THE GIRLS OF MYSPACE:
NEW MEDIA AS GENDERED LITERACY PRACTICE AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

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While many composition scholars have eagerly embraced the promise of computers and other technologies in their pedagogical practices (C. Selfe, 1999, 2004; Wysocki, 2004; Sirc, 2002; Gee, 2003), not everyone views technology as a positive influence on writing instruction and production in this country. One particular genre under fire is social networking sites used by tech-savvy teens and others to post images, information, and diary-like blog entries. Latest estimates put the leading social networking site, MySpace, at 110 million active users with one in four Americans reported to have a MySpace profile (Owyang, 2008). The site is the fifth most visited site on the Web (Alexa, 2008) with millions logging on each day. It may, therefore, be negligent of those in composition studies to ignore a technological pastime taken up by so many of our students and based almost solely on users' composing practices involving both text and images. Although many have dismissed MySpace postings as nothing more than a teenage fad, the new medium's emphasis on multimodality, community building, and identity construction suggest this rhetorical practice is worth studying as one of the most prominent new media texts being utilized by young people.

This pilot study focuses on a sampling of profiles (the material "text" for MySpace) composed by females age 16-18 to interrogate the intersection of technology, gender performativity, and identity construction in this cyberspace. This pilot study is useful in classifying MySpace as the latest new media text being appropriated by women to build and expand their own notions of gender, specifically femininity, and also explores feminist research methodologies necessary for exploring such new media settings. Guided by the work of feminist researchers (Hill Collins, 2000; Naples, 2003; Sandoval, 2000) this study pays particular attention to an often marginalized group – teenage females – and the MySpace mode of communication that is so often marginalized within the academy.

Utilizing textual analysis, narrative, and some quantitative measures, the study considers rhetorical choices involving text, image, and design as well as ways such new media texts are influential in community building and performing modern feminine adolescence. With an emphasis on MySpace as a remediated new media text (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), this work explores the ways use of multiple media change both message and author (Manovich, 2001;
Kress, 2003) and traces out this literacy practice as the latest used by women in constructing their on- and offline identities. A historical account of women's use of new media texts in recent centuries traces the lineage of women's appropriation of existing texts in the form of commonplace books, scrapbooks, autograph albums, note passing, and online texts. This study then utilizes a methodology steeped in both feminist and techno-feminist approaches with emphasis on textual analysis of a sample of 25 profiles interconnected by two primary profile creators. Relying on four guiding research questions, this work focuses mainly on the role MySpace plays in the performance of both womanhood and teenhood as well as ways utilizing the variety of media embedded within the MySpace application may shape users as rhetors and tech users as well as part of a larger community. The findings of this pilot study allow a better understanding of how teens are defining themselves and performing femininity within the MySpace community and may offer insight into future research and critical approaches to this and similar online communities and literacy practices.
Dedication

For my mom, who made me believe I could do anything.
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CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW AND JUSTIFICATION

While many composition scholars have eagerly embraced the promise of computers and other technologies in their pedagogical practices (Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004; Sirc, 2002; Selfe, 1999), not everyone views technology as a positive influence on writing instruction and production in this country. It is nearly impossible to switch on a television or open a magazine or newspaper without being informed of the devastating effects the Internet and other technologies – text messaging, video games, etc. – have on grammar and language usage as well as our children's very safety and self-esteem. One particular genre under fire is social networking sites used by tech-savvy teens and others to post images, information, and diary-like blog entries. Although many such sites exist – including Xanga and Facebook – the most popular and thus, for many, most suspect is the cybercommunity MySpace.

In fact, in July 2006 the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006, a bill intended to "protect against access to a commercial social networking website or chatroom" at public places like schools and libraries (U.S. Senate, 2006). Although the bill stalled in the Senate's Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, controversy surrounding MySpace only increased in 2007 with four lawsuits filed by parents on behalf of their daughters, children the lawsuits claim were assaulted as a direct result of their online MySpace activity (Suit links, 2007). In January of 2008, MySpace officials entered into an agreement with attorneys general from 49 states and the District of Columbia to “develop technologies and work with law enforcement officials across the country to better protect children” (Benderoff & Kridel, 2008) and software is being developed outside of the company for security and surveillance, including the YouDiligence social networking monitoring service intended to track the online activity of college athletes (Sander, 2008). Despite the fears
expressed by lawmakers, parents, and educators, MySpace continues to flourish. Latest estimates put MySpace at 110 million active users with one in four Americans reported to have a MySpace profile (Owyang, 2008). The site is the fifth most visited site on the Web (Alexa, 2008) with millions logging on multiple times each day to update their profiles and visit online friends.

Recent scholarship by Mike Thelwall (in press) presents a snapshot of the typical MySpace user as 21, female, single, with a public profile, and interested in using the site mainly for friendship. This study of more than 20,000 profiles reveals a concerted “youth bias” to the space (Thelwall, in press), allowing for the possibility that many users may actually be younger than reported due to identity play and also age restrictions requiring users to be at least 14 to access the site. While it is impossible to say definitively the average age of MySpace users, it is apparent that this is a space dominated by young people. The Pew Internet & American Life Project, by the Pew Research Center (2007), reported that 55 percent of online teens age 12-17 have a social networking profile. There is no denying the popularity of social networking sites with millions of users logging on regularly and apparently a large portion of those visiting these online spaces are young people, the same young people who populate our composition classrooms. It may, therefore, be negligent of those in composition studies and education to ignore a pastime taken up by so many of our students and based almost exclusively on users' composing practices involving both text and images.

Of the educators taking note of MySpace usage, many are concentrating almost solely on the possible dangers of the practice, with countless magazine articles and news show segments warning parents and educators to monitor young people's use of such sites. According to Joanne Barrett (2006) in *Multimedia & Internet@Schools*, "The first concern for educators about these sites is safety" (p. 10). Such safety concerns, and perhaps legal woes, prompted MySpace to
develop a software program – code-named Zephyr – allowing parents to monitor a minor's username and posted age (Magid, 2007). Not everyone, however, is convinced that online dangers pose the overwhelming threat the popular media publicizes. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (2003) posit that instances of online dangers are exaggerated and often less pressing than offline ones (p. 89). Perhaps, then, before passing more laws and bans and thereby implying that online spaces are unsafe, particularly for young girls and women, studies like this one can contribute to a better understanding of ways young people actually operate within these spaces and how they are constructing and being constructed by them. This study seeks to demystify the practices of young women in cyberspaces and to challenge perceptions of online femininity limiting woman only to sexual object or easy mark.

While young people's online safety is obviously a concern for both parents and educators, perhaps our first concern as teachers should be understanding this phenomenon and how it affects the way young people communicate online and in the classroom. Cynthia L. Selfe's (2004) warning to composition instructors about the perils of ignoring emerging technologies is especially important in light of the MySpace controversy. She advises teachers to begin:

- paying attention to the whole range of literacies that students bring to the classroom. … Students … are often the first to experiment with new kinds of texts, to discover new literacy values and practices. They are also the first to understand the functions new media texts fulfill in their lives. When teachers begin to pay some respectful attention to the new kinds of literacies students develop in these electronic contexts, composition classrooms might become better places in which to learn and teach. (Selfe, 2004, p. 57-58)
This emphasis on multimodality – specifically in regards to new media texts – persists among composition theorists and Selfe expanded her ideas at the October 2006 Thomas R. Watson Conference in Rhetoric and Writing held in Louisville, Kentucky. There Selfe explained to composition instructors and theorists the limitations we inflict on ourselves and our students when we do not validate new forms of expression:

> When we insist on print … (u)nwittingly we may limit students' rhetorical approaches to the bandwidth of our own experience. … What I am arguing is that we provide students with all available means of persuasion, not just the ones we are familiar with. When we limit our understanding of composition as a single modality we ensure that our instruction is less than accessible.

Although many have dismissed MySpace postings as nothing more than a teenage fad, the new medium's emphasis on multimodality, community building, and identity construction suggest this rhetorical practice is worth studying as one of the most prominent new media texts being utilized by young people. It is important, therefore, to first interrogate in this chapter the meaning of the term "new media text" in current composition theory. While recent scholarship often limits this phenomenon to computer-mediated texts, I argue that the definition needs to be much broader, especially in relation to the texts women are writing and allowing themselves to be written by. This concept of composition as identity construction is at the heart of this project and is what makes MySpace a community and practice deserving of study. With an emphasis on women's rhetorics, I will trace out some of the leading historic and modern new media texts utilized by both authors and readers (society) to construct and question identity. For centuries, and now with MySpace, women have "written" themselves into the existing male-centric dominant ideology and thus frequently gravitate to mediums not initially intended for women's
use or edification. In adapting such media to their purposes, women are remediating both the media and societal roles available to them and are simultaneously reinscribing and disrupting the available categories for "woman" in our world. Exploration – and the sometimes expansion – of such identity categories through composition most often takes place between adolescence and adulthood and so this study will focus on a sampling of profiles (the material "text" for MySpace) composed by females age 16-18. Clearly this sampling is insufficient for drawing overarching conclusions about MySpace and similar online literacy practices, but is useful in classifying MySpace as the latest new media text being appropriated by women to build and expand their own notions of gender, specifically femininity. Recent qualitative and quantitative studies of MySpace focused on demographics (Thelwall, in press), friending practices (boyd, 2006), and even writing classroom uses (Brown & Donohue, 2007), but there remains a gap in research involving feminine identity construction specifically. A close reading of profiles created by young women allows an understanding of rhetorical choices not available through statistics alone. This pilot study will begin to identify trends of usage and representation among female MySpace users through a textual analysis of 25 profiles and the apparent rhetorical choices involving text, image, and design made by the profile designers.

Welcome Friends: MySpace Defined

MySpace, an Internet phenomenon and meeting place for millions online, was created in 2003 by Tom Anderson, a film major and musician, and marketer Chris DeWolfe. The site originally began as a sort of cyber-gig where unknown musicians could showcase their music (Barrett, 2006) and has since morphed into an online hangout for people of all ages, with a special emphasis on teens and 20-somethings. Nearly half of those using MySpace in 2005 (9.2
of the 20.6 million users in 2005 were registered as ages 12 to 24) were young people regularly utilizing the site's mix of media and networking as part of their personal literacy habits (Hempel & Lehman, 2005). MySpace, billed as "a place for friends," is intended, according to the site's "About Us" page, as an online community for everyone from "friends who want to talk Online" and "single people who want to meet other Singles" to "families who want to keep in touch" and "business people … interested in Networking" (2007). Users build contacts of all sorts by sending “friend requests” to other users – a sort of email invitation to be listed on another user’s personal profile site. In fact, each new user begins MySpace with at least one included “friend,” creator Tom Anderson. Whether MySpace is used as a singles' bar, family reunion, or even portable conference room, the medium itself remains integral to the beginning and strengthening of social bonds.

Perhaps the site's musical heritage, or the very nature of hypermediated texts themselves, results in a composition practice blending audio, video, visuals, and alphabetic text. Links to multiple media and networks available to MySpace users appear on the site’s homepage (see Figure 1) and includes everything from videos to ringtones.

Figure 1: Screen Capture. Links to Media on MySpace Homepage. [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)

Not only are MySpace community members invited to connect to existing media beyond the MySpace interface, but they are also expected to use multiple media to create their own profiles. According to MySpace creators, "Your profile is Your Space on the Web, where you can
describe yourself, hobbies, and interests. You can even upload pics and write journals” (About Us, 2007). Each new member of MySpace receives a standard, blank template that will serve as their somewhat standardized homepage and base of operations for containing information about themselves and also for connecting to other MySpace members. The basic MySpace template (see Figure 2) lists age, location, gender, and other personal statistics as well as a place for users to identify themselves visually via a photo appearing at the top, left-hand corner of the profile. Prompts also encourage adding personal or popular video and “pics” to this representation. Additionally, the site encourages users to share their "latest blog entry" and written information via the "Blurbs" box. Many users also load original or downloaded songs to play on their pages.

Figure 2: Screen Capture. Standard Template for MySpace Profile. www.myspace.com/jenalmjeld

The popularity of MySpace has invited much conjecture. Is it the ease and speed with which users can have a sort of personal homepage up and running that attracts so many users?
Does popularity breed popularity as more and more users are drawn there simply because others are already there? Does the convergence of multiple media simply reflect modern composers preferred way of communicating in this medium-conscious and technologically-rich age? This project has neither the ability nor intention to answer such questions, but will instead concentrate on ways teenage females are using the space and how this use is tied to past female literacy practices. Thus, this study will focus on the use of MySpace in the personal realm and as a community and identity builder for young women.

Before focusing on feminine uses of MySpace and other new media texts, it is necessary to situate MySpace within the field of composition as both text and literacy practice. This chapter will consider differing definitions of new media and will review scholarship casting new media as both academic and personal educator. Despite the continuing and often documented success of new media in the classroom and private realm, many continue to dismiss such texts as inappropriate for the academy. Historically texts composed by women, and now those privileging communication styles other than alphabetic text, were labeled unscholarly. However, as computers and composition was established as a field in its own right, the use and valuing of new media texts as both objects of and tools for scholarship has grown. Many educators, in composition and various other fields, now incorporate such texts within their curricula, but this inclusion has not completely erased questions of evaluation and appropriateness for such texts alongside other academic texts. Finally, this chapter will explore feminist theories of identity construction and performativity in order to see how historic and modern new media texts write both those composing them and the society consuming them.
New Media Texts Defined

Defining new media texts continues to be a challenge within the field of composition. New media “is an enormously general and hence vague term,” according to Martin Lister, et al. (2003), "yet its utterance suggests certainty, as if 'the new media' already exist here and now as fully achieved material and social practices" (p. 9). For some scholars a medium's materiality is not always relevant (Wysocki, et al., 2004), but much composition scholarship now focuses on new media texts as technology-based formats and genres not previously considered appropriate or germane to composition studies. Lev Manovich's 2001 *The Language of New Media*, for instance, focuses almost exclusively on computer-mediated texts when discussing new media. Similarly, the authors of *New Media: A Critical Introduction* (2003) see "digitality" as one key to new media (Lister, et al.), but their definition of new media is a bit broader than Manovich's. Additionally, pedagogical theories centering on digital mediums including wikis, chatrooms, blogs (Barton, 2005; Herring, et al., 2005; Weller, Pegler, & Mason, 2005), webpages (Sirc, 2002), and other computer-based formats are now commonplace in modern composition scholarship. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's seminal text *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000) explores the ways in which new media are constantly re-writing and reappropriating contemporary media. Gunther Kress (2003), discussing the ability of new media to remake existing forms and modes, sees computer technologies and media as especially important in shaping users and other media. "The combined effects of the changes in the [computer] media and in the uses of modes reach further still;” according to Kress, “they are not confined to the screen, but affect all media and all modes" (p. 21).

This action of remediation, of remaking an existing medium, is, for Bolter and Grusin (2000) and other composition scholars, a "defining characteristic of the new digital media" (p.
45) and the concepts of immediacy and hypermediacy become essential in defining not only new media products and artifacts, but also new media users. Immediacy, according to Bolter and Grusin, refers to the attempt to erase the medium and focus solely on content, while hypermediacy privileges interaction with the medium itself. This distinction is especially important when discussing MySpace, a technological pastime spawning its own language both online and off. Users frequently turn this cyberspace into a playful putdown or T-shirt slogan ("you looked better on MySpace") or into a verb when, for example, planning "to MySpace" someone. The ability for the medium to transcend the computer screen and move into the offline world proves the medium itself and not the content presented therein is the real draw to this literacy practice. The desire to connect with the MySpace interface and with others utilizing the same medium seems much more powerful than any desire to so fully immerse oneself in the MySpace community that the medium itself becomes transparent. MySpace users have no wish to remove the artificial confines of the medium in order to experience reality (as is the case with virtual reality programs and the like), but instead crave the socially-sanctioned interaction with the medium. In the case of MySpace, the medium is quite often the message and participating in the literacy practice is much more important than the tangible products (be they written, visual, audio or other) or sharing of information that may result.

This need to interact with and create new media is not limited to computer applications, however, and is not a modern concept at all. Bolter and Grusin actually provide examples dating to the Enlightenment to demonstrate the seemingly limitless genealogy of new media. Media including painting, photography, and film predate the computer and seem to lay the groundwork for the remediation now taking place online. "What is new about new media is therefore also old and familiar: that they promise the new by remediating what has gone before," according to
Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 270). And just as Bolter and Grusin found it impossible and impractical to offer a complete history of new media texts in their own work, I will refrain from attempting a thorough timeline of women's new media usage. Instead I will limit this study to several of the foremost modes women have historically utilized in order to remediate both the existing mediums and texts of the age and their own identities. By examining common feminine modes of personal education and identity construction, such as women’s commonplace books, we begin to understand MySpace’s role in feminine maturation and exploration rather than simply as the latest widget to catch teenagers’ fancies.

New Media as Educator

New media texts have a rich heritage as tools of personal education. For centuries students have been gathering bits of speeches, letters, and other writings from popular scholars captured in a variety of media to make later use of in their own personal and academic lives. What often results is a sort of personalized manual for public performance. For this study of MySpace, I am most interested in focusing on the use of commonplace books – personalized texts created by students and citizens alike – for personal edification and social mobility. These books, which enjoyed prominence for centuries, often included both textual and visual bits of cultural knowledge that were collected by bookkeepers and reconfigured, or remediated, to convey new meanings and serve the personal needs of the collector. The idea of commonplaces originates with Aristotle and his *topoi*, or four types of commonplaces from which student rhetors could choose topics for their speeches. Later, Erasmus and other humanist educators envisioned commonplace books as locations where male students could collect examples of successful rhetoric (Lockridge, 2003, p. 337). In a time when textbooks and other works of
literature could not be easily obtained, ancient students learned to catalog the words of others in their own handwriting for later use. The importance of recording knowledge in one’s own hand is traced to ancient Roman rhetorical training as educators believed students could be “habituated into both skill and virtue” (Murphy, 2001, p. 36) and thus this practice of personalized, lifelong learning as seen in the keeping of commonplace books continued for centuries with privileged male students keeping notes of their learning as models and resources for future public speaking and writing.

