Me, Myself, and My Blog:
Girls' Self-Expressions on LiveJournal

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I report findings from an empirical study involving twenty female adolescent bloggers. I sought to explore the ways in which girls use their blogs to express and explore their identities. During the course of in-depth interviews, the girls discussed their motivations for blogging, its role in their daily lives, and the value they perceive in this activity. They described the opportunities that blogging affords them for unique forms of self-expression. At the same time, the girls noted several ways they censor themselves online. Writing with their audience in mind, they are careful to present a specific self-image. I explore the apparent tension between girls' self-expression and self-censorship online.

Keywords

Gender and identity; Internet and youth; girls' studies

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents are using blogs as personal journals to record and reflect on their experiences, relationships, and feelings [2,3,24,26]. Although many well-known blogs provide political commentary, most people use their blogs for personal expression to record and reflect on their daily experiences [16]. Bloggers tend to be young, with 54% under the age of thirty [16]. Data from the PEW Parents & Teens 2006 Survey show that the number of teen bloggers in the United States doubled between 2004 and 2006 [17]. Fully 28% of online teens were bloggers at the end of 2006, compared to 19% at the end of 2004. Adolescent girls are considerably more likely to blog than adolescent boys. Whereas 20% of online boys reported blogging in 2006, 35% of online girls said they were bloggers.

As teens' enthusiasm for blogging grows, many of the adults in their lives express concern about their public disclosure of personal information, ranging from their geographic location to chronicles of their friendships and romantic relationships [22,26]. These adults worry that such online self-disclosure may result in various forms of victimization at the hands of peer bullies and adult predators [28]. They express particular concern about the

psychological and physical well-being of teenage girls [5].

There appears to be a disjunction between adolescents' keenness to participate in online spaces and adults' worry over the potential risks. Within this context, I conducted an empirical study involving 20 female adolescent bloggers who had been blogging for at least three years in a popular online journaling community called LiveJournal. Through in-depth interviews, I sought to identify the girls' motivations for blogging, the ways in which they express themselves on LiveJournal, and the role that blogging plays in their everyday lives. In this paper, I present the findings from these interviews and discuss the value that the girls said they receive from blogging. I consider how these findings might be used to bridge the apparent gap between adolescents' and adults' perceptions of online communication.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Girls' Developing Sense of Self

Beginning with Hall's foundational writings, theorists of human development have characterized adolescence as a period of active self-construction [13]. According to Erikson, identity development is the primary task of adolescence [6]. At this time, individuals rework their childhood identifications as they begin to consider their role in the larger society. Erikson described the social nature of this process, explaining that individuals rely on feedback and recognition from others to shape their understanding of themselves.

Gilligan was among the first scholars in the United States to focus specifically on girls and articulate a theory of adolescent girls' developing sense of self [4,11,12]. Like earlier theorists, Gilligan emphasizes the relational nature of girls' developing sense of self. She argues that girls' healthy psychological development depends largely on their ability to express themselves authentically in the context of supportive relationships. According to Gilligan, girls who are able to join their inner and outer worlds through authentic self-expression are said to be communicating with strong voices. Gilligan observes that, unfortunately, many girls experience a loss of voice during the transition from childhood to adolescence. As they develop the ability to think abstractly, some girls perceive a disjuncture between their values and society's values. In response, they hide certain parts of themselves in an
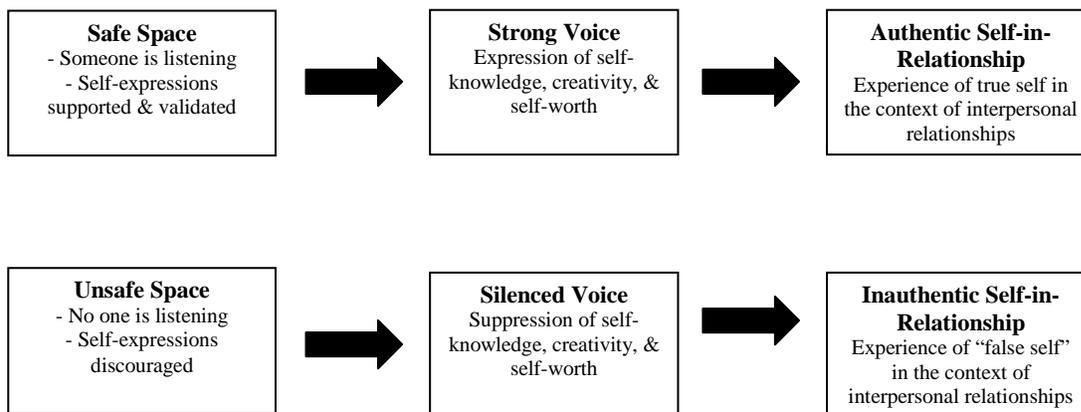
attempt to conform to society's expectations of them. As they silence their thoughts and opinions, their inner and outer selves become compartmentalized, or dissociated. Gilligan claims that this loss of voice places girls at psychological risk during adolescence. *Figure 1* depicts Gilligan's account of strong and weak voices as two psychological pathways, one that leads to an authentic self-in-relationship and one that leads to an inauthentic self-in-relationship.

