, Muise and Desmarais 2012). My participants illustrated these findings: implementing strategies of controlled self-disclosure allowed them to proactively guard against potential online risk and overcome issues related to trust and fear, and necessarily entailed maintaining some degree of online privacy as a strategic response to these fears – yet also granted agency through this opportunity to exercise control and established them as responsible, proactive virtual citizens.

Whether the self-disclosure related fears of participants performing the ‘safe girl’ were legitimate or well founded is less central to my analysis than the fact that these participants felt that they were. As a result, the regime of fear was a part of their lived reality, and agency lay in asserting that they possessed the control to actively respond to this fear and potential risk. In fact, asserting a proactive response to this fear and controlling online risk appeared to grant participants performing the ‘safe girl’ the agency to continue to set their Facebook profiles as publicly searchable. Acknowledging their awareness and negotiation of the potentially risk-laden connection between privacy, gender and online safety (Baumgartner, Valkenburg and Peter 2010; Gilbert, Karahalios and Sandvig 2010; Manago et al. 2008) appeared to enable participants performing the ‘safe girl’ to engage in the potentially risky act of maintaining a searchable Facebook

profile, due to the fact that they were openly managing the ‘most serious’ risks and consciously weighing the benefits of searchability against its potential negative consequences.

Only one outlying participant stated that, “I’d just feel way more safe if they didn’t have to see me. If somebody wants to add me, I’ll talk to them, message them, and add them on Facebook myself” (Sandra). Most other participants explicitly stated that being publicly searchable was a desirable aspect of their presences on Facebook, appearing to value visibility – albeit with caveats such as retaining some blocked content or implementing a ‘limited profile’ setting – over protective invisibility. “It’s too extreme [to make yourself completely unsearchable],” Natalie recounted. “You want people to be able to find you.” Jenna agreed, musing, “No one’s going to not want to be searched; that’s ridiculous. If you want to talk to people, how are they going to find you?” Participants performing the ‘safe girl’ thereby usually opted for risky visibility over protective invisibility, with the exception of Sandra, who was the only participant who preferred to remain protectively invisible online.

Agency for participants performing the ‘safe girl’ identity was thereby tied to internalized compliance with the regime of order and this regime of fear, where participants openly expressed that they were competent in controlling purported risks and managing gendered online fears, but was also tied to a degree of resistance to these regimes’ expectations of complete online privacy. Rather than the meek, submissive, shamefully compliant subjects described by Koskela (2004), my participants were empowered by their compliance itself, subverting traditional understandings of internalized gendered risk as an inherently disempowering aspect of these regimes. Under

the regime of fear, participants were actively able to address potential risks as agential subjects and *cope* with online fear. By actively addressing potential risks as agential subjects, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ were able to challenge “traditional definitions of the subject and [pose] a unique way to conceive of subjectivity and the agency and power that is implied therein” (Koskela 2004:220). Unable or unwilling to escape the expectations of the regime of order and regime of fear and the risks that they imply, these participants found a way to remain empowered through a potentially disempowering process, and simultaneously managed the expectations of privacy and self-censorship imposed by these regimes, establishing themselves in the public eye as responsible, critical, hard-working – yet partially public – digital citizens.

Additionally, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ experienced agency through asserting knowledge of the online risks that they feared and by ensuring that they had independently controlled and mitigated them, had lessened them through online risk management strategies, or had rendered them less risky by reframing them as ‘safer’. In cases where participants performing this identity engaged in a risky online behaviour notwithstanding its potential risk or in cases where risk management was not possible – most notably, when disclosing gender itself or making themselves publicly searchable – they took care to stress that the benefits of engaging in these risky behaviours outweighed their associated negative consequences. By asserting that they had critically engaged with online risk, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ identity consciously responded to media constructions and pop cultural frameworks that operationalize young women online as inherently risky: they ensured that their own online existences were less risky or

were not risky, established that they had addressed any potential risks as autonomous subjects, and emphasized that they were responsible virtual citizens.

### **3.1.2 – Constraints Upon Agency**

Agency for participants performing the ‘safe girl’ was constrained when they were unable to autonomously mitigate or otherwise lost control over their management of online risk, or when they were required to exert an excessive amount of labour to do so. In such situations, these participants were unable to assert that they were responsible digital citizens who had proactively addressed or critically engaged with perceived online risks, either because these risks were an inescapable reality of online participation or because the labour that was necessitated in order to be ‘safe’ was inherently invisible. Under these conditions, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ felt forced to portray themselves as ‘unsafe’ online subjects who had failed to respond to online risk or who inherently lacked the control to do so successfully.

Often, the constraints upon agency encountered by participants performing the ‘safe girl’ were related to insufficient social networking privacy settings or to unwanted online disclosure requirements built directly into social networking platforms. Jenna described that, “They give you security options without really giving you security options,” implying that existing Facebook privacy controls were inadequate. She further related that while she preferred not to disclose her last name on Facebook, Facebook had removed the option for her not to do so, denying her the autonomy of making this choice. Jenna combatted this constraint by choosing to use a fake name, opening up a liminal space for re-assertion of agency where Facebook forced disclosure against her will:

When I was young, [Facebook allowed you] to make your last name an initial, like, just the letter. Now, if you put one letter as your last name, it won't go through. I think that's ridiculous. [...] Now I either have to make up a last name or put two random letters.

Parvati displayed a similar distaste for mandatory self-disclosure in online social networking, specifically problematizing that profile pictures automatically appear in public search results:

You used to be able to have a profile picture and anyone who didn't know you could not see that picture; it would just come up as a question mark. But now, if you want to have a profile picture, anyone in the world who searches you can see that picture. I would way rather it not be that way, because, like, if somebody searches up my name [...] they can see who I am.

Participants performing the 'safe girl' conceptualized these constraints upon agency as unmanageable or restricting because managing them required a level of withdrawal from full online participation or required an excessive amount of labour in comparison to the less invasive, less labour intensive alternative of non-disclosure. That participants potentially felt like they were forced to partially withdraw from full online participation has important implications for gendered online equality: as young women, they had their online agency and ability to participate freely restricted in spaces where males would not necessarily feel oppressed by similar constraints, once again illustrating that "e-quality" is an ideal as opposed to a lived reality. While participants could, in theory, have created a false last name or posted a profile picture that was not personally revealing, it was simultaneously easier and less risky simply not to be forced to disclose a last name at all or to have a profile picture that was invisible in public search results in order to avoid these gendered constraints upon agency and full online participation.

The arduous labour entailed in managing some online risks was a considerable constraint upon agency for participants performing the 'safe girl' identity. Social

networking sites have been conceptualized (Davis 2012; Gatson 2011; Marwick and Boyd 2010) as labour-exposing spaces that give subjective actors defined and explicit control over their own self-representations, which require labour to maintain. Davis (2012) suggests that online actors are required to render this labour invisible, achieving this invisibility with varying degrees of success according to the presence of diverse cultural, historical and material influences.

As previously outlined, however, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ did not render their online labour invisible; rather, they flaunted it with pride in order to show that they were proactively managing potential online risk and possessed control over this risk. In doing so, these participants neutralized the potential disempowerment resulting from the effort of maintaining invisibility. Being a responsible girl online, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ believed, required work, and they were empowered by displaying that they had the work ethic to perform this labour and were proactively and controllingly responding to virtual risk and internalized fear.

However, in cases where this labour was inherently invisible – for example, when it took place ‘behind the scenes’ of a Facebook profile or if it demanded an excessive amount of time or effort that could not clearly be displayed as part of a publicly articulated online risk management strategy – it was no longer agential; rather, it was constraining. The strongest example of this constraining online labour for participants performing the ‘safe girl’ related to Facebook privacy settings. Participants described that Facebook can implement new privacy settings or change existing privacy settings while defaulting users’ settings to ‘accept’, failing to inform them that these settings have changed. These participants were therefore required to constantly monitor their online

privacy settings in order to control for potential changes, simply to ensure that settings they internalized as riskier or less desirable had not been implemented without their consent. Amber summarized these concerns:

They're making it more and more difficult. They change privacy settings often, [...] and [...] if you're not up on it, they'll revert you back to standard, which is very low. [...] They can use your information [...] for statistics or something, or [...] take your information and put it somewhere. And it [is] just standard, so for everybody they put 'yes' unless you manually went in and changed it. If they make something new, they'll kind of do it in their benefit.

Labour also became constraining for participants occupying the 'safe girl' identity when the labour of managing their online self-disclosure and potential risk interfered with their daily lives. As Amber explained, "I'm busy. I just can't be bothered to sit down and filter all my pictures and all my friends; it's just too much work." Natalie agreed: "I've had [Facebook] since I was 15, and I don't really want to go back and delete all of those pictures and stuff. I don't really want to delete all that [because it requires so much work]. But I'm sure eventually, like, I'll have to."

Participants performing the 'safe girl' identity, then, reversed the typical dynamics of labour-related agency outlined by Davis (2012), who theorized that public, visible labour was typically inagential for girls online, while maintaining the invisibility of online labour was integral to their experience of agency. For participants performing the 'safe girl', the agency-constraining, invisible labour that they were required to perform online was different than the visible labour from which they gained agency: this invisible, agency-constraining labour can be understood as arduous labour, or labour that is excessively taxing without any marked, overt benefit in terms of granting agency when articulated as a critical risk management strategy or assertion of control over online risk.

Participants performing the ‘safe girl’ experienced a final constraint upon agency when they were unable to mitigate online risk at all regardless of the level of labour undertaken to do so, whether arduous or otherwise: in other words, when they had no control over whether or not they endured online risk. In such cases, these participants rationalized online risks by asserting that they were not truly risky, or that their benefits outweighed their potential negative consequences. In this way, participants performing the ‘safe girl’ continued to portray themselves as responsible online subjects who endured certain online risks because, in fact, they were not risks at all, or because they had been critically tolerated due to their alleged benefits.

The most common unavoidable online risk that participants performing the ‘safe girl’ felt compelled to rationalize was the threat of targeted advertising. When asked about targeted advertisements that data mine user content – specifically in Gmail and Facebook – participants performing the ‘safe girl’ appeared to welcome this potentially invasive marketing. Simultaneously, however, these participants acknowledged its potential risks to personal privacy. Tina described its appeal, trivializing such risks:

They can use my keywords in my email, and, you know, advertise things that they see are in the content of my email. It’s the same with Facebook. [...] I think that’s kind of cool – I like having advertisements that are for things I might be interested in. But I do know some people who are like, “Oh my God, invasion of privacy”. Marketing’s going to do as much as it possibly can do; I’ve come to terms with that, personally.

Amber agreed with Tina: “[Targeted advertising] just makes your life easier. That’s what it comes down to, I think, [so it’s worth its associated risks].” For participants performing the ‘safe girl’, then, since agency was intimately linked to a responsible online identity and autonomous management of online risk, it was necessary to reframe unavoidable risks as beneficial, lest agency be constrained when they were forced to endure them.

### 3.1.3 – Role of Boyfriend

For participants performing the identity of the ‘safe girl’, relationships with their boyfriends were face-to-face, private interactions as opposed to online interactions that were appropriate to display publicly. Participants performing this identity tended to internalize publicly displayed relationships as inauthentic or inviting negative judgment: they were conceptualized as inherently risky. For participants with boyfriends, a common strategy to avoid disclosure was either simply not to enter a relationship status on Facebook, or to enter an obviously false relationship status. “When I was in a relationship [...] I never changed my status,” Natalie recounted. “I think it said something like ‘widowed’ or something stupid like that.” Tina similarly described limiting online disclosure of her romantic relationships: “You’re not going to go and, you know, pour your heart out to someone on Facebook.” She elaborated that, “I don’t really publicize [my relationships] even to people that I’m friends with. For example, I’d never write that I was with the love of my life for almost six months. [...] I wouldn’t even post that and I have a private profile.”

Such perceptions that disclosure of a boyfriend should be limited further reinforce the various constraints upon self-disclosure faced by young women in online social networking (Thiel-Stern 2008; Baumgartner, Valkenburg and Peter 2010). However, it was unclear whether participants were reluctant to disclose their boyfriends because of fear of negative consequences such as potential negative judgment or unwanted advances from males, or whether this reluctance stemmed from shame, where participants felt actively shamed by disclosure of a boyfriend and interpreted this disclosure itself as inappropriately sexual or immodest. For example, Tina was ambiguous about whether her

reluctance to reveal her boyfriend online stemmed from a belief that this public display was morally inappropriate or simply signaled to others that she was inauthentic and therefore presented a risk of negative judgment: “My Facebook [...] is my connection with all my friends, not just my boyfriend,” she stated. “When [...] it looks like the only person and the only thing that makes up who you are is your boyfriend, then that’s a lie, because it’s superficial.”

Sandra was similarly ambiguous, describing that her boyfriend noticed girls online and that girls could feel at risk of shaming from similarly judgmental males, although it was unclear whether she herself experienced or internalized this shame. “My boyfriend, like, he notices girls. He pays attention when girls have an open profile and he automatically thinks that they’re, like, a slut if they do,” she shared. “Or if they have, like, a ridiculous amount of friends, [he perceives them as] very attention-seeking. So I think guys notice.” For Sandra, it appeared that not revealing her relationship status was a way to create space to be ‘not that girl’ and avoid anticipated judgment from males online, regardless of whether she internalized that judgment – much in the same way as not excessively self-disclosing online was a way for participants to avoid slut-shaming.

The risk is clear: if participants performing the ‘safe girl’ failed to maintain a private, responsible online profile with a private boyfriend, they believed that they could be perceived by men as starved for attention, immodest, or ‘slutty’, further entrenching the need to remain constantly vigilant about their online self-portrayals and implying that these self-portrayals were affected by these fears of negative judgment. Koskela’s (2004) suggestion that girls experience shame as a gendered constraint upon agency in online spaces would for the first time be supported by my data if participants performing the

‘safe girl’ felt actively shamed by the public disclosure of a boyfriend or general self-disclosure, or internalized this shame as opposed to merely fearing the prospect of it; however, my data does not suggest that this is true. Rather, it can merely be suggested that shame could intersect with the ‘safe girl’ identity in intriguing ways, particularly when further layered upon intersections with gendered fear.

Finally, in line with the recurring focus on safety and resiliency in the ‘safe girl’ identity narrative, participants performing this identity also used social networking to guard against potentially risky interactions with ex-boyfriends, both online and offline. This identity narrative was unique amongst the five narratives in this study for establishing a role for ex-boyfriends: namely, as potentially risky individuals who should be proactively managed alongside other online risks. Jenna explained, for example, that she “found out [...] through a guy’s news feed that he now goes to [my university], so I can be sure [...] to avoid him.” This monitoring of online social networking to establish distance in ‘real life’ illustrated that social media can be used as a means of managing risk in offline situations.

Tina employed a similar avoidance strategy to move on after a breakup: “I remember actually writing my ex-boyfriend an email saying, ‘Can you change your privacy settings so I can’t see your profile, because I’m trying to move on?’ [...] You can see everything they’re doing, [like] the females they’re talking to.” Participants performing the ‘safe girl’ identity, then, asserted themselves as cyborgs (Haraway 1991), where offline realities and offline relationships intersected with and were shaped by online realities, and where the online presence of ex-boyfriends impacted offline life, including participants’ negotiation of physical space and emotional well-being.

## **PART 3.2: THE ‘PROFESSIONAL GIRL’**

The ‘professional girl’ identity as performed by my participants was associated with narrative threads relating to current employment, future job opportunities, and maintaining an ‘adult’ persona. Participants occupying this identity were concerned with academic- and employment-related goals and pursuits, using online social networking to portray themselves as hireable or intellectual and also mobilizing online social networking to facilitate academic or work experiences. Within this identity, participants’ potential to experience agency lay in controlling their online self-portrayals and projecting a professional appearance to coworkers, employers, and teachers; simultaneously cultivating these controlled self-portrayals by concealing aspects of self internalized as unprofessional; and enhancing school or work experiences via online social networking platforms. Agency was correspondingly constrained for participants occupying the ‘professional girl’ identity when they lost control over their online self-portrayals and professionalism could not be maintained or was difficult to maintain; when their online profile or online conduct was perceived as unprofessional; or when separate management of work, school, and personal relationships was not possible. Much like the ‘safe girl’, details of relationships with boyfriends of participants occupying this identity were kept private as opposed to being publicly displayed.