Finally, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the art of commonplace bookkeeping found its way into the realm of the womanly. Young women of “better families” spent hours in the parlor collecting, clipping, and arranging words, images, mementos, and sometimes their own written thoughts in books in an effort to increase their abilities as letter writers and conversationalists. Such texts offer a perfect example of the ancient desire and need to remediate existing media (in this case magazines, poetry books, and letters) to produce both new texts and new experiences for bookkeepers. Chapter Two discusses in depth the need for women especially to turn to media of their own fashioning in an age when education and its implements were often denied them.

*New Media Texts Frequently Misunderstood, Mistrusted*

Although commonplace books enjoyed hundreds of years of prominence, few contemporary new media texts seem as readily embraced in academic settings. Perhaps the reliance on alphabetic text, the preferred mode of the academy, eventually afforded commonplace books and similar historic new media texts validation, but modern new media texts often face obstacles in the academy. Despite the pleas of various composition scholars
(Selfe, 1999; Wysocki, et al., 2004) to incorporate more new media text assignments to engage technologically savvy students, there remains much contention concerning assessment of such assignments and to what extent these projects offer transferability of rhetorical skills to traditional academic writing. This scholarly tendency to mistrust and dismiss certain content and formats persists in many institutions of higher education. James Paul Gee (2003) explains the trepidation often surrounding new modes of discourse and knowledge-making:

The problem of content is, I believe, based on common attitudes toward school, schooling, learning, and knowledge. … The idea is this: Important knowledge is rooted in, or at least related to, intellectual domains or academic disciplines like physics, history, art, or literature. Work that does not involve such learning is meaningless. Activities that are entertaining, but that themselves do not involve such learning are just "meaningless play." (p. 21)

Just as Gee's 2003 *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* has recast gaming as an important cognitive activity, MySpace profiles can be viewed as constructed arguments created not by accident but through conscious rhetorical decisions. By carefully selecting visual depictions, textual elements, and other design elements, profile composers create and privilege specific online identities. MySpace emerges as the latest in new media texts; a remediation of webpage design, note passing, personal diary, autograph album, scrapbook, and commonplace book. MySpace may be especially interesting as the latest, wildly popular feminine new media literacy practice, a practice capitalizing on this generation's infatuation with all types of media and resulting in the exploration of young women's identities and narratives.
Previous New Media Scholarship

Considerable work has been done to encourage and validate the use of new technologies in educating the next generation of writers and to take advantage of the knowledge those writers may bring to the composition classroom. For example, Gee's study of video gaming echoes Selfe's (1999) cautions about dismissing literacies and practices the academy is unfamiliar with or considers apart from real learning. "We can learn a lot from those young people who play games," Gee insists, "if only we take them and their games seriously" (2003, p. 10). Gee finds himself defending and elevating the world of gaming in much the same way I hope this project will seek to meaningfully explore and gather useful insights from the world of MySpace. For Gee, gaming itself is not the issue; rather he is interested in "the potential of video games" (2003, p. 9) for spawning critical and creative thought. Gee's work, then, urges us to align what happens in the classroom with what happens in our technology-rich lives beyond the academy (p. 7) and therefore finds learning happening within what was previously regarded as a frivolous video and computer gaming fad. Additionally, much has been done concerning other teen computer literacy practices (Alexander, 2006; Mazarella, 2005; Merchant, 2001) with special emphasis on blogs in some cases (McDaniel, 2005; Bortree, 2005; Herring, et al., 2005), but studies focusing specifically on the MySpace setting are rare and work concentrating on gendered identity construction in this space seems particularly lacking and worthy of scholarly investigation.

Although MySpace and related social networking sites have many similarities to blogs, MySpace differs by introducing a rigid set of templates for measuring identity (via musical interests, favorite TV shows, number of friends, etc.) that blogs seem less restrained by. Whether they are aware of it or not, teens are using such sites to explore, expand, and create their identities, both online and offline. Robert Samuels' (2006) Integrating Hypertextual Subjects,
explores the impact new media have on the institution and constituency of higher education. In accordance with Bolter and Grusin (2000), who published their text before the emergence of MySpace and many other contemporary programs and new media practices, Samuels describes the ability of technology users to both shape and be shaped by media. "The user or reader becomes one with the program," according to Samuels, "and experiences his or her self mirrored both inside the screen and inside his or her own consciousness" (2006, p. 143). Thus it would seem that MySpace users' identity construction and performance are not limited to the confines of the MySpace cyber-environment, but also draw from and continue to influence users' offline lives as well. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (2003) note the reach digital technologies have in affecting the wider culture beyond the computer screen recognizing multiple ways “media culture, computers, genetic engineering, and other emerging technologies are dramatically transforming all aspects of life … It is a world where multimedia technologies are changing the very nature of work, education, and the textures of everyday life” (p. 76). It follows, then, that the features and options embedded within the MySpace profile templates are teaching young people to define themselves in cyber and other spaces in relation to prescriptive categories, provided adjectives, and limited visual options. These available options for identity representation are conformed to or questioned by the profile creators via text production, image selection and placement, and other rhetorical strategies.

*MySpace as New Media Text*

MySpace clearly has cultural currency based solely on popularity and prevalence in daily conversations. But, relying heavily on the theories of Bolter and Grusin (2000) and Kress (2003), I contend that MySpace also seems worthy of scholarly attention as it is an important new media
text in at least four ways: (1) it remediates existing media and also privileges the MySpace medium itself; (2) it is governed by a logic different from alphabetic text and therefore is open to multiple readings; (3) it is historically situated and as such both constructs and reflects culture; and (4) it constructs, both consciously and unconsciously, the identities of users.

MySpace as new media: Remediating existing media

First, MySpace's emphasis on synthesizing and remaking existing media may make it particularly appealing to many users and most certainly qualifies it for classification as a new media text. For Wysocki, et al. (2004), it is "useful … to think of 'new media texts' as texts where we keep their materiality visible" (p. 19). This reliance on the medium for meaning-making is uncomfortable for many, maybe especially those more accustomed to traditional academic texts, but actively selecting an appropriate medium/media forces users to attend to such tenets of academic writing as tone, audience awareness, delivery, and organization. In both delivery style and purpose, MySpace draws from existing media to offer users a way to combine images, video, music, alphabetic text, and other elements to create both meaning and representation. Most obviously, MySpace exists as a remediation of webpage design, a sort of pre-fab homepage offering both uniformity and ease of use as well as the possibility of personalization for those with greater technological skill. For example, applications like "Pimp MySpace" allow for customization in a setting that is otherwise purposely standardized for easier reader access and user design. Other opportunities for customization come from the ability to embed songs and video clips in an individual's space. For example, Figure 3 is an icon for a music video housed on MySpace and available for inclusion on personal profiles.
With these technological possibilities, existing popular music, television shows, film and other media products are harvested and refashioned as a mark of personal identification for whatever user chooses to include them on a personal profile. Building one’s online ethos in such spaces seems to require a command of multiple media in order to fashion a visually and technologically appealing representation that might encourage more traffic to one’s site. By combining existing media in new, unintended ways the old media are repurposed to serve a new medium and create new meaning for both user and reader. Finally, MySpace incorporates alphabetic texts and images by including a blog function for users. A definitive count of operational blogs seems nearly impossible with countless bloggers opening and almost as quickly abandoning blogs, but current estimates hover around 2.9 million active blogs (NITLE Blog Census). With the enormous popularity of the genre, the decision to include this existing medium within the MySpace template is yet another example of the MySpace medium's ability to reformulate existing media to create a richer, newer medium – one dedicated to hypermediacy.

*MySpace as new media: New rules for new media*

This combining of old media in new ways forces those creating new media texts, as well as those consuming them, to reevaluate the ways we "read" the world around us. Kress (2003)
argues that the shift from the dominance of the book to the dominance of the computer screen has changed the way we make meaning. While traditional alphabetic "writing is ruled by the logic of time; image is ruled by the logic of space" (Kress, 2003, p. 20) and so MySpace, a medium embracing both visual and textual media, requires readers to change the way they “read” texts. MySpace and other new media spaces are ruled by design principles unique to a new medium combining the rules and logic of existing media. The fact that an image representing the user is larger than the accompanying textual headline or username set at the top of a MySpace profile suggests that visual rhetoric is highly valued in this space. Additionally, where objects are placed on a profile tells visitors to the site where they should begin "reading" the profile. Most profiles place the profile creator's personal statistics and contact information at the top of the page followed by a place for listing MySpace "friends" both textually and visually at the bottom of the profile. This suggests that visitors should get to know the profile creator, then perhaps contact the person, and finally begin to build community by joining the profile creator's friend Web. Although such a design suggests starting points for profile readers, these points are not fixed as they would be in traditional alphabetic texts. "In a written text there is a path which I cannot go against if I wish to make sense of the meaning of that text," according to Kress (p. 3). "Reading the elements of an image" – or in this case a profile – "out of order' is easy or at least possible" (p. 4). This ability to determine one's own reading path is key in characterizing MySpace as a new media text.

This more flexible reading pattern is a direct result of what Lev Manovich (2001) terms the "modular structure" of new media texts. Manovich explains, "a new media object has the same modular structure throughout. Media elements, be they images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples. These elements are assembled into
larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities" (p. 30). Modular design is at the heart of Web design and can easily be seen in the rectangular structure making up most MySpace profiles including the user name and image package, the "contact" structure for reaching the profile creator (see Figure 4), and the MySpace Wall intended to house visitors' posts.

![Figure 4: Screen Capture. MySpace Contact Box. www.myspace.com/jenalmjeld](image)

This modular design allows for readers/viewers to enter the profile text at multiple points, creating multiple readings of the same profile. "A new media object is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite revisions," according to Manovich (2001, p. 36). The ability to, in a sense, create a unique reading every time you click on a profile text – even if you have visited the text before – offers more choices for both MySpace creators and readers. MySpace and other new media texts ask us to "break away from or … think and act differently than print technologies" (Wysocki, et al., 2004, p. 19) and therefore cannot help but impact the ways we both represent and interpret the world around us.

**MySpace as new media: Practice as historically situated**

These different ways of reading and composing new media texts carry influence beyond the computer screen or commonplace book page. New media texts are first and foremost a
product of the society producing them. Writing – in all its current forms and formats – "only exists because it functions, circulates, shifts, and has varying value and weight within complexly articulated social, cultural, political, educational, religious, economic, familial, ecological, political, artistic, affective, and technological webs" (Wysocki, et al., 2004, p. 2). MySpace clearly reflects and perpetuates the values and goals of the American society from which it sprang. Two key values inherent in the networking site's very construction are access (both to information and to one another) and the need for belonging. These values are mirrored and often inspired by the media used to spread such cultural goals and mores. "Technologies become significant when social and cultural conditions allow them to become significant," according to Kress (2003, p. 18). It seems, then, that the phenomenal success of MySpace is a testament to its ability to both display and encourage certain types of behaviors and ideals. First, we must consider the importance of access both in our society and in this online space.

Access is obviously an issue in this country with cellular phones, mobile Web connections, laptops with Bluetooth technology and similar devices ensuring that most of us never need to miss an email or phone call again. Being connected seems a virtue in both our modern professional and personal lives and MySpace celebrates connectedness. First, the medium itself, billed as "a place for friends," is all about connection and community and intersects traditional interpersonal relationships with the 24-hour-a-day access possible at any corner of the globe via computer technology. This system built on connecting people and technology continues to privilege personal connections for users as well. For example, with the and “Online Now!” icon appearing whenever a MySpace user is logged on, it is possible for members to track the accessibility of their "friends" at any given moment. Access then is not only defined by access to the interface, but also is a moment-by-moment proposition concerning
the availability of any user at any time. If users do happen to be offline at the moment, the MySpace template offers a myriad of options for contacting others including sending a private message, sending forwards, or posting comments on a person's "Wall" (see Figure 5).

This obsession with constant access, to both people and the technology connecting us to other people, is a reflection of our cultural preoccupation with 24-hour services and the ability to "find anything online," in this case even community. This fascination with access is perhaps rooted in our cultural allegiance, and maybe even addiction, to technology. While some continue to be skeptical of new technologies, computer applications seep into most every commercial and social scenario in our culture. This fascination with technology and resulting media reveals Bolter and Grusin's (2000) concept of hypermediacy at work in MySpace, and users seem under the spell of this medium that celebrates the ability to connect to whatever community or marker of cool one wishes by merely switching on your PC.

This sense of belonging, the second cultural value visible in MySpace, is paramount to most any teenage experience and this online literacy practice is no exception. Just as many teens seem to participate in MySpace because it is the thing to do within existing teen culture, the MySpace culture also appears to have its own rules of conduct. Those who follow the "rules" –
as defined by visual appearance and representations, eye-catching page layout, and fashionable answers regarding musical interests and other pop culture signifiers of cool – are rewarded with the expansion of their friend circle. One of the largest sections of the average, as-designed MySpace profile is the "Friends" area, which lists each person's "Top 8" friends' names and photos as well as a link to view a full directory of the user's friends. For many MySpace participants, an expanding friend list is proof of a profile's desirability and the profile designer's ability to assimilate and to belong in this community. With many users amassing hundreds of online "friends" it seems that popularity is measured in cyberspace in much the same way it is in high schools. The larger your friend circle, the more social currency you often carry and this real-world desire for approval from a friend circle seems expressed in the yearning of many MySpace users to grow their friend list exponentially.

These values, both visible and encouraged in the MySpace apparatus, illustrate the medium's undeniable tie to the society that created it. This tie to culture guarantees that MySpace – and all other media – are never neutral or free of the problems that exist in our larger society. Manovich (2001) reminds us that "new media objects are cultural objects; thus, any new media object … can be said to represent, as well as help construct, some outside referent. … New media representations are also inevitably biased" (p. 15). In the case of this study, MySpace is undeniably biased when it comes to gender roles and representations. Although the repeating of gender stereotypes and limitations is certainly troubling, especially when concerning adolescent users and composers, Kress (2003) argues that we are not restricted to static representations within media, but rather may consider new media texts vehicles for societal and personal transformation. "To communicate is to work in making meaning. To work is to change things. …
To make meaning is to change the resources we have for making meaning, to change ourselves, and to change our cultures" (Kress, 2003, p. 11).

**MySpace as new media: Constructing MySpace users**

The role of MySpace in identity construction further designates it as a new media text. "The construction of the self through a medium is nothing new," according to Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 261) and MySpace continues that tradition by providing opportunity not only for users to choose visual, audio, and textual representations, but also for these acts of representation to become a part of identity creation. In the MySpace community, as in offline communities, identity is often tied to whom one associates with and what ideas and concepts one adopts. MySpace users, then, define themselves by carefully cultivating their friend / reader circle, joining MySpace groups, and marking themselves as technology users by spending time online. While striving for commonality – via the often-occurring MySpace self-portrait photos, repeating blurbs of information about sexuality, relationship status, and religion, and consistent spatial design for pages – there is also the drive to distinguish through customization. The selection of graphic elements, color, font, and other additions to the standardized template all ask users to actively decide what identity they will convey, maybe especially in terms of gender performance. Selecting a pink background, for example, to set off provocative photos may, in fact, say something about a user both to the community viewing the profile and to the user herself. Wysocki, et al. (2004) agrees saying, "the particular shapes and arrangements and materials of our communications contribute to how we see ourselves in what we make and to how others take in what we give them" (p.12). Of particular interest to this project are the ways this medium encourages, restrains, and inspires young women to perform their own femininities. The concept
of “performing” identity is key to this project and is rooted in feminist (Butler, 1990) views of gendered identity as constructed or enacted rather than inherent within a person. This perspective allows for greater multiplicity in gender roles as men and women perform rather than simply reveal their genders. With this performance in mind, it is important to realize that most every keystroke – whether it is to add a photo or create a headline greeting for a profile – has an impact on the ways users see themselves and the ways they wish to be seen.

This act of identity creation / representation through media is particularly important to the discussion of ways new media texts specifically remediate users' personas. Among the six criteria for identifying new media offered by Lister, et al. (2003), at least one focuses on the impact media has on users. New media texts, according to the authors, offer "new experiences of the relationship between embodiment, identity, and community" and in doing so provide "shifts in the personal and social experience of time, space, and place … which have implications for the ways in which we experience ourselves and our place in the world" (p. 12). MySpace, as a new media text, offers adolescents alternate ways to experience their lives away from home, school, and other offline locations and activities. One result of this opportunity may be young people's ability to "try on" a variety of personalities – including both emotional and physical presences – that may be impossible to adopt in their regular daily lives. The concept of identity play has long been noted in digital literacies scholarship and a 2006 study of young women’s online activities (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie) focuses specifically one way female users construct representations in online spaces. In their study they discovered many girls intentionally took on or amplified characteristics not normally present in their offline personalities (p. 11). Still other girls in the study, who reported utilizing a number of digital and new media technologies including blogs, webpage design, and social networking sites, took on personas
opposite of their own or those perceived as culturally more powerful (p. 12). Similarly, teenage
girls on MySpace may experiment with provocative images and words in order to explore what
they assume are more adult and autonomous identities. The medium, then, is intimately
connected with the ways users perform their identities and genders and may even allow
exploration into the multiplicities inherent within these identities.