girls face online [3]. In most cases, girls use online spaces to communicate with their close friends. At the same time, they understand that these personal communications could be viewed by a potentially large and unknown audience.

Since most studies of adolescents' online activities typically involve content analyses rather than face-to-face interviews [2,26], little is known about girls' perceptions and experiences of their online selves. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by including the voices of 20


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┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐
│     Safe Space      │ ───▶ │    Strong Voice     │ ───▶ │  Authentic Self-in- │
│ - Someone is        │      │ Expression of self- │      │    Relationship     │
│   listening         │      │ knowledge,          │      │ Experience of true  │
│ - Self-expressions  │      │ creativity, &       │      │ self in the context │
│ supported &         │      │ self-worth          │      │ of interpersonal    │
│ validated           │      │                     │      │ relationships       │
└─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────┐
│    Unsafe Space     │ ───▶ │   Silenced Voice    │ ───▶ │ Inauthentic Self-in-│
│ - No one is         │      │ Suppression of self-│      │    Relationship     │
│   listening         │      │ knowledge,          │      │ Experience of       │
│ - Self-expressions  │      │ creativity, &       │      │ "false self"        │
│ discouraged         │      │ self-worth          │      │ in the context of   │
│                     │      │                     │      │ interpersonal       │
│                     │      │                     │      │ relationships       │
└─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────┘
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Figure 1. Two pathways depicting Gilligan's account of voice and its impact on authenticity in interpersonal relationships.

Harter and her colleagues tested Gilligan's assertion that a loss of voice places adolescents at psychological risk [14,15]. According to their findings, adolescents experience a lack of voice as a lack of authenticity in their relationships. When they do not speak what they feel, adolescents believe they are not being true to themselves. Harter calls this experience "false self" behavior. According to Gilligan, the experience of at least one authentic relationship, or "psychological safe house," can help guard against girls' loss of voice. In the context of such a relationship, girls are able to communicate openly without fear of ridicule or rejection. Third wave feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards observe that the pioneering work of Gilligan and other second wave feminists has created greater opportunities for today's girls to experience authentic relationships [1].

Girls Online
Scholars have explored the potential for online spaces to serve as "psychological safe houses" in which girls are able to share their thoughts and feelings with each other [3,5,20,23,25]. Yet, this scholarship reveals an apparent paradox. Some studies, such as Mazzarella's investigation of teen fan sites, suggest that girls experience online spaces as supportive communities that allow for free and authentic self-expression. Other studies, such as Stern's analysis of girls' personal websites, find that girls censor their online self-presentations due to their awareness of a public audience [25]. In some online spaces, it appears that girls engage in simultaneous self-expression and self-censorship. Bortree attributes this paradox to the "dual audience" that

teen bloggers. The findings reported in this paper provide insight into the girls' perceptions of opportunity and risk online; their reflections on the dynamic between online self-expression and self-censorship; and the degree to which they experience their online selves as authentic or false.