### **3.2.1 – Agency**

For participants performing the ‘professional girl’, the potential to experience agency was found in exerting control over their online self-portrayals and cultivating and projecting a ‘professional’ self-image online to those with whom they are affiliated in a

professional context, including coworkers, professors, teachers and employers. Participants described that they are vigilant in censoring information posted to their online social networking profiles and maintaining control over how they are perceived by those within their professional networks, both when they consider this information potentially incriminating and, interestingly, when there is not any content that they consider overtly objectionable. An aspect of professionalism is therefore the simple limitation of disclosure of personal or identifying information online, regardless of whether this specific information could result in negative consequences or is considered unacceptable: “It’s not that I have a whole bunch of pictures I don’t want anyone to see,” Sandra shared. “It’s just, I don’t want everyone to know what’s going on in my life. [...] The job factor is also there.” Vecepia echoed similar concerns: “I’m a little hesitant about giving too much info about myself. [...] If I put up my resume and actually showed [my employers] what I was doing, they’d probably be a bit more hesitant in hiring me again or contacting me for other projects.”

Danni described that she learned from her mother the importance of appearing professional in online social networking: “My mum has a professional occupation [...] so she’s very aware of all those things, and [she tells me], ‘Don’t screw up your life on Facebook’. And she’s always telling me that somebody got fired because they posted this, [and], you know, just to monitor everything.” When participants performed the ‘professional girl’, they did not automatically consider having an open Facebook profile unprofessional; rather, they described that it was the nature of posted content that determines professionalism. “My boyfriend’s aunt and uncle, I met them and they added me on Facebook,” Tina shared. “Their profiles are open, but he’s a lawyer, and he’s very

professional. [...] I think it's more the content of the profile that defines the person. Or what they want to project, at least.”

For participants performing the ‘professional girl’, agency also lay in using social networking to enhance or partake in professional activities online, further controlling their online self-portrayals as professional through engagement with these professional functions of social networking. These professional activities fell into two realms, either school- or work-related, although these two realms can intersect. Vecepia described how she mobilized her online social networking contacts to gain academic knowledge and in turn produce job opportunities:

One of my friends is getting a Master's in philosophy, and I was writing a philosophy paper, and one of his status updates was a quote from some guy I can't even remember. But I'm writing a paper about him at the time, so I'm like, excellent! He can help me out! [...] I got a job out of that, too.

Other participants similarly used social networking to facilitate educational experiences online, including group projects and conferences. “It's always in one place. You can go there, you know who's online, and you can talk to that person. Anyone you want to message, you can message that person,” Tina related. “I was at a federal provincial simulation, [and] the people who were playing the federal government set up a Facebook page. [...] That just made sense for them, because everyone has Facebook.” Vecepia likewise said that she uses Facebook to correspond with international group members in online courses: “I can reply at four in the morning, and I can talk with someone else who's in my group who is currently in Japan. [...] It's much easier than traditional email.” Participants performing the ‘professional girl’ also used online social networking to hold other students to their educational and professional standards, aware that online

conversation histories provide historical records to facilitate this accountability. Vecepia stated:

I've had situations, like, in groups, where I might have been online and people haven't been pulling their weight, and I'll send them an email and call them out on it. Because I want to have that email in writing. I'm not going to go talk to them in person, because then I don't have that proof of, like, calling them out for being lazy. So sometimes you want to have it in writing to back you up.

Crow and Longford (2000) have critiqued digitization through a cyberfeminist lens, concluding that there is a marked gendered division of labour within this new information economy, where females are overrepresented in traditionally inconsequential spheres such as housework, telework, and part-time employment – a trend also noted by Munt (2001) and Gajjala (2000). Keats Citron (2009) has similarly outlined that gendered online risk can have offline effects that transcend online spheres. Loss of agency online can perpetuate the loss of autonomy that females can experience in retail and economic spaces, resulting in women's continued inability to attain professional goals (Keats Citron 2009).

The 'professional girl' identity performed by my participants, however, reclaims this lost ability to attain professional goals, establishing agency by establishing control over the gendered division of labour and asserting herself as professional – and equally as professional as men. Participants performing the 'professional girl' concerned themselves with maintaining a professional appearance to coworkers, employers, or teachers; they also used online social networking to facilitate or improve their work or school experience, exerting control by concealing aspects of their identities that they internalized as unprofessional. Participants performing the 'professional girl' identity actively critiqued a patriarchal system of labour that is “rooted in narratives that glorify modern

scientific processes [and lay] the ground for notions of modern economic [patriarchal] growth” (Gajjala 2000:123), firmly establishing that women do, in fact, contemplate their futures and are concerned with developing skills for high-status jobs, contrary to earlier cyberfeminist claims (Hellman 1998).

Participants performing the ‘professional girl’ further solidified their professional online identities and contemplated their professional futures by managing their professional appearances via alternative social networking sites to Facebook, notably LinkedIn, which Tina described as a “professional social networking site”. Participants conveyed that LinkedIn is more business-centric than Facebook and can be employed as a means of stressing professional aspects of online identity: “You put your resume on [LinkedIn], job description, stuff like that,” Vecepia described. “It’s like you’re pimping yourself, really.” Tina offered that, “[It] is really good for business people to post, like, their contacts.” Tina also described a distinct divide between online social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, noting that, “As far as the professional world, [people] have LinkedIn. I know people who have their personal Facebook page, and then in their [professional] life, if someone wants to add them, they [use LinkedIn]”.

Although all participants were aware of the existence of *LinkedIn* and acknowledged its capacity to enhance professional online self-portrayal, many also felt that use of this social networking platform will likely increase with age, as participants develop careers to promote online. As Natalie stressed, “I think [job-related online social networking is] more of a thing that older people [use]. I think it depends on your profession as well.” It remains clear, though, that while my participants may, likely due to their age, not have used social networking platforms like *LinkedIn* as often as

Facebook, they were nonetheless fully concerned with contemplating and attaining professional goals and establishing an autonomous presence in retail, economic, and educational spaces (Keats Citron 2009). Participants experienced agency by asserting professionalism in the online spaces they occupied, and their social networking habits exposed clear optimism regarding future educational and career ambitions.

### **3.2.2 – Constraints Upon Agency**

Agency was constrained for participants performing the ‘professional girl’ when a professional image could not be maintained, when it was difficult to maintain, or when elements of an online profile were perceived as unprofessional by others: in other words, when these participants lost the ability to actively control the perceived professionalism of their online identities. Participants were conscious of the potential negative effects of posting incriminating content to Facebook profiles upon future employment opportunities or university admission, detailing the labour they exerted to ensure that they appeared professional. “I had to really check my Facebook and make sure it was private,” Amber explained, “because a teacher or employer can look you up, and if they find any little thing, it can cost you a job.” Parvati seconded this awareness that employers can search the Facebook profiles of potential new hires:

A bunch of my friends got jobs with the city of Ottawa, and when they went in for their first training day, [staff had printed out] an inappropriate picture of each of the new employees that they found via Facebook. And it was a wake-up call, and they had to go in and change them.

Participants performing the ‘professional girl’, then, were tasked with constantly censoring and regaining control over their online self-presentations to remove content they deemed unprofessional. Such content generally included revealing photos or photos

that participants internalized to be inappropriate, although specifically what qualified as inappropriate varied from girl to girl. Many participants provided only vague generalizations of what they considered objectionable content, implying both that professionalism is a commonsensical notion and also that the scope of content that may be deemed unprofessional was broad. “I took down some pictures and things that would incriminate me, like, unacceptable social things,” Amber sweepingly described. “I just want to keep it, like, low profile. [...] I don’t want to let anyone just kind of get that information.” Sandra was similarly imprecise in defining the nature of unprofessional content: “For my job later, I don’t want [to post] anything [objectionable], even when it’s, like, friends or whatever, if it’s something [potential employers don’t want to see] in pictures.”

The imprecise, broad operationalization of ‘unprofessional’ that necessitates constant vigilance in self-censorship online, coupled with the capacity for members of virtual citizens’ online social networks to tag them in potentially objectionable photos or other publicly-posted content without their knowledge, represented a considerable constraint upon agency for the ‘professional girl’. If objectionable content was posted unbeknownst to a participant seeking to project herself as a ‘professional girl’, she lost the ability to control what content could be seen by others; additionally, if the labour entailed in the process of censoring self-presentation became overwhelming or unmanageable, she further lost the ability to autonomously manage her online identity and self-presentation.

Participants performing the ‘professional girl’ additionally assessed male behavior online in interesting ways. For example, they reported that men should be professional

and conscious of their online self-presentations, much like themselves. Males in positions of authority were perceived to be less professional when they allowed subordinates or students to join their online social networks, as were males who approved friend requests from younger individuals. Jenna related, for example, that, “One of my English teachers from high school, he was like a ‘cool’ English teacher.” She elaborated:

I think [he] only talks to his students; I don’t think he has any actual friends. His wall is all students and him, and a lot of the stuff is really inappropriate. Like, they were talking about Mariah Carey and how in a picture she has a really nice face. I guess nobody really suspects anything because he’s just, like, a cool teacher. But it’s weird.

Participants performing the ‘professional girl’ appeared to see little difference in standards of professionalism between men and women: these participants believed that both genders should strive to be professional, and that this professionalism was gender-neutral. Participants’ tones of voice implied that approving friend requests from younger individuals, or friending younger individuals in order to achieve status or popularity, would be equally as unprofessional regardless of whether they were done by a female or a male.

While participants performing the ‘professional girl’ identity believed that the development of skills for high-status jobs was essential for females and believed that men and women should be held to the same professional standards, these participants also constructed professionalism as inherently ‘male-like’. Since online behaviour is gendered – males traditionally use online social networking for less communicative purposes than females and therefore engage in less online self-disclosure to potential online audiences (Costin, Kalpidou and Morris 2011; Shariff and Gouin 2006) – to be professional and agential for participants performing the ‘professional girl’ identity was to bracket their

femininity and conceal these stereotypically feminine communicative traits. By posting fewer online photos, being tagged in less online content, concealing ‘objectionable’ content and generally engaging in less online self-disclosure, participants asserted that they were being more professional; however, they were also latently asserting that this professionalism was inherently masculine: to be communicative and self-disclose online – or to be stereotypically feminine – was conveyed as unprofessional.

Participants performing the ‘professional girl’ also found their agency constrained when separate management of work, school, and personal relationships was not possible: participants’ agency was constrained when they lost the ability to control the members of each sphere who had access to particular online self-presentations that were intended for one, but not all, of these realms. Many participants expressed frustration or anxiety when school and work spheres intersected too closely with personal social networking that they primarily used to communicate with friends. Vecepia explained that while she used Facebook to communicate with coworkers and was a member of a Facebook group for the retail chain at which she worked, a customer “found me out of, like, ten thousand people in that group. It creeped me the hell out. And he’s a regular customer, so I couldn’t really say anything. [...] What we started doing was switching name tags after that.” She worried that her work superiors could be monitoring her via her social networking profile: “I do most of my work online. I work for a lot of companies. I’ve never met my bosses; they’ve never met me.” She also expressed concern that her Facebook profile could provide a window into her identity that could potentially make her superiors question whether she is an ideal employee, causing them to “think that I can’t do my job”.

For participants performing the ‘professional girl’ identity, boundary management was a recurring theme of their online interactions. ‘Professional girl’ participants’ agency was linked to effectively segregating their personal, school and work relationships, as well as their public and private relationships; agency was correspondingly constrained when this segregation was not possible. Boundary management as an inherent part of online agency for this identity expands on the bracketing of femininity performed by ‘professional girl’ participants in the course of maintaining their professional images. Not only were these participants invested in concealing communicative aspects of self and reducing their self-disclosure online, they were also invested in ensuring that each of their online spheres of interaction did not intersect: limiting the ‘more professional’, less communicative spheres (work and school) from seeing the ‘less professional’, more communicative personal sphere maintained professionalism and granted agency, also reinforcing that professionalism is gendered. For ‘professional girl’ participants, communicative aspects of self must be concealed and a comparatively more masculine self-portrayal maintained within ‘professional’ spheres, while the realm of personal relationships that must remain segregated from these professional arenas remained the lone site of uninhibited communicative interaction and self-disclosure.

Participants performing the ‘professional girl’ were similarly concerned with professors and other school personnel encroaching too far into personal social networking spheres or with having these spheres appropriated for school-related purposes against their will, implying that school-related functions of social networking were ideally limited to enhancing interactions with classmates, sharing knowledge, or facilitating group projects. The autonomous choice of participants performing the ‘professional girl’

to use social networking to enhance education was an important aspect of their professional identities; however, when this autonomy was taken away – for example, when professors required social networking use as a mandatory component of coursework – agency was reduced for these participants. Simultaneously with this loss of autonomy, participants performing the ‘professional girl’ identity lost the ability to control the ways in which they use the online spaces that they inhabit when faced with these requirements, unable to maintain Facebook, for example, as an arena for friend-to-friend interactions. Many participants described that they “had to” join a Facebook group or were “forced” to use online social networking in certain courses, establishing the importance of personal autonomy in choosing to use social networking for a particular purpose. “My professor put up a Facebook group, where we had to post,” Amber related. “We had to join the group and then we had to post videos that we made for the class. [...] You had to do it, but he was giving you the option of not doing it. But it wasn’t really an option.” This concept of control over the nature of participants’ use of online social networking was therefore a key aspect of their experience of agency in an online context.

Other participants elaborated that when social networking was mandated as part of coursework, the inherent functionality of social networking – namely, to maintain social connections – could be lost, offering insight into why the loss of autonomy to participate willingly could undermine agency, in addition to taking away control over how social networking was used in a general sense: it also restricted free self-expression online. “We had to [act] politically correct; we couldn’t do, like, online dating,” Amber explained. “It was kind of [in line] with the [code of conduct of the] University. [My professor] made that very clear. So it’s pretty bone dry.” Parvati seconded this

perspective, offering that, “If people start posting, ‘Oh, who are you, you want to go out?’ sort of things, the TAs will just delete it. They don’t want that on the page. [... My professor] should have just made a blog.”

In effect, when participants performing the ‘professional girl’ were “forced” to use social networking for coursework, the very purpose of social networking was mutated and reformulated based on the needs, standards, or opinions of professors, educational personnel, or university codes of conduct: social networking was no longer social networking and no longer ‘belonged’ to youth, and participants lost the ability to autonomously control what content or information they posted online. Rather, online spaces were appropriated by those in a position of power to reflect goals that were entrenched in institutionalized educational discourses, transforming platforms for individual expression into coercive, restrictive forums of mandatory self-censorship. Under this framework, social networking was no longer agential: its capacity to grant agency was effectively neutered, since the personal autonomy to freely participate had been removed.

### **3.2.3 – Role of Boyfriend**

Much like the ‘safe girl’, participants performing the identity of the ‘professional girl’ ensured that their relationships with their boyfriends were face-to-face, private interactions as opposed to online interactions that were displayed publicly. To have a visible boyfriend, according to participants performing this identity – much like having a public profile at all – was inherently unprofessional. It is interesting to note that once again, professionalism was tied to a bracketing or masking of femininity, where

displaying a visible marker of heteronormative femininity – having a boyfriend – was correspondingly associated by participants with unprofessionalism. As Vecepia commented about a girl with a public boyfriend, “She looks like she’d probably show up, twirl her hair, and be like, ‘Oh, this is too hard. [...] I’ve got to see my man.’” Danni agreed: “There’s just, like, no content or substance, really [in the profile of a girl with a public boyfriend]. It’s all about her boyfriend, but it’s not, like, anything.” Concealing this marker signaled professionalism, while a publicly displayed boyfriend – a common status marker in relationships with other girls – was necessarily considered to be the opposite. As Parvati related, “I have dignity. I’m going to keep my profile closed.”