Writing Writers: How Texts (New Media and Others) Write Us

While pedagogical and functional effectiveness are key criteria for the appropriateness of
any medium or technology being considered for use in the classroom, it is important to realize
not only how and what sorts of texts authors are composing, but also how those texts are
composing author identity. While medium selection clearly conveys meaning to an audience, it
also provides parameters for authors regarding exactly what sort of messages are sent and how
the author may be represented. Bolter and Grusin (2000) explore how media control not only the
ways we deliver and discover information, but also the limits and opportunities we intuit for our
own identities. "We see ourselves today in and through our available media," according to the
authors. "This is not to say that our identity is fully determined by media, but rather that we
employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity" (p. 231). Kress (2003)
goes further to suggest that users – situated within complex cultural webs of competing identities
and purposes – construct and define both their own identities and the media they use according to
their personal needs. "In making … meanings as messages in these webbed domains, individuals
constantly sustain, produce and transform the resources of the technology of literacy, in line with
… needs, demands, meanings and desires .... In this way the shape of the resources becomes, and
then is, an expression and reflection of the meanings that individuals make" (p. 18). This ability
to truly make a text one's own, regardless of templates or pre-existing settings, reaffirms that
texts of all sorts are useful as sites of exploration and identity building. Kress (2003) and Bolter and Grusin (2000) remind us that this is not a new phenomenon, or one limited to new media or digital texts. Individuals have long explored their personal identities through the lens of the culture surrounding them whether practicing their future selves in commonplace books or measuring themselves by the standards of popular media including teen magazines, popular music, and television. New media texts like MySpace simply "offer new opportunities for self-definition" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 231).

This act of defining oneself takes place at both conscious and unconscious levels. In the case of MySpace, authors obviously make deliberate choices regarding images, words, songs, and other markers of identity and membership, but such authors most likely rarely consider what exactly these choices say about them, much less what their very presence on the MySpace network conveys. Samuels (2006) likens technology users to the very texts they are creating and interacting with: "On this level, we can say that student writers are like hypertexts because they are structured by multiple associations and links created by the circulation and mapping of language and culture" (p. 14). Participation in this new media literacy practice speaks of users' willingness to seek community in online spaces and therefore marks them as surely as any of the answers given about sexuality or relationship status on the MySpace info box. Although such identity construction appears to be taking place, few are analyzing exactly how such practices impact the users themselves. Samuels agrees stating, "I believe that students are using new communication technologies in productive and creative ways, but I also believe their usage is often highly uncritical" (2006, p. 3-4). Perhaps investigation of such practices by composition researchers may allow a more analytical approach to MySpace usage. For Kress, "practices can only be understood when the potentials and limitations of the tools with which one practices are
understood" (2003, p. 13). For this study, it seems crucial to recognize the impact MySpace and similar fill-in-the-blank social networking site profiles are having on young people and their ability to either replicate or resist the dominant stereotypes and ideologies in our society.

Media, and the Web particularly, are often met with allegations of furthering cultural stereotypes and of replicating rather than resisting the persistent rigid dichotomies so often seen especially in regards to enacting gender. First, it is important to realize that no medium evolves from outside of the culture that creates it. "New digital media are not external agents that come to disrupt an unsuspecting culture," Bolter and Grusin remind us. "They emerge from within cultural contexts, and they refashion other media, which are embedded in the same or similar contexts" (2000, p. 21). MySpace, as a medium then, cannot rationally be blamed for creating sexual images of young users or for some of the dangerous situations resulting from the unscrupulous and unintended usage of the medium to harm others. MySpace is not creating many of these problems and certainly not the values of consumerism or exaggerated sexuality that some may find unseemly about the online environment. Instead, MySpace, like the media before it, serves as a reflection of the society it rose from. This is not to say that MySpace users and perhaps designers do not knowingly co-opt and benefit from furthering some of these ideals, but it seems futile to blame the medium alone for the problems of sexism, classism, and violence in our world. Like the ancient question of art imitating life or life imitating art, it seems that with media, too, it is a tossup. The ideals and messages furthered in particular media, including MySpace, are affecting users, but these messages and agendas exist offline as well. Perhaps it would be more beneficial, then, to make users aware of the meanings embedded within the media they interact with than to simply create laws banning and restricting media we consider
dangerous. Removing the medium will not remove the deeper cultural ideologies constantly at work around us.

One particular issue of discussion surrounding many new media (i.e. television, film, Internet) concerns gender roles and images. For computers specifically, the very design of current hardware and software technology continues to be a largely male-produced construct and thus is often criticized for replicating the idea of woman as object rather than user or creator. The oft-critiqued concept of "male gaze" discussed in depth concerning visual media like art and film may then be applied to the discussion of computer technology. While Bolter and Grusin (2000) acknowledge the similarity between the desire for immediacy – for complete immersion within and erasure of a medium – and the desire to control and possess that is linked to male gaze, they feel that hypermediacy may offer alternatives to this subject positioning based solely on sex. The authors explain that as new media writers move from the need for immediacy "into a fascination with media," (2000, p. 84) they become not subjects but users of hypermediated texts:

New media are thus fully involved in the contemporary struggle to define the self as both embodied and mediated by the body. On the one hand, they contribute new strategies of transparency that would seem to reinforce the dissecting male gaze. … On the other hand, through strategies of hypermediacy, new media refashion the normative gaze and its implied views of male and female identity … Because transparency always passes into hypermediacy, these same new media can both enact and critique traditional beliefs about gender and self. (2000, p. 240)

Like so many other media, MySpace is often condemned for promoting an overly-sexual and provocative ideal of womanhood as well as unrealistic and hyper-masculine images of men.
Although media are undoubtedly laden with rigid and romanticized views of gender, this study is concerned mainly with how these impossible standards may apply to womanhood. To be sure, MySpace does not provide girls a gender-free haven and so it is important to understand the sorts of messages about femininity that are embedded in the medium. It is also important to recognize the potential of the hypermediacy promoted by this medium to provide a richer, more layered image of womanhood just as hypertext often provides multiple readings and interpretations of both the text and the text creator.

*Feminist Theories of Identity Construction*

The passage into womanhood is not easy or obstacle free and for hundreds of years women have turned to alternative media in order to express their thoughts and feelings. Chapter Two of this study traces the lineage of women's new media texts considering commonplace books, scrapbooks, autograph albums and other texts. These texts – often not as respected and never as widely circulated as texts produced by men of the same eras – have been utilized by women for generations because they were the only outlets available to female rhetors. Just as generations of women have endured societal limitations regarding education, profession, and basic rights based solely on their sex, modern new media continues to place demands on women concerning appearance, access to technology, and propriety. At the height of the Internet boom many scholars adopted a utopian view of technology as a gender equalizer or neutralizer. It was hoped that gender would no longer matter once people were removed from their physical bodies and surroundings and placed instead in cyber-settings. Too soon, though, feminist and techno-feminist scholars noted the prescribed gender roles and discriminations existing in the offline
world were often repeated in these new online settings (Tulley & Blair, 2003; Faulkner, 2001; Balsamo, 1999).

Anne Balsamo (1999) discusses the persistence of gender issues in technological spaces in her work, “Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading The Body in Contemporary Culture.” The author recognizes that this move from traditional bodies to technological systems should minimize gender differences and expectations because “the disappearing body is the one that promises most insistently the final erasure of gender and race as culturally organized systems of differentiation” (p. 285). However, she explains, this dream for technological equality is not realized because “contemporary discourses of technology rely on a logic of binary gender identity as an underlying organizational framework to structure the possibilities of technological engagement, and ultimately to limit the revisionary potential of such technologies” (1999, p. 288). Thus it seems that even without physical, gendered bodies present online, the technological systems themselves are too deeply steeped in traditional gendered roles and dichotomies to ever offer true gender multiplicity for users.

Undoubtedly, MySpace is a system marked by gender and identification as profile template questions focus on relationship status, age, and sexual orientation. In fact, to create a new profile a user must choose either male or female as a gender category. Leaving the question blank is not an option. This study is not interested in exploring the plurality of genders represented online, as this concept seems foreign to most software applications, but will instead focus on the multiplicities within those genders. I am interested not in exploding the gender binary, but in exploring ways MySpace and other technologies and new media texts may explode binaries within the binary. Our world is not only divided into a man/woman dichotomy, but these divisions offer further polarities concerning available roles within each gender category.
Stereotypes persist for both genders, but may be especially pertinent to this study when concerning the feminine archetypes of good girl/bad girl, virgin/whore, bride/bridesmaid, etc. It seems gender limitations go even further than male or female by offering few gray areas when it comes to the black and white classifications within each gender. Most are uncomfortable with such stringent oppositional feminine roles, yet texts continue to attempt to force us into these roles. Just as commonplace books allowed a place for women to problematize the popular image of "wife" and "mother," MySpace offers modern young women a place to problematize and remediate the feminine roles available by sampling from culture, friend networks, and their own ideas.

Although technologies often serve to continue categorization and norming practices, especially in regards to the performance of femininity, they also may problematize those traditions. “Being online does not simply replicate the larger cultural norms, but may in some respect magnify the problem,” (1999, p. 33) state authors Joanne Addison and Susan Hilligoss in their discussion of lesbian identification in online settings. "One notable effect of this actualized but delocalized self is the possibility of false or invented selves,” the authors continue (1999, p. 33). Gender, then, is not removed or really even expanded via technology, but online spaces like MySpace may foster more options for identity and performance within those gender categories and may in fact encourage experimentation and play when it comes to broadening the restrictions often associated with femininity. Bolter and Grusin (2000) point to the possibility for identity play in online spaces like chatrooms and MUDs: such spaces "have remained social environments, opportunities for (usually) young participants to conduct experiments in self-definition" (p. 258). Specifically, girls on MySpace may feel more impetus and freedom to try on different personas outside of the persistent dichotomies of womanhood and through that play
may affect change in the identities they will take on for themselves and the cultural edicts that will be passed on to future generations.

This concept of identity play is closely tied to performance, especially in regards to gender, in that both reflect choice and agency rather than mere acceptance. Addison and Hilligoss remind us that “the voluntarily assumed gender roles of these spaces challenge dominant assumptions about the relationship of identity to body” (1999, p. 33) and offer spaces where young girls, especially, may craft their own gender and identity roles – at least some of the time. Girls in online settings have available the means to shed the constraints of their female bodies and their offline personalities and to perform attitudes and values that may contradict traditional ideas of femininity. On social networking sites, girls have the chance to write and invent themselves, maybe multiple times and in various ways. Addison and Hilligoss, along with other feminist scholars, recognize the importance of "the process of naming oneself" (p. 38) and in choosing and interrogating an identity rather than merely settling for the only options available. It is true many girls on MySpace seem all-to-willing to perpetuate stereotypical roles such as woman as object of desire, but this practice may at least allow participation in one's own sexuality rather than reduction to mere object. The thought of teenage girls as sexual beings is troubling for many, but is an undeniable fact. It is also important to remember that, for many young women, this MySpace "acting" is merely preparation for adulthood. Many are trying on sexuality, experimenting with and sometimes questioning the ways they will allow themselves to be written and read by others as they approach adulthood.

In an interview in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, Drucilla Cornell (2001) remarks that sexuality and gender roles themselves are part of “a symbolic code that both imposes limits on 'who you are' as a person and at the same time is always open to … re-
imagination, or re-representation" (p. 447). Perhaps then just as new media remediates existing media, the MySpace medium may allow the remediation of existing gender roles. New media do not start from scratch when inventing themselves, but instead adopt the best of existing media practices to form more effective models. Similarly, MySpace does not offer brand new gender categories, but instead may make existing categories within those gender divisions more expansive and more workable for women of this age. This challenge to imagine new possibilities for these gendered positions falls on the newest generation of cyber-girls.

The potential to reshape reality, and even cyber reality, is inherent both in the work of feminism and the technologies now available. Feminists interested in composition studies recognize the power of women's voices and experiences in recording and shaping existence. The editors of *Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory* discuss the work of feminist composition scholars:

> For us, feminism is the effort to disrupt the ideology of domination that pervades our culture and many of our relationships. It is the effort, in other words, to eliminate relationships of domination, oppression, and elitism and the creation instead of relationships of self-determination, affirmation, mutuality, equality, and respect. (Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2004, p. 2)

One way to disrupt that system of power is to continue to question the categories and ideologies that rule so much of our existence. The work of this project, then, is to study not only how young women are performing femininity, but also to consider how they perform themselves. Chela Sandoval (2000) reminds us that "there are cultural and human forms that do not easily slip into either side of a dominant binary opposition" (p. 151) whether we are discussing gender, class, race, or any of the other ways society marks difference. Difference can never be completely
ignored in our world and just as there is no one feminism or one womanhood, there must and
should be multiple ways for teens to perform and participate in their own gendering.

*Listening To Her Story*

One way to respect the multiplicity of women's and teens' experiences both online and off
is to let them tell their own stories. Just as feminist theory is often rooted in individual
experiences, work in feminist cyberspaces must begin by recognizing and privileging the voices
of women living cyber existences. Feminist researchers Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Nancy
Naples (2003), and Sandoval endeavor to re-write the rules of research and scholarship in order
to include more voices and validate a multiplicity of knowledges that might serve to celebrate
and at least partially represent the varied worlds of women. For feminist researchers, a real
concern is to transcend the "exclusionary forms of knowledge" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 48) and to
turn women's experiences, emotions, and unique subject standpoints into beginning points from
which to transform the dominant ideology. The same is possible for female experience online. A
feminist methodology for investigating female cyber-practices must be attentive to the actual
ways that women are using technologies and also the ways those technologies are using women.
Thus, places like MySpace, previously considered of no interest to scholars, should be reclaimed
as a site where praxis and theory meet online. Judith Butler (2001) reminds us in “The End of
Sexual Difference?” that “theory is an activity that does not remain restricted to the academy. It
takes place every time a possibility is imagined, a collective self-reflection takes place, or a
dispute over values, priorities, and language emerges” (p. 416). It seems that building new theory
about the usefulness and dangers of online social networking sites for women must begin by
allowing the women themselves who are represented online to frame and perform their own technological identities.

Examining MySpace Gender Performance and Identity Construction

To begin to interrogate online social networking practices, and particularly how such literacy practices shape and are shaped by the women undertaking them, this project will focus on four research questions. By combining textual analysis of both MySpace profiles and related historical texts, this study is concerned mainly with female adolescent performance and construction of both personal and societal identity and community. Specifically, four research questions guide this work:

1 – What codes, if any, does MySpace provide for "performing" girlhood/womanhood?

2 – What role does MySpace play in adolescence and is participation in the literacy practice a marker of modern American girlhood?

3 – What impact does MySpace have on building community (both online and off)?

4 – In what ways does it appear that the multiple media present on MySpace remediate female users’ identities as writers/composers, women, technology users, etc.?

With these questions as guides, I hope to gain understanding of MySpace production as both literacy practice and artifact of American female adolescence.

First, in an effort to establish the relevance of both MySpace as a literacy practice and the importance of women's use of such new media texts to perform and interrogate gender roles and societal expectations, Chapter Two provides a historical account of women's use of new media texts in recent centuries. The chapter traces the lineage of women's appropriation of existing texts in the form of commonplace books, scrapbooks, autograph albums, notes and, finally,
online texts. In doing so the chapter explores the very real effects that women's voices – displayed in a variety of media and texts – have on themselves and society.

To further focus on MySpace as a new media text for women, Chapter Three offers an explanation of my methodological approach for exploring this space. This study utilizes a methodology steeped in both feminist and techno-feminist approaches with emphasis on textual analysis rather than interviews or surveys. Through a textual analysis of a sample of 25 profiles interconnected by two primary profile creators, I focus mainly on representations of femininity that confirm or confront cultural norms and also representations that may contradict the profile itself. Just as we must read historic women's new media texts without the benefit of author feedback or explanation, this first step in analyzing MySpace as a text focuses not on how such texts are consciously constructed, but instead on ways the medium itself and the community of users shape the profile and in doing so shape the profile creator's online and perhaps offline identity. Specifically, I offer visual analysis of images, colors, and other design elements conforming to or troubling mainstream feminine representations. By further analyzing text included on the main profile pages specifically regarding gender and the literacy practice itself, I trace out trends in naming practices regarding women as well as expectations for feminine friendship and communication. Finally, quantitative measures focus on numbers of online “friends”, commenting practices, and types of media incorporated in profiles by female designers. Chapter Four, then, will report the findings of my analysis of these feminine texts with special attention to how teens are building community, defining themselves, and performing femininity within the MySpace application. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the implications of this work for modern composition scholarship and considers future research in this area.
CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN’S NEW MEDIA TEXT USE TO WRITE INTO BEING

In much the same way that new media texts often face resistance and mistrust in the composition classroom (Gee, 2003; C. Selfe, 2006, 2004; Sirc, 2002), so too have women’s voices – whether spoken or written – long been silenced in both the academy and society at large (Glenn, 1997; Ritchie & Roland, 2001; Lockridge, 2003; Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2004). For centuries women’s voices have been filtered through the men around them and through the modes designed for and by those men. Because schools privileged the world of men, particularly business, law, politics, and all other worlds denying women access, women’s rhetorics have long been confined to the domestic sphere (Donawerth, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Halloran & Wright, 2001). Writing recorded in recipes, directions for household tasks, and personal journals were permitted and often encouraged for women, but were never meant for public consumption. Women's writings were intended to be for themselves and were assumed to “matter most in the home” (Johnson, 2002, p. 15) where they would help women better serve their families. Personally, such texts were “sites for meditations on and experiments with individual subjectivities” (Kelley, 2008, p. 59) and societally sanctioned roles they were expected to fill as women. Despite severe restrictions on when and how a woman could express herself in the past, female rhetors seemed always able to appropriate texts not originally intended for their use, thus allowing their own stories to be crafted and recorded. Some of these texts found an audience beyond the author herself and many did not, but all are relevant for composition scholars interested in women's historic and modern literacy practices. Just as rhetoricians have recently expanded the field to include women's writings and speeches, modern new media texts – like MySpace – being used by women also deserve scholarly scrutiny to explore the ways such
writings are impacting the women authoring and reading them as well as the society surrounding these women.