METHOD
The participants ranged in age from 17 to 21 years. All girls had been blogging for at least three years on LiveJournal, a popular online journaling community. Each participant took part in an hour-long, semi-structured interview between May and December 2007. During the interviews, I asked the girls to reflect on their motivations for blogging, the ways in which they express themselves on LiveJournal, and the role that blogging plays in their everyday lives.

My analytic approach involved writing field notes during and immediately after each interview; summarizing major themes and personal impressions in reflective memos; and drafting analytic memos that explored relationships and discrepancies within and across participants [19,21]. In addition, I drew from my memos and the relevant scholarship on girls' development and online participation to create a coding scheme that I used to analyze each transcript in a systematic way. This coding process allowed me to confirm, revise, or reject my initial hypotheses. Throughout my analysis, I consulted with members of the GoodPlay research team to discuss emergent themes and discrepant data.

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FINDINGS

The girls in this sample said that LiveJournal affords them a unique opportunity to express parts of themselves that often go unexpressed offline. At the same time, they described different ways they censor themselves and the strategies they use to present a specific self-image. Despite this self-censorship and their reflection that LiveJournal is only a partial self-representation, most girls maintained that their LiveJournal self is no less authentic than their offline self. To illuminate these themes, I have chosen to focus on one girl in the sample and explore her blogging experiences in detail. In the process, I explain why Gilligan's pre-digital conception of authentic self-expression does not adequately represent girls' online experiences.

Jill[1]

Jill, age 17, had just completed junior year (11th grade) of high school at the time of our interview. Blogging since 7th grade, she had participated in two other blogging communities, DeadJournal and Xanga, before she opened her LiveJournal account in 2003. Her decision to move from one blogging community to another was largely influenced by her friends' blogging practices and her desire to share this experience with them. Jill was one of seven girls in this sample who presented herself as reserved and introverted. She answered my questions with a soft voice and did not elaborate on her answers. Jill spoke about her recent struggle with an eating disorder, but claimed that she had recovered. She talked about the role that blogging had played in her recovery.

Jill spoke about the value she receives from maintaining a measure of distance from her LiveJournal audience. She noted that she appreciates having the opportunity to organize her thoughts before communicating them to others. She commented, "I feel like I can say what I want to say, then I can go back and change it and make it make more sense. Because sometimes when I talk it doesn't make a lot of sense." In addition, Jill observed that the physical and temporal separation from her audience meant that she can, "just say something, and have no one like talk back to me about it." It appears that, for a reserved girl like Jill, the asynchronous nature of communication on LiveJournal provides a sense of security.

Jill said that LiveJournal was particularly valuable to her during the time of her eating disorder. She did not feel comfortable sharing this difficult experience with her friends and family offline, because she felt as though she would be judged negatively. When Jill expressed this side of herself on LiveJournal, she received supportive comments from her friends. Even though she was friends with many of them offline, she claimed that LiveJournal was a better way to talk to them about such a sensitive topic. In this online context, she explained that her friends could keep their initial, unfiltered reactions to themselves and respond instead with care and compassion. By talking

about her eating disorder on LiveJournal, Jill did not feel the burden of overcoming it alone.