Various scholars (Manago et al. 2008; Phillips 2009) have noted that the public nature of virtual self-presentations generates labels and introduces feedback mechanisms by which adolescents legitimize aspects of identity. Female publicity has historically been linked to objectionability or immorality: Thiel-Stern (2008), for instance, has equated moral panics about young women in public spaces with discourses surrounding public dance halls during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, where female participation in public spheres can lead to advances, whether wanted or unwanted, from males. In modernity, girls are problematized for publicly posting self-revealing photos and videos on the Internet (Thiel-Stern 2008): both scenarios contain an implication that female publicity, particularly in romantic or sexualized contexts, is objectionable or something that is capable of ruining reputation.

Such narratives perpetuate ideologies that reinforce upper class, heterosexual, Western values that females and female relationships should be maintained privately as opposed to publicly, even if maintaining public identities and relationships is enjoyable to

many girls (Thiel-Stern 2008). Thiel-Stern (2008) and Welles (2005) have argued that these patriarchal and colonial discourses reinforce troubling ‘she asked for it’ mentalities surrounding gendered victimization, integrating alarmist language, fallacies, and exaggerated stereotypes that further enhance moral panics surrounding women in public spaces and suggest that sexual predators will be more attracted to girls as a result of publicly articulated sexuality. Reactions of participants performing the ‘professional girl’ to publicly displayed boyfriends in Facebook profiles reinforce these tropes, establishing publicly articulated sexuality and publicly articulated romantic relationships as an element of not only immorality, but also as an element of unprofessionalism.

Other participants echoed the tropes described by Thiel-Stern, similarly equating having a visible boyfriend displayed on a social networking profile with superficiality or being an unsuitable job candidate. Participants performing the ‘professional girl’ responded overwhelmingly negatively when asked about girls who had publicly displayed boyfriends, questioning these girls’ intelligence and broader professional skillsets. “There’s just, like, no content or substance, really,” Danni offered about the profile of a girl with a public boyfriend. “It’s all about her boyfriend. [...] Does she have to go to work? Is she going to the gym? There’s not any plans or anything.” Danni also succinctly stated that a girl who publicly disclosed her boyfriend on Facebook would be an unsuitable candidate to hire for a potential job: “I wouldn’t hire her.”

Relatedly, Tina summarized that ‘grown-up’ relationships are also not put on public display: “I find that a lot of relationships that I think are really good, [...] if you go on Facebook, you wouldn’t even know they were together,” she shared. “With a mature relationship, that stuff’s kind of tamed down. Like, you know, they’re allowed to have

their own lives.” Once again, bracketed femininity is equated not only with professionalism, but also with maturity and adulthood: participants occupying the ‘professional girl’ identity conceptualize a ‘grown-up’ female, as Tina explained, as someone who does not publicly display her significant other. Not only is this significant again due to a lack of a visible marker of heteronormative femininity – a publicly displayed boyfriend – forming an intrinsic part of a ‘mature’ identity as conceptualized by participants performing the ‘professional girl’; it also implies that these participants internalize that once viewers of an online profile know a girl is attached to a boy, they assume that she is less mature or less professional. Maturity and professionalism are in this way linked to an independent, self-reliant, stereotypically masculinized online self-presentation. Girls performing the ‘professional girl’ identity could, for this reason, feel compelled to conceal this aspect of their femininity, lest their social status be lessened or social capital decreased due to these negative connotations of publicly displaying a boyfriend. For participants performing the ‘professional girl’, then, relationships with boyfriends were thusly framed in terms of professionalism, and private relationships were necessarily considered more professional, mature, and desirable than public relationships.

### **PART 3.3: THE ‘FAMILY GIRL’**

The ‘family girl’ identity as performed by my participants was associated with narrative threads relating to parents, family members and family relationships. Participants performing this identity employed strategies of differentiated self-disclosure within online social networking to control their self-portrayals by maintaining family relationships or ethically-sensible ‘family professionalism’ cultivated offline, while simultaneously embracing alternate subjectivities that did not necessarily correspond to this ‘family girl’ image. Within this identity, participants’ potential to experience agency lay in controlling their ‘family-friendly’ self-portrayals and maintaining their offline family relationships, while also controlling their online self-presentations by segregating these self-presentations to depict separate identities to family members and friends. Agency was constrained for participants occupying the ‘family girl’ identity when they lost this control and family relationships could not be managed separately from other relationships in online social networking, when this control was threatened and they were faced with parental surveillance, and when family members or parents saw ‘objectionable’ content they had posted to their online social networking profiles. In line with the ‘safe girl’ and ‘professional girl’, relationships with boyfriends of participants performing this identity were managed outside the gaze of family members, in this case because participants did not necessarily want these relationships to intersect with family relationships. Control, for participants performing the ‘family girl’ identity, appeared to be rooted in making the decision when to alert family members to a potential relationship, with this control of access preventing the relationship from being escalated

prematurely by parents or other relatives. Therefore, relationships were not necessarily always disclosed to members of family networks.

### **3.3.1 – Agency**

Although family and peer relationships are still segregated on platforms like Facebook, participants performing the ‘family girl’ valued remaining “connected both to their household and home environs” (Durrant et al. 2011) in addition to their peers, using privacy controls to manage the family-peer divide rather than excluding family members entirely from online social networking and finding agency in controlling these relationships. Participants performing the ‘family girl’ simply blocked family members from seeing objectionable content or provided them with limited access to content they intended to be seen primarily by friends, employing these strategies to experience agency and control their ‘family friendly’, ethically-sensible self-presentations to family members. As Tina outlined, “You can block pictures from people [...] if you don’t like your family members to actually see things. But you want to be friends with them just so they’re happy, [so] you can [put them on limited profile].” Vecepia agreed that social networking could be used to facilitate family relationships, offering that, “I don’t really want to defriend [family members] because they’re nice; they give me stuff. They send money. But I also don’t want them to see everything that I do.” Parvati stressed the importance of maintaining distance from family members in online social networking: “you don’t really want [family members] to know what you do in your free time.”

Participants performing the ‘family girl’ identity considered certain kinds of content to be objectionable and kept this content hidden from family members. For

example, Vecepia worried about the way family members would interpret photos of her drinking: “Usually, the photos [of me] that tend to go up from other people are drinking-related ones, so [family members would] probably think that’s all I do”. Danni echoed these concerns: “If you just look at the photos, it looks like I’m a complete alcoholic.” Other objectionable content included relationships with significant others and other behaviours – such as partying, staying up too late, being non-studious, or articulating sexuality – that ran contrary to the ethically sensible ‘family girl’ image. While this content remained a part of the performed identity of these participants in the context of disclosure to peers, it was actively censored from parents and other family. Participants did not reject the elements of their identities that they deemed inappropriate for family consumption: rather, they simultaneously embraced their ‘family-friendly’ and ‘non-family-friendly’ subjectivities, portraying themselves differently depending on their anticipated audience and finding agency in controlling these differentiated self-portrayals.

As Durrant et al. (2011) note, youth generally manage self-presentation to peers separately from self-presentation to family. While online domains are used to explore alternative self-representations to friends, self-representations to family members – particularly self-representations through photographs – are closely bound with domestic order, ethical sensibilities, power relations, and moral obligations (Durrant et al. 2011). In other words, “Teens [present] themselves differently at home to their family than they [do] to their friends online” (Durrant et al. 2011:116). While Durrant et al. (2011) argue that youth use online social networking to maintain the separateness of self and family as well as to establish self-presentations to peers while distancing themselves from family relationships, my participants employed social networking to strengthen both

simultaneously, bringing home-based family relationships into the online realm where relationships with friends were concurrently – but separately – nurtured. As Tina related, “For me, my Facebook [...] is my connection with all my friends. [...] Like, my family, my friends, who I am. It’s my way to project who I am.”

One method by which participants performing the ‘family girl’ managed their differentiated online self-disclosure was by maintaining online relationships with family members on alternate social networking sites to Facebook – for example, eFamily.com – where the danger of family and peer groups intersecting was less immediate or was non-existent since peer-to-peer relationships were generally restricted to Facebook. On such alternative social networking sites, family relationships could be managed more directly, and private content that family members might not want disclosed on Facebook could be shared more freely amongst family networks. “I have a profile on – I can’t even remember the name of the site,” Tina shared. “But it’s a more private one, so I can put, like, pictures of my family, and my family all [have] profiles on there. So they can see more private pictures.”

A final way that participants performing the ‘family girl’ experienced agency was through controlling and strengthening family bonds via offline interactions in tandem with online interactions. While online social networking was a crucial component of maintaining family relationships, participants performing this identity felt that these relationships must also be cultivated offline via face-to-face or more ‘real’ interactions, such as telephone conversations. These offline interactions were not necessarily a component of relationships with friends. “Phone calls are kind of [restricted] to mum and grandma,” Amber offered. “[Other] people don’t talk.”

While participants occupying the ‘family girl’ identity sometimes lamented not being able to constantly use technology in certain face-to-face family situations, they nonetheless endured this offline relationship building despite its potential inconvenience, since it was an important aspect of solidifying their family identities. Vecepia, for example, related that disconnecting from technology in order to attend family functions could evoke negative emotions: “My parents have a cottage in the middle of nowhere that doesn’t have Internet. [...] I had to go for three days, and it nearly killed me. I had no cell phone, I had no Internet [...], I missed a bunch of opportunities with my friends, and I just felt, you know, remorse.” Yet, even faced with these regrets and negative aspects of being separated from technology, she did nonetheless opt to spend time with her family, establishing that for participants performing this identity, strengthening family relationships superseded the immediate benefits of technological engagement with others. For participants performing the biographical narrative of the ‘family girl’, family-oriented identity was in this way maintained in both the online and offline realms. It is clear that much like the ‘safe girl’ and the ‘professional girl’, participants performing the ‘family girl’ were truly cyborgs (Haraway 1991), fusing their virtual identities with offline subjectivities performed concurrently in ‘real life’.

Participants performing the ‘family girl’ identity therefore found agency in being able to exercise control over their online self-portrayals as ethnically sensible and ‘family friendly’, maintaining or enhancing family relationships cultivated offline and fostering a wholesome ‘family girl’ image. This agency involved maintaining differentiated online self-disclosure to family members and friends to control which networks saw specific posted content. While potentially objectionable content could acceptably be displayed to

friends or other acquaintances, in order for the online experiences of participants performing the ‘family girl’ to be agential, they felt that they had to be able to exercise enough control to prevent their family members from seeing this ‘inappropriate’ content. Generally, this content was not removed entirely; rather, Facebook privacy controls such as ‘limited profile’ were used to separately manage friendships and family relationships, ensuring that online social networking could be used as a tool to strengthen both.

### **3.3.2 – Constraints Upon Agency**

Agency was constrained for participants performing the ‘family girl’ when they lost the control required to manage family relationships separately from other online relationships, and when parents or family members saw objectionable content on their online profiles. If participants lost this control over their differentiated online self-presentations and members of these participants’ family members viewed such content, the ethnical sensibilities and moral obligations of their ‘family girl’ identity became threatened, potentially compromising their carefully cultivated family-oriented images. Participants occupying this identity feared judgment by family members for behaviours that could be considered contrary to their family-oriented images; they also worried that family members could misinterpret posted content that they had intended for friends, taking it out of context or using it to make assumptions about their lifestyle choices, again threatening their control over how they were perceived. “I [...] look at the dates of when [pictures] are put up. I’m only really in photos if other people add them, and usually I’ve probably been drinking,” Danni explained. “If [family members] can look at the photos and see that one group of photos was from May and one was from September and another

was from December, then that doesn't look so bad." She elaborated that even when her posted photos span a broad range of dates, judgment from family members still occurs: "My parents [...] were just looking on [Facebook] and were like, 'Don't you have any nice photos?' And if you look at the dates, they're, you know, six months apart. [...] They're not every day."

In order to avoid this misinterpretation or judgment, it was easiest for participants performing the 'family girl' to place family members on limited profile or in a separate friend network, controlling their perception of their online profiles simply by removing their access altogether to content that could easily be misconstrued. Durrant et al. (2011) have established that subjects portray themselves online as they want to be seen by others. Participants performing the 'family girl', as established above, concurrently managed two potential audiences – family members and friends – and thereby performed two unique simultaneous online subjectivities. When these subjectivities intersected – namely, when family members viewed online content that was meant to be seen only by friends and took it out of context – these participants lost control over their ability to present themselves as they wanted to be seen, and their family-oriented identity was compromised, diminishing their online agency.

Differentiated disclosure was often simple to implement for participants performing the 'family girl' due to the presence of interpersonal privacy management controls such as limited profile or other implementing viewing restrictions on certain types of posted content, yet these participants experienced frustration when their parents engaged in surveillance or attempted to intrude upon online spaces meant for friends as opposed to family members. This surveillance presented further constraints upon agency

for these participants by contributing to their loss of control over managing content that was seen by both audiences.

Amber, for example, feared her “parents’ hawk-eye when they walk by”. Vecepia likewise described that in one instance, her mother learned via Facebook that she had been lied to about Vecepia’s whereabouts when she had gone out drinking:

A friend of mine uploaded a bunch of shots where we’re all holding tequila shots and we all look really hammered. And my mum stopped by apparently, [and saw the pictures] and she was like, “She had a good night last night!” And I was like, “Damn.” I told my mum I was studying. [...] So I have to really think about [whether photos taken at parties could potentially end up online].

Control over managing their separate identities as family-oriented and friend-oriented – and being able not to have these two subjectivities intersect – was a key component of agency for participants occupying the ‘family girl’. Since elements of these participants’ identities as friends were inherently incompatible with their identities as ethically sensible ‘family girls’, when family members intruded into spheres reserved for friends – whether this intrusion was accidental or surveillance-driven – this control was lost, and the agency of these participants was constrained.

### **3.3.3 – Role of Boyfriend**

For participants performing the ‘family girl’, their relationships with their boyfriends were something that did not usually intersect with family relationships and must be managed outside the gaze of family members. While family members may have been well-intentioned, participants occupying the ‘family girl’ identity acknowledged that parental interest in their boyfriends can be more constraining than it is beneficial, necessitating potentially awkward explanations or justifications in the event of a break-up

or if they chose to get back together with an ex-boyfriend. In the interest of avoiding this awkwardness or these forced justifications for their behaviour, participants performing this identity often chose not to display their boyfriends on their Facebook profiles, even removing family members from their Facebook networks altogether when they were in relationships. “With family, it’s hard,” Tina explained:

I had a breakup and then we got back together. And my friends knew about it. [...] My family has me on Facebook, and they’d never met the guy. [I] went to a family reunion, and they were bombarding me with, ‘What happened? I saw this changed, and then that changed!’ And I was like, ‘Oh my goodness. You can’t have me on Facebook anymore. [...] This is a part of my life that you shouldn’t be seeing.’

Hauge (2009) has described that girls learn expected and acknowledged normative practices through a variety of socially transmitted discourses relating to gender, sexuality, and corporeality, and that the multiplicity of these discourses can produce tension between these discourses, lived subjective practices, and subjects’ interpretation thereof. She elaborates on Wetherell’s (1998) earlier suggestion that subjects experience and negotiate this tension as either ‘troubled’ or ‘untroubled’, writing that, “Some subjects have to negotiate more tensions concerning particular subject positions than others, owing to shifting intersections of categories such as gender, age, [...] and sexuality” (2009:295). Participants performing the identity of the ‘family girl’ exemplified these troublesome lived tensions when the ‘friend-related’ discourse of disclosing a boyfriend to peers intersected with the ‘family-related’ discourse of remaining comparatively guarded and private for fear of disrupting a ‘wholesome’ family image.

