

## CREATING AND REGULATING IDENTITY IN ONLINE SPACES

Girlhood, Social Networking, and Avatars

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Claiming identity is a complicated, fluid, and complex process. For girls, it often means actively taking up or denying popular discourses around feminine ideals, to some extent at least, or blindly following along without much consideration of such issues at all. Either way, how girls negotiate identity in online places is as diverse and varied as the individuals<sup>1</sup> themselves, their economic and material locations, and their shifting purpose for engaging with technology. But the options on offer to girls as they construct avatar self-images are less fluid. Among the locations in which girlhood identity is being constructed socially and culturally, personalized avatar sites designed for the online creation and sharing of avatars on social networking sites promise a space for the cultivation of uniqueness and individuality. When girls are asked to create an avatar self-likeness—what might be conceived of as a form of visual self-narrative situated within commercially designed online spaces—and when they are asked to discuss their creative decisions among themselves by way of critically reflecting on their choices of representation, a cultural politics involving multiple relational power structures is uncovered. The personalized avatars constructed online reveal that normative discourses of girlhood and the media-generated beauty myth not only reside in cyberspaces, they also discipline and regulate these self-representations. Even within a symbolic economy in a virtual space, dominant discourses assign power to notions of idealized beauty and brand loyalty. And for the girls claiming identity here, indeed, claiming a space of belonging in this space, it is no more straightforward in an online context than it is in the hallways of high school.

In this chapter I endeavor to explore how even in an online world where girls have claimed a vital space, the construction of personalized avatars and the girls' reflective comments about them serve as evidence of a greater understanding for both the girls and, by extension, for me

as researcher, of the power structures (still) residing within girlhood. I will begin by exploring notions of girlhood identity, especially as it relates to style as a kind of social skin, and I will draw from scholarship on alter-ego forms of avatars as a way of positioning this work and distinguishing it from earlier work in this area. I acknowledge work by scholars conducting identity work with youth, for whom the connection between virtual and real worlds is mutually constitutive (Kafai et al. 2007; Valentine and Holloway 2002). In this work, *place* is conceived of as a widely mediated electronic space, and I employ Foucault's (1967) notion of *heterotopia* (a placeless place in which one can see oneself where one is not) to describe the social networking spaces these girls occupy.

Next, this chapter will explore how teenage girls at once regulate themselves and others through the construction of their personalized avatars and what they consider to be the social implications of sharing personalized avatars in social networking spaces. The domain of policing is not limited to the girls' creative decisions during the construction of their avatars, however, since the sites that invite the construction of such self-images also contribute to the regulation of girlhood representations. Finally, this chapter offers an opportunity to hear and learn from a group of teenage girls about how they experience the cultural politics of identity construction and how a placeless place influences who they are and who they want to be in this context.

The teen years are a critical time for the development of identity. Pinar tells us that "in studying the politics of identity, we find that who we are is invariably related to who others are, as well as to whom we have been and want to become" (2004: 30). The focus of this chapter is on these relational identities, some deliberately considered (as with self-monitoring by peer groups on social networking sites) and some ubiquitous but subtle (as with lifelong hegemonic gender codes of popular culture). More specifically, it will include the voices of a group of girls who provide guidance to a broader understanding of the politics of identity representation. Before turning to the research findings, I first position this work within the scholarship on girlhood identity generally and on avatar identity in particular.

### **A Placeless Place: Locating This Work**

A range of scholarship in girlhood studies makes clear that identity making and concomitant social relationships emerge fluidly through a collaborative engagement with popular culture and a negotiation of

complex and often conflicted notions of belonging, desire, and fantasy (Currie and Kelly 2006; Mazzarella 2005; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2008; Pomerantz 2006; Poyntz 2006; Stern 2007). While teenage girls are often interested in claiming a coherent identity, rarely are their conceptions of their self-representations straightforward. The implications of this relational nature of identity become salient as the girls in my study present avatar images layered with their embodied dreams. Scholarship in girlhood identity has found that brand possession and girlhood style have the potential to act as currency in the market of peer acceptance (Driscoll 2002; Jiwani et al. 2005). Moreover, when girls' subject positions are repeatedly located within discourse that values a Western ideal of feminine beauty (Levin and Kilbourne 2008) across multiple genres and multiple cultural representations (for example, music video, television, and magazines), then these positions are more readily accepted and taken up as normative (Gilbert 1989).

