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Book Review:

**Girl Wide Web:
Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity**

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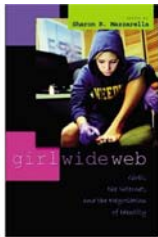
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Young people are spending time online in increasing numbers. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 21 million teens go online, 12 million teens create content for the Internet, 5 million keep personal web pages, 4 million are bloggers, and 8 million read blogs (Lenhart, Rainine, & Lewis, 2001). In a review of literature, Wartella, Lee, and Caplovitz, (2002) found that—other than in gaming—girls have experienced a narrowing gendered digital divide in computer and Internet use as compared to boys. Books such as *Girl wide web: Girls, the Internet, and the negotiation of identity* illustrate the various ways that girls are experiencing and participating in the online landscape. Editor Sharon Mazarella sets up the book by confirming a rise in girls going online and substantiating a need to study girls as a unique group, spurred by girls' studies scholars. The eleven chapters of the book cover primarily qualitative approaches through a critical feminist lens, but some chapters include quasi-quantitative analyses. Topics range from empowering Web sites for girls, girl fandom, and girls using computer-mediated communication.

Three chapters examined Web sites for girls: gURL.com, about-face.org, and Blue Jean Online. In "What are gURLS talking about? Adolescent girls' construction of sexual identity on gURL.com," Grisso and Weiss's examination of discourse about sex on bulletin boards of this Web site found that it offered a safe, supportive environment for girls to talk openly about sexual issues and concerns. However, much of this discourse appropriated sexual scripts from the media, and girls were concerned with male pleasure rather than their own, reinforcing stereotypes about gender and heterosexism.

Merskin examines About-Face as a space for a “jammer girl” identity that disrupts the false dichotomy of good girl/bad girl in “Making an about-face: Jammer girls and the World Wide Web.” Similarly, in an analysis of Web site content and discourse, Walsh found that Blue Jean Online provides an alternative online magazine for girls that challenges dominant gender discourse and emphasizes political activism and social change in “Gender, power, and social interaction: How Blue Jean Online constructs adolescent girlhood.” The Web site analyses found that indeed, there are sites where girls are participating in safe spaces and talk openly about issues such as sexuality and where they are challenging gender stereotypes. However, Grisso and Weiss could have put additional emphasis that some of this discourse may include policing in heteronormativity and gender stereotypes, thus hindering the safety of the environment.

Four chapters explored girl created girl-created content and fandom. Harewood and Valdivia’s chapter, “Exploring Dora: Re-embodied Latinidad on the Web” examines discourse about identity in posts on a parent bulletin on the *Dora the Explorer* Web site. They found that posts policed boundaries between Latinidad and whiteness and used tropicalizing discourses of Dora as the exotic other; focusing on appearance and emphasizing the Spanish language. They argue although the Web offers a “disembodiedness” that can transcend representation, the body politic narrative reinserts itself as a way to enforce and police borderlines about ethnicity and mainstream culture. Scoudari’s “You’re sixteen, you’re dutiful, you’re online: ‘Fangirls’ and the negotiation of age and/or gender subjectivities in TV newsgroups” explores how teen girl fans of television shows negotiate subjectivity and identity in Usenet groups. Scoudari found that although users can adopt various positions in regards to the same text, Angela McRobbie’s popular culture teen codes of romance, fashion and beauty, personal and emotional life, pop stars and music, and elements of romantic individualism are upheld in the data. Gregson’s “What if the lead character

looks like me? Girl fans of Shoujo anime and their web sites” analyzes girl-created fan Web sites of *shoujo* anime (animation created by women for a female audience, known for its female lead characters). Although girls were found to be active in online anime fan culture (stereotypically a male realm), they were more concerned with romance and *bishonen* (beautiful boy) characters than the lead girl anime characters. Mazarella examines girl-created fan Web sites of teen idol Chad Michael Murray. Her textual analysis reveals that girl creators reproduced norms from teen idol celebrity magazines, created a fan community by discerning “true fans” through celebrity knowledge accumulation, and participated in the adoration of male celebrities, which represents a way that teen girls to cope with new feelings about the transition to sexuality. These chapters illustrate that girls are actively participating in fandom spaces by creating Web sites and posting to bulletins to discuss popular culture. However, the underlying discourse often reconstructs heterosexist norms where girls recreate hegemonic tropes concerned with body image and beauty, romance and relationships, and males as heroes.