While Jill discussed the freedom she feels to express herself on LiveJournal, she also talked about ways that she censors herself online. For instance, she said that she tries not to write about her friends, because she does not want to risk offending anyone. Further, she explained that thinking about her audience while blogging affects her writing:

> I think at the beginning of when I write, or like halfway through, I decide if I'm going to make it just for me [private] or for my friends. And if I'm going to make it just for me, I write whatever I want. But if I'm going to make it for my friends, I try and filter myself.
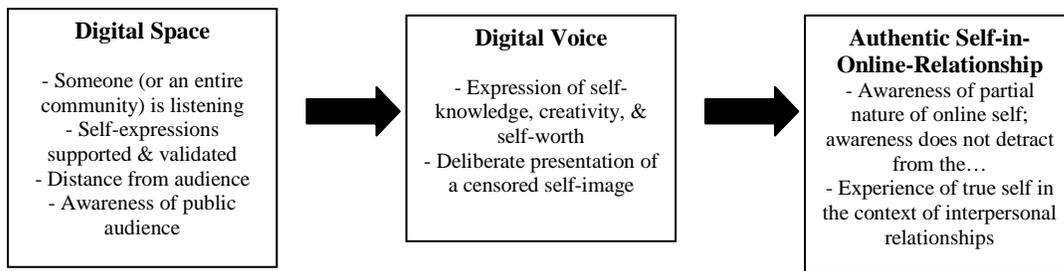
Here, Jill describes how the awareness of her audience influences what she says on her blog. She also remarked that she writes in full sentences and avoids using "Net Speak," explaining that she wants to be taken seriously on her blog. Evidently, Jill is aware of the public nature of her online self-expressions and mindful of the image that she conveys through her writing.

Jill's concurrent self-expression and self-censorship on LiveJournal can be examined in light of *Figure 2*. The "digital space" that she described bears resemblance to the "safe space" depicted in *Figure 1*. Operating as a safe space, LiveJournal provided Jill with an outlet to express an uncomfortable side of herself (her eating disorder). Not only were her friends listening to and supporting her expressions, they were doing so at a safe distance. At the same time, Jill talked about her efforts to construct a specific self-image on LiveJournal due to her awareness of a public audience. She is careful to present only those aspects of herself that align with the image she wishes to portray. Thus, the voice she speaks with online does not match either the "strong voice" or the "silenced voice" depicted in *Figure 1*. Instead, Jill speaks with a "digital voice" that is both expressive and carefully controlled (see *Figure 2*).

Jill's digital voice gives rise to a distinct type of self-authenticity online, represented by the third panel in *Figure 2*. Jill was one of only three girls who described a marked disjunction between her online and offline selves. When asked to compare her LiveJournal self with her offline self, she noted that the former conveys a distinct and incomplete self-representation. Her LiveJournal self is distinct because it highlights "what goes on in my head," and it is incomplete because it lacks all the details of her life. Despite this dissimilarity, Jill portrayed her writing on LiveJournal as an authentic form of self-expression. Like the majority of girls in the sample, the partial nature of her online self does not render it inauthentic. Indeed, the fact that the readers of her blog can gain insight into her inner thoughts and feelings suggests that Jill does not regard her online self-expressions as "false self" behavior.

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[1] This name is a pseudonym to protect the participant's confidentiality.

Digital Space		Digital Voice		Authentic Self-in-Online-Relationship
- Someone (or an entire community) is listening - Self-expressions supported & validated - Distance from audience - Awareness of public audience	→	- Expression of self-knowledge, creativity, & self-worth - Deliberate presentation of a censored self-image	→	- Awareness of partial nature of online self; awareness does not detract from the… - Experience of true self in the context of interpersonal relationships

Figure 2. A proposed pathway depicting the distinct expression and experience of voice online.

DISCUSSION

Turkle observes that every era holds a different conception of psychological well-being [27]. Gilligan conceived of psychological health as inhering in authentic self-expression [11,12]. According to Gilligan, adolescents who join their inner and outer worlds and speak with a strong voice are more likely to experience psychological health than adolescents whose inner and outer worlds remain disconnected. However, the "digital voices" that girls use online do not appear to fit neatly into Gilligan's account of strong and weak voices because they are neither silent nor unhindered. Moreover, they are experienced in a different kind of safe space and give rise to a different kind of self-authenticity.