Additionally, boundary issues impacted the intersection of the disclosure of a boyfriend and remaining guarded to family members, since meeting family members

represented a turning point in participants' relationships with their boyfriends in terms of seriousness and longevity due to the importance placed upon family relationships by 'family girl' participants. Boundaries allowed these participants to maintain control over the status of their relationships and avoid family members undesirably escalating these relationships, providing participants with the autonomy to regulate their own relationship statuses. Such boundary issues were not necessarily present in 'friend-related' discourses, since friend relationships did not represent a similar turning point or inevitably facilitate such unwanted relationship escalation. Family members being privy to the existence of a boyfriend brought 'friend-related' discourses surrounding disclosure of a boyfriend into direct collision with incompatible 'family-related' discourses. This intersection generated interdiscursive tensions that were troublesome for participants to negotiate: for this reason, the boyfriend was not a publicly displayed aspect of the heteronormative profile of participants performing the 'family girl'.

## **CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS, PART TWO - THE 'MEDIATIZED GIRL' AND CONFLICT WITHIN AND BETWEEN ONLINE GENDERED IDENTITY NARRATIVES**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I first outline in section 4.1 the remaining identity narrative performed by my participants: the 'mediatized girl'. This identity narrative was thematically tied to celebrity and popularity, drawing biographic continuity from these tropes. In section 4.2, I consider the collective identity narratives available to participants – the 'safe girl', 'professional girl', 'family girl' and 'mediatized girl' – in terms of how their conflicting narrative structures and confining stereotyped ideals surrounding the performance of girl in online spaces converge to cause participants to switch between these narratives to criticize or bully girls who either conform to certain identities too well or occupy identity narratives that are contradictory to other narratives.

Mayeux (2011) has outlined that perceived popularity can be associated with both positive and negative characteristics, and that adolescents in particular tend to reflect this paradox. On one hand, popularity can increase agency for youth, contributing to social prominence, social connectivity, connectedness and centrality within peer networks. Popularity can enable youth to garner social power effectively and can result in negative characteristics being overlooked in favour of character traits perceived as more desirable, such as attractiveness, humour or style (Mayeux 2011). Simultaneously, however, adolescents perceived as popular are "not always very well liked, particularly as they move into adolescence" (Mayeux 2011:349) and can be viewed by their peers as sexually promiscuous or relationally aggressive (Mayeux 2011). As Mayeux also describes, "The association between popularity and acceptance decreases over time. This

is particularly true for girls” (2011:349). Participants reflected this paradox of perceived popularity simultaneously granting and constraining agency. While those performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity drew agency from garnering the social power and other positive attributes associated with popularity and controlling their online self-portrayals as girls who were popular, participants also illustrated that popularity is not always associated with increased acceptance and can instead prompt negative judgment, criticism, ridicule, and even cyber bullying or cyber gender harassment.

First, I outline the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative, which values establishing a popularized, celebritized identity that is in touch with popular culture and focuses on gaining positive attention within online spaces. I examine the intersection of this identity narrative with celebrity (Tyler and Bennett 2010) and explore the various ways in which participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity established celebrity and popularity online, experiencing agency by portraying themselves as such. At the same time, I explore how this focus on popularity and celebrity can be agentially constraining, assessing the ways in which ‘mediatization’ can lead to a lack of acceptance or negative judgment by others online or can lead to experiences of addiction to online social media, resulting in participants experiencing a loss of control over their self-portrayals as girls who enjoy the social capital associated with popularity and celebrity.

I then turn to the ways in which conflict between identity narratives and the confines of stereotyped ideals of the performance of online femininity contribute to confrontation between young women, both on- and offline. I explore how these negative behaviours can particularly be targeted towards ‘mediatized girls’, whose occupied identity narrative was inherently opposed to expectations of privacy, safety,

professionalism and ethical sensibility embedded in the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’ narratives, also exploring the role of participants’ boyfriends across all four identity narratives collectively. I suggest that cyber bullying, contrary to some scholarly suggestions (see Keats Citron 2009), is not exclusively precipitated by character traits functioning on the level of the individual, but are rather symptomatic of a patriarchal system that only permits girls to occupy these stereotyped identity narratives that are inherently confining and conflictual, instead linking cyber bullying to the existence of these identity narratives themselves. I investigate how negative judgment can be interpreted as self-reflexive criticism by girls of their own potential failure or fear of failure to adhere to social expectations of normative gender role performance. In closure, I offer that initiatives at the policy level could benefit from deconstructing prevailing media stereotypes surrounding the performance of girl online, and suggest that ‘e-quality’ is impeded by current cyber bullying policy that fails to do so.

#### **PART 4.1: THE ‘MEDIATIZED’ GIRL**

The ‘mediatized girl’ identity as performed by my participants was associated with narrative threads relating to popular culture, mass media, celebrity, and popularity: participants occupying this identity cultivated a pop culturally savvy and celebritized virtual self-portrayal. Within this identity narrative, participants’ potential to experience agency lay in gaining popularity, friendship, celebrity or positive attention, as well as in interacting with or expressing an interest in mainstream popular culture. Agency was correspondingly constrained for participants performing this identity when control over maintaining a popular, celebritized self-portrayal was lost and no popularity, friendship, celebrity, or positive attention was gained – for example, when attention from others was negative and online profiles were perceived as superficial, inauthentic, or ‘slutty’ – or when online social networking and maintaining an online presence became all-consuming or otherwise ‘addictive’.

Details of relationships with boyfriends of participants occupying this identity were invariably publicly displayed, with these relationships representing an important positive aspect of identity that superseded other interests or personal characteristics. The ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative was unique amongst the identity narratives established in this study in its operationalization of a publicly displayed boyfriend as a means of attaining popularity, celebrity, or positive attention. This public display diverted from all other narratives, each of which stressed that details of relationships with boyfriends should remain strictly private.

I theorize that the intersection of celebrity and online social networking provided an opportunity for my participants to focus on online popularity and stylized self-

expression as a means of attaining positive attention or renown; however, participants performing this identity also indicated that these same facilitators of agency simultaneously presented a barrier to achieving agency, as online celebrity, publicly visible profiles and stylization could also lead to negative attention or even cyber gender harassment. Within this identity narrative, the fragility of relying so heavily upon audience interpretation was made clear: while participants performing this identity hoped that their online self-presentations would be received positively by their online social networks, often, their self-presentations had the opposite of this intended effect, garnering negative as opposed to positive attention. Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity, then, had to constantly balance the potential agency gained from a celebritized, ‘mediatized’ online self-presentation with its simultaneous potential to constrain agency when audience interpretation was negative.

#### **4.1.1 – Agency**

For participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity, agency lay in attaining popularity, acceptance, and online celebrity and asserting control over their online self-presentations as ‘popular girls’. Language constructions signaling agency included emotive words such as “feel” or “care” (particularly in relation to popular culture), expressions of popularity, or expressions where participants expressed a desire to appear at the ‘top’ of a social hierarchy where they had a corresponding surplus of symbolic and cultural capital including status, reputation, the right to be listened to, education, skills or taste (Tyler and Bennett 2010), as well as expressions of celebrity. The latter construction, expressions of celebrity, included asserting an interest in popular culture

and literally engaging with celebrities by following celebrities on online social networks or ‘liking’ celebrity fan pages, or achieving personal celebrity by incorporating media representations into one’s social networking profile and then emulating them in one’s online self-performance. Engagement with popular culture was also an important aspect of this celebrity-related agency within the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative, established through pop cultural references in the online profiles of participants performing this identity. As Tina described, in ‘mediatized’ profiles, “You see shows like *The Hills* or [...] *Gossip Girl*.” Participants performing this identity conceptualized social networking itself in similarly mediatized terms: as Tina also related, online social networking is “like a reality show, with people you already know.”

Tyler and Bennett (2010:376) have defined celebrity as “the condition of being talked about”. This operationalization serves as the working definition of celebrity in this study. However, celebrity, unlike popularity, which in the context of this study is attached to a positive connotation of being at the top of a social hierarchy and enjoying corresponding benefits such as increased social capital, can be attached to negative as well as positive audience reactions. The Internet can be a means through which young women may bring themselves closer to aspects of celebrity, including how many hits a profile or webcam receives or how many friends a girl has on Facebook (Senft 2008). Senft has described that, “On the web, popularity depends upon a connection to one’s audience. [...] Most people in technoculture know full well that they aren’t really celebrities. [...] In fact, this anxiety about not being known is a key component of the celebrity mode of subjectivization” (2008:26).

The ‘mediatized girl’ identity is not unique amongst the identities delineated in this study for being tied to being known by others. However, unlike participants performing the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’ identities, whose focus on being known was restricted to specific and usually private self-presentations to friend or family networks with comparatively more intimate social bonds, participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ desired to be known in a more general sense, seemingly regardless of who was the ‘knower’. Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity, in line with this focus on being generally known and anxiety about not being generally known, therefore placed more of a focus on visibility and publicity than participants performing the aforementioned three identities. Anxiety about not being known was reflected in participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity having primarily open Facebook profiles: for girls occupying this identity narrative, as Tina described, “Anyone can find them. They just want people to see them.” This focus on celebrity, or being known, intersected with a focus on popularity: therefore, participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ placed importance not only upon making sure that they were seen online, but also upon receiving a positive response from those who were seeing their online profiles.

Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity outlined that agency also lay in a more literal context for celebrity and involved controlling one’s online self-presentation to reflect these contexts, including following celebrity Facebook or Twitter accounts, liking celebrity fan pages, or expressing an interest in popular culture or famous personalities. These literal contexts could also possibly bolster personal online popularity by contributing to a more pop culturally savvy self-presentation and were additionally a way of exploring how to ‘be popular’ by finding styles and clothes to

emulate those with ‘popular girl’ status, who scholars (Gunther et al. 2007; Good 2003) have linked to those who engage in celebrity emulation. Tina explained that online social networking is “a celebrity thing. It makes you feel closer to celebrities. It makes everything so close.” Amber agreed, but acknowledged that this feeling of closeness was not reciprocal: “You feel close with [celebrities]. They don’t care about you.”

Jenna illustrated the importance of manufacturing personal popularity and emulating celebrity appearance ideals or personality traits by altering one’s online self-presentation, outlining that it was desirable to be part of “the in-crowd, the cool people who have the best parties, and [in order to be considered as such], you kind of have to act in a certain way.” Agency in this sense was signaled by participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ through expressions of controlled self-presentation with a goal of attaining such popularity and its associated cultural capital, linked with words such as “show”, “perceive”, “prove” or “project”. Sandra opined that a girl performing the ‘mediatized girl’ could be concerned with “trying to prove to everyone that her life is so interesting”, while Jenna agreed that ‘mediatized girls’ are “trying to [...] build a picture of themselves as [how] they want to be perceived.” Tina pithily summarized that she posts online in order to engage in “positive interaction in general. And if the interaction is about you, even better.”.

Participants who performed the ‘mediatized girl’ identity cultivated their online self-presentations to conform to appearance ideals associated with celebrity (Gunther et al. 2007; Good 2003), particularly through online photos. Jenna described that in photos on Facebook, people “put a lot of work into making themselves look really good,” elaborating that, “If you saw that person in real life, aside from their profile picture, a lot

of people don't look the same." Tina offered that online profiles are about "what you want to project about yourself," and that a girl who is 'mediatized' "very much likes people who are attractive, so she has an entire album of herself being attractive." A thin, sexy aesthetic ideal is reflected in the online photos posted by young women who occupy this identity and is linked to the attainment of celebrity status: "They want people to comment and be like, 'Oh, you're so beautiful; wow, look at your hair; you've lost ten pounds,'" Jenna stated, summarizing that, "It's nice to hear. People want to hear it." Parvati concurred, stating, "Attention is attention."

Van Zoonen (2006) has outlined that for young women online, celebrity is restricted to specific types of femininity that are highly regulated and disciplined. Popularity and fame, various other scholars have likewise argued, are less dependent upon forms of achievement and public speech than they are upon aesthetic attributes and personal appearance (Barber et al. 2005; Manago et al. 2008; Senft 2008). Scholars (Gunther et al. 2007; Good 2003) have also linked aesthetic ideals and celebrity worship to negative body image, low self-esteem and disordered eating, as well as to the emergence of an unattainable 'thin ideal', where women overestimate the thinness of body type preferred by others of both genders, although my own data did not reinforce these findings.

Girls who are aware of this thin, sexy ideal, Good (2003) has also argued, show tendencies to internalize it and believe that it is important to meet the expectations that it presents, conceptualizing themselves as 'winning' competitions with their peers in terms of attaining body image ideals such as being prettiest or thinnest. Participants performing the 'mediatized girl' indeed appeared to have internalized this aesthetic ideal, yet as

opposed to describing these negative consequences of adhering to it, found agency in establishing that they had done so successfully and had exercised the control over online self-presentation that was required in order to do so. While this unattainable ‘thin ideal’ may be accompanied by certain body image and self-esteem risks as established by Good (2003) and Gunther et al. (2007), it can also contribute to online agency: namely, by contributing to online celebrity, popularity and positive reception by others – or at least perceptions of online celebrity, popularity and positive reception – for those who perform it.

Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ described that they attempted to bolster their online popularity or gain attention by posting Facebook statuses referencing song lyrics, poetry or proverbs. Often, the meaning behind these statuses was not immediately apparent, designed simultaneously to maintain an appearance of uniqueness or esotericism while inviting other users to ask questions or provide attention by asking further questions. Agency was established for these participants via the positive attention, response, or interest that was provided by others in response to such statuses. Tina outlined that these statuses were a way of saying, “This is happening in my life. I’m going to post a song lyric so somebody goes, ‘What’s up?’” Natalie similarly recounted that, “I had a friend post something like [a song lyric] and I asked what was up, and she was like, ‘Oh, I thought no one was going to ask!’ It’s a cry for help. [...] It might be an attention thing.” While the ultimate goal of these lyrical or proverbial comments was to gain positive attention, section 4.2 will illustrate that often, such statuses and ‘mediatized’ performances were often received by other girls negatively as opposed to positively.

Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ described that as age increases, the need to be seen and to attain celebrity and popularity online can diminish. Tina shared that, “In high school, [...] if you have more friends, you look better. [...] I think that high school is almost like a popularity contest. [...] There’s a complete shift in thought process [as people get older].” Tina saw a typical ‘mediatized girl’ in her younger self: “I used to [have an open profile and write in a ‘mediatized’ way] once upon a time,” she recounted. “I thought it was cool and fun.” Other participants agreed that during their high school years, they exhibited more ‘mediatized’ traits: “Subconsciously, I think [girls] think that if they don’t act like that, they’ll start drifting away from their friends,” Jenna stated. This anxiety about appearing ‘mediatized’ in order to garner positive attention, as Hauge (2009) has suggested, appears indeed to be something to which adolescent girls are particularly sensitive. As participants aged, however, this anxiety appeared to diminish – participants even explicitly referred to this need to be seen as popular and ‘mediatized’ as “juvenile” (Tina; Natalie) and “immature” (Tina), associating mediatization with youthfulness.

Some participants noted, as I will outline in section 4.2, that attempts to achieve positive attention and interact with celebrity or popular culture could potentially be interpreted by others as attention-seeking or inauthentic, sometimes resulting in a loss of agency due to negative, as opposed to positive, attention, usually from young women occupying other identity narratives in an attempt to create space to be something other than prevailing gendered stereotypes. This potential for negative attention could explain some participants’ unwillingness to classify themselves as mediatized during focus group proceedings, or to describe that when they were mediatized, it was their younger selves as

opposed to their present selves. ‘Mediatization’, as Hague (2009) has found, is also a developmental marker of a shift to maturity, as girls reach puberty and the establishment of a sexualized identity indicates a transition from childhood to adolescence. Since participants had already reached adulthood, their reluctance to classify themselves as ‘mediatized’ could also be linked to having already undergone this transition, and a feeling as though being ‘mediatized’ could characterize them as still in the process of experiencing this transition.