Those in the composition field have repeatedly proven that discourse formerly ignored in canonical texts deserves another look. In the past decade, rhetoricians like Cheryl Glenn (1997) have "regendered" and reclaimed texts previously considered unimportant either because of content or authorial status. For example, Susan Miller's seminal text *Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing* refutes the argument that commonplace books are mere scribblings of the rich, and instead endows them with value as societal and personal artifacts. In the same way, a close analysis of young women's practices in online settings like MySpace may reveal similar sorts of theoretical and pragmatic lessons that researchers of the past gleaned from commonplace books and other everyday feminine texts. Filled with personal and cultural history, an understanding and valuing of MySpace may shed light on the complex and often controversial ways young women in our technologically-rich society are working to make sense of their world and plan for their futures. Composition scholars must acknowledge the important role the MySpace new media literacy practice is playing in modern girlhood and female adolescence and gendered identity construction. Interrogating the rhetorical foundations of this practice, with special emphasis on the feminine attributes of the MySpace literacy act, may allow a demystification of what the news media and even well-meaning education journals promise us is a dangerous place for girls on the Web. To avoid further limitations like those faced by women concerning speaking and writing, a deeper understanding of this social networking practice is the first step in reversing a tendency to declare yet another place – this time the Web – unfit or unsafe for girls.
Tracing the Lineage of Women’s Literacies

While identity representation and construction through composition and design on the Internet is a fairly new concept, the practice of identity play and exploration through writing itself is not a new idea at all. In fact, the tendency for writers to both craft and interrogate their public selves through social networking sites and blogs is modeled after pedagogical practices implemented for centuries by both educators and women seeking to educate themselves. While people of multiple genders and ages take part in online literacy practices like MySpace, the MySpace practice itself is rooted in the highly gendered art of personal commonplace bookkeeping and subsequent women’s literacy artifacts and practices. Therefore, another relevant, but incomplete line of study pertaining to this project is the historical composition practices of young women attempting to discover how and where they fit in society. This chapter considers women's adoption of existing historic texts, many formerly intended for men of the era, and ways such texts are now remediated within the MySpace interface. By keeping commonplace books, scrapbooks, and autograph albums, along with note passing, young women have long recorded and crafted their identity evolution while simultaneously remediating the texts being employed. I then acknowledge the role of women's voices within these and other texts and clarify how important the concept of feminine authorial control is to this study, especially as it has often been denied in many women's texts. In order to situate and interrogate MySpace as a modern women's new media text, I draw parallels between elements and features of MySpace production and the earlier women's texts discussed within this chapter. I also refer back to the four research questions concerning adolescence and gender performance, community building, and author remediation outlined in chapter one that are guiding this study. By considering the MySpace literacy act and resulting profile texts alongside rhetorical predecessors
I hope to establish MySpace as the next in a long line of women's texts intended to build, reinforce, and problematize personal and societal ideals of womanhood.

*Commonplace Books: Gathering Cultural Knowledge*

Commonplace books have a long history as tools for both education and social acceptance. Since their inception centuries ago, commonplace books have occupied a variety of positions in rhetorical training – alternately seen as hallowed storehouses of ideas for rhetoricians to draw inspiration from or hackneyed lists of tired terms only the least creative speaker or writer would call upon. Just as its reputation has changed, the very format of the commonplace book itself has evolved. In fact, commonplace books have already made their way to the Web at sites like scribblingwoman.com, commonplacebook.com, and figarospeech.com. As noted in chapter one, commonplaces as educational devices originate with Aristotle and his topoi and were intended for male students only. For centuries the books served mainly as repositories of the thoughts of others, a place for capturing the pearls of wisdom of educators and thinkers thought to be greater than the students themselves. Following the advice of Aristotle, Quintilian, and other ancient rhetoricians, male students at such prestigious halls of learning as Harvard and Yale harvested quotations, definitions, poems, and other bits of conventional wisdom of the day to ensure their rhetorical success in both the classroom and in social settings. These collections were intended as models and resources for future writing. In fact, ancient rhetorician Seneca argued that rhetoricians should “follow… the example of bees who flit about and cull the flowers” (Havens, 2002, p. 153) by creating personal stockpiles of existing knowledge to use as resources for future rhetorical acts, thereby creating completely new works by gathering the ideas of others.
Although these books often included only the words and ideas of other authors, the decision to gather and place certain resources together made commonplace books new compositions and thus new media texts endowed with new purpose and meaning unique to their composers. Thus the very modern hypermedia concept of online composition via arrangement, manipulation, or linking of existing texts – as seen in blogs, webpages, and social networking sites – is not a modern idea at all. Students especially have long used a variety of media to collect and arrange existing images and words and thus assign their own meanings simply by selecting and arranging old media in original ways. Despite a long history of use in rhetorical training, commonplace books first enjoyed wide acclaim during the Renaissance. Scholar Earle Havens (2002) reports that humanists and theologians popularized the medium as a “device of memoria technica, or ‘artificial memory’” (p. 138) and exploited it as a personal and societal “storehouse of knowledge” about individuals and the age in which the books were constructed (p. 137). This literacy practice was seen as essential to the earliest stages of writing, collecting, and organizing information. Thus historic commonplace books teach much about the compiler’s society and also serve as a reflection of the keeper’s intellectual and religious efforts, a mirror of “personal piety” (Havens, 2002, p. 141). This mainly academic pursuit – tied to the shaping of a scholar’s intellect and character – soon became a tool of education reaching beyond the walls of the classroom. Kenneth Lockridge (2003) explains “commonplace books are blank books in which genteel men and eventually women wrote down, and in some instances transformed, selections from their reading that they thought particularly interesting or significant” (p. 337). Lockridge tracks the change in commonplace books from academic notes and organizers to rehearsal spaces for “witty and informed civil conversations of the coffee house and the dinner party” (p. 338). This merging of the public uses of rhetoric with the private practices of the home proved impetus for
women to take up commonplace books. While women continued to be largely excluded from the more traditional rhetorical practices of speech making, publication of texts, and formal education, commonplace books emerged as a site of learning for women – as a sort of home schooling that allowed those denied access to schools a place to contemplate their world and themselves.

Figure 6: Image. Commonplace Book.
Owner S. Carter Wood.

Nan Johnson (2002) discusses the importance of these “parlor rhetorics” that encouraged women to perform in both written and oral modes within the home. The “nonacademic or parlor traditions of rhetoric and popular constructions of rhetorical performance after the Civil War helped to sustain the icon of white, middle-class woman as queen of her domestic space,” according to Johnson (2002, p. 2) and also effectively limited the reach of women’s rhetorics to
the domestic sphere. Popular women’s parlor rhetorics included training in many facets of discourse including writing, reading, and elocution. Although elocution was a vastly important tool of ancient feminine rhetors, this study is confined to discussions of more materialist rhetorics – more in line with the MySpace text – resulting in texts created by young women.

Women’s lack of opportunity for schooling until well past 1900 is well documented. S. Michael Halloran and Elizabetha Wright (2001) explain that although it was eventually considered desirable to educate women, this education had clear limits. Because women were trained to be well-read and good speakers only so they could pass knowledge on to children and serve as entertaining hostesses and competent wives, “belletristic rhetoric’s focus on taste and literacy … fit well with the nineteenth-century notions of womanhood” (p. 234). Commonplace books then were encouraged as ways to increase a woman’s cultural knowledge and also to provide a record of appropriate ideas she could later use in conversations and in letter writing. Such books (like the one seen in Figure 6 on the previous page) were created by women in the privacy of their own parlors and bedrooms, often as a solitary activity, and the bits of news, ideas, poetry and other valuable insights gathered within the books’ pages were referred to later as women wrote cards and signed letters to friends or participated in dinner party discussion. In pursuit of these womanly literacy and rhetorical practices, teens and women were finally given leave to pursue and transform knowledge they were previously denied. This merging of the public uses of rhetoric through the performance of conversation and letter writing as rehearsed in the private practices of domesticity made commonplace books appropriate for women of the age. Just as commonplace books crossed the boundaries of personal and private spaces and performances, so too do MySpace profiles. Web composers frequently include material – both text and still and video images – that seem decidedly private although the site is clearly available.
to anyone with a MySpace account. This project considers ways the MySpace design may encourage the sharing of such private sentiments as a marker of participation in adolescent online society. Just as commonplace books often housed knowledge to be used in later correspondence with friends, many MySpacers circulate mass-produced messages to strengthen the bonds of online friendship. Additionally, although many of these postings and images seem inherently personal, they are often clearly presented with an eye toward an audience beyond the profile creator. Shock value, as seen in sometimes objectionable language and highly sexualized images, may be intended to attract and retain audience interest. By analyzing the sorts of images and content posted by profile creators and circulated among fellow users, we begin to understand the specific role of MySpace in encouraging certain ways of performing girlhood online. This intersection of performativity and privacy merits future study of both the historic commonplace book practice and modern social networking sites.

Not only did the commonplace book practice result in artifacts of public usefulness forged in private construction – in much the same way that the blog function of MySpace serves both a diary and a public journal – it also allowed women a place to examine their personal views, beliefs, and goals through the public lens of society as reflected in the published works of the time. Kenneth Lockridge (2003) categorizes commonplace books as spaces where “the public self [was]… rehearsed in this intensely private arena provided by literacy” (p. 338). Girls and women used commonplace books not only to remediate existing texts, but also to remediate their existing public and private selves. The ability of the commonplace book as a medium to control how authors viewed and created themselves aligns with Bolter and Grusin's (2000) assertion that "the self … is defined and in a sense embodied through its participation in various media" (p. 258). Images and ideals of womanhood were gathered from various media within the pages of
the commonplace book medium and these books therefore scripted and often limited the personal
and public realities available to the women interacting with this medium. Commonplace books,
thus, seem to remediate females users' identities through creation and collection, just as this
study considers ways MySpace production may remediate modern female composers' identities
via multiple media. While these books were originally intended to help bolster a woman’s public
performances as speaker and correspondent, they eventually became a place for women to
consider and construct their own identities in relation to social norms. Clearly, MySpace and
similar sites do not offer the privacy of historic commonplace books and bedside diaries, but
these historic gendered literacy practices and media may explain young girls' perception of such
modern cyberspaces as private. For centuries girls and young women have sought out secret
places to make sense of their lives and the fact that MySpace mirrors these historic texts in so
many ways may endow the new medium with some imaginary sense of privacy simply because
these earlier women's new media texts offered that.

The melding of the personal and the public seen in ancient commonplace books resulted
in very personal records infused with cultural stereotypes and society's collective memory,
teaching women specifically – through observation and collection – how they were to conduct
themselves. An obsession with correctness swept across eighteenth- and nineteenth-century
America (the heyday of women's use of commonplace books) and gave birth to the conduct book
genre that promised to teach men and women everything from perfect writing and speaking to
etiquette regarding proper attire and manners. The conduct book – a sort of mass produced
commonplace book – served many of the same roles as its homemade counterpart in helping to
“establish the middle class as a group with shared interests by emphasizing gender roles and the
domestic ideal of women’s sphere,” (p. 5) according to scholar Jane Donawerth (2002). These
books taught men and women conversation and correspondence skills in the privacy of their own homes and also perpetuated the cultural norms of class and gender by indoctrinating readers in the “proper” ways the genders conducted themselves. Thus, while conduct books were important in expanding women’s access to knowledge and increasing their cultural capital by the only means available to them – by equipping them to become good conversationalists and eventually witty wives and mothers – they also limited the gender. Conduct books offered a very prescriptive guide to being a lady or gentleman of breeding, leaving little room for individuality and no room for questioning. These codes of conduct and acceptability produced and replicated in conduct and commonplace books lead to an investigation of the possible codes for "performing" womanhood and girlhood that may be embedded within the MySpace literacy practice.

Emerging as a sort of personalized conduct book, historic commonplace books represented current wisdom on everything from motherhood and marriage to friendship and mourning practices. Understanding and exploring such topics was important for personal growth, to improve correspondence and conversation skills, and to prepare composers to interact in society. Keeping commonplace books, then, proved individuals belonged in that educated, genteel world where everyone knew the right things to say and the appropriate stories and sentiments to share. Miller's *Assuming the Positions* (1998) explores commonplace bookkeeping as a highly classed performance of literacy and education. She sees this genre as a way for both men and women of the age to propel themselves socially or to maintain their positions in society by proving their adherence to societal values. “The examples of ordinary writing contained in this collection exemplify an elite practice carried out by women and men with access to many entitlements,” (p. 5) Miller writes of the Virginia Historical Society’s collection of commonplace
books from 1800-1880. Miller argues that these books are valuable in uncovering the individual and societal mores these composers consciously and subconsciously recorded and perpetuated in their works. By collecting, organizing, and later referring back to poetry, prose, images, and other bits of literary fodder, these bookkeepers exemplify the “cultural persistence of hegemonic common opinion” (Miller, 1998, p. 5) and offer modern readers a clear map as to how these ideals and limitations were passed down at even the most personal level. By participating in this culturally supported literacy activity, commonplace bookkeepers displayed at least superficial allegiance to the values forming the bedrock of the societal ladder they were so desperate to climb. Creation of these works served as markers of membership within proper society. This study considers possible ways MySpace may now prove participation in a given society, this time the modern American adolescent culture. By adopting similar aims as conduct books in a much more private and personalized setting, commonplace books allowed women a safe place to reconcile their own ideas with that of the controlling patriarchy, although clearly commonplace books did not provide a haven from cultural limitations and stereotypes based on gender.

Society, then and now, holds many cultural opinions concerning what it is to be one gender or another. While commonplace books were utilized by both sexes to prepare to perform in society, they were especially important to women as places to assimilate themselves into a world that frequently denied them a voice. While recent additions to the rhetorical canon show some women speaking out publicly on a range of social and political issues, most kept their ideas to themselves or within their circle of friends and family. Thus commonplace books were a “womanly way” to offer opinions and to gather and glean the best of what society could offer. By scavenging scraps of information and imagery from sources beyond themselves, women pieced together entirely new works reflecting personal significance. Similarly, MySpace appears
to be leaving behind a clear picture not only of what individual site keepers value, but also how
gender roles are assigned by society and in online spaces. In fact, to set up a new profile site
users are required to choose either "male" or "female" as the only gender options and thus the
persistent dichotomy of the sexes continues in MySpace production. Those who would rather not
select a gender at all or who might wish other options receive a message denying them the ability
to create a profile until one of the two genders is chosen (see Figure 7).

![Screen Capture](http://signup.myspace.com)

Figure 7: Screen Capture. Gender Selection Box.
www.signup.myspace.com

Additionally, study of MySpace offers insight into what it means to be a cybercitizen and the
rhetorical powers needed to gain and maintain one's status online and in offline social groups.
Just as commonplace books were in vogue as the markers of privilege centuries ago, this study
considers the role MySpace plays in adolescence, specifically girlhood, and the impact the
practice may have on teens' ability to fit in with desired communities. Like historic
commonplace books, modern social networking sites serve to norm profile creators in regards to
the cultural practices and also serve as concrete proof that MySpace users are willing to be
normed.
Scrapbooks: Piecing Together the Past for the Future

Another popular parlor pastime closely tied to documenting and reinscribing the ideals of womanhood and considered an essential art for women for centuries is scrapbooking. Often a performance of femininity itself, scrapbooks – like commonplace books – emphasize the marriage of words and images and focus on the goal of recording and understanding one's place within a community. Scrapbooking, an historic practice turned multi-million dollar industry in recent years, continues the commonplace bookkeeping tradition of gathering the best scraps of information and images society has to offer and piecing the old information together in entirely new works. The tendency to hoard bits and pieces of larger compositions began in commonplace books and continued in scrapbooks as girls augmented these works with more personal mementos and individualized bits. Scrapbooking, a very tactile amalgamation of the highly gendered art of quilting and traditional journaling, emphasizes ordering and preserving connections to the past. In a 1991 article, Patricia P. Buckler and C. Kay Leeper explore the

Figure 8: Image. Scrapbook Page. Owner Jen Almjeld.
popular practice of scrapbooking among “upper middle-class American women in the South, during the antebellum era” (p. 1). Scrapbooks offer a glimpse at both the personal history of the bookkeeper as well as the historical context in which the text was created. “The concept of womanhood in all its possibilities pervades this scrapbook,” Buckler and Leeper report of the mid-nineteenth century work of Ann Elizabeth Buckler (1991, p. 6). The young woman, a well-to-do Maryland native, explored issues of religion, mourning, motherhood, and marriage in her work in her “persistent efforts to develop her own consciousness, to probe the many facets of her feminine identity and social role” (p. 6). For this scrapbook keeper and others who kept scrapbooks and commonplace books, these texts served as a way to “actively incorporate scraps or fragments of the maker’s external reality into an expression of her individual self” (Buckler & Keeper, 1991, p. 2). Thus, these texts provided scrapbookers with codes of womanhood and also allowed bookkeepers to repurpose those codes for themselves, and in the process to shape their own identities by re-shaping existing media. Through analysis of several MySpace profiles, this study looks for similar patterns and codes for "performing" womanhood and girlhood that may exist in online spaces and also considers the opportunity new media texts like MySpace may offer composers for remediating their own identities by remediating multiple media.

While commonplace books looked at future selves, scrapbooks appear to concentrate more completely on events of the past, but through this act of considering and critically arranging and decorating evidence of the events of their lives, scrapbookers actively created a desired identity for themselves. This identity was important not only in documenting desirable social happenings and personal milestones, thus serving as a marker of contemporary womanhood and society, but also often set the course for a scrapbooker's future. A scrapbook filled with various media including images of friends and poetic texts about friendships might,
for example, mark a girl as a one who values the camaraderie of girlfriends above all else. Other feminine themes of romantic love, motherhood, and travel might suggest different goals for the young woman writing her future largely through the preservation her past. Like commonplace books, scrapbooks perpetuate and document feminine codes of conduct while simultaneously capturing an individual woman's personal performance of such codes. The themes captured and repeated again and again in such texts are eventually internalized to some degree by those participating in this literacy event and thus become a part of their identities both within the texts and in other areas of their lives.