Furthermore, a cultural currency resides in online sites' promise of an opportunity to construct a unique self-representation. That which is considered cool is often manifested as an object of desire that can be purchased as a gateway to peer acceptance and belonging. And cool is often marketed as the ability to express a unique look—the infinite humanist promise that individuality *can* reside in spaces where subjectivities are claimed and represented. As a result, despite a belief that they have the capacity to represent themselves through forms of individual creativity, the girls in these spaces become unwitting victims of a kind of identity conformity. These social discourses are mixed, however, and are confusing in that they come from competing regimes. MTV, for example, offers a barrage of sexualized themes promoting scantily clad girls and young women as the objects of heterosexual male fantasy and desire, while conservative political agendas remind girls of the virtues of innocence and wholesomeness (Dines 2011). Even the once-wholesome images of the youthful innocence of Disney's stars are confounded as they (Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Miley Cyrus) morph their charming schoolgirl choreography into raunchy soft porn gyrations.

## Creating a WeeMee

In my research (Morrison 2010, 2011), the term personalized avatar is used to describe the avatars created on the weeworld.com site and to differentiate them from those in fantasy genres and online gaming in which alter-ego and role-playing identities are encouraged. The word avatar, derived from Sanskrit, means descended from the gods. From

this definition, avatars might be conceived of as hyperbolic representations (Butler 2005) of subjectivity where idealized bodies should be anticipated. Thomas (2007) suggests that the close and selective editing involved in creating an avatar is literally rewritten or traced over by desire, not to mention its being deliberately posed or performed as a statement of identity. For Thomas, children and youth are more likely to exaggerate their identity in avatars through gender performance rather than engaging in what Turkle (2005) refers to as the kind of gender-swapping that is commonly reported with adult experiments online. However, the weeworld.com site is designed for users to create a *unique* WeeMee. In fact, as their name implies, WeeMees are intended to be autobiographical. They are designed for use within the ever-developing virtual WeeWorld site, but also as a form of digital image signature in multiple online interactions such as social networking sites and instant messaging. In fact, there are options built into the WeeMee site to export an individual's WeeMee to just about any computer, tablet, or phone screen.

Over a decade ago, Kolko (1999) debunked the once-popular belief that the physical self is separate from the self of online representation. She found that identity play in graphic virtual reality (GVR) games like *Second Life* allowed experimentation, empathetic identifications, virtual border crossings, and a sense of the non-unitary nature of identity. She also noted that markers of identity such as gender or race are not within the sole control of the users creating the avatars; she argues that the author of an avatar is masked behind the producer of the program that allows its construction—a significant point explored in depth by the girls in my study.

More recently, Kafai et al. (2007) found that when tweens construct avatars in the context of a virtual world called Whyville.net—a large scale multi-user GVR—avatars become a form of complex self-exploration in what can be described as a kind of identity workshop. Drawing from Donna Haraway's (2003) seminal cyborg manifesto and the notion that feminist coalitions ought to be made more on the basis of affinity than on identity, Thomas found that one of the most important aspects of how girls' identities are shaped online relates to a sense of community belonging or "coalition of affinity" (2007: 23). This was in accord with her earlier findings (2004) that the avatar images girls produced were either consistent with ideals of Western femininity and beauty or else they were statements of resistance and rebellion. Her findings demonstrate how cyber bodies are often encoded representations of fantasy and desire. As one participant in Thomas's later study puts it: "It's me minus the things I don't like about me" (2007: 9).

## **Creating a Contemporary Paradigm for Girlhood Research**

The method of research employed in this project recognizes an inherent tension between attempting to be true to lived experience and being aware that the nature of experience and any representation of it are always partial and always political (Fiske 1996; Saukko 2003). As a form of new ethnography, it employs a cultural studies methodology to examine everyday lived experience, and it does so in the context of its natural (or as natural as can be possible) existence. A feminist poststructuralist lens is employed with both modesty and reflexivity (Britzman 2000) to make visible dominant and regulating discourses and social power as these relate to avatar graphics, in order to make sense of how girls understood themselves and others in this context.