As Amber described, attempts to gain online popularity can be viewed by others as “a classic case of trying too hard,” and that “the vast majority of other people are going to be like, ‘Oh, another song lyric.’” Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’, then, were required to balance gaining positive attention with the threat of gaining negative attention, experiencing agency through potential reactions from friends to self-portrayals that could potentially bolster online celebrity such as a thin, sexy aesthetic or lyrical or proverbial statuses, while simultaneously guarding against potential constraints upon agency when these reactions were adverse as opposed to agreeable, for example, being seen as ‘trying too hard’.

#### **4.1.2 – Constraints Upon Agency**

Negative attention, a constraint upon agency for participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity, was signaled through words with negative connotations, generally falling into three categories: expressions of inauthenticity such as “fake” or “superficial”, gender-based slurs such as “slutty”, or other negative emotive expressions such as “attention-seeking” or “trying too hard”. While participants recognized that

occupying a ‘mediatized girl’ identity could be socially powerful, this recognition was often paired with conflicted dissent: participants also rebelled against, resisted or disparaged girls who performed this identity, for a variety of reasons that will be explored more fully in section 4.2. Jenna described that others can perceive ‘mediatized girls’ as “superficial, [like] they want everything to seem perfect”; while Tina agreed that ‘mediatized’ online profiles can be construed as inauthentic – “[they aren’t] what they actually are.” Amber summarized that others online can view these profiles as “a fake life”. Interestingly, Jenna, Tina and Amber all occasionally occupied the ‘mediatized girl’ identity themselves, notwithstanding these perceptions: again, section 4.2 will delineate their rationale for doing so, as well dissect their and other participants’ tendencies to slip in and out of this and other biographical narrative constructions.

Tyler and Bennett have outlined that celebrity is a disciplinary sphere of social life. Celebrity is a site where social hierarchies are established and rituals of social abjection play out, including punishment and disapproval for sexual or social transgression: “A central spectatorial pleasure of this bawdy theatre is that it enables audiences to experience and reassert class difference, to affirm ‘I am not that’” (2010:380). While participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ experienced agency through attaining celebrity and experiencing positive attention, the flipside to this celebrity, as Tyler and Bennett suggested, were the constraints imposed by negative attention, judgment and disapproval. These constraints were compounded by the potential for participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ to become targeted subjects of this negative attention and become isolated from their peer group through deliberate, repeated

and unwanted behaviour from others (Shariff 2008): in other words, by the potential to become victims of cyberbullying or online harassment.

Participants did not describe first-hand experience with being targeted in such a manner, perhaps due to their reluctance to openly admit to occupying the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative. This reluctance can possibly be attributed to the potential to be negatively judged for being too mediatized – instead, the potential for ‘mediatized girls’ to endure cyberbullying or online harassment was revealed when participants were asked to characterize stereotypical ‘mediatized girls’, and characterizations from many participants were overwhelmingly hostile or negative. Participants described ‘mediatized girls’ as “obsessive” (Vecepia), “fake” (Jenna), “attention-seeking” (Amber), “superficial” (Jenna; Tina), and “slutty” (Tina; Natalie; Sandra; Amber), criticizing their pop cultural interests and tendency to use poetry and proverbs in their Facebook statuses, as well as their tendency to post public content and display a public boyfriend.

Despite this disapproval, which will be elaborated upon in section 4.2, participants criticizing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative still tended to befriend ‘mediatized girls’. As Tina recounted, “I have friends – or quote/unquote ‘friends’ – who have stuff like that [in their online profiles]. And I laugh at it every time. It’s ridiculous.” Yet, notwithstanding this disapproval, the clear subtext was that Tina did still have these types of friends within her online social networks because this performance of femininity as a mediatized gender role was equated with both social power and social acceptance.

Participants equated ‘mediatization’ with the performance of ‘girl’ in particular a general sense, characterizing an interest in popular culture and gossip as entirely gendered interests. “I can’t imagine any of my guy friends doing [...] what I’ve done

before,” Tina stated. “There’s less guys watching soap operas and less guys watching romantic comedies; there’s less guys caring about gossip and girls’ statuses and who’s with who and who does what and whose passive aggressive song lyrics were on today.” Parvati agreed that mediatization was a marker of femininity, offering that males do not “gossip as much as [girls] do”. Mediatization as a marker of femininity in this identity narrative was a departure from markers of femininity in the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’ narratives, where performances of girl were associated with privacy, ‘responsible’ or ‘mature’ online self-portrayals, and ethical sensibility. Mediatization, as participants asserted, was associated with immaturity, publicity, and even sexual promiscuity, running contrary to the key markers within these other identities. Interestingly, however, participants performing the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’ identities still drew these markers of femininity from mediatized portrayals of how young women should act or portray themselves online, namely as vigilant, non-sexual, private and inherently ‘safe’ virtual citizens (Thiel-Stern 2008). When participants performed these three identity narratives, although femininity was marked by quite different character traits than participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity, it appears that the narratives underscoring these markers of femininity were no less mediatized – merely, they were mediatized in a different context.

The lone exception described by participants to this allegedly gendered interest was gay men, who were conceptualized by participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity as more mediatized, or more interested than heterosexual men in gossip and popular culture. “I was hanging out with a bunch of my gay friends, and they would

actually tend to go and see more of the girls' profiles than the guys', because the girls' profiles had more stuff going on," Sandra recounted. "It make[s] it more interesting."

Tina simultaneously condemned 'mediatized girls' yet retained them in their online friend networks, recognizing the social strength of being associated with a mediatized identity. Having an online friend who is mediatized was a marker of socially approved standards relating to the performance of girlhood in online spaces, where participants criticized the stereotyped 'mediatized girl' portrayal on one hand, yet needed to display that they had these types of girls within their friend networks on the other in order to establish social capital and establish themselves as 'properly' performing girlhood online. While they may not have approved of this mediatized performance or at least recognized the potential for negative judgment that could result from publicly appearing as too mediatized, it was necessary at least to appear somewhat mediatized or aligned with mediatization in order to adequately 'do' girlhood in virtual spaces, and simultaneously avoid criticism and gain social status. While identification as too mediatized could constrain agency by prompting negative judgment, at the same time, identification as someone who did not have any mediatized friends was in itself a failed performance of girlhood online, positioning participants' relationships with mediatization and 'mediatized girls' as inherently conflicted.

Participants performing the 'mediatized girl' also risked negative attention from other girls, such as slut-shaming or gender-based degradations. Sandra explained that for girls performing a 'mediatized' identity, "Because [their] profiles are open, you'd maybe associate [them] with being easy. It's subconscious." Amber described a similar link between 'publicness' in a 'mediatized' profile and sexual inappropriateness, responding

to a girl's public Facebook profile by stating, "I think that because she's giving us all this information, we just label her as a slut without really knowing." Such judgments about open profiles being equated with 'sluttiness', since they invoke targeted individuals' gender in sexually threatening and degrading ways, can be considered gender harassment (Keats Citron 2009): as such, participants performing the 'mediatized girl' again had to balance maintaining online popularity and celebrity with performing an identity that was 'too public' and could prompt such agency-constraining gender harassment. In the context of the 'mediatized girl' identity narrative, harassment was a constraint upon agency since it detracted from online popularity: rather than receiving positive attention and gaining the social and cultural capital associated with being at the top of a social hierarchy, when participants were harassed, this hierarchy was disrupted, attention became negative, and social and cultural capital correspondingly decreased. The risk of harassment, then, threatened the control that participants performing the 'mediatized girl' identity held over their online self-portrayals, since they had to constantly manage their self-portrayals in terms of this risk.

Participants performing the 'mediatized girl' were also aware of a male gaze upon their online social networking profiles, and feared or internalized negative judgment – and presumably gender harassment – from males who may be watching. "My boyfriend, like, he notices girls," Natalie shared. "He pays attention when girls have an open profile, and he automatically thinks that they're, like, a slut if they do. Or if they have, like, a ridiculous amount of friends, [he judges girls as] very attention-seeking. So I think guys notice it." Sandra succinctly concurred with this assessment that girls must be conscious

of their online self-presentation: “No, I don’t think guys and girls do get treated equally online.”

Agency was finally restricted for participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity when they lost control over their ability to choose when or how often to cultivate their online profiles and maintaining their online presences became all-consuming, signaled by addiction metaphors or expressions of dependency upon social networking. Jenna related that if she were to be disconnected from social media for a month, “I’d go through withdrawal!”, adding that, “You almost get addicted [to Facebook].” Amber similarly admitted that social networking is “like a drug – it makes no sense, but you still want it.” Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ were more likely than participants performing other identity narratives to experience social networking as an addiction; this reflects that their prioritization of online celebrity and popularity demanded that they spend more time online cultivating friendships and maintaining their online social networking personas. As Vecepia summarized, “I think the more time you spend using [social networking], [...] the more you’re going to be affected by it.”

Much like a drug, when participants performed the ‘mediatized girl’ identity, they conveyed a clear dependence upon social networking, linking a loss of social networking not just to negative emotions, but also literally – although with a tongue-in-cheek sheepish awareness – to death. Jenna admitted that, “I think I would die [without social networking].” Withdrawal was also a common experience for participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ when they were faced with the loss of online social networking. Vecepia recounted, for example, that, “My parents started bribing me to go to family reunions [where I have no Internet access]. I had to go for three days, and it near[ly] killed me.”

She continued to express the pains of being removed from social networking and the negative emotions resulting from that loss, describing that, “I missed a bunch of opportunities with my friends and I just, you know, remorse.”

The addictive qualities of social networking can in this way transcend the virtual realm, affecting emotional well-being or detracting from lived experiences offline, as participants have related. The ‘mediatized girl’ clearly illustrates, then, as Haraway (1991) has suggested, that human and machine are inseparable. Participants’ self-definitions were linked to externalities such as active participation within social spheres and conformity to mainstream media representations of girl that required constant attention, management and grooming, so much that when this management was not possible and participants lacked an Internet connection, they felt feelings of regret, remorse and withdrawal. Even when such management was possible, these self-definitions were still outside of their control, since their success depended not only on participants’ online performances, but also on how their performances were received by potential audiences. Agency was therefore constrained for participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity not only by direct separation from social networking since this control and management was not immediately possible, but also by the very nature of the feedback mechanisms that were inherently outside participants’ control but were entailed in validating participants’ complex self-definitions.

#### **4.1.3 – Role of Boyfriend**

Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative were unique among the identity narratives identified in this study for conceptualizing their

relationships with their boyfriends as positive and public aspects of their identities. For participants performing this identity, boyfriends were invariably displayed publicly and were used as a means to generate positive attention and further personal popularity, celebrity, and desirability. As Tina summarized, ‘mediatized girls’ “have a status update every two seconds [and] talk about their boyfriend[s] [...] all the time, with hearts and stuff.” Natalie agreed, relating that, “It’s all about, ‘Oh, I love you so much; I have the best boyfriend ever’.”

As established above, participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity conceptualized mediatization as a way to gain a surplus of symbolic and cultural capital – in other words, to gain popularity. Hauge (2009:298) has suggested that “girls who are conceptualized as ‘popular’ make the hetero-romantic couple a significant domain in the constitution of subjectivities as adolescents, and this may be due to relationships with boyfriends as an important source of identity among girls who possess this subject position”. Intersections between age, sexuality and gender, Hauge continues, emerge when girls no longer belong to the category of ‘child’, and therefore notions of sexuality and the ways in which heteronormative sexuality influences relationships between boys and girls is an inherent part of coming of age as adolescent. As part of this negotiation of coming of age, young women establish subject positions as sexual beings as a way of transcending childhood and gaining popularity as comparatively older and more adolescent. During this process, girls abandon “sexual innocence” (Hauge 2009:298) to embrace more ‘mature’ subjectivities that are internalized as related to popularity and therefore to celebrity. The publicly displayed boyfriends of girls performing the ‘mediatized girl’ identity illustrate this coming of age process and publicly mobilize this

process to gain popularity, establishing to the public viewers of their online profiles that they are no longer sexually innocent children and have embraced more mature, popularized identities.

At the same time, however, participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ recognized that others could associate a publicly displayed boyfriend with superficiality, inauthenticity, or sexual promiscuity, potentially constraining agency by contributing to bullying or other negative judgment, such as potential gender harassment. Tina offered, for example, that when “it looks like the only person and only thing that makes up who you are is your boyfriend, then that’s a lie, because it’s superficial. [...] I think that because [a girl with a public boyfriend] is giving us all this information, we just label her as a slut.” Danni likewise observed that in a ‘mediatized’ profile with a prominently displayed boyfriend, “There’s just, like, no content or substance, really. It’s all about her boyfriend, but it’s not, like, anything.”

Participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ balanced, then, their popularized and public online appearance with the negative effects it could potentially bring about, not only from other girls, but from males as well. They managed their online personas with the goal of maximizing positive and minimizing negative attention from both genders, attempting to gain as much agency as possible while simultaneously guarding against harassing or negative intrusions that could potentially occur in the course of this online performance of a mediatized identity.

## **PART 4.2: CREATING A SPACE FOR RESISTANCE – HARASSMENT AS A STRATEGIC TOOL TO OPPOSE ENCULTURATED PATRIARCHAL STEREOTYPES OF ONLINE FEMINITY**

As sections 1-4 of my analysis have established, participants negotiated a variety of media representations and enculturated expectations of what it meant to perform ‘girl’ online by alternating their occupancy between a variety of gendered identity narratives that were not necessarily mutually compatible. Some identity narratives were comparatively easy for participants to concurrently negotiate – for example, participants were able to respond to online fear and perform the ‘responsible’ self-censorship and proactive risk management of the ‘safe girl’ identity while also portraying themselves as ‘professional girls’ who additionally exercised the ethical sensibilities and family focus of the ‘family girl’ narrative. However, the expectancies of the ‘mediatized girl’ narrative presented participants with a variety of inconsistencies with the other identity narratives available to them, stressing public, celebrity-oriented and sexualized self-portrayals that many participants viewed as running contrary to expectations of ‘safety’, professionalism, and family-orientation that were engrained in the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’ narratives. Participants additionally viewed mediatized stereotypes as too confining and narrow, believing that it was immature or weak to simply comply with them. Simultaneously, however, participants recognized that at least some level of compliance with these stereotyped performances was socially required, in order to obtain the social approval and social capital they granted.

In order to navigate the inconsistencies and contradictions within and between the various identities available to them and to resist the confining stereotypes of the ‘mediatized girl’ narrative, participants retreated into ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ or

'family girl' identity narratives to harass, bully, judge or ridicule those who successfully conformed to mediatization, characterizing 'mediatized girls' as blameworthy, inferior or deserving of attack rather than critiquing the patriarchal culture underpinning these stereotypes. Participants likewise attacked girls who performed the 'safe girl', 'professional girl' or 'family girl' identities more successfully than they did, again establishing conflict as a trope that underpinned constraints created by these identity narratives.

This section will examine the ways in which this degradation occurred, exploring how narrative threads relating to confrontation and conflict underscored the tensions participants faced to conform to available conflicting media representations of how to properly perform 'girl' in online spaces: namely, the stereotyped characteristics of all four identity narratives. I will investigate how the various pressures faced by participants to conform to these representations converged to cause conflict between girls both on- and offline, ultimately linking cyber harassment not to gendered character traits but rather to these problematic gendered media representations themselves. I will also examine the role of participants' boyfriends throughout these conflicting media representations. Finally, I will close by suggesting that, in line with the epistemological goals of this study, emergent policy, particularly policy relating to cyber harassment, should attempt to deconstruct these stereotyped gendered media representations and hold a patriarchal system accountable for the ways in which it positions girls to fight with one another rather than facilitate young women's agential experiences of online girlhood.