Scrapbookers, then, actually create an identity – of who they were, are, and hope to become – for those viewing their finished scrapbooks in much the same way that MySpace users craft identities via online profiles. As seen in Figure 9, profile creators personalize a somewhat scripted online identity box situated at the top, left of each profile by mixing images (whether a photo like the one above or a drawing, cartoon, illustration, or other visual), alphabetic text, and
statistical information. Like commonplace books and scrapbooks, profile designers often include quotations from others, as is the case with the Luce Irigaray quote above, as well as images from popular media in order to remake their own identity in this place. Continued study of multiple profiles might offer insights as to how young women in particular are creating and viewing their own identities through the multiple media available on MySpace.

Scrapbooking, now a pastime taken up in 20 percent of American homes (2003, Neff, p. 3), continues to celebrate what is considered acceptable and desirable for individuals by mainstream society. This heteronormative nature of scrapbooks can be seen in the millions of prepackaged cutouts, borders, tiny fabric dresses and suits, metal tags, and pre-selected quotations filling scrapbook supply store shelves designed to help scrapbookers correctly display their personal histories. By combining several media and modes including text, images, and tactile bits, women are building themselves from the existing media of their society. Like other new media text creators, scrapbookers collect and manipulate existing media – photography, alphabetic text, drawing, etc. – in order to create and celebrate an entirely new medium, one dedicated to the hypermediacy of the scrapbook itself (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Although scrapbooks and many other media employed by women tend to perpetuate dominant ideologies rather than actively challenge them, some texts have been reappropriated by those desiring to reject rather than duplicate the wisdom and rules of society. One interesting example that may have particular significance in light of what many have deemed the risqué nature of some MySpace profiles is the scrapbook of Starr Proctor. In a 2002 article in feminist magazine *Bitch*, author Andy Steiner shares the story of 27-year-old Proctor who includes accounts of one-night stands and photos of illicit drug abuse in her scrapbook (p. 22). Far from the homogenized worldview expressed in the usual scrapbook spreads depicting white weddings, family vacations,
and holiday dinners, Proctor’s appropriation of the scrapbooking genre upsets societal expectations of what it is to be a woman. In a similar fashion, what at first appears a now highly corporate and also highly scripted online space, MySpace may, in fact, offer a possible site of resistance and questioning for young women as they formulate their identities. Scholars have identified several online locations – like gURL.com and AboutFace.com, in addition to personal webpages and blogs – where women and girls are openly disrupting the myths of womanhood and are appropriating and reconfiguring the societal tropes of "the womanly." This study continues that line of work by focusing on ways girls are performing these gender roles in online spaces and by concentrating on ways multiple media – available in literacy practices like MySpace – may trouble and expand existing options for "doing" femininity.

Still, such breaks with and rebellion against dominant culture remain the exception rather than the rule for most online spaces. Therefore, these exceptions must be documented and fostered if young women are to recognize the potential of online spaces for upsetting rather than surrendering to social norms. Guy Merchant, in his 2001 study of chatroom use by teens, notes a problem with this potential for challenging and changing social norms in his observation of teenage girls especially: "This particular age or gender group … may be too preoccupied with establishing and confirming their own identity in relation to their peer group to try on different identities" (p. 299). This study, then, explores ways MySpace, like scrapbooks and commonplace books, may both propagate the dominant ideology in our society, and also carry hidden possibilities for questioning the way things are. In fact, MySpace may offer even more potential for change than previous women's new media texts as online profiles have a theoretical audience of millions compared to the handful of viewers who see most people's scrapbooks. Therefore,
resistance to cultural norms taken up on MySpace have more opportunity to be read than do cultural questioning posed in more author-focused, paper-bound texts.

*Autograph Albums: Building Self Through Community*

While both scrapbooks and commonplace books focus on composition and simultaneous identity construction in private with an audience introduced only after the composing process is complete, autograph albums are highly gendered texts that build content within a wider community. Such texts often contain a mix of published poems, prose, lyrics, and personal musings, penmanship, drawings, paintings, and mementos along with the name and date of entry for the additions recorded in the hand of different friends.

![Figure 10: Image. Autograph Album Cover. Owner Jen Almjeld.](image)

For many young women and girls one sign of belonging came in the form of autograph books kept in relation to friendship circles, school, or social groups. Like its predecessors, the autograph album thus deftly remediates existing media and modes into a new media text while also remediating personal identity, offering it up as a work in progress to a community of fellow writers, in this case, friends. Autograph album entries not only serve as material remembrances
of friendships and school memories, but also as a way to collect wisdom from contemporaries on issues such as friendship, love, and planning for the future, all issues especially important to girls passing into womanhood and seen documented in other women's new media texts. Like commonplace and scrapbooks, autograph albums provide codes for properly performing womanhood.

Autograph albums first enjoyed wide popularity during the mid-sixteenth century in Europe among university students and were known as *album amicorum* or "book of friends" (Morrison, 2003, p. 78). In America, albums were first widely circulated in the late 1800s. Autograph albums existed in two formats in the 1800s, one concentrating on rare or celebrity autographs and one collecting signatures of one’s intimate circle of friends (Thorton, 1996). No matter whose signatures populate an album, the power of handwriting – as a medium all its own – is undeniable in this feminine literacy practice. In a cultural study of handwriting, Tamara Plankins Thorton (1996) explains that handwriting displayed “the places where the self happened” (p. xiii) and thus 19th century handwriting manuals concentrated not only on the forming of script but also emphasized the physical and mental components of the writer. “The achievement of a beautiful hand … was regarded as an active process in which the soul was uplifted and the body disciplines. Victorians were to form their letters as they formed themselves, through moral self-evaluation and physical self-control,” according to Thorton (p. 47). Training in penmanship, therefore, was considered an important developmental process for those in proper society and having a “good hand” seems to have garnered the same sort of social acceptance that having a MySpace profile might now afford modern teens. Handwriting is also interesting in regards to this study in that “handwriting is the work of an individual writer but executed in imitation of a standard model” and therefore “straddles the cusp of individuality and
conformity” (Thorton, 1996, p. xiv) in much the same way that personalizing a standard MySpace profile might. While handwriting once “functioned as a form of self-representation in nineteenth-century America” (p. 52) young writers and composers now have access to multiple mediums in online spaces like MySpace for representing themselves.

Like commonplace books and scrapbooks, the autograph album practice seems highly gendered and deeply dependent on socio-economic standing. Christie Ann Farnham (1994) describes the ornate nature of such albums “published with sentimental drawings of young women, wreathed in ivy and flowers, they provided space in addition to that for signatures for friends to copy their favorite verses or pieces of religious advice or poems for their composition” (p. 148). In much the same way that scrapbooks and commonplace books marked cultural belonging for women of earlier generations, autograph albums were important markers of identification and belonging within specific friend groups, most often in school settings. “These books … made it patently clear who was not popular among their peers,” said Farnham. “Through these practices of inclusion and exclusion, young women constructed their position in the social world of the school” (1994, p. 148). By gathering a collection of signatures and wisdom from key members (and sometimes mere acquaintances) in one's social circle, autograph albums serve as sort of a personalized yearbook, a remediation of the literacy event and product that is signing and having one's yearbook signed by classmates. A founding researcher in work concerning adolescents and literacy, Meg Finders (1997) considered yearbook signing and several other literacy practices carried out in middle school in her important work, Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High. Finders reports that such unofficial literacy events occurring in school but not officially part of curricula are vital to adolescent development and is "a visible rite of passage, as a cultural practice to mark oneself as in control, as powerful" (1997,
p. 19). Autograph albums, then, serve not only as instruction for societal norms and approved roles, but also as material markers of participation within that society. One key for girls finding their personal power in such situations is to remove all adult interaction with or validation of one's literacy practices (1997, Finders, p. 11) and so things like friendship albums, note passing, bathroom graffiti, and yearbook signing emerge as important testing grounds for performing adolescence and one's independence.

Although autograph albums have many similarities with yearbooks in that both were meant to preserve friendships, autograph albums actually repurpose the yearbook genre by including not only signatures, but also the chance to craft instead of merely sign off on a vision of one's particular social circle's history. By offering up blank or mostly blank pages where friends may add their favorite passages and created images and comments, autograph albums remake the rigid template of yearbook spaces and signing patterns. This remediation is important in the ways that it affects the community members participating in the event as well as the book owner controlling the album. Taking part in such a literacy practice allows writers/designers to not only revise and re-vision existing visual, textual, and cultural media, but also offers alternate identities as composers, advice givers, and members of a community or friendship circle. Further scrutiny of MySpace practices consider whether MySpace and the various media represented there offer similar opportunities for identity remediation.

One key function of autograph albums was to cement social ties. “Relationships locked into print could not be disputed,” according to Finders (1997, p. 71). Thus, being granted writing privileges in another's autograph album is a public statement of a personal relationship and helps participants document their own social position within specific groups. Perhaps the public performance of these private relationships contributes to the tension between public and private
writings seen in this and other women's new media texts. While autograph albums had the potential to be very personal with entries written to a particular person, many remained rote and standardized. In fact, countless books containing suggested autograph verses have been on the market since the 1800s and modern counterparts like 1961’s *Remember Me When This You See: A Collection of Autograph Verses* (Morrison) and 1995's *Yours Till Banana Splits: 201 Autograph Rhymes* (Cole & Calmenson) promise "just the right way to say something memorable … to make sure your friends will always remember you" (Cole & Calmenson, 1995, foreword). These rhymes, joke, and sentiments have changed little over the years, but the ways they are being used may have. In 2003, Morrison updated her 1961 autograph collection with the release of *It Rained All Day that Night: Autographs, Rhymes & Inscriptions*. In it she suggests these entries be used "in souvenir notebooks, school yearbooks, autograph albums, or on-line guestbooks" (Morrison, foreword). No matter how these signatures have changed throughout the years, the goal of the words and the albums and online spaces where they appear remain the same – to build community.

Although the popularity of autograph albums continued for hundreds of years with mass produced albums sold to grade-school and middle-schools girls well into the 1980s and 1990s, it seems that autograph albums are much less prevalent now and appear to have coincidentally faded in the era preceding mass distribution of home computers. This research project, in fact, considers the possibility that MySpace and similar social networking sites are now serving the needs of adolescent females concerning building and documenting social ties in writing and learning the rules of modern teenhood through repetition and vague advice. Although MySpace profiles are not as purposefully circulated as autograph albums, online "friends" may still be approved or denied by profile creators and comments posted may be deleted at any time the
profile creator wishes. Further study may also reveal ways MySpace encourages participants to select pertinent bits of societal and personal wisdom to pass on to profile creators (via mass-produced sayings about friendship and love, etc.) and thus displays connection to and often concern for those receiving posts. Just as autograph albums celebrated and showcased the building and preservation of girl-centered community, the MySpace Wall offers visitors a place to post messages as well as a means for tech-savvy girls to gather sayings, wisdom, and other dated reminders and proof of friendships and particular moments in history.

Notes: Paper Predecessors of MySpace

Another popular way for women to document friendships is seen in the literacy practice of note passing. In light of the womanly commonplace book practice of gathering wisdom and topics for future conversations and written correspondence (Lockridge, 2003), letter writing has been a highly gendered art imperative especially for the social success of the privileged. For the purposes of this study, however, I am more interested in the more modern practice of schoolgirls passing carefully folded and often ornately decorated notes in class. This practice can be categorized as a new media text because although the letter-writing format itself is not a new or remediated text, combining this alphabetic textual medium with intricate tactile designs for folding places schoolgirls' notes at an intersection between visual art, women's handicrafts, and traditional letter writing. Through practiced folds and geometric shapes, such notes communicate much more than the words written inside them. By participating, girls unconsciously demonstrate their allegiance to the community exchanging such messages as well as the ability to learn and invent creative ways to communicate. Such texts are important in building community and also in performing and building one's identity as "girl" and sometimes "teen rebel."
The complicated folding may also suggest a need to be secretive and to confine the flow of information to certain individuals. Finders’ study of two friendship circles (1997) reveals that for adolescent girls certain "literate practices served to mark social boundaries" (p. 21).

Specifically, only those within the "social queens" group (1997, Finders) studied were permitted access to notes with the letters serving as a tangible marker of belonging to the circle. Finders reports:

In all of the literate underlife, there existed a tremendous sense of play. Embedded within the play, the social queens used literacies for the following purposes: establishing a set of agreed-upon norms, competing for social status, connecting within a community, staking a claim, and defying authority. Clearly many literate behaviors supported more than one function, but all focused on the social aspects. (1997, p. 54)

Just as commonplace books, scrapbooks, and autograph albums were used to prove a woman's worth and belonging within certain social circles and settings, note passing demonstrates an early willingness of modern girls to be normed into gendered literacy patterns and continues the tradition of texts that blur the lines between private and public writings. Although the notes are intended to be read by an audience of some kind, they still often contain intensely private sentiments about the writer herself or about those she knows. Sharing private thoughts with others, be it a large or small audience, certainly carries risk, but in the case of Finder's "social queens" group, participating in the practice also garners a great deal of social currency. The middle school girl receiving the most notes was usually considered most popular (Finders, 1997, p. 67) and could produce written proof of her own social position. Thus, note passing serves not
only to strengthen a community's bonds (in this case a friend circle), but also secures the author's rightful position within a given community.

The self-worth found in sheer numbers of notes is similar to the phenomenon of amassing hundreds of "friends" (see Figure 11) or displaying numerous posts captured on one's MySpace Wall. Both require documented proof in the form of witty sayings, funny images, and sometimes one-word greetings to establish a sort of social ranking among those within the community.

Thus, it seems that note passing rituals adhere to ideas of new media as described by Bolter and Grusin (2000) in that they are both written by and simultaneously write authors. Suddenly, based on interaction with the text, the girls in Finders' study are transformed from students to note passers. This literacy practice allows them to usurp teachers' authority and to establish themselves again and again as members of the discourse community and friendship circle passing the notes.

Fig. 11: Screen Capture. “Top 8” Friend Space.  
www.myspace.com/jenalmjeld
The ability to be resourceful when passing notes and thus thwart the authority of teachers and other adults is another important component of this literacy practice. According to Finders, “More often than not, the content of the notes was inconsequential; meaning was conveyed in the passing of the note rather than within the text itself. The act of passing the note during class relayed the message, an act of defiance of adult authority” (Finders, 1997, p. 69). Audience is acutely important for note passing and even though it is a small audience – often only one other reader – notes remain a medium to be shared. Sharing this literacy practice not only documents an act of boldness, but also illustrates the progression of women's new media texts as mostly author centered to audience focused. This study focuses on the parallel between MySpace and notes in that both require accomplices – a community – to realize the goal of exploring and expressing one writer's power in recording and sharing ideas. It seems that, for many girls, MySpace posting allows rejection of adults' objections to online social networking sites. Students logging on to such sites during library research time or an instructor's lecture experience the same sort of mutinous thrill as note passing by participating in personal rather than school-sanctioned literacy practices. As such sites gain more and more notoriety in the press and among parents for being dangerous and undesirable, they become, perhaps, even more enticing to young people searching for another way to perform adolescent rebellion through literacy practices.

Rebellion may also be expressed – in MySpace and in notes – through the creation of private languages. The apparent similarities between MySpace and note passing are quite striking when considering the impact the two media have on existing language conventions. MySpace and similar technologies have a history of spawning their own lexicon with MySpace terms like "the Wall," "profile views," and "commenting" showing up both online and off. Additionally, MySpace has also remade existing terms, assigning verb status to former nouns as
in the case of "friending" and "MySpace-ing." This desire to remediate not only a medium but also language itself seems a well-established ritual in teen culture as young people transform existing terminology and create entirely new terms in an effort to distance themselves from the discourse of adults and others outside their own communities. A particularly relevant example of this phenomenon comes in the 2004 work of Laura Miller as she documents the linguistic and social practices of Kogals, young Japanese women challenging gender norms. The "Kogal" label is one coined by the popular press and describes "young women between the ages of 14 and 22 who project new types of fashion, behavior, and language" (Miller, 2004, p. 225). The Kogals are cast as outspoken, rebellious, and often promiscuous and their language patterns are key to performing this challenge to societal norms of girlhood and womanhood. Riddled with slang, English-hybrids, sexually explicit imagery, and shortened and truncated words, the Kogal language is a performance of resistance replacing "restraint" with "self-assertion; in place of modesty, there is self-confidence" (Miller, 2004, p. 236). While the linguistic style focuses much on gender, there is also "the tension between young and old" here that is "similar to that in all societies" (p. 241). By rejecting ideals of the demure young woman wished for by so many parents, schools, and media outlets, these girls use language to both alienate and confound the older generation.

Similar linguist practices of exclusion are clearly evident in note passing practices and other women's new media usage. Finders reports in her study that girls often use code, abbreviations, and other private language when composing notes to one another (1997, p. 65). Although some of this new language construction may be rooted in expedience or speed (i.e. abbreviations in instant messaging), this linguistic play seems also to strengthen the discourse community involved and to foster feelings of belonging. Abbreviations like BFF (Best Friends
Forever), LYLAS (Love Ya Like a Sister), and TTFN (Ta Ta For Now) have appeared at the end of young women's notes and in yearbook signatures for generations and suggest a need for girls to continue their mothers' and grandmothers' written rites of passages. However, just as new media remake the media of past generations and utilize established formats in innovative ways, contemporary girls express ancient friendship themes in new spaces and with new technologies. Thus, the cryptic abbreviations and tongue-in-cheek epigrams recycled for generations in autograph albums and scribbled on notebook paper are now inscribed on MySpace Walls and messages to profile creators. Whether through the Kogal language or the language of abbreviations seen in schoolgirls' notes, young women have long created new communities and performed adolescence and girlhood in linguistic ways that challenge existing social codes and MySpace may offer the next avenue for such rebellion and identity exploration.