The ten girls who participated in my study came from across Canada, although they only ever met in a secure online space during the summer of 2009. Their ages ranged from thirteen to sixteen years, with six being fifteen or sixteen and four being thirteen or fourteen. By design, the project recruited the girls from Facebook, where they were invited to create an avatar as part of a study. From here, the study moved to a secure forum site where they assumed pseudonyms (which are used below), shared their avatars, and discussed their creative choices with other participants. In this space I acted as a facilitator while the girls directed the line of questions they found relevant about their creative intentions. Eventually, and since the avatars they created were designed for use in multiple forms of digital communication, the girls were asked to discuss whether or not they would post their avatars on Facebook as their profile pictures.

## **Styling a Unique Avatar—One Just Like Everybody Else Has**

Long before having to consider the social implications of posting an avatar as a profile picture on a social networking site, the girls were asked to describe their avatars. My intention (Morrison 2011) was to see which part of their descriptions would be given primacy. Their responses relied heavily on physical description and on claims of being unique. Often they described the avatars by saying, “It’s so me!” While attending to physical details like skin tone, eye color, and hair color for their avatars, descriptions of their clothes and hairstyles occupied a significant part of their discussions. Their elaborate descriptions of style choices should not be surprising, since scholarship in girlhood culture reminds us that girls are already schooled in the expectations of

shopping for clothing, trying on outfits, and discussing style in spaces where girls forge bonds of friendship and connection (Driscoll 2002; Levin and Kilbourne 2008). Even in virtual space, style functioned as a powerful social marker (Pomerantz 2006). There is also an understanding that these kinds of practices might allow for taking risks and trying on clothes that would never be worn in public. When these behaviors are theoretically conceived within a virtual space, WeeMee avatars allow for a virtual reproduction of these girlhood practices. While these avatars do not actively woo members into hegemonic or patriarchal discourses, their work is much more subtle. They prey on a desire to belong, to be cool, all while promising the effect of being unique.

As something always in progress, dependent on context and forever relational, performances of identity, as I found, relied at times on what Davies (1992) called “forced choices” (46), or what I came to describe as a sutured identity. On several occasions, the lack of accumulated points<sup>2</sup> combined with the limited options on the WeeWorld site meant that normative discourses available to the girls served as structural restraints in shaping the way they constructed their WeeMees. Like Kolko (1999) had observed years earlier, the girls’ avatars were masked behind the limits of WeeWorld. Cutie-Pi articulated the challenge the girls experienced when they could not find the attire, accessories, or objects of affiliation that they wanted: “[We] try to express it as best we can but are confined to the options that the program offers.” Theoretically, if style is conceived of as a kind of social skin and as an embodied subjectivity, it can also be understood as a form of agency for the girls. Seen this way, the WeeMee site both promises uniqueness and denies agency at the same time. Pomerantz explains: “Agency is related to the decisions we make and actions we take *within*, and not outside of, discourse’s effect. In other words, girls make decisions within a range of possibilities. This way of thinking about agency suggests that girls’ choices of style are not without limitation; they are not entirely ‘free’ choices.” (2008: 66) Questionmark explains her navigation through the process of finding the desired clothing for her avatar in a way that demonstrates this kind of agency. Her self representation is limited, but still within a range of other possibilities: “I had trouble choosing the shirt because I had seen a plain shirt with a white blazer over it, *but it cost 500 points, which I didn’t have!* When I chose a different shirt that was free, I had trouble choosing a colour. It took me a long time to choose shoes, because *the checker flats that I wanted also cost points, and I didn’t really like any of the other shoes.*” On the surface, it might appear to be not very important that a girl cannot find the shoes she wants for her avatar. In terms of identity creation, it is not, by itself, a significant

factor. However, when taken in combination with other socially limiting discursive practices over multiple media platforms, the effect over time is significant for it contributes to a larger hegemonic cultural ethos. In another episode, Questionmark's self-narrative is silenced in a more profound way. She explains: "I broke my leg: I tried to find crutches or a cast for my WeeMee but they had none." Because of her broken leg, she would not be playing volleyball or figure skating, yet this self-narrative is impossible, and she opted instead to represent herself in a manner authorized by the WeeWorld site. The absence of options such as a cast or crutches (or wheelchairs, for that matter) functions as a semiotic restraint by limiting her represented identity. In her quest to construct an accurate representation of herself, Questionmark made a second avatar. It (she) is dressed neatly, standing at a school locker with a volleyball at its (her) feet. Questionmark revealed that, even with multiple avatars, she did not get to share her interest in acting, writing, and other sports. Even though she had to settle for a makeshift skating dress, no sports jersey, and no crutches, she was satisfied enough with this example of a sutured identity.