#### **4.2.1 – Conflict From Constraint: Resistance to Narrow Ideals of Online Femininity**

While popular culture and media representations of femininity permitted participants to occupy one of four available stereotyped identity narratives online – either as ‘safe girls’, ‘professional girls’, ‘family girls’, or ‘mediatized girls’ - participants viewed mediatized stereotypes as particularly constraining, believing that it was immature or weak to simply comply with these stereotypes since they were narrow interpretations of femininity. As a form of resistance to these constraints, this section will explore how participants routinely expressed overt statements of annoyance towards girls who conformed to the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative, occupying other identity narratives often simultaneously to refer to these girls using negative descriptors such as “juvenile” (Tina; Natalie), “fake” (Amber; Jenna), “desperate” (Vecepia; Tina; Amber), “attention seeking” (Tina; Amber; Parvati) or “slutty” (Tina; Amber; Sandra).

For example, Tina described one of her mediatized Facebook friends by offering, “I thought she was the most irritating person on the planet,” while Danni asserted that in the Facebook account of a ‘mediatized girl’, “You could [...] smell the desperation coming from [her] profile.” Parvati described that if a girl is mediatized, “People will judge her; they’re going to be saying she’s annoying,” while Tina assessed that such judgmental reactions were “just automatic. [...] They’re] negative. People just pre-judge, you know? [...] There’s nothing about [a ‘mediatized girl’] that isn’t cliché. It’s like, where is her mind?” Tina also described that, “Me and my roommate get the other person up to laugh at profiles [that are ‘mediatized’]. Like, ‘Oh wow, what a bonehead, get away,’ you know?”

Participants also found mediatized stereotypes constraining since they often found it difficult to be successful at these performances, tasked with adhering at the same time to contradictory requirements of ‘safer’, more ‘responsible’ identity narratives like responding to online risk and fear while performing the ‘safe girl’ and remaining private and professional while performing the ‘professional girl’. Yet, simultaneously, as established in section 4, participants recognized the necessity of at least some degree of compliance with mediatized stereotypes in order to obtain social approval and social status, aware that social capital was directly related to adherence to or association with these mediatized representations. As Tina specified, ‘mediatized girls’ were “typical of people I’d say I could be detached with. Like, not close friends, not people I’d hang out with.” Her latent assertion was clear: while she disapproved of ‘mediatized girls’, she still recognized the importance of having them in her online friend networks.

As a means of resolving these contradictions and constraints between their available identity narratives, participants attacked girls who effectively conformed to mediatized stereotypes since some degree of resistance to these stereotypes was necessary in order to justify why they could not or would not consistently or adequately occupy them and subsequently benefit from the social capital they granted. Specific behaviours typical of ‘mediatized girls’ prompted negative judgment or ridicule: girls were likely to be demeaned for having open profiles, having pop cultural interests, writing in a stylized manner, displaying a public or overt interest in a boyfriend, displaying photographic content that was deemed inappropriate or sexually promiscuous – for example, pictures of drinking, partying or ‘beach photos’ – or having a high number of social networking friends. As Tina summarized, “It’s just a priority. You can kind of

tell where [the] priorities [of ‘mediatized girls’] are – and I don’t want to project that my priorities are the same.”

Public social networking profiles were a strong component of ‘mediatized’ identity narratives yet directly opposed the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’, and ‘family girl’ identity narratives, each of which stressed the importance of online privacy. Girls with public profiles drew particular targeted ridicule from participants, who slipped into each of these three privacy-valuing narratives to castigate them. “I think [instinctive dislike of a ‘mediatized girl’] has a lot to do with the fact that she has a public profile,” Tina shared, occupying the ‘safe girl’ narrative to associate having a public social networking profile with inauthenticity and a lack of online safety, as well as with attention seeking behaviour that invited negative consequences. “You know, some of the things [a girl with a public profile] says are so ‘too much information’. [... People with public profiles] are not really real, because anyone can find them. [... They] just want people to see them.” Parvati agreed, relaying that, “If you keep your profile open, you’re automatically judged as somebody who wants attention. Like, that’s the first thing you notice about someone, [whether] they have an open profile.” Sandra similarly linked a public profile to low self-esteem and an inauthentic self-portrayal, exuding the self-confidence of a ‘professional girl’ to elaborate that if a girl has a public profile, she “doesn’t believe in herself. [...] I think that maybe she has to project that [she does], prove it to everyone else, by showing it. She has to show it to everyone.”

Recurring tropes of the ‘safe girl’ and ‘professional girl’ identities surrounding female publicity as unprofessional, unsafe, objectionable or something that was capable of ruining reputation (Thiel-Stern 2008) were reiterated by these participants, once again

reinforcing patriarchal and colonial ideals that females should present themselves privately instead of publicly, regardless of whether public displays are enjoyable or agential for girls who are making them (Thiel-Stern 2008; Welles 2005). Agency was identified by participants occupying these narratives within mainstream tropes of acceptable female interaction as inherently private and demure, and once other girls stepped outside these tropes, they were open to attack and critique unless they performed it perfectly – namely, within ‘safe’ or ‘professional’ frameworks, such as maintaining a public social networking profile to advance a career. As Jenna described, “My boyfriend’s aunt [...] added me on Facebook. [Her] profile is open, but [...] you know, the grammar, it’s just professional. [...] I think it’s more the content of the profile that defines the person.” Tina agreed, describing that “I have friends [...] who] are artsy types, and so they really want to show people their art and really want to showcase that kind of thing, so they make their profile open to showcase their talent.” Vecepia evoked imagery of the cyborg (Haraway 1991) to equate mediatized online self-presentations to a lack of ‘real life’ work ethic, blurring the lines between online personae and offline abilities: “[A ‘mediatized girl’] looks like she’d probably show up to [a job], twirl her hair, and be like, ‘Oh, this is too hard. I can’t stay late; I’ve got to see my man,’ or something like that.” Participants gave little thought as to whether the ‘mediatized girls’ who were the targets of their criticism had agentially made the choice to publicly self-present: instead, these participants adhered to popularized moral panics surrounding women in public spaces (Welles 2005), articulating that public displays were inherently risky, unprofessional, and undesirable.

Participants also criticized ‘mediatized girls’ for their Facebook photos, in addition to the other content posted publicly to their profiles. Tina explained that ‘mediatized girls’ are “mostly partying or half naked,” while Sandra stated that, “A lot of girls judge people by their pictures.” Tina extended these negative judgments to the realm of gender harassment, slut-shaming a girl who publicly posted photos with her boyfriend and for posting a ‘beach photo’ where she was smiling at the camera while wearing a bikini: “I was going to say [she is] slutty. Because the content of all of her photos is either her half naked or draped over some guy. [...And] what she said, with attention-seeking.” She did, however, admit that most girls still occupied this mediatized identity narrative to a degree: “Everyone probably has one photo like that, out of, like, 200.”

Natalie explained that while having a public profile generally meant a girl was attention-seeking, ‘attention-seeking’ and ‘slut’ were “not synonymous, but they often go hand-in-hand.” Sandra offered that “Because [a girl’s] profile is open, you’d maybe associate her with being easy,” while Jenna similarly opined that ‘mediatized girls’ with public profiles “want to be objectified”. Parvati, like Tina, asserted that a girl with an open profile “is probably trying to make a really good reputation of herself, but that’s not what other people are going to be saying.” Such negative expressions, particularly those that invoke gender in a hostile or demeaning way, can be considered cyberbullying or cyber gender harassment (Shariff 2008) and again reinforce tropes established in the ‘professional girl’ identity narrative, where girls were problematized for publicly posting self-revealing photos and videos online and where female participation in public spheres was viewed as inviting sexual advances from males (Thiel-Stern 2008).

‘Mediatized girls’ were further criticized for their tendency to write in a stylized manner and to cite proverbs or song lyrics in their Facebook statuses, illustrating that this form of self-presentation can have the opposite of its intended effect and attract negative as opposed to positive attention. Vecepia described that, “Unnecessary capitalization irritates me to no end,” while Jenna likewise expressed that, “All the hearts and x’s [...] when [a ‘mediatized girl] says, ‘Wish I cud’ – ‘c-u-d’ – it’s just her text [that signifies to me that she is irritating].” Tina offered that lyrical or proverbial statuses were “a cry for help. [...] It might be an attention thing.” Pop cultural interests similarly irritated many participants, who linked this mediatization with a lack of political interest and general superficiality. “From what I gather [...], *Gossip Girl* is a ‘mean girl’ type show. [...] It’s about the projection of self, [the] idea that, you know, ‘I’m so tough’ and ‘I’m so mean’,” Tina related. “What are [the] political interests [of a girl who lists *Gossip Girl* as an interest on Facebook]? Oh, that’s right – not there.” She continued to criticize other pop cultural interests of ‘mediatized girls’: “*Twilight*? Oh, wow.”

Other participants shared these ‘anti-mediatized’ sentiments: in response to an assertion that she did not recognize many of the pop cultural references in mediatized online profiles, Amber informed Vecepia, “That’s good.” Tyler and Bennett have written that, “The ascendancy of [...] debased, commercialized culture is understood typically as a deeply uncritical populism that masquerades as democracy, but which in fact represents the erosion of social and cultural values by the market” (2010:378). Participants echoed this stance, delineating that the focus of ‘mediatized girls’ on popular and commercial culture was uncritical and socio-culturally erosive, despite the fact that it obviously granted social capital. “Like, seriously, that’s your 17<sup>th</sup> update about how much you love

your new phone,” Tina criticized, continuing that, “Marketing’s going to do as much as it possibly can do. [...] It’s just, you know, survival of the fittest in this ‘rich girl’ world.”

In addition to outright rejections of the narrow confines of performative femininity prescribed by popular media, these denunciations of mediatized traits and behaviours can be interpreted as self-reflexive criticisms by participants performing various identity narratives – whether the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’, or ‘family girl’ – of those who adhered to social expectations of girlhood to which these participants aspired themselves, or that they at least recognized the merit of performing. While girls who performed mediatized identities complied with stereotypical media ideals of femininity and were rewarded for this conformity with social capital and agency drawn from popularity or celebrity, participants performing other incompatible identities turned their gaze upon such ‘mediatized girls’ as a result of this successful compliance and criticized them for it.

Ringrose (2006) has detailed that aggression in girls can arise from prior enculturated representations of normative girlhood. She argues that instead of challenging these normative representations, “girls take out their frustrations on other girls” (2006:413) when they themselves fail to personally adhere to these stereotypes of femininity, or when these other girls adhere to these stereotypes more efficiently than they do. Ringrose writes that, “A secret terrain of manipulation, meanness and psychological hurt is articulated as the dark underside to girls’ silence, repression and victimization” (2006:413); this terrain is revealed in the aggressive tendencies of participants performing identity narratives that were incompatible with the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative toward the successful normative girlhood articulated by girls who occupied this latter mediatized subjectivity.

Participants exemplified that these aggressive tendencies can be supported by a broader peer group (Shariff 2008): as soon as Natalie became the first participant to voice her distaste for mediatized profiles, asserting that they were “a little ridiculous,” other participants joined in this castigation, adding on other criticisms in rapid succession. As the focus group progressed, targeted ridicule of ‘mediatized girls’ became bolder and more assertive, encouraged by the support of the broader peer group of focus group participants. “It’s so annoying,” Parvati chimed in, while Jenna added that ‘mediatized girls’ “want to be objectified; [they] want attention.” Amber contributed that, “[They] think they have the ideal life,” while Tina offered that, “It isn’t what they actually are.” Jenna agreed, stating that, “They’re superficial. They want everything to seem perfect.” Vecepia told that ‘mediatized girls’ were “obsessive”, and Jenna concurred: “I was going to say fake.”

Negative judgment perpetuated by a broader peer group was also evident towards focus group members who exemplified mediatized characteristics, in particular, towards Jenna, who refused to partake in slut-shaming ‘mediatized girls’ with the other participants. After she stated her objections to characterizing a ‘mediatized girl’ as a slut – “There’s not enough for me to call her slutty. [...] How does it make her a slut, if she’s with some guy for six months?” – other participants turned their gaze towards her, notably after she mentioned that she had a high number of Facebook friends and signified that she was potentially mediatized herself. “I had about 300 [friends] at the beginning of the year, but [...] it’s been a long time. I’ve never gone through it,” Jenna stated. Sensing that she was deliberately not disclosing her true number of Facebook friends, possibly because Tina had earlier laughed at the possibility of someone having “like, 4000

Facebook friends”, Tina pressed her to respond: “So, how many is it?” Under pressure to respond, Jenna replied, “I don’t know, just...1000? 2000?” Her answer was met with confrontational laughter and sarcasm from Tina, who mockingly responded, “...Just?”

As the focus group progressed, other participants, led by Tina, continued to reinforce their disapproval of girls who had a high number of Facebook friends and of Jenna in particular. “It’s funny how much it changes, because in high school, [...] if you have more friends, you look better. And now it’s like, if you have [...] a decent amount of friends, [...] there’s a little more respect for you there,” Tina outlined, immediately after Jenna admitted to having a high number of Facebook friends. She continued her criticism, stating that, “Now people are like, ‘Oh, wow, that person has 5000 friends – what’s the deal with them, who do they think they are?’” Natalie offered that her boyfriend notices “if [girls] have a ridiculous amount of friends,” while Danni shared that, “People my age who have open profiles [and many Facebook friends] are more socially stunted. I remember back in high school, they didn’t have any friends. [...] You [can] sort of [...] smell the desperation coming from their profiles.” Jenna chose to avoid further criticism by remaining silent until the end of the focus group, when she quietly asserted that, “I don’t find that having an open profile or having a lot of friends means that you’re a slut. [...] It doesn’t mean that you’re a slut just because you have slutty pictures on there. [...] I don’t think it should be considered.”

This degradation of ‘mediatized girls’ with a high number of Facebook friends was particularly poignant, since a high number of Facebook friends is a quantifiably visible marker of the popularity and social capital that ‘mediatized girls’ can gain from conforming to normative representations of mediatized femininity. Rather than

acknowledge that the identity narratives that they typically inhabited restricted them from having a similarly high number of Facebook friends – because the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’ narratives all stressed the importance of having smaller, private, more selective online friend networks – participants instead denounced girls who chose to maintain these larger friend networks. Participants rejected the potential for ‘mediatized girls’ to experience agency from having broader friend networks and to benefit from the social capital they granted, slipping into these more privacy-oriented identity narratives to critique girls with larger friend networks as attention-seeking, immature, sexually promiscuous and desperate. In the process, these participants justified why they themselves did not cultivate a similarly vast network of friends: ostensibly because they were not similarly attention-seeking, juvenile or sexualized like the ‘mediatized girls’ they condemned, but subtextually because the other stereotyped narrative performances of girl available to them prevented them from enjoying the social benefits a broader friend network could grant while simultaneously continuing to appear ‘safe’ or professional.

While the behaviours and characteristics that participants condemned were typically associated with the ‘mediatized girl’ identity narrative, participants also engaged in conflict as a way of rejecting other stereotyped gendered narratives available to them, including the ‘family girl’ and ‘professional girl’ identities, also finding themselves constrained by these media representations of ‘proper’ ways of performing girl online. This conflict occurred when participants were unable to fully adhere or were unable to adhere as well as other girls to these narratives, again establishing degradation and criticism as strategies of resistance when social expectations of femininity were too

narrow for them to perform. This conflict also particularly occurred when performances of the ‘family girl’ and ‘professional girl’ were public as opposed to private, implying that ‘proper’ performance of each of these identity narratives demanded self-disclosure be limited to private spheres. While recognizing, for example, that posting content online was acceptable if it was limited to family and friends, participants disparaged women who posted professional or family-related content that was viewable by wider networks.