Building Identity Through Historic and Modern Texts

Perhaps the most important parallel between MySpace and note passing and other historic women's new media texts are the part all have and continue to play in young women's identity construction. The familiar pedagogical concept of "writing to learn" illuminates some of the potential inherent within the act of composition, but for female rhetors particular texts may hold even more promise. Historically, as women were often denied access to both education and public rhetorical performance, women's new media texts offered them sites to perform "writing to belong," "writing to claim," and sometimes "writing to question." Such writing, defined as composition utilizing a variety of media, appears integral to defining and problematizing codes of womanhood and adolescence, as well as the construction of both individual and community identities. The texts discussed in this chapter (commonplace books, scrapbooks, autograph
albums, notes) were often used to secure a place in society or a smaller friend group. By composing, women built their identity as "proper" ladies of an age and/or members of a discourse community obedient to and cognizant of prevalent codes of conduct. These texts were often membership cards for women in claiming their femininity and social standing. Such texts, thus, staked a claim for women rhetors, proving they earned a right to membership in whatever community they desired to join (mothers, wives, friends, citizens, a given class). These claims were made through both the act of composing as well as the texts produced and shared with appropriate audience members. Often, simply performing such acts were an accepted and expected part of female adolescence and young adulthood. Finally, some women used new media texts as places to question their roles in such groups. In commonplace books, for example, even though women rarely included their own explicit ideas and writings, the act of gathering and arranging existing media demonstrates active answer-seeking through remediation to piece together what mothers, wives, daughters and other representatives of womanhood of a certain age did, said, and looked like. Similarly, scrapbooks aid women in exploring their own experiences and through deliberate representations women construct for themselves and those around them who they are at present and who they will be in the future. Finally, autograph albums and notes allow such questioning to be done in a communal environment with writers seeking answers about their current and future identities not solely through individual "writing" but also as members of a community of writers. Consequently, such new media texts – and perhaps successor MySpace – are much more than artifacts of female adolescence, but are instead essential tools for crafting a woman's image of herself and of others. Such texts make it possible for women to situate themselves within communities and to control in at least a small way how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them as they perform their gender.
Despite centuries of such women's literacy patterns and practices, women’s texts have long been ignored and considered not academic or important enough for study, particularly by rhetoric and composition scholars. Despite a relatively short history, rhetorical canons have already succeeded in designating some works and rhetoricians as worth knowing while dismissing others. For example, the curriculum in early rhetoric and writing programs often consisted of readings composed by only the most privileged in regards to class, education, race, and gender. In an effort to expand the limited scope of rhetorical scholarship in at least the area of gender, scholars such as Cheryl Glenn (1997) in *Rhetoric Retold* and Joy Ritchie and Kate Roland (2001) in *Available Means* began a tradition of reclaiming voices previously ignored by the academy. Glenn's realization that the "canonical rhetorical history has represented the experience of males, powerful males, with no provision or allowance for females" (1997, p. 2) led to her 1997 project aimed at mapping new approaches to and avenues of access for the works of women rhetors. "Our new maps," according to Glenn, "are 'doing' differently what maps do: they are taking us more places, introducing us to more people, complicating our understanding in more ways than did the traditional map" (p. 4). Similarly, in 2001, Ritchie and Ronald's *Available Means* brought even more female voices to students' and scholars' attention. This work continued in the 2004 revision of Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin's 1999 work *Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory*. These important works have indeed contributed to a radical shift in rhetoric and composition and are "redrawing the boundaries of rhetoric to include new practitioners and new practices" (Glenn, 1997, p. 17), but even they persist in a hierarchical ranking of knowledge and texts and suggest that more work is yet to be done in reclaiming lesser-known female rhetors' voices appearing in unexpected texts.
Reclaiming Modes: Expanding Definitions of Scholarly Texts

The next step for the recovery of texts may be to consider not only class and gender, but also genre. While the field grows ever more open-minded in regards to who merits attention, academic standards continue to devalue certain rhetorical practices and elevate others. While it may seem impractical to label every writing, image, or utterance as worthy of rhetorical study, it is also problematic to continue to ignore certain valuable texts offering insight into communities and the lives of individual rhetors simply because they are not preserved in formats we are comfortable with in the academy. For example, in recent years conference presentations and journal publications have explored the merits of women's home-based texts like cookbooks and recipe cards. By validating some historic forms of everyday and seemingly mundane compositions – especially those of women – we may succeed in validating and encouraging the voices of modern female rhetors, regardless of the mode through which they choose to express their thoughts.

Traditionally, one way to make a text acceptable is to legitimize it through the voices of men of power of the age. Many of the historic female speakers in current rhetorical collections exist only through the words of men or were granted voice only after gaining approval from the patriarchal powers that be. Aspasia, for example, is considered one of the earliest female rhetoricians, but none of her own words survived the fifth century. Instead, her story is told – and many think often twisted – through the words of Plato, Plutarch, Cicero, and others. The very fact that "Aspasia is mentioned by her male contemporaries is remarkable," according to Glenn (1997, p. 37), but much of the scholarly mention she has received was laced with severe judgment. Aspasia "was either apocryphal or a glorified prostitute" (Glenn, 1997, p. 5) and her story serves as a cautionary tale rather than inspiration to women, warning that those "who insist
on entering the rhetorical arena … will be used, misappropriated, and long ignored. Or worse, they will be disfigured, inscribed with masculine fantasy and curiosity” (p. 3). Currently, many girls’ and women's texts are ignored and dismissed as frivolous, overly sexual (in the case of modern online writings and photos included at sites like MySpace), and therefore unfit for study.

Hearing Her Voice: Listening to Young Women

The 1994 project Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls by Mary Pipher, is most accurately categorized as a study in psychology or sociology, but is another important milestone in the work to honor and understand the voices of female speakers. Based on Pipher's experiences as a clinical psychologist, the book incorporates girls' stories to illuminate controversial issues like drug and alcohol use, sexuality, eating disorders, and other often-unseen issues of American girlhood. Although Pipher's work was pivotal in introducing the issues of teens and girls in our culture into the realm of public debate, these issues were presented not by the girls themselves, but through the filter of a trained, academically-sanctioned medical practitioner's voice. In effect, the text suffers the same challenge that Aspasia and many of the women included in the new rhetorical canon face; their stories are recognized only through the authoritative voice of another. The absence of authentic girls' voices was an issue for then high schooler Sara Shandler when she read Pipher's work:

As I finished Pipher's introduction, I felt her describing me – an adolescent girl caught in the Ophelia syndrome. Her case studies looked behind the facade, describing the whirlwind of adolescence. She wrote about our teenage experience with clarity and sensitivity. However, Pipher viewed the whirlwind from the outside. Her portrayal of young females was accurate, but her representation was
limited by her role as a psychologist, a parent, and most importantly, as an adult.

…. I felt Pipher was speaking for me, and I wanted to speak for myself. … If Ophelia is to be revived then it must be done by the collective voice and actions of Ophelias everywhere. (1999, p. xiii)

Thus began Shandler's project to collect the words and voices of teenage girls as recorded in genres frequently ignored or denied legitimacy as rhetorical documents. "My rows of journals reminded me of my own struggles gone by," said Shandler (1997). "There was junior high: drinking in the baby-blue book, rumors of too many boyfriends on the yellow Mead perforated pages. Tenth grade: My pleas with God to figure out why I slept so much and cried so much in the small wirebound book" (p. xii). Shandler’s project took on many of the same issues as Pipher's – sexuality, violence, depression – but actively sought out journal entries and personal notes and letters from teens to describe, in their own words, how these issues affected their lives. The final project includes the writings of hundreds of teen girls from all over the country and includes entire sections on "feminist pride" and identity. By encouraging girls to share their own "view(s) from inside the whirlwind" (1997, p. xvii), Shandler not only documents young women's struggles, but also invites them to interrogate their own experiences and to consciously and purposely shape their own representations and selves through writing.

This open, honest exploration of identity with an emphasis on the gendered nature of one's existence was only possible, in Shandler's mind, with the removal of adult intermediaries. "With Ophelia Speaks, I provided the ear of a peer, not the watchful eye of an adult. There is a capacity for openness among adolescents, adults are rarely entrusted with our emotional reality," according to Shandler (1997, p. xvi). This perceived safety from judgment seems to be a common denominator between the Ophelia Speaks project, MySpace production, and other
women's new media texts. In order to honestly and freely explore identity, it seems that women need spaces they perceive as safe from scrutiny. MySpace, then, may be the progeny of such female literacy practices and thus provides a forum for continuing the work of honoring and studying women's voices. The MySpace cyber-place offers authors, both male and female, the freedom to adopt, reject, and investigate the identities available to them by harvesting and arranging images, songs, quotes, video, and other artifacts from their own and others' lives.

Although there is great potential for texts like MySpace to serve as sites of resistance and exploration, they often only perpetuate the stereotypes and heteroglossic views preserved in other historic texts and modern online spaces. The scrapbook industry, for example, provides many products for book design that are merely stylized versions of what the American experience, family, and woman “should” look like. Thus, scrapbooks are not empty receptacles of women’s experiences, but rather templates into which women strive to reconcile their lives and to document what they have been taught are significant moments in their existence. This project will consider whether or not the MySpace profile templates and community have a similar tendency to reinscribe codes of American womanhood and adolescence and to reinforce rather than question a woman's traditionally defined roles as sexual object of gaze and marriageable commodity (Grisso & Weiss, 2006; Ivanic, 1998). Through set prompts and provided responses about relationship status, sexual preference, and religious affiliations (see Figure 12), the MySpace template encourages profilers to relate their experiences in rather prescriptive and often limiting categories.
Although such models can be problematic, it should not suggest that the potential for challenging the patriarchy, heteronormity, and other dominant ideologies does not exist in women's rhetorics like MySpace. For centuries some female rhetors have repurposed texts designed to perpetuate feminine rules and norms – like scrapbooks and commonplace books – into spaces free from judgment and intervention where one could try on any number of identities in either actual or perceived privacy. Although parents are being advised to spend time lurking on MySpace and other sites in an effort to monitor children's actions, examination of girls’ profiles suggests that MySpace is still perceived as a largely parent-free zone. Although many adults have their own MySpace accounts, teens seem to approach the site much like other historic women's rhetorical texts and assume that although such texts can be made public, they were primarily personal spaces intended only for chosen readers. Thus, MySpace may offer
young women at least the appearance of a safe space where they can perform the adolescent ritual of raising their voices out of earshot of parents, teachers, and other adults associated with monitoring or judging what girls feel they can say. The first step in encouraging critical literacy of texts like MySpace is for researchers to recognize such texts as legitimate objects of study and expression and to then strive to understand exactly what draws young people to these literacy practices and spaces and what sorts of rhetorical decisions profile creators are making once they are online.

No matter what format it might take, young women continue to turn to the written word and images to fulfill and perform certain feminine roles and to build their own identity and community with other women. My project, then, continues the investigation of how young women find their voices, particularly in relation to this newest female literacy practice. Just as commonplace books, autograph albums, and scrapbooks were the constant companions of our great-grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, modern girls appear to see MySpace production as the next rite of passage into American womanhood. Chapter Three will explore the methodology, strongly rooted in feminist approaches to research, used in this pilot study of young women's expressions of femininity and identity in cyberspaces. Just as Shandler's work emphasized the importance of women's texts speaking for themselves, this study will consider 25 texts created by girls. In the following chapter I investigate both the limitations and advantages of researching from within one's own discourse community by referring to feminist researchers' use of narrative and personal experience in scholarly study. Although this study will obviously include analysis and framing from an adult researcher, I feel my own membership in the MySpace community will allow me to speak from "within the whirlwind" of this often unruly and ever-changing cyber-world.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The previous two chapters outlined the importance of new media texts in the composition and rhetoric field and in the lives of female rhetors specifically. While such texts are undeniably important to young women's identity exploration and construction, their inclusion in the canon and as objects of scholarly study remains problematic. The same is true of the research methodologies undertaken to study such texts. While ethnography, narrative, and other nontraditional research methodologies have gained acceptance within the field of composition studies, new media research offers even more challenges both for performing and disseminating scholarship. In a 2006 article in *Computers and Composition*, Patricia Webb suggests academics must "expand our definitions of research" (p. 464) to investigate the research questions arising in the writing classroom. Her solution, the same as offered by other scholars (Blair & Tulley, 2007; Kirsch, 2003) is to take on "mixed-mode studies" in order to open "up new areas for us to research as well as expanding the kinds of answers and results we can achieve" (Webb, 2006, p. 471, 473).

Using this multi-modal approach to research as a model for this project, I combined textual analysis, narrative, quantitative measures for usage and production, and standpoint theory. Additionally, I attempted to be self-reflexive throughout this research project. Self-reflexivity is paramount to research in general (Naples, 2003; Packard & Conway, 2006; Deutsch, 2004; Lawthom, 1997) and perhaps even more so for this study because I served as both researcher and pseudo-subject as I too am a woman using MySpace to write my on- and offline identities. New media research is often difficult to define because just as new media builds upon and remediates existing media, it seems that research of such new media texts, locations, and users must also remediate and combine existing research methodologies to
accurately portray these digital experiences. This project thus draws on multiple modes of research in order to triangulate data, with particular attention to feminist theoretical and methodological approaches utilized to best serve and represent the population being studied.

This chapter outlines the overall design of this research project and attends to the four specific questions guiding the pilot study. Additionally, because this is a pilot study and also new media research, I discuss both the advantages and limitations of this sort of project and this particular situation. This discussion draws upon the work of feminist and composition scholars and researchers and pays particular attention to the problem of insider versus outsider status and notions of researcher and subject power and positionality. I also address possible concerns regarding the textual analysis and narrative approach I adopted versus more traditional objectivist approaches to research and scholarship.

Project Design

This project includes a textual analysis of 25 user profiles designed by girls age 16-18 enrolled in high school. I began my exploration for appropriate profiles by doing a search for young women who would fit the age category in a town in northwestern Ohio. The town has a population of about 25,000 residents with a mid-size public university and local industries as the major employers in the area. After identifying one profile creator in this region I was able to link to other profiles from that user's site, in much the same way Denise Bortree studied connected blogs produced by female teens (2005). This had the interesting result of allowing me to consider texts produced, in many cases, by those involved in an online friendship circle. I found that many of the profile users were connected to one another in multiple "Friends" listings and so these profiles show even further similarity to earlier women's literacies. Just as notes and autograph
albums are normally texts circulated within a specific friend group, it seems that many MySpace profiles operate in a similar fashion. While some profile creators spend a great deal of time collecting "friends" from all over the world, many of whom they will never meet face-to-face, the majority of the profiles I studied seemed to make online "friends" with acquaintances they saw at school and at other offline locations.

Building my subject pool in this way renders this sample limited as the profiles are obviously constrained geographically and thus racially and often economically. This economic divide particularly seems echoed in other studies concerning access to and participation in online activities (Thurlow & McKay, 2003). Because most of the subjects from the given area are in some way or another linked to the local high school, the pool is predominantly white, much like the population of the Ohio town itself. Despite these limitations, many relevant insights resulted from this pilot study and perhaps most importantly it informs the types of questions we should be asking about MySpace and other new media applications when it comes to literacies played out in our world and in our classrooms as well as how such literacies contribute to gendered experiences and identities. Such a close reading of a limited number of profiles offers a depth and richness of data that is unavailable through statistical analysis alone.

Even with such a limited pool of profile creators, it would undoubtedly be interesting to hear what those designers might report about their motives and goals for designing their online representations, but I chose not to contact the profile creators for interviews or surveys. Because I am looking at MySpace profiles as the latest in the succession of women's historic texts used to explore and claim feminine identities and voices, I chose to approach the study through texts rather than through individual subjects creating profiles. I wanted to approximate the approaches other composition scholars have undertaken to study scrapbooks (Buckler, Ott, & Tucker, 2006),
commonplace books (Lockridge, 2003; Miller, 1998), and autograph albums (Kelley, 2008; Johnson, 2002). Removing the authors, and in this case designers, from the analysis of the texts allowed me as a researcher to concentrate more on how these spaces might be read and to look for trends among the age group rather than focusing on individual author intentions and personal preferences. Following the example of work done by Kaveri Subrahmanyam, Patricia Greenfield, and Brendesha Tynes involving teens and chatroom usage, I feel this study, like theirs, offers "analysis … at the cultural rather than individual level" (2004, p. 655). But, while Subrahmanyam et al.'s study reports to "know nothing about individual participants" (p. 655), I feel MySpace profiles reveal infinite amounts of personal information. Still my project seeks general knowledge about teenage culture – though necessarily limited – rather than the more individual insights garnered by case study and ethnographic approaches. Just as Shandler's (1999) collection of letters from young women did not include interviews or surveys, I feel it is sufficient to let these young women's online stories speak for themselves. Part of the project of reclaiming such female texts is to allow those texts to be read and parsed on their own merit, to focus attention on the teen authors' voices rather than simply reporting that such works exist.

Guiding Research Questions and Data Collection

In studying young women's use of MySpace, I focused on facets identified by previous scholars regarding women's use of commonplace books, scrapbooks, notes, and autograph and photo albums. Questions of community building and how one performs both womanhood and teenhood while utilizing a variety of media are as pertinent to the MySpace literacy event as they were to ancient women's rhetorics. In order to address the many questions about MySpace usage represented in this study, I chose a multi-modal approach to research combining descriptive and
visual methods, use of narrative, and standpoint theory. The particular approaches to data collection coupled with the theoretical grounding guiding much work in feminist research, allows me to more fully represent young women's online stories. These stories – as situated within the master narratives of femininity and sometimes fear governing much of online life – are drawn directly from profile creators' words and online representations of themselves and others. Susan McLeod explains "in the humanities, we look at text and interpret it, tell stories about it" (2003, p. 153). Although traditional research in the humanities might limit those stories to textual tales, much of the communication and representation done online is done without alphabetic text, necessitating the addition of visual methods (Packard & Conway, 2006) in order to document and decipher profile users' online identities and personal realities.