As the study progressed, a more complex understanding of the girls' subjectivity emerged as they discovered that, at best, their personalized avatars could capture only a limited self-narrative. This began with a revelation that the avatar might not be able to provide the kind of accurate self-representation it promised. The girls began with an expectation (and even a promise) that they would be able to represent the self in a manner that is physically (if not stylistically) accurate. They soon learned the difference. One of the key ideological ploys of identity is that we are coaxed into claiming a singular identity: "this process involves recruiting subjects to the specific meanings and values constituted within a particular discourse and encouraging identification" (Weedon 2004: 19).

Cherrytree articulates this best. Because she opts to represent herself as a singer, a number of other self-narratives are not possible:

My avatar doesn't show that there are other things I love besides music  
& clothes, such as, family & friends & theatre & movies & more.  
It doesn't show that I enjoy school, & that I'm an honour student.  
It doesn't show that I am very soft-hearted, & would do anything for my  
family.  
It doesn't say that I am stubborn at times, or that I worry a lot.  
It doesn't show that I'm a people person, & very good with kids.  
There are many things that the avatar doesn't show, but it's just like me.  
If you look at me, you probably wouldn't be able to see these things either.

Her observation demonstrates a keen awareness that what you see, whether in person or in avatar form, presents a limited image of identity. It also demonstrates that Cherrytree is not willing to buy into her WeeMee as a unified self-image.

## **Regulating the Online Self: Being Judged on Style**

The five older girls in my study (Cherrytree, Princess, Butterfleye, Livie, and Shorty) all described the social scene at their high schools and revealed the existing tensions and complex negotiations around peer groups, popularity, symbolic meanings, and social power. Much of the tension they felt reflected conflicting positions around the clothing they wore and how they anticipated being judged by others. Cherrytree explained that in real life, “[k]nowing you may be judged by what you wear definitely influences the things you wear.” Princess, too, acknowledged the power of this symbolic economy. “Sometimes, and it’s a shame, people judge you by the way you look. Most times people don’t want to get to know you before [they] decide if you are a nice or good person or not, they just look at your outfit [or in this case a picture] and if you don’t look like someone they would be friends with, then they just pass you in the hallway.” The ubiquitous nature of online social networking places girls (and their images) into the surveillance culture, where, like living in Foucault’s (1977) panopticon, they are under the objectified gaze of peers and suspicious adults. Even when this gaze does not fall directly upon them, girls often regulate their representations according to the discourses of that gaze until eventually they begin to participate in discourses that invite it. The result is a constant insecurity and questioning of their bodies, their clothing, their complexions, their hairstyles, and their sex appeal. In the anticipation of the gaze they regulate their representations. One of the most revealing findings of this study was that girls felt the weight of judgmental gaze upon them even in terms of their cartoon self-images. Given the cultural currency and pervasive nature of social networking, the girls engaged in a kind of pre-emptive censorship born of a deep awareness that their peers would judge them based on the way their avatars looked. Butterfleye explains: “I’d like to think that people don’t judge us based on our looks, but I know that it happens often. That’s why I think it’s important to choose a picture that represents you, not what society says you are.” Cherrytree was even more specific about who was applying the social pressure. She wrote, “A lot of girls judge other girls by what they wear.”



And Cherrytree must have felt the weight of that gaze upon her when she vigorously defended her avatar with its midriff-baring top.

My avatar may come off as 'skanky' because of the belly top, but that is not what my avatar is saying about me.