The concept of a digital voice can be illuminated by considering its foundation in a post-traditional society. Several theorists have described the effect that such a society has on the way in which the self is constructed, experienced, and expressed [9,10,18,27]. They observe that a traditional society is marked by stability – in knowledge, institutions, traditions, and social roles. Conversely, a post-traditional, or postmodern, society is characterized by constant flux. Such a society may give rise to a new sense of self that is fluid and changing, rather than constant and stable [9].

Gergen questions whether authenticity is possible in the absence of a unitary and stable self [9]. If the self is understood as fluid and multiple, it becomes challenging to identify an underlying core that can be labeled genuine. Lifton asserts that multiplicity and authenticity need not be incompatible [18]. He attempts to reconcile the apparent tension by introducing the concept of a protean self. Lifton contrasts the protean self with the fragmented self, which he associates with the process of dissociation. Referred to as splitting by Freud, dissociation is a mental process that arises when the mind becomes separated into discrete parts that do not communicate with each other [8]. Gilligan describes adolescent girls' removal of parts of themselves from public display as a form of dissociation [11]. According to Lifton, a fragmented self parallels the process of dissociation in the way that its different facets remain compartmentalized and uncoordinated.

The protean self is also composed of multiple facets, but it differs from the fragmented self in its search for coherence. Lifton's account of the protean self is compatible with a web-like conception of human development [7]. At certain points in time, some strands along the web of development may appear separate and uncoordinated. Gradually, however, these disparate strands become integrated. This process of differentiation and integration resembles the process by which the protean self calls on its multiplicity in search of coherence. Lifton argues that it is this deliberate search for coherence that makes authenticity possible in the context of multiplicity. He claims that in today's postmodern world, authenticity does not inhere in the full expression of a singular self; instead, it emerges from the effort to find coherence in an individual's many forms of self-expression.

The Internet is a distinctly postmodern space that undercuts traditional notions of temporal and geographic location. The complexity of the postmodern self and its web-like development seem well-suited to such a space. As Turkle notes, digital selves embody multiplicity and fluidity in the way they are constructed and expressed [27]. While she acknowledges the potential for fragmentation in the face of this multiplicity and fluidity, she also recognizes the opportunity to realize Lifton's conception of the protean self [18].

It appears that the unique blend of self-expression and self-censorship described by Jill and the other girls in this study bears closer resemblance to the protean self than the fragmented self. Jill echoed the majority of girls when she declared that her online self, while partial in nature, is nevertheless a true self-representation that allows her to experience authentic interpersonal relationships online. She did not appear concerned about omitting parts of herself from LiveJournal, apparently regarding such omissions as a necessary aspect of online communication. Her comments support the proposition that, instead of giving rise to a fragmented self, online spaces like LiveJournal are able to support the development of girls' protean selves.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample I used for this study was not randomly selected; thus, I do not claim that my findings are representative of

all female adolescent bloggers. Moreover, I do not suggest that the "digital voice" pathway presented in *Figure 2* embodies the blogging experiences of all twenty girls in this sample equally well. Nevertheless, I do suggest that the girls' online self-expressions are more adequately represented by this model than Gilligan's "pre-digital" account of girls' development. The validity and usefulness of the digital voice model should be tested with a larger and more diverse sample.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate how traditional conceptions of adolescent development may need to be reconsidered in light of the distinct nature of girls' online self-expressions. Specifically, I attempted to show that Gilligan's "pre-digital" account of voice does not adequately represent the "digital voices" used by the girls in this sample. Neither strong nor silent, these voices are experienced in a distinct space and result in a distinct experience of self-in-relationship. This self may be partial in nature, but it is nevertheless a true self-representation.

The findings reported in this paper could help to close the apparent gap between adults' fears over Internet victimization and girls' attraction to online spaces. The girls in this sample were well-versed in the risks associated with their online activities and took measures to protect their privacy. At the same time, they articulated a variety of benefits they receive from participating in these supportive and non-threatening communities. Armed with an understanding of girls' motivations for and processes of online self-expression, adults may be better positioned to engage them in a constructive conversation about the risks and benefits associated with networked communication.

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