The final three chapters on computer-mediated communication were the most fascinating because readers hear the most of girls’ voices and uses of Internet technology. The researchers examined girls’ use of Internet, instant messaging, and chat behavior through ethnography, participant observation, narrative analysis, and interviews with girls. McMillan’s wonderful ethnography of how the Internet is used by teenage girls in India explores how girls use the Internet in their everyday lives. Girls used the Internet mostly for email and surfing the Web, they used it mainly in groups at cybercafés, and were exposed to a variety of content that reinforced their changing global, local, and individual identities. For these girls, the Internet played an important part of their leisure activity and empowered them with agency to distinguish themselves apart from cultural norms imposed on them. Thiel’s “IM me: Identity construction and gender negotiation in the world of adolescent girls and Instant Messaging” found that for

twelve girls of different races and backgrounds, IM provides a sense of freedom because it is an unsupervised space with the absence of parents, girls felt more comfortable conversing in IM as compared to face-to-face, and some used it as a diary function. However, with this freedom girls expressed more profanity, aggression, and meanness than they would in face-to-face communication. Clark's "The constant contact generation: Exploring teen friendship networks online" examined how 56 teen and tween adolescents used cell phones and online chat. *Constant contact*—always being connected to friends and family—was important to girls, who felt they could communicate better through online writing and chat. Constant contact was also used to maintain social hierarchy, to talk about gossip and rumors, and to talk about popular culture as a catalyst for wider discussions about personal belief systems. Similar to Thiel, Clark found that being in constant contact provided girls with freedom from parental supervision and more control in self-presentation. These chapters show how girls rely on the Internet primarily as a peer communication tool (more than the phone or face-to-face conversation), and it is a way to keep in *constant contact* with friends and family, experiment and assert identities and roles, explore emerging sexuality, reinforce social hierarchies, and distance themselves from parents.

One final chapter that seemed a bit out of place from the others was Edwards' "Victims, villains, and vixens: Teen girls and Internet crime." In a framing analysis of newspaper reports about Internet crimes committed by and against girls, Edwards found three major frames that construct girls as victims of the Internet, emphasize the police as the only heroes who can save them, and highlight our civil liberties as the ultimate sacrifice we have to make in the battle to protect girls. Most importantly, Edwards found an absence of girls as sources in the articles—an omission of girls' voices.

Although the authors use various qualitative and quasi-quantitative approaches, while providing insight on case studies, the methodology used lacks the rigor of

quantitative generalizability. The studies also lacked a longitudinal focus and several required more diverse girl participants. In addition, researchers who studied online postings and girl-created Web pages must take caution in assuming that the content has been posted by girl users or that interactions take place within an “all female environment” without knowing exactly who the authors are. In one chapter, it was unclear what the direct connection to girls was, as it examined parent discourse (Harewood & Valdivia).

In addition, some authors, even after finding evidence of transgressive behavior and affirmations of heterosexist, stereotypical norms about gender, claimed girls enact agency and perform the ability to make their own choices. Although girls are participating in “safe” girl-oriented places where there is a sense of community and support, and where there is evidence of identity play and negotiation, some of these spaces include flaming, aggression, policing, and gossip. Authors such as Grisso and Weiss authors seem overly utopianist, idealizing places where girls may practice discourse that can be hurtful and unsafe.

Most articles seek to explore whether Internet content and practices—some girl created—either challenged or perpetuated stereotypes about women. Unfortunately, most authors, with the exception of Merskin and Walsh, found that girls are participating in ways reinforce stereotypes about women and girls, including concern with body image, appearance, and gender roles.

Today, just two years since the book was published, new issues that girls face online have emerged. These issues, such as multi-tasking, user-generated content (MySpace and YouTube), cyber-relationships (with issues of pornography, cyber-sex, cyber-dating, and cyber-violence), cyber-bullying (virtual harassment), gaming for girls, and e-marketing towards girls need to be addressed. And one website—Blue Jean Online—is already dated, as it no longer exists.

Overall, *Girl Wide Web* provides a diverse overview of girls' issues in the Internet landscape, and offers a ray of hope that girls online are participating a space where they are challenging gender norms, negotiating identity in new ways, and participating in safe, supportive online communities. However, there are evident problems and challenges girls face that question Mazzarella's utopian vision of a "Girl Wide Web."

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