Before long, she provided insight into the high stakes of cultural codes and hegemonic assumptions: she was the first to ask if she could make a second avatar. Perhaps the belly top represented a risk that she later reconsidered. It was clear that Cherrytree was worried that she had performed her girlhood identity incorrectly, and she was eager to dissociate herself from the undesirable social code implied by the belly top. She explained, "Even though you should be able to wear what you want & not care what people think, it is hard sometimes when people [in] society are cruel & make fun of others or make assumptions about the type of person they are. I think this may apply to people when choosing style for their avatars." Cutie-Pi also wrote about how audience perceptions added pressure to girls to present an image that conformed to social expectations. She makes reference to feeling pressure from "the whole school society," and admits to constructing her online self-images in order to gain social approval from her peer group.

### **The Cultural Politics of Class**

The girls in my study are surrounded by popular media discourses that afford social status to those who wear trendy clothes and who own lots of material possessions. From the time they are young, girls are schooled in the notion that they are what they wear, and such ideas have colonized their play for generations. For over fifty years young girls have learned that Barbie's identity is defined by what she wears and what she owns (Steinberg and Kincheloe 1998). More recently, discourses of idealized Western beauty have been complicated by the popularity of Bratz dolls. These dolls do not abide by standard notions of Western beauty, but they have sexy clothes and accessories that demand attention (Levin and Kilbourne 2008). In both cases, clothing and style suture identity to discourses of femininity and material wealth. Walkerdine (1997) found that the promise and desire for upward class mobility led young girls to believe in narratives that promised fame and riches, even in their early forms of play.

A similar illusion can be sustained on the WeeWorld site, where girls are able to mobilize common signifiers of wealth, even though they do not have the economic means to do so in real life. They can still have

virtual designer clothes and handbags; they can position their personalized avatars in exotic virtual places; and they can be affiliated with objects of their desire. In a consumer culture, spending and possessing material things contributes to the illusion that one belongs to a class for which such items are readily accessible. In nearly every case, the girls constructed their WeeMees to include highly valued virtual material items (or what the girls called bling), and combined this with positioning their avatars in exotic backgrounds (like Paris or on a tropical beach). This provided the girls with a kind of virtual cultural capital that might not be available to them in their real lives.

Popular culture positions girls as flawed in comparison to images of idealized beauty. The WeeWorld site does not position them as ugly or lacking; it does the opposite. Any possibility for users to be positioned as imperfect is removed, while opportunities abound for them to present themselves as ideal. The message on the WeeWorld site is clear: girls are encouraged to position themselves according to discourses of consumer culture and emphasized femininity. Economic barriers that might exist in the real world are removed in this virtual site with a promise to represent the *real* self. It is the compelling lure of an idealized identity.

## **Regulation in Cultural Discourses: Identity Not of Our Making**

Signifiers of social/cultural resistance such as tattoos or body piercings may be gaining mainstream popularity, but no such symbolic forms of resistance existed as options on WeeWorld at the time of this study (Morrison 2011). Neither were signifiers of visible disability such as casts, crutches, or wheelchairs (though the latter two options exist now). Indeed, the option to construct a fat avatar did not exist either (aside from the small belly option that male avatars could choose), confirming observations by Cooper (2007) and Thomas (2004) about the absence of real body types in cyberspace. Perhaps creating idealized representations conjures a desire to represent the self in an idealized form, or it may reflect a social reality mirrored in commercial and entertainment culture. It might also reflect a desire to reject or turn away from these pop cultural codes.

## **Avatars as Profile Pictures**

With an awareness of the social pressures in their online spaces, the girls engaged in a debate about whether they preferred to use avatars