These stories are key to this project. Just as Shandler worked to share and justify uncut, unedited bits of young women's lives as documented in diaries and similar textual documents, I concentrated on legitimizing the depictions young women weave of themselves in MySpace and similar cyberspaces. Sharing these girls' stories is a good step toward the standpoint theory championed by so many feminist thinkers (hooks, Sandoval, Harding). Harding's standpoint epistemology calls for us to "start thought from marginal lives" (1992, p. 6) letting experiences of "the other" guide our research goals, questions, and procedures:

To start thought from marginal lives is not to take as incorrigible … what marginal people say or interpretations of their experiences. Listening carefully to what marginalized people say … and trying to understand their life worlds are crucial first steps in gaining less partial and distorted accounts of the entire social order. … Starting thought from marginal lives is not intended to provide an interpretation of those lives, but instead a causal, critical account of the
regularities of the natural and social worlds and their underlying causal tendencies. (p. 7)

My work here with MySpace will not reveal the "truth" about each profile creator's life or even this slice of her identity. Instead, it explores the unspoken but always present ideals of womanhood and teenhood – as depicted visually and textually by young women online – that shape us as society and as individuals. For this study, I posit that not only are the voices of teenage females marginalized, but so are the modes they choose for expressing those voices. New media texts, and MySpace in particular in this case, can be considered as marginalized within scholarship as such modes are too often demonized or completely ignored. The combination of such modes with young women’s voices situates MySpace on the margins of composition theory and serious academic study. This sort of work may encourage more critical inquiry and discussion of the digital spaces many of us populate and the ways young women particularly are immersing themselves within such cyberspaces. For many users and scholars, literacy practices like MySpace have either become second nature and therefore neutralized or remain completely ignored and therefore insufficiently scrutinized. Further study is needed in order to understand the role such literacy practices have in shaping young women’s identities.

The four specific questions guiding my study are as follows:

**Question 1**: What codes, if any, does MySpace provide for "performing" girlhood/womanhood?

Clearly femininity and sexuality are commodities on many MySpace profile sites and by carefully considering a sampling of girls' sites I attended to the commonplaces of womanhood as represented in this cyber-community. I considered here specifically visual and design elements
of a profile user's page and the ways such choices reinscribe or reject societal views of femininity.

• **Visual analysis and qualitative measures.** Specifically, I reported the number of images seemingly marked as feminine or sexualized on each profile page. I defined feminine images in a similar fashion as rhetorical scholars looking at commonplace books and scrapbooks (Buckler & Leeper, 1991; Hedges, 1982) and other earlier women's rhetorics. Just as Buckler and Leeper (1991) identified images depicting a range of womanly topics from "marriage and love to women's rights, women's influences, beauty, purity, and … spiritual qualities" (p. 6) within the pages of an antebellum woman's scrapbook, I focused on images ostensibly linked to modern femininity or sexuality. I identified feminine images as those a) depicting a female body, b) tied to topics previously identified as womanly (i.e. marriage, motherhood, beauty, etc.), or c) overtly sexual. Although much research has focused on the body as "an important means for expressing gender, sexual, and other identities" (Subrahmanyam, et al., 2004, p. 654), the absence of the actual physical body in the MySpace location necessitates analysis of other markers of gendered identity. Including analysis of visual depictions allows for a deeper understanding of the ways girls are writing womanhood online and what sorts of stories they are telling for and about themselves and their friends.

• **Textual analysis and qualitative measures.** I also recorded the number of comments provided by and posted to profile users regarding gender. Examples of such comments might include discussions of dating, body image, and the use of language marked as feminine. Similar to the study by Subrahmanyam, et al. (2004), I define feminine terms as those "…terms commonly used to refer to females, such as chick, babe, and girl; and … names [and words] that had a sexualized or seductive quality" (p. 656). I concentrated on both profile creator's personal
representations of womanhood as well as comments they might have received from others in regards to appearance, sexuality, or gender. I also expressly attended to profile designer's chosen screen names.

• *Visual analysis.* One final factor to be considered on each profile was the color scheme choices. At sites like pimpmyprofile.com, designers can download any number of free graphic backgrounds to personalize their profiles. Certain colors and images carry cultural designations as either feminine or masculine. For example, Lynn Peril's popular culture observation *Pink Think: Becoming a Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons* (2002), is devoted to the color and iconography deemed feminine by American society and how such colors and images are used to further the heteronormative agenda of raising up proper girls and women. Peril's rather unscientific – but entertaining and enlightening – book throws into stark relief many of the invisible feminine codes surrounding women in advertising, toy production, self-help books, and countless other industries. As a product of the society that created it, MySpace and other online applications obviously have similar buried codes for performing one's sex via color and by attending to the choices this sampling of profile creators are making regarding images and hues, it may be possible to begin to understand the ways such codes are manifest on MySpace. A related study by David Passig and Haya Levin (2000) looked at online learning and gender with special attention given to colors preferred by boys and girls. While Passig and Levin's work relied on interviews to reveal preference, my work considers apparent color preference as demonstrated by inclusion in a profile creator's site.

**Question 2:** What role does MySpace play in adolescence and is participation in the literacy practice a marker of modern American girlhood?
Here I was less interested in the content or meanings of the MySpace communications being exchanged, and instead focused on the frequency of posts and exchanges to begin to hypothesize how big a role MySpace plays in girls' daily lives. With Web tracking services ranking MySpace fifth most visited site on the Web (Alexa, 2008), it appears that many users visit the online community multiple times each day. Without the benefit of software or survey data I chose to measure usage by looking for evidence in the form of archived communications visible to both the profile creator and those visiting the site. MySpace posting seems to be a reciprocal activity so those sites housing many posts and comments are probably managed by designers actively viewing and writing on other profiles.

• **Qualitative measures.** To document usage I counted the number of comments posted to each profile user's Wall, blog entries, and images during the month of November 2007.

• **Textual analysis.** I also looked for mentions of MySpace participation itself ("I will post my pictures soon", "Why didn't you message me?" etc.) to try and gauge what was expected of the community in regards to the profile creator's online presence and performance. Here I looked for textual evidence of the practice in more than just sheer numbers of posts as I attended to mentions of MySpace as a practice and as an established mode of communication and expression within the online discourse community.

• **Narrative.** I combined both qualitative and quantitative measures to explore this research question as frequency alone does not necessarily make something important. By adding narrative evidence of the value of the MySpace literacy practice I allowed the female authors themselves, rather than just me as researcher, to assign meaning to this practice.
**Question 3:** What impact does MySpace have on building community (both online and off)?

MySpace, like other feminine literacy practices including autograph albums and note passing, has an express goal of increasing communication and connection among users. Billed as "a place for friends," participation in MySpace, as with many such literacies, is as important or even more so than the content of the communications circulated at the site. Thus, I concentrated on qualitative measures of friendship and community building in the form of Wall posts and online chain letters.

- **Qualitative measures.** I reported the number of "friends" each profile has listed as well as the number of viewer comments left on the profile Wall, to posted images, and in response to blog entries.

- **Textual analysis and quantitative measures.** I also looked for overlaps in the friendship circles represented online and noted comments about friendships that may exist offline as well. For example, comments posted from one profile user to another about "meeting at school" or "what time is the movie?" are important in illustrating how such online relationships may work offline. I coded certain repeating phrases concerning friendship including "at school" and "at church" and similar phrasing suggesting teens' relationships exist both on and offline. By attending to both numerical and narrative evidence of friendships I was able to create a fuller picture of feminine MySpace relationships.

**Question 4:** In what ways does it appear that the multiple media present on MySpace remediate female users as writers / composers, women, technology users?
As with the previous question, I foregrounded the medium over the message here and looked specifically at what sorts of media the girls used (video, audio, still images, Flash, live links, surveys, etc.).

*Qualitative measures.* I first categorized the sorts of media girls were using (audio, visual, interactive, animation, etc.). Attending to the specific sorts of media young women are using allows initial discussion of ways MySpace may be influencing young women's identity in regards to being technology users.

*Narrative.* I also looked for references to the profile creator's media usage, successes, and failures as represented in any posts. In this way, I considered how profile creators use media to craft their identities in regards to gender and also as technology users writing with multiple media. I also considered the work of previous media scholars looking at gender preferences regarding website design (Agosto, 2002) and online operations (Passig & Levin, 2000; Schumacher & Morahan-Martin, 2001). Finally, I included comments left for the profile user regarding technology.

Revealing the Researcher: My Methodological Choices

My approach to this study is consistent with the trend in research within the field of composition and rhetoric. Todd Taylor explains in the 2003 collection *Composition Studies in the New Millennium* that "like a growing number of academic disciplines, we (composition scholars) embrace a wide variety of methodologies, … meaning that researchers use a wide variety of strategies for gathering evidence and constructing their arguments" (p. 143). This multiplicity has caused initial concern for some within (North, 1987) and outside of the discipline, but scholars like Taylor, McCleod (2003), Kirsch (2003), and Webb (2006) argue that
diversity in research is required in response to the diverse writing situations and modes our students operate within. According to Kirsch, "As scholarship in composition expands and diversifies, it becomes more insightful and more valuable" (p. 133). As researchers face ever changing writing audiences and locations, making "room for multiple research methods, for flexible paradigms and theories that can help researchers adapt to changing circumstances" (Kirsch, 2003, p. 135) is increasingly important.

This need to expand the approaches to scholarship within our field comes as an attempt to correct and prevent the bias of earlier research. "The research methods of the past have often failed those who found themselves in vulnerable or subordinate positions, such as women, people of color, basic writers, adjunct teachers, and students," according to Kirsch (2003, p. 135). Sullivan's (1992) now historic piece "Feminism and Methodology in Composition Research" focuses on the unique approaches required for researching women's writing lives and correcting the insufficiencies of traditional research methods:

Feminist scholarship in composition thus has both reactive and proactive components: it focuses on received knowledge – on existing studies, canons, discourses, theories, assumptions, and practices of our discipline – and reexamines them in the light of feminist theory to uncover male bias and androcentrism; and it recupirates and constitutes distinctively feminine modes of thinking and expression by taking gender, and in particular women's experiences, perceptions, and meanings, as the starting point of inquiry or as the key datum for analysis. (p. 40-41)

This project then undertakes a reactive agenda in insisting that new media texts like MySpace become part of or at least inform existing rhetorical canons and theories. Additionally, this
project is proactive in blending multiple research methodologies to more accurately portray young women's online lives. By actively studying young women’s online representations we gain a truer understanding of such online experiences, one that differs from the warnings and judgments made by the mass media.

Because this piece is a pilot study, it is obviously limited in its ability to truly represent the multiplicity of women's lives and experiences online in regards to race, class, and other issues. The sample is fairly small – with only 25 profiles considered – and therefore is not representative of the diverse voices present on MySpace as users chosen all originate in a medium-sized Midwestern town meaning race and class are not adequately varied here. Thus the representations of womanhood I comment on will invariably be colored by Eurocentric ideals of beauty and decorum and the perceived privilege that allows these girls access to computers and leisure time either during school or at home. While this is a serious concern, I feel this work is still valuable in drawing attention to one marginalized segment of society – teenage females – and in highlighting the need to investigate this often marginalized online space. The strength of studies like this one is the ability to illustrate one segment of otherwise ignored populations and to encourage similar work with other subject groups.

Not only is it difficult to accurately represent varied voices in research, but this study is further complicated by the location in which these young women are writing. Just as gender carries with it unavoidable implications for research and often necessitates different or multiple methodological approaches, so too do new media environments. Thanks to the Internet, researchers now have access to limitless pools of potential research subjects and sites; however, issues of permission, right to privacy, and subject and researcher power relations are dramatically different online than in a lab or classroom and so these increased research
opportunities also bring increased considerations and complications. Such drastic changes in researcher settings, audiences, and applications demand a redefinition of research best practices. According to Kristine Blair and Chris Tulley (2007), "digital writing researchers need to align themselves with theories and practices that call for increased multimedia and multivocal delivery of and access to scholarship that will inevitably foster broader definitions of research, authorship, and ownership" (p. 305-306). Recalling dissertation work that was hindered by university and academic standards for "appropriate" approaches to research and scholarship, the authors encourage technorhetoricians to adopt and promote strategies necessary for examining digital spaces. Just as Nancy Deutsch recalls an initial research experience that forced her "to consider (her) positionality as a woman, a feminist, a researcher, and a member of the White, educated middle class in a way in which a more seasoned researcher may have been too comfortable to recognize" (2004, p. 886-887), we must realize that work with digital media makes even the most experienced researcher a bit of a novice. In the same way established research methodologies sometimes failed to meet the needs of certain populations, they also often fall short when applied to digital environments. For example, Mike Thelwall’s (in press) impressive quantitative study of MySpace profiles provides exciting statistical data regarding such practices, but without projects, like this one, to scrutinize individual profiles as texts it is impossible to rely on the validity of such statistics given the ability of online users to play or lie in regards to identity representations. Work with marginalized populations and locations require a revisioning of epistemological and methodological approaches.

New media and feminist research methodologies seem to have much to offer one another in several areas including discussions of the insider-outsider debate, the impossible goal of true objectivity, and negotiations of power. In fact, Laura Sullivan's 1999 piece in *Computers and*
*Composition* draws out hypertext as a feminist space by emphasizing the personal as privileged in both online settings and feminist scholarship and theory. She also explains ways the push beyond binaries urged by feminist thinkers regarding gender is realized in hypertext's multiple layers and the celebration of fragmented identities and situated knowledges and realities present in both online spaces and feminist scholarship. This early analysis of digital media via the lens of feminism suggests that hypertext may not only be categorized as a feminist space, but also that research done in such spaces necessitates the adoption of feminist research methodologies, methodologies which generate persistent objections from portions of the academic community.

One leading approach to feminist research that may be especially helpful to new media researchers is the use of narrative. Just as Sullivan (1999) grounds her article in her own experiences online, many feminist technorhetoricians (Henwood, Kennedy, & Miller, 2001; Naples, 2003) find auto-ethnography and other forms of narrative a useful approach to examining women's online experiences. An increasing call for self-reflexivity (Deutsch, 2004; Naples, 2003; Harding, 1992) points to the importance of narrative not only for subjects, but also for researchers themselves. A scholar's background and positionality not only controls how he or she interprets data, but also what sorts of questions are asked in the first place. Positioning oneself as an insider may cause complications for researchers regarding relationships with subjects and the reception of one's final work, but, according to Deutsch, "although the role of insider-outsider can be difficult to balance, it sometimes provides unique opportunities for information gathering" (2004, p. 898). This seems especially pertinent to new media scholarship as it is virtually impossible to identify the sorts of questions to be asked or practices to examine without first participating in these digital spaces. This need to speak from within a cyber-community like MySpace is similar to Shandler’s positionality in her work with adolescent girls.
Her position as teen female gave her insight to her subjects – fellow teens recording their lives in diaries – in much the same way that I hope my experiences as a woman using MySpace allowed me to interrogate rhetorical moves made by other females online.

Although one major goal of this study is to elevate the importance of girls' stories and everyday experiences, one possible limitation of the study results from my explicit decision as a researcher not to include interviews and surveys from profile creators. While this limits my ability to accurately predict why certain rhetorical moves were made and instead shifts focus onto the MySpace profile as artifact of identity formation and performance rather than dissecting the stages of such a process, I feel this approach is consistent with research regarding earlier women's rhetorics. Relying on my own judgment and categorization of such communicative products rather than profile designers' feedback necessarily resulted in an unequal power relationship between myself and the subjects I am studying. Just as Shandler (1999) objected to Pipher's important but obviously researcher-centric approach in choosing and explaining what bits of teenage experience would be represented in *Reviving Ophelia*, I was forced as a researcher to make similar editorial decisions regarding what examples to use from each young woman's online story for this study. Although profile creators were not given the opportunity to offer metadiscursive explanations regarding their online compositions, listening to the girls' voices via online publication is a good beginning to this sort of research endeavor.

Also, it is my hope that my position as a MySpace user allows a bit of leeway as I make editorial and research decisions from the standpoint of both insider and outsider in this cyber-community. The insider-outsider debate remains contentious for researchers from many fields with the main issue apparently linked the goal for neutrality and objectivity in research. Harding's (1986, 1992) early work calls into question the supposed objectivity of quantitative
scientific approaches in particular. Harding's recent work (2006) explains, "conventional standards for objectivity, rationality, and good method appear to be incompetent to detect … sexist and androcentric values and interests" (p. 80). Such research methodologies are perhaps so deeply steeped in dominant ideologies and the narratives of those in power that they often fail to recognize when the voices of "others" are being silenced. It appears that a less traditional research model is useful when examining the unique nature of gender and new media to composition studies so my decision to forego more accepted research methods like surveys and interview data makes this study no less objective than other methodologies.

Keeping with Harding (1992) and other feminist researchers, I strived for a "strong objectivity" (Harding, p. 6) that recognized my own positionality as a researcher and how my work as a woman, academic, feminist, and MySpace user influenced this study. For Harding and social scientists Jill A. McCorkel and Kristen Myers (2003), research is never neutral, but is rather always aware of "the situatedness of the knower, the context of discovery, and the relation of the knower to the subjects of her inquiry" (McCorkel & Myers, p. 200). I recognize the impossibility of complete objectivity when it comes to my research regarding MySpace usage by young women. Without interviewing profile composers it would be impossible to definitively say why they do the things they do online (even then it may be impossible because self-analysis is hardly infallible). So instead I approached this literacy practice as the latest in a long line of women's texts contributing to identity construction. And I hope that merely acknowledging the importance of such writings within composition studies and the existence of a gendered master narrative underscoring our literacy practices and identity performances will give voice to the often marginalized stories of young women.
The goal of empowering women's voices is obviously important to this study as well as to feminist research methodologies. Rebecca Campbell and Sharon Wasco (2000) remind us "the overarching goal of feminist research is to capture women's lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women's voices as sources of knowledge" (p. 783). And just as "traditional theories and methods of social science do not effectively, nor very accurately, capture the experiences of women" (Campbell & Wasco, p. 787), they also are often inadequate for capturing lived experiences online. Issues of power between researcher and subjects are always problematic, and it is not without reservation that I study women's online narratives without contacting them or interviewing them. Including such interviews would be a wonderful facet of another research project, but I feel that inclusion would detract from the work of this study, which must first situate the MySpace literacy practice within the rhetorical tradition. Just as scrapbooks, commonplace books and other women's texts have been scrutinized as texts in isolation from authors, I feel that the recognition of MySpace profiles as texts worthy of academic study is a good first step in reclaiming another women's rhetoric. As such, this perceived study limitation may actually be a strength of this project. Through a close read of a limited number of profiles done in isolation from author comment this work approaches MySpace from a new perspective. This lens is not based on statistics or user reporting, but instead considers profiles as texts impacting and revealing both society and individual users.