Vecepia, a first year undergraduate student, outlined her annoyance with ‘professional girls’ who posted online that they had successfully completed university degrees that she herself would not yet have been able to complete: “It’s like you’re pimping yourself, really. Because everyone’s like, ‘Oh, I have an MBA from so-and-so,’ and I’m like, ‘Oh, good for you.’” Danni distastefully condemned women who had children and publicly performed ‘family girl’ identities, criticizing “those ones who update about their kids – you know, ‘I love my kid’. I don’t need that.” Natalie agreed: “‘I’m seeing my baby, and we did this and this’ – it’s just so much.”

Amber extended her disgust from girls who posted photos of their children to girls who publicly posted other family-oriented relationships or status markers: “I hate it when people do it with their pets, when people have, like, 18 photo albums of their dog.” Achievements of other girls and their successful compliance with gendered identity narratives were more palatable for participants when they were not publicly displayed, perhaps because publicity made these successes more visible and threatened participants’ self-esteem by underscoring that themselves they were unable to similarly successfully comply to social expectations of femininity. In addition to being a response to potential threats to their own performances of various identity narratives, disparaging comments of

girls who posted public content online were also a way for participants to discipline girls who publicly performed identity narratives that were attached to expectations of privacy: “I think it’s anything too much – everything in moderation, right?” Tina assessed. “Everything can be too much.”

The inherent conflict within and between the identity narratives available to participants was also highlighted when they engaged in strategies of distancing. Participants criticized and distanced themselves from girls who conformed to certain stereotyped performances of girl by switching between identity narratives to occupy those that opposed the performances they were criticizing. Tina, for example, expressed her distaste for girls who publicly displayed their boyfriends – “I think [instinctive dislike] does have a lot to do with [having] a public profile, the whole, ‘heart heart heart, xoxo’” – by stressing that she herself was a ‘safe girl’ and did not make such public displays, accentuating that, “I’d never write that I was with the love of my life for almost six months.” Tina also transitioned into the ‘family girl’ identity narrative to establish that she was kind and ethically sensible, positioning herself opposite ‘mediatized girls’ who posted passive aggressive status updates: “Passive aggressive statuses [are] actually so common. And I make a very clear effort not to do this.”

Tina additionally distanced herself from the pop cultural interests of ‘mediatized girls’ by criticizing *Gossip Girl*, then explaining her own knowledge of the show by clarifying that, “I don’t watch it. One of my friends watches it.” Amber condemned girls who made constant status updates, then stressed that she, like Tina, was a ‘safe girl’ and was less likely to self-disclose online: “I’m not a big ‘status updater’ myself. I don’t need to update. Like, Twitter, I don’t understand how it came to be, because, ‘I’m drinking

coffee right now'? It's stupid." Natalie occupied the 'professional girl' identity to criticize 'mediatized girls', establishing herself as comparatively more mature and professional: "People who are older don't really write about [interests typical of 'mediatized girls']. You know, like, I don't really know anybody our age who writes that kind of stuff." Distancing was also evident when participants established that they would not associate with the girls they targeted, both on- and offline. Amber stated that, "I don't have friends with a profile [that is mediatized]," while Parvati agreed that 'mediatized girls' were "not [typical] of our friends." Vecepia, meanwhile, bluntly proclaimed that, "I would never be friends with [a 'mediatized girl']. She's irritating."

It is clear, then, that the various available identity narratives surrounding the performance of girl in online spaces culminated in conflict for participants, whether because these narratives themselves were too constraining and participants wanted to resist these stereotyped representations of femininity, because these narratives were difficult or impossible to occupy, or because certain identity narratives were mutually incompatible – specifically the 'mediatized girl' narrative with the 'safe girl', 'professional girl' and 'family girl' narratives. Rather than facilitating agency for participants, these identity narratives collectively constrained agency by positioning girls to fight with one another and constantly defend their own online self-presentations, causing them to blame and castigate other girls in response to their own potential lack of adherence to social expectations of normative virtual girlhood.

#### **4.2.2 – Roles of Boyfriends Across Identity Narratives: Criticism of Public Displays**

In the course of navigating the various identity narratives identified in this study, participants displayed their relationships with their boyfriends privately as opposed to publicly, in line with the privacy-oriented narratives of the ‘safe girl’, ‘professional girl’ and ‘family girl’. Even when participants had strictly private profiles that were only visible to a small, secure network of friends, they did not display their boyfriends to these friend networks: as Tina related, “I don’t really publicize [my relationship with my boyfriend], even to people that I’m friends with. [...] I wouldn’t even post that, and I have a private profile.” In fact, no participant admitted to publicly displaying her boyfriend on Facebook, even when participants were performing the public ‘mediatized girl’ identity: rather, participants described that other ‘mediatized girls’ publicly displayed their boyfriends, retreating into these other narratives to affirm that they themselves did not.

Regardless of the identity narrative that they were occupying, participants attempted to define themselves as something other than a girl in a relationship with a boy. The rationale for this lack of display of a boyfriend varied: in the ‘safe girl’ narrative, a prominently displayed boyfriend was internalized as risky, sexualized or inviting unwanted sexual advances from males; in the ‘professional girl’ narrative, a publicly displayed boyfriend was associated with unprofessionalism. Relationships with boyfriends were something that participants similarly wanted to manage outside family relationships in the ‘family girl’ identity narrative, lest their family members prematurely escalate these relationships or these relationships upset their ethically sensible ‘family friendly’ self-portrayals; finally, participants performing the ‘mediatized girl’ recognized

that a publicly displayed boyfriend could invite negative judgment or harassment from other girls online and kept their boyfriends private for this reason. Despite these differences in particularly why it was undesirable to display a boyfriend online, each identity narrative therefore had in common that a girl define herself in terms that were unrelated to her potential attachment to a male and placement within a heteronormative relationship, since it would overshadow her self-portrayal as a girl who was either 'safe', professional, family-oriented, or receiving the positive attention of such importance to 'mediatized girls'. Similar to the conflict-oriented responses to other girls online that were outlined in section 5.1, participants expressed negative judgment toward girls who did choose to publicly display their boyfriends online, falling back upon each identity narrative's own unique rationale to justify why these attacks were valid or justified.

Tina claimed that 'unprofessional' girls who displayed their boyfriends publicly were immature: "I find that a lot of the relationships that I think are really good, like, they look really good on Facebook, you wouldn't even know they were together," she shared. "A lot of the ones that are kind of 'too much relationship', like, 'I love you!' – two weeks later they're single. With a mature relationship, that stuff's kind of tamed down." Other participants described that 'mediatized girls' with publicly displayed boyfriends were superficial or attention-seeking: "There's just, like, no content or substance [in the profile of a 'mediatized girl']. It's all about her boyfriend, but it's not, like, anything," Amber stated. Natalie elaborated that, "I think when [...] the only thing that makes up who you are is your boyfriend, then that's a lie, because it's superficial." Parvati agreed with these assessments: "Yeah, the [public display of a boyfriend] is obviously for people. 'Loves her man'? That's really unnecessary. Like, no one cares." Tina summarized that, "If I

were to project who I am as being ‘I’m Colby’s girlfriend’ and that’s all there is to me? That’s not really my life. [...] It’s superficial.” Others equated a publicly displayed boyfriend with sexual inappropriateness or ‘sluttiness’, falling back upon the ‘safe girl’ narrative to describe that publicly articulating a boyfriend could be equated with sexual promiscuity. Amber described that when a girl has a publicly displayed boyfriend, “Because she is giving us all this information, we just label her as a slut.” Tina agreed, describing that a girl was “headed in a [slutty] direction [...]because] she says she’s staying at a hotel with her boyfriend. I don’t need to know that.”

While such negative judgment against girls with publicly displayed boyfriends can be attributed to the available identity narratives each prohibiting such a public display for their own unique reasons, it can also be linked to the coming of age process described in section 4.3, where girls entering adolescence wished to publicly display their boyfriends as a method of gaining popularity and rejecting child-like sexual innocence (Hauge 2008). This backlash by participants against such public displays can be interpreted as an expression of anxiety and self-reflexive criticism by these participants regarding their own articulation of this coming of age process, potential inability to comply with heteronormative standards of girlhood and inability to enjoy associated popularity and social capital when these standards were successfully met. Interestingly, participants chose to attack girls who did make these public displays, rather than critique the patriarchal system that framed performances of girlhood in such a restrictive manner that they could not do so themselves.

Much like condemning girls performing mediatized identities, participants turned their gaze upon girls who adhered to social messages regarding the performance of

heteronormative female sexuality and coming of age by publicly displaying their boyfriends. One participant, Natalie, even extended her negative judgment to a married female friend: “She is always like, ‘Love you so much, husband and baby,’ [...] and it’s just so much.” In the process of casting these negative judgments, participants latently supported the same bracketing of femininity established by participants who performed the ‘professional girl’ identity, where stereotypical femininity was suppressed as an aspect of appearing more professional. In doing so, these participants reinforced that in order to maintain a positive online reputation, young women online should adhere to more stereotypically masculinized self-portrayals, or at least to self-portrayals that suppress aspects of stereotyped femininity – like having a heteronormative boyfriend – that they believed could potentially lead to negative associations or produce negative judgments.

#### **4.2.3 – Reconstructing Online e-Quality: Shifting Policy Initiatives to Deconstruct Media Representations of Femininity**

McRobbie (2008:103) has assessed that performances of femininity are “regulated by the wider patriarchal relations which are as resistant to change as ever [...] even though in this new landscape of desire and female empowerment, masculinity is less dominating”. Even though identity narratives available to participants appeared empowering or agential at-a-glance or participants found a way to mobilize these narratives in agential ways – for example, participants found agency in proactively responding to online fear in the ‘safe girl’ narrative, establishing themselves as professional in the ‘professional girl’ narrative, cultivating family relationships in the ‘family girl’ narrative and gaining popularity in the ‘mediatized girl’ narrative – these

narratives themselves were nonetheless products of the patriarchal framework upon which virtual spaces are constructed and the wider patriarchal relations that regulate young women's online identities (see Chapter 1; Gajjala 2000).

McRobbie continues to describe, as sections 5.1 and 5.2 have illustrated, that “young women in recent years display an abundance of tensions which cannot be reconciled. [...] Young women find themselves positioned in a post-feminist frame where notions of equality are routinely invoked, while, at the same time, new terms and conditions are being set.” (2008:108-110). She argues that “this is a socially induced imbalance accruing from the female subject having become ‘gender aware’ as a result of previous feminist activity and struggles associated with sexual politics, while also now being expected to disregard this awareness” (2008:110). In other words, on the one hand, girls are aware of gender and that experiences of females are unique to those of men. Yet on the other, girls must discard their uniquely female subjectivities in order to perform ‘girl’ within the narrowly stereotyped terms and conditions dictated by patriarchal frameworks including mainstream media, capitalism, and colonialism. These patriarchal frameworks underpin virtual spaces (Gajjala 2000), only providing young women online with a set of confining and often contradictory identity narratives within which they are socially permitted to perform femininity: online, there is no such thing as equality. As McRobbie has stated, “The young woman in contemporary political and popular culture is asked to reconcile autonomy and the possibility of achievement with compliancy with a patriarchal order which is dissolved, de-centralised, and nowhere to be seen” (2008:122).

Sections 5.1 and 5.2 additionally outlined that these patriarchal, stereotyped identity narratives, which only permit girls to perform identities that are ‘safe’, professional, family-oriented or mediatized, converge to produce conflict and harassment between girls as they struggle to navigate their inconsistencies and contradictions, unable to freely define femininity in their own terms. Participants described that this confrontation has become an inherent part of normative female identity as girls interact with one another online. Parvati admitted that, “I’ve had a few testing conversations, or, like, big fights, you know.” Tina expressed outright that online confrontation was a normative aspect of virtual girlhood: “If a girl says something [mean online], it’s just like, okay, that girl is being a girl.” Other participants confirmed that fights or confrontations were commonplace between girls on online social networking platforms. “I’ve had someone confront me in an email on Facebook,” Sandra divulged, while Parvati agreed that “there’s lots of drama on Facebook’. [A girl will] start a mean post, and then all the other girls will join in. I’ve seen it a thousand times.”

As McRobbie describes and as my participants suggested, the patriarchal identity narratives available to girls online caused anger and conflict, particularly towards girls who were particularly successful at complying with prevailing identity narratives or whose occupied identity narratives contradicted other prevailing narratives: “Melancholia which is characterized by ambivalence and anger [...] takes up the role of berating ‘critical agency’. The young woman’s illegible rage expresses the powerlessness in the forced abandonment of this public feminist ideal” (2008:116-120). Available identity narratives converged to illustrate this ‘illegible rage’: this conflict-laden intersection of lived experiences of agency within and between these identity narratives provides a

useful lens through which to consider cyber bullying and cyber harassment, which are the subjects of many current policy initiatives governing the online interactions of young women and youth in general. Scholarly literature (see section 1.5) has identified cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment as constraints upon agency for young women online, further asserting the relevance of this study for contextualizing policy initiatives related to these issues and to young women's online interactions in particular.

Cyber harassment takes place within a broader misogynistic Internet culture where women are assumed naturally to be at risk of being harassed and where abusive commentary is taken as a given danger of online participation (Keats Citron 2009). Women online do form a sort of captive audience, often left without means of avoiding cyber attacks, short of completely shutting down the websites on which they have an online presence. Likewise, women cannot escape harassment by others on third-party sites like Facebook or Twitter. Although such harassment is inescapable, "women who maintain an online presence should not be required to forego [having one] in order to escape harassment, just as women should not have to quit their jobs or leave their homes to insulate themselves from sexual harassment or domestic violence" (Keats Citron 2009:376). Through the failure on a macro level to recognize that these harms present a unique threat to women and have legitimate social meaning, abusive behaviour toward women continues to be promoted and tolerated (Keats Citron 2009).

As a response to such issues, female victims go offline or downplay stereotypically feminine attributes (Keats Citron 2009) – or in the case of my participants, adhere to prevailing social norms promoted by patriarchal media of performative femininity in online spaces. Keats Citron (2009) has indicated that social or visible

minorities are most likely to endure targeted harassment online and that targeting by online bullies primarily involves appearance, dress, ethnic background, religion, and economic standing. However, my data suggests that girls are most likely to endure targeted harassment in the course of navigating the conflicting media-supported identity narratives available to them online. Rather than micro-level characteristics of girls themselves, it appears that a primary problem contributing to cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment is the macro-level narrow patriarchal frameworks within which young women are permitted to perform femininity online.

In response to the diverse issues facing young women online, a wide variety of solutions – both legal and extralegal – have been proposed in terms of next steps. Media literacy initiatives have been suggested as a means through which greater media awareness and higher long-term self-esteem can be promoted, although immediate self-objectification has been forewarned as a possible negative consequence of these interventions (Choma, Foster and Radford 2007:581). Websites where users are permitted to post their own content – including Facebook – are more likely to offer civic material and facilitate a broader range of ICT knowledge and skills; therefore, social networking itself may enable the empowerment of young women through education built into self-productive platforms (Baldwin-Philippi 2006; Banet-Wiser 2004). Baldwin-Philippi et al. encourage website designs that address girls less as consumers or potential employees and more as emergent Internet citizens (2006:771). Twenge likewise recommends that groups aiming to empower girls and women decrease their emphasis on instilling instrumental and assertive traits in young women, where patriarchal discourses are often replicated through the latent devaluation of traits that are expressive or communal.

Instead, the value of these “feminine” traits, Twenge argues, in addition to instrumental and assertive traits, should be parlayed to both genders (2009:338).