or photographs as profile pictures on Facebook (conceived of here as an affinity space). At issue was the importance of posting something that would not only be an accurate self-representation but also a public statement of identity. Most agreed that with an avatar they could project their wishes, dreams, and fantasy lives more than they could with a photograph. However, the girls told me that the pressure that came from gaining social acceptance in their peer group meant that the stakes were higher in terms of the first impressions these representations would make. Making a wrong first impression could be a disaster. Butterflye explained the utopian promise and regressive pull embedded in this choice: "Profile pictures should reflect who you are, not who society tells us you should be. First impressions are everything, and if someone gets the wrong impression of who you are, because of your avatar or profile picture, it can be everything from embarrassing to downright dangerous." Shorty added another dimension that considers the unintended audiences of these avatars or other forms of self-representation: "I agree with Butterflye about first impressions. They are very important and you only get to make them once. The way we represent ourselves on the Internet may seem harmless until a teacher or a future employer stumbles across your Facebook page and some inappropriate photos ... I think accuracy is important and you should represent yourself truthfully but you don't need to display every part of your private life." Overall, the girls expressed a general lack of enthusiasm for using their avatars as profile pictures, betraying an apparent contradiction. The girls observed that their avatars were able to represent them accurately with the exception of a few (albeit sometimes significant) limitations. Yet when asked if they would be willing to use these avatars as their profile pictures on social networking sites, they all agreed that they preferred to use photographs. Perhaps this contradiction reflects the complex nature of girlhood and the cultural politics of representation in these sites. Another explanation for their reluctance to use avatars might speak more to the fact that digital photographs have more currency in their world. Social networking sites in many ways depend on the uploading and sharing of digital photographs. The rapid uptake of non-gaming avatars in other locations (Korea, for example) might indicate a global trend toward personalized avatars as a form of online identity representation, but while WeeWorld has an interest in becoming the standard in personalized online and mobile identity creation in North America and Europe, these avatars may not yet have become common currency in a youth market in Canada. Posting an avatar as a profile picture for these girls might require taking a social risk that they are not yet (or ever) willing to take. In the end, when the

girls were asked if any of them would be willing to use either of her avatars as her profile picture on Facebook, the answer was that they would not.

## **Conclusion**

The girls initially believed that they could construct an accurate cartoon self-image. However, what unfolded was an understanding of how contrived, socially constructed, and commercially influenced versions of girlhood are, not just in this space, but everywhere. One of the most significant findings from this study came about because the girls were unable to represent themselves accurately. They came to an understanding about the non-unitary nature of identity and of the unrealistic promise of uniqueness. And they found that they often had to settle for a sutured identity where the options for representation were weighted heavily in the domain of emphasized femininity. Despite the illusion of choice provided by contemporary consumer culture, Buckingham (2003) reminds us that identity is socially and culturally assigned, made available and made possible with language and through media discourses, which increasingly includes social media. This phenomenon is seen in the very limited choices available on the WeeWorld site when users have no accumulated points or if they are unwilling to pay for the virtual items. The highly valued (and heavily promoted) items the girls could choose for their avatars extol the virtue of owning more things as part of an ever-changing fashion market that values the latest trends, even online. This is in no way intended as a criticism of WeeWorld specifically; this site is not unique in its positioning of girlhood identity in these terms.

The girls in my study told me that they feel this pressure just as strongly in online networking spaces, and especially where they use any kind of self-images. The study demonstrated the mobilization of already sanctioned codes such as for clothing styles, hairstyles, makeup, and body piercing work to signify compliance or resistance to normative discourses in pursuit of girlhood identity (Driscoll 2002). More than providing a visible code for identification in real-life locations, they also exist in the symbolic economy that governs their digital spaces where group membership is defined and where girls can be included or segregated as members of particular groups in online spaces (Thomas 2007). Pomerantz argues that nowhere do girls feel the social repercussions of style more acutely than in school: “for girls—particularly in school—social visibility depends upon style; girls’ identities are contingent

upon it" (2006: 176). I would offer that even with personalized avatars, the hallway repercussions line cyberspace as well.

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## Notes

1. I have used pseudonyms throughout this chapter.
2. According to a response to a query directed to the WeeMee site by KupkakeLuvX3, "[t]here are many ways to earn green and gold points, but you can also buy them with a credit card, Paypal, or just send in cash to pay for gold or green points. If you don't have the money, or want to use your money on something else, you can earn them. To earn gold points you can go to the 'Earn free gold' button under 'Get Gold' and earn them by watching videos, completing offers, and filling out surveys. You can earn green points by buying stuff for your WeeMee or Room(s), chatting with friends online, sending messages, completing quests, and so on. There are also video ads that pop up every once in a while. If you watch them you can earn 1-5 green points." <http://www.weeworld.com/home/KupkakeLuvX3/blog/blogentry.aspx?id=9436155>.

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