Part of this project may be not only to reclaim these types of women's digital texts, but also to lay claim to the research methodologies necessary to study such texts. This research process mirrors the subject of the research in regards to fear and mistrust. Just as the news media and society seems to tell girls that MySpace is dangerous and seedy and no place for a proper young lady, the academy often tells me as a feminist researcher that feminist methodologies are
inadequate and unreliable and have no place in the world of research. The next chapter will include my observations and findings resulting from traditional, feminist, and multi-modal research methodologies. I concentrate on discussions of modern images of womanhood, teenhood, and community building as evidenced through 25 MySpace profiles and the MySpace template itself. Studying such representations allows greater understanding of the narratives present in our society and influencing young women and the ways in which they repeat and resist such narratives of womanhood in their own literacy practices.
CHAPTER FOUR:
GIRLSPACE AND WOMEN’S WAYS WITH NEW MEDIA IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Studying MySpace and similar online communities and locales is daunting thanks to the scope and reach of such practices in our population, but these research challenges also necessitate our interrogation of such spaces. Modern girls and women are investing ever-increasing amounts of time and energy in online activities, but although the mode is new, the goals of such practices are not. Young women have long been engaged in multi-modal identity construction and representation activities (Dacome, 2005; Lockridge, 2003; Donawerth, 2002; Miller, 1998; Finders, 1997; Buckler & Leeper, 1991) and analysis of the profile artifacts created by female MySpace users chosen for this study suggest MySpace is the latest incarnation of composition as female identity exploration and expression. A useful first step in understanding this multi-modal feminine literacy practice is to apply a multi-modal research approach combining narrative, quantitative, and textual analysis to a limited pool of users and documents. Despite the restricted scale of this pilot study – consisting of 25 profiles created by 16- to 18-year-old females enrolled in high school, most from the same Midwestern region of the United States and of similar ethnicity and presumed class – significant trends emerged suggesting some previously ignored ways women are using social networking sites and leading to future research agendas aimed at interrogating other aspects of the practice or other segments of the user population.

This chapter will first offer a brief overview of the profiles analyzed in this study and will then consider each of the four research questions outlined in the previous chapter. By gathering and analyzing textual, visual, and numerical evidence culled from the 25 profile sites in the
study, this chapter offers initial interpretations of the ways young women are constructing themselves, their communities, and their own adolescence via this particular cyber-practice.

Overview of Selected Profiles and Profile Themes

The 25 profiles chosen for this study were all linked in some way to an initial profile originating from a small high school in Ohio with an enrollment of about 1,000 students. The sample, therefore, is fairly homogeneous with the profile creators residing mainly within 50 miles of one another and all of similar ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Because the girls in the study are active in online spaces such as MySpace it is reasonable to assume they have fairly frequent access to computer hardware as well as Internet capabilities. There are no doubt different economic classes present within the study and definitive decisions about financial means cannot be made simply by looking at one’s online profile, but participation in such online activities suggests at least minimal financial stability as evidenced by access to technology. Similarly, because online spaces are known for identity play, it is impossible to be sure each girl accurately reported her age and school affiliation, but by considering other contextual clues within the texts like posted photos and comments from profile visitors, I chose profiles that appear consistent with the categories defined for the study.

The 25 profiles considered were also designated public for reader access. The option exists on MySpace and similar social networking sites to set a profile to “private,” limiting access to said profile only to those who have “friended” the profile composer. Because this work is interested in situating and exploring this gendered literacy practice rather than in developing composer case studies, I chose to study profiles as artifacts and therefore included only those accessible to all MySpace users. Of the 25 profiles initially chosen for the study, one profile
switched to private midway into the study. To preserve the integrity of the original profile set, I retained the now private profile in the overall study but noted any changes in data collection and reporting.

Even though the profiles in this study were set to public, I will refrain from revealing profile creators’ names (which are often included in such spaces), full screen names, or other identifying details or facts. Current research requirements and review board considerations underscore the need for this type of scholarship to learn from subjects while always minimizing harm, so I consider these texts while revealing as little as possible of profile creators’ identities. Additionally, feminist research methodologies emphasize the need to study marginalized voices often ignored, while also exercising extreme care in not appropriating others’ voices (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Harding, 1992). To balance the need to explore this literacy and cultural practice with users’ safety and privacy expectations (which I observe perhaps to an even greater level than the users themselves), it is important to focus on trends and overall themes rather than unique facets of individual profiles and profile creators. Profiles are thus referred to by number only with each profile randomly assigned a number from 1 to 25. Below is a table listing each profile and including an overview with mention of the color scheme, font choice, and overall mood of the profile (see Table 1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profile 1</strong> Light blue with hearts as repeating design element; uses serif font, like cursive handwriting; overall cheerful tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profile 2</strong> Black, gray with some white with small emo cartoon as repeating design element; uses sans serif font, blocky headings; overall gloomy, dark and stark design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profile 3</strong> Peach and pink with lines, circles and dots as repeating design elements; uses sans serif, red fonts; overall graphic and cheerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile 7</td>
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<td>Profile 8</td>
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<td>Profile 9</td>
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<td>Profile 10</td>
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<td>Profile 11</td>
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<td>Profile 12</td>
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<td>Profile 13</td>
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<td>Profile 14</td>
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<td>Profile 15</td>
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<td>Profile 16</td>
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<td>Profile 20</td>
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<td>Profile 21</td>
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<td>Profile 22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Profile 23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Profile 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile 25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Description of Each Profile Color Scheme, Font Selection, Overall Theme

Data Retrieved, Analyzed Regarding Specific Research Questions

Data was collected largely within a two-week period and focused on profile users’ posts and publications occurring within a 30-day period. Information regarding user screen names, types and number of sexualized images, types of media used, and other data was collected beginning mid-November 2007. During that two-week period I concentrated on the posts visible on each user’s profile, the main page that does not require viewers to even log in to MySpace. For some users, the visible posts (usually numbering around 50) included only the most recent comments from friends made in November and October while other girls’ posts spanned several months depending on how active they and their friends are on the site. For research questions regarding frequency of posts, I concentrated on posts made during the month of October 2007. Given these limitations, it is important to note that profile creators have the option of deleting posts so those showing may not be all that were received. Still, that these posts were selected for archiving and viewing says a great deal about the profile creator’s rhetorical decisions. Additionally, some screen captures were taken to archive the sorts of communications –
especially involving ready-made chain letters and images – taking place between users. Data were collected in an effort to target four major research questions. Each question concerns the ways young women specifically are using MySpace as a new media literacy practice not only for communication via public representations, but also to shape personal identity. Pertinent findings are listed and discussed below each research question.

**Question 1: What codes, if any, does MySpace provide for “performing” girlhood/womanhood?**

Before turning to the sample profiles, it is important to consider the schemata provided by the application itself in regards to gender codes. When setting up a new profile, identifying oneself as either male or female is one of the first tasks required of users (see Figure 13). Along with age and nationality, this template seems to privilege gender as marker of identity in online spaces like MySpace. Gender identification is so important, in fact, that it is impossible to decline answering the question or to provide some sort of “other” designation such as transgendered.

Similarly, in the basic template provided for new members, statistical information and identity markers including the user’s gender, age, and geographic location are displayed prominently at the top, left-hand corner of every profile next to the main profile image. Other questions built into the template in the form of user’s “Details” box include inquiry about one’s relationship status, sexual orientation, and desire for children and apparently privilege user’s status in regards to traditional heteronormative relationships. Such sanctioning of hetero love relationships can also be seen in earlier feminine literacy practices as in templates and mass-produced items like wedding dresses and baby rattles intended for scrapbook construction. The placement and necessity of categorizing one’s gender suggests that MySpace participates in the cultural presumption that gender somehow defines people and that certain judgments can be made based solely on how one marks the gender box.

This homogenized view of gender in online spaces is also obvious in popular MySpace-related websites like www.pimp-my-profile.com that categorize layouts as “girly,” “sexy,” and “dark and dirty.” Another popular site, www.mygirlyspace.com, compartmentalizes layouts and the girls who use them as “emo,” “anime,” “dark,” “flowers,” “hearts,” and “sexy guys.” Although such sites assume all female users would visit sites like www.lovablelayouts.com, they do offer considerable options for ways to “do” femininity online. While being identified as one’s gender is a persistent problem on MySpace and similar social networking sites, the ways to perform and enact one’s gender seem to be broadening.

Making a Name: Personalizing Spaces

Variety is obvious even in the limited sample of profiles studied in this project. Of the 25 profiles, the majority (14) chose their names as the main signifier of their online identities.
Whether or not users retained their real names within the online space is unknown, but eight chose to represent themselves with common feminine first names while one user provided both a first and last name. Five users chose to include modifications of traditional names paired either with graphic elements (3 users) or sayings (2 users). Only three of the profiles studied seem to provide obvious pseudonyms – two with text only and one incorporating both textual and graphic elements. The graphic elements in profile names are especially intriguing as they often seem specifically feminine with hearts, stars, squiggly lines, and crosses used to wordlessly call to mind topics like love and religion. The remaining six profiles in the study incorporate sayings as profile names. Two of these sayings seem markedly feminine as one refers to menstruation and one alludes to a heterosexual love relationship. Four sayings appear gender neutral and refer generally to life or allude to popular cultural sayings.

Not only do profile creators often perform their identity – and thereby their gender – by choosing screen names, but decisions of overall profile layout and photographic elements contribute to young women’s online representations of femininity. Color undoubtedly has much cultural meaning in terms of gender and sexuality (Peril, 2002), with modern males associated with blue and females with pink even from earliest infancy. Color choices for decorating one’s online space are limitless, and yet I found that the majority of the sample profiles utilized feminine pastels of pink (5), blue (5), yellow (1), and other hues (2), while ten profiles were mainly in traditionally masculine colors like black (6) and red (4). The final two profiles are predominantly blue and white, but I chose not to include them in discussions of color selection since both stuck to the provided template for their sites and therefore did not consciously modify their pages’ color schemes. Although many colors carry some cultural gender baggage, the profiles studied demonstrate ways users are remaking the rules for color. For example, black is
often used to highlight dark themes like the profile user who self-identified as emo and the use of black and grays on the profile space devoted almost entirely to the cult classic *Buffy the Vampireslayer*. However, two of those profiles utilizing black most seem to claim it as a womanly color with one user displaying repeating tiny gray hearts (Profile 10) and another highlighting her dark gray page with pink headings and cursive handwriting (Profile 5). Additionally, one user (Profile 19) who incorporates lots of feminine pastels seems to subvert expectations by filling her background with the word “bang” and images of a gun in lavender and reappropriating blue and pink cartoon characters by adding images or references to illegal drug use and sex.

No matter the intention of the color scheme and images chosen for a profile, it seems clear that the majority of profiles in this study are purposely crafted to represent something about the users’ online and offline identities. Besides color choices, many profile users personalize sites by incorporating images, words, and other elements. Of the 25 profiles in this study, several

**Figure 14:** Screen Capture. Tractor Image.
categories of layouts emerged including photos or dominant images as background (9), graphic elements like lines and circles (7), hearts (5), and words (2). Still two profiles are not included in this data as they did not graphically alter their site and instead utilized only the provided template. Like color scheme modifications, graphic elements appear in a wide variety of genres with photos and images ranging from pairs of lovers to seemingly unfeminine images like farm equipment (see Figure 14) and the Air Jordan outline gracing countless tennis shoes. The farm image comes from Profile 24, a profile identifying largely with rural life and thus drawing a particular sort of femininity from this culture. Perhaps such variety highlights the ways that MySpace and similar new media sites and documents are widening ways to define femininity in this generation. Referring only to this small sample, it seems that girlhood may be experienced and expressed in any number of ways including farm life, first love, athleticism, cheerfulness, friendship, sex, and even gloom. Just as the girls who created these pages cannot be neatly categorized into “girly” or “flirty” or “punk,” it seems new media spaces are not easily categorized as merely sexual, dangerous, or stereotyping. Depending on the skill and forethought of the users, such spaces can actually emerge as sites of multiplicity and difference rather than simply factories reproducing cultural expectations for girl- and womanhood. Judy Wajcman, in *Technofeminism*, discusses technology’s potential as both empowering and limiting for women and the ways we define femininity. “What it means to be a man or a woman is no longer ordained by ‘nature’ – gendered identities are contested terrain,” writes Wajcman (2004, p. 2-3). “These … changes are associated with the unprecedented technological options available to us” (p. 3). Although technology offers many options for enacting gender, it does not erase gender, and so performing one’s gender remains as tied to online adolescence as it is to offline adolescence.
One of the principle identifiers on any profile is found in the main image located, in most cases, at the top left-hand corner of the profile. The image provides physical representation for the textual username provided for each profile and augments the statistics of age, location, and relationship status also listed. Considering the 25 profiles studied, MySpace appears as both a unique literacy event and discourse community and also a link to scrapbooking, commonplace books and other earlier women’s literacies. Only one profile declined to provide a profile image and instead relied on the provided template space holder. Seven of the profiles displayed versions of the MySpace self-portrait that has become so associated with social networking sites. These pictures vary in location from bedrooms and bathrooms to outdoors, but all share the conventions of unique angle of vision and framing that this genre has come to prize. Such conventions may be comparable to early photographic portrait practices employing mass-produced backgrounds and prescribed poses as photography was emerging as a new technology in the mid-1800s (Buckler, Ott, & Tucker, 2006). Such formal poses were previously commonplace in painted portraits, but soon came to define early era photos just as the MySpace portrait now defines this online space. Another approach to self-representation unique to high-tech new media is seen on the profile of a user who represents herself as an avatar. Profile 16 – a profile which is highly feminized and filled with pink, glittering objects like puckered lips and stylized words “Princess” and “Sexy” – provides an avatar of a slim, dark-skinned woman with long brown hair wearing a form-fitting tank top and shorts in the place of a traditional photo. The ability to create and digitize one’s persona is unique to online female literacy practices, but although the medium has changed, the models of standardized beauty – slim, sexualized – remain the same. While femininity and even adolescence may be contested terms, the editors of Geographies of Girlhood: identities in-between (2005), explain that some facets of femininity,
such as attractiveness and heterosexuality, remain static. “The shifting landscape of ideal
girlhood still mandates an adherence to certain nonnegotiable markers of ideal femininity,”
according to authors Pamela J. Bettis and Natalie G. Adams (p. 10). So although there are
variations of the profile image, users seem cognizant of adhering to acceptable representations.

Other profiles took more traditional approaches to representing themselves visually via
the profile image with five choosing to pose for pictures of themselves smiling or serious (3) or
acting goofy for the camera (2). Five of the profiles in this study included representations of the
profile user and one or more friends and three represented romantic love (in this case all
heterosexual couples). Other concepts such as motherhood (1 profile) and woman as sexualized
(1 profile) can also be tied to previous feminine texts. These representations bring to mind the
“womanly topics” observed in previous feminine literacy practices like commonplace books,
scrapbooks, and friendship albums. Within these spaces young women charted out future selves
as wives, lovers, mothers, and friends. As stated in Chapter One, MySpace not only remediates
existing media but also existing themes and expectations of womanhood. Commonplace books
have long included images and prose depicting women’s roles and the modern scrapbook
industry offers ready-made objects to display idealized family life featuring babies, travel, and
financial stability. It seems such themes continue in this emerging space and not only are these
concepts persistent in our society, but also the act of experimenting with relationships and
adulthood in multiple ways continues to be key to adolescence with this phenomenon
manifesting itself in MySpace and similar composition practices.

_Picturing Womanhood: Images Repeat Womanly Topics of Past_

The main profile image is not the only relevant signifier of user identity available on
MySpace profiles. Consistent with previous work attempting to code uses of feminine speech in
online settings (Subrahmanyam, et al., 2004), I categorized and counted feminine images – including the main profile image where appropriate – present on each profile’s main page. I defined feminine images as those a) tied to topics previously identified as womanly (i.e. marriage, motherhood, beauty – often related to relationships), b) depicting a female body and not related to relationships, or c) overtly sexual or sexual commodification. While most pages included multiple feminine images, those key to this study are ones categorized as dealing with topics previously identified as womanly or those overtly sexual. Oftentimes depictions of the feminine body are included on the page, but most are actual rather than constructed representations of physical and emotional identity. The images that fall within the womanly topics and overtly sexual categories are significant because they are chosen to represent rather than merely replicate the user’s identity / body / gender. These categories also mirror previous women’s literacies in their usefulness in allowing young women to explore adult topics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Feminized Images</th>
<th>Womanly Topics Images</th>
<th>Body Images</th>
<th>Sexualized Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>55 %</td>
<td>29 %</td>
<td>16 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – Categories of Feminized Images Present on Profile Main Pages

Of the 76 total feminine images included on the profiles in this pilot study, it is interesting to note that over half (42) of the feminine images posted on main pages by profile creators may be categorized as dealing with womanly topics. Issues of romantic love, friendship, and fairytales and fantasy were reoccurring themes expressed on many of the MySpace profiles and these themes can easily be traced out to women’s use of scrapbooks, friendship albums, and commonplace books. The practice of collecting and copying or physically pasting existing