Initiatives and policy dealing with cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment, however, appear largely to function on an individual as opposed to holistic level. Such initiatives often attempt to identify characteristics of girls who are susceptible to this abuse and subsequently ‘protect’ these girls or punish their abusers, although Keats Citron (2008) has suggested civil rights recourses to gender harassment which show some promise to address such gender inequality. My data suggests that on the contrary to mainstream initiatives to address cyber bullying, rather than neoliberally and patriarchally attempting to identify characteristics of girls that could lead to online harassment and neglecting to consider the root causes of this harassment itself, it is more prudent for cyber bullying policy to deconstruct prevailing media representations and pop cultural expectations that dictate socially accepted standards for the performance of femininity online. These normative identity narratives themselves, rather than simply aggregate characteristics of individual girls, position girls to bully and harass one another. It is therefore imperative to examine and redefine these identity narratives on a macro level to challenge the very structure of normative online femininity, since normative online femininity as it currently operates is underscored by patriarchy, influenced by potentially harmful media representations of stereotyped ways of performing girl, and fraught with contradiction and conflict.

Policymakers should therefore begin to deconstruct the various identity narratives available to girls online and examine how they promote conflict and constrain gendered online agency as opposed to promoting agency, equality, and diverse performances of

girl. This deconstruction of gendered stereotypes at a policy level presents a viable solution to liberate young women from the patriarchal constraints, conflict, and “illegible rage” (McRobbie 2008) they experience online, mobilizing young women’s own perceptions and lived experiences into ‘real’ change (Burns and Walker 2004; Miller 2000) and perhaps finally helping to construct virtual spaces that better reflect gendered ‘e-quality’.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I have considered questions of young women's experiences of agency online. Rooted in a cyberfeminist theoretical framework that acknowledged the reality that young women online do face unique challenges and risks in the course of maintaining agential online presences, this project has attempted to delineate how young women experience and maintain agency in a virtual context, simultaneously exploring the challenges, risks and constraints that they encounter while doing so. Borrowing from Rosas and Dhen (2011), who illustrate the importance of considering biographic narrative continuity in web-oriented qualitative data analyses, I ultimately framed participants' experiences of online agency in my thematic qualitative analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) via four biographically consistent identity narratives consistently performed by my participants, each with a unique operationalization of agency, unique constraints upon agency, and uniquely situated role of a heteronormative boyfriend. Participants did not remain positioned within one static narrative: rather, throughout the duration of my focus group discussion and throughout the course of their online interactions, they constantly moved between these narratives, occupying different identities depending on given contexts and often occupying multiple identities simultaneously.

Participants performing the 'safe girl' identity consistently experienced agency in the context of risk, safety, fear and resiliency. Within this narrative, participants found agency in establishing themselves as 'responsible' virtual citizens who were able to critically analyse and autonomously manage a variety of online risks, mobilizing online social networking to create self-portrayals that conveyed their resilience to potential online risk and culturally entrenched gendered fears regarding virtual spaces. Within this

identity, participants' potential to experience agency was constrained when the online risks they perceived could not be controlled or mitigated autonomously or when this autonomous risk management was not visible by their online social networks. From participants' discussions of agency within this identity narrative, I suggested that, contrary to Koskela's (2004) findings that agency is strongly related to shame within online spaces, agency for young women potentially intersects more strongly with fear than with shame, since while my participants consistently experienced agency through their responses to fear and perceived online risk, they did not report feeling shame.

Within the 'professional girl' identity narrative, participants experienced agency through controlling their online self-presentations and presenting an 'adult' persona to coworkers, professors, classmates or potential employers, as well as through using online social networking to enhance their work or school experiences. Agency was constrained for participants performing this identity narrative when they lost control over their online self-portrayals and a professional image could not be maintained or was difficult to maintain, or when they were unable to manage work, school and personal relationships separately. I displayed that participants optimistically consider their futures and were concerned with developing skills needed for high status jobs. However, I also explored how the establishment of professionalism and contemplation of participants' futures entailed a bracketing of femininity, where professionalism was inherently portrayed in tandem with stereotypically masculine characteristics.

The third identity narrative associated with self-presentation as a responsible, cautious or ethical virtual citizen was the 'family girl' identity narrative, where participants experienced agency by using online social networking to maintain offline

family relationships and control their self-portrayals as ethically-sensible, family-oriented individuals, simultaneously embracing alternate subjectivities that did not correspond with this ‘family-friendly’ image. Agency was constrained for participants performing this narrative when family relationships could not be managed separately from other relationships, or when their control over their self-presentations was threatened if they faced parental surveillance or family members saw ‘objectionable’ content they had posted to their online social networking profiles.

The final identity narrative performed by my participants, the ‘mediatized girl’, was related to narrative threads of celebrity, popularity and popular culture. Within this narrative, participants’ potential to experience agency lay in gaining popularity, friendship, celebrity or positive attention, as well as in interacting with or expressing knowledge about mainstream popular culture. Agency was correspondingly constrained when no popularity, friendship, celebrity or positive attention was gained – usually when attention from others was negative and profiles were perceived as superficial, inauthentic, attention-seeking or ‘slutty’ – and resulted in a loss of control over their self-portrayals as girls who enjoyed the social capital associated with popularity and celebrity. Agency was also constrained in this identity narrative when online social networking and maintaining an online presence was experienced as ‘addictive’ or all-consuming. In this section, I examined the intersection of agency with celebrity and popularity, and examined this identity narrative’s unique mobilization of publicity as an agency-granting milieu, particularly in terms of disclosure of a boyfriend.

Following my analysis of the four identity narratives performed by my participants, I considered these four identity narratives collectively in terms of their

conflicting narrative structures and reflection of confining, stereotyped ideals surrounding the performance of 'girl' in online spaces, as well as the related role of 'the boyfriend' across all four narratives. Within these identity narratives, girls on one hand were socially required to reflect in their online self-presentations the expectations of privacy, safety, professionalism and ethical sensibility running through the 'safe girl', 'professional girl' and 'family girl' narratives, but on the other hand gained social capital through reflecting public, sexualized, popularized and celebritized tropes of the 'mediatized girl' narrative. I offered that the conflict between these identity narratives, as well as the confines of each identity narrative itself as a limiting performance expectation of online femininity, contributed to confrontation between young women, both on- and offline. I explored how negative behaviour and cyber harassment could particularly be targeted towards 'mediatized girls', but can also be directed towards other girls who perform the requirements of other identity narratives particularly well in addition to particularly inadequately, for example, when performances transgressed embedded expectations of privacy within a particular narrative. I extended that negative judgment could be interpreted also as a self-reflexive criticism by girls of their own potential failure or fear of failure to adhere to such social expectations of normative gender role performance, as well as a condemnation of girls who failed to adhere to these expectations themselves.

I concluded by relating this inherent conflict between identity narratives to cyber bullying, offering that cyber bullying, contrary to popular media and policy discourses, is not simply brought forth by character traits at the level of the individual. I criticized such work as restrictingly patriarchal and neoliberal in scope and theoretical depth, pointing out that it tended either to imply that girls were somehow blameworthy for attracting

harassing behaviours or were in need of paternalistic legislative protection. I offered instead that my data signified that cyber bullying and cyber harassment are symptomatic of a patriarchal social system that only permits girls to occupy stereotyped identity narratives like the four identified in this study, and that since these identity narratives are confining and conflictual, they converge to cause bullying behaviours between young women online. I finished with a discussion of policy governing young women within online spaces and suggested that emergent policy, rather than continuing to favour the same patriarchal, neoliberal overtones as some academic research, should begin to deconstruct stereotyped gendered media representations of how to 'properly' perform femininity. Such future policy could ultimately hold a patriarchal system accountable for the ways in which it positions young women to fight with one another rather than facilitating their experiences of online agency.

To this end, I have successfully achieved the epistemological goals of this study: namely, to adopt the best interests of my participants and through an analysis of their gendered lived experiences related to agency in online social networking, work towards the implementation of 'real' change (Burns and Walker 2004; Miller 2000). Participants' descriptions of their online experiences have shed light upon current policy and also upon academic literature related to agency and young women's online life: notably, that such policy and literature have largely neglected to consider macro-level, systemic frameworks that dictate the confines within which girls are permitted to be girls inside virtual social spaces. In drawing these conclusions, I have contributed to scholarly literature by identifying the inadequacy of neoliberal and patriarchal research and policy regarding young women within online spaces to achieve emancipatory ends, and also by

supporting the pursuit of more holistic emancipatory approaches. I have identified a potential redirection for research and policy related to cyber bullying and cyber gender harassment, and have additionally contributed to academic knowledge by providing an exploratory framework that can potentially offer a starting point for the deconstruction of mediated stereotypes that I recommend.

I again must reiterate that it is imperative for future policy, particularly policy that addresses cyber bullying, to begin to move away from micro-level responses. Such policy at least latently casts patriarchal blame upon the populations it governs and largely either responsabilizes youth or young women to self-protect against potential cyber bullying or adopts harshly punitive stances against it. While various criminologists have suggested that overly punitive neoliberal crime control and legislative initiatives have largely proven to be ineffective and fail to address root causes of crime or deviance (see Christie 2000; Cahill 2011; Milford 2012, etc.), responsabilizing young women to self-protect against harassment fundamentally has the same effect: doing so fails to address on a broader scale the factors that lead to the behaviours these initiatives aim to govern. Without the deconstruction of systemic representations that limit the ways in which women can self-express online within socially acceptable frameworks, my study has indicated that cyber bullying behaviours will continue to be perpetuated online, since these very systemic representations play a crucial role in generating online harassment. Policy therefore must shift to begin this process of deconstruction, abandoning its neoliberal, patriarchal roots for more progressive alternatives.

Additional academic research is required in order to verify and further examine these findings; as I have recommended, this future research should abandon patriarchal

and neoliberal theoretical stances in favour of more flexible, emancipatory feminist frameworks. By conducting a study of a larger sample of young women and by considering a sample that traverses a wider geographic region, in addition to including the voices of women from social, ethnic, or religious minorities, a clearer picture could be obtained. It would also be fruitful to question future research participants on their perceived effectiveness of and ideas to ameliorate current policy initiatives that address their online interactions and address cyber bullying, in order to more specifically focus potential directions for future post-deconstructive legislation and to ensure that young women have a voice in emergent policy that governs them.

To close, and to bring discussion back to the participants who made this study and these findings possible, I would like to offer two final statements. The first is from Tina, who powerfully stated that her online social networking profile was “my way to project who I am. [...] My profile belongs to me, and my life belongs to me.” Jenna, meanwhile, stated that at the same time, “You kind of have to act a certain way” online. The juxtaposition of these two statements drives home the key conclusion of this study: while the Internet can potentially offer young women an empowering platform to engage in agential, feminist self-expression and take control of their own identities, it simultaneously forces them to adhere to constraining patriarchal social expectations that restrict this control. Such is the paradox of gendered agency within online social networking, a paradox that future emancipatory initiatives must work to deconstruct.

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## **APPENDIX I: DISCUSSION GUIDE**

### **Assessing the Regulation of Online Social Spaces from the Perspectives of Young Women**

#### **Focus Group Discussion Guide**

##### **Introduction**

The co-investigator (the facilitator) will introduce herself, the principal investigator and the research assistant to the participants and then explain the room, the process, the purpose, and the audio tape recorder to those participating. The facilitator will advise the participants that if at any time they are asked a question that they would rather not answer, all they have to do is let the facilitator know, and she/he will just move on to another person in the group. The facilitator will make it clear that participants have the right to not participate, and the right to opt out at any time without penalty, harm or loss of promised benefit.

##### **Round Table Discussion**

The focus group will start with a general discussion of the types of social media the participants use, how they use them and why:

- What kinds of social media do you use? Do you have a social networking page? Do you blog? Do you post videos you've made yourself?
- How long have you been using social media?
- Why did you start?
- How much time do you spend using social media in a typical day?
- What kind of information about yourself do you post online? Why?
- Do you ever worry about your online privacy? What does privacy mean to you?
- Do you spend time selecting particular images to post?
- What kinds of pictures of yourself do you post? Have you ever asked someone to de-tag you from a photo? Why? How did they respond?
- Do you post comments on other people's pages or blogs? What kind of things do you post? What kinds of things do they post on your pages?

Then a general discussion of the benefits:

- What's the best thing about social media?
- What other kinds of things do you like about social media?
- Can you give specific examples of experiences you've had that illustrate those benefits?
- If you couldn't use social media for a month, what would you miss most?

##### **Exercise – Examining a Facebook Profile**

The facilitator will hand out hard copies of a fictitious Facebook profile for a 17 year old girl. The profile will be created by the investigators, based on research identifying tools and strategies young women use to construct their online identities as young women, and the potential benefits and risks they involve. The participants will not be told the profile is fictitious. The facilitator will introduce the girl, by providing some of the profile information.

### **Round Table Discussion**

The facilitator will ask the participants what they think of the girl and whether or not they would accept a friend invitation from her and why. The group will then discuss the elements of the profile. In the ensuing discussion, the following probing questions will be asked:

- What do you think of her profile picture?
- Why do you think she chose that picture?
- What kinds of things are people likely to think about her based on her picture?
- Does she look the same or different than mainstream media images of girls her age? Why do you think that is?
- What do you think of her interests? Is she a typical 17 year old girl? Why or why not? What do her interests say about her?
- What kind of picture do you get of her boyfriend, based on the photos and comments in the profile?
- Why do you think she talks about her boyfriend in her profile?
- What kind of friends do you think she has? Why?
- What kind of girl do you think she is? Why? What kinds of girls do you think she hangs out with?
- When you were deciding what kind of girl she is, what information did you use?
- What would other types of girls' profiles look like?

Probe for insight into the relationship between mainstream media images and the images and text used to construct the image of the girl in the profile.

The group will then be asked to list any negative consequences the girl may face, given the kinds of information she has revealed.

- Could the girl have avoided the consequences by keeping the information private? What would she give up by keeping that information private?
- Have you ever had any online experiences where you've felt you've been treated unfairly or made to feel uncomfortable because you're a woman?
- Would a boy or young man experience the same negative consequences by participating in social media? Why or why not?
- Are young women and young men equal online? What does equality mean to you? What does it look like online?

- Do young people rely on certain images or stereotypes to portray themselves as “men” or “women” in social media?
- What do these tell us about gender? What does gender mean to you? Do you find it easy or difficult to portray your own gender on social media?
- Do you ever use social media to enact alternate conceptions of gender, experiment with your identity as a woman and/or contradict gender stereotypes?
- Have you ever experienced gender discrimination or harassment online?

Finally, the group will discuss the potential of regulation to promote gender equality online.

- Are you aware of any laws or regulations that are in place now to deal with the kinds of issues girls and young women face online?
- Do the rules and regulations in place now make it easier or harder for the girl to enjoy the benefits of social media?
- What kinds of regulations or laws would help girls and women deal with the issues they face online?

### **Closure and Review**

A round table discussion will allow respondents to make general comments that might have been missed in earlier discussions.

The participants will be told that the profile was fictitious and that it was created to help focus the discussion on the issues pertinent to the research. They will also be told that if they want to withdraw from the study, their data will not be used.

Thank you and close.



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**Ethics Approval Notice**  
**Social Science and Humanities REB**

**Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)**

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Valerie	Steeves	Social Sciences / Criminology	Supervisor
Trevor Scott	Milford	Social Sciences / Criminology	Student Researcher

**File Number:** 06-10-20B

**Type of Project:** Master's thesis (Secondary use of data)

**Title:** Exploring Gendered Risk in Girls' Online Social Networking: A van Dijkian Approach to Web-Oriented Cyberfeminism

<b>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Approval Type</b>
06/19/2012	06/18/2013	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

**Special Conditions / Comments:**

N/A

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Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at:  
[http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application\\_dwn.asp](http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application_dwn.asp)

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at:  
[http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application\\_dwn.asp](http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application_dwn.asp)

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5841 or by e-mail at: [ethics@uOttawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uOttawa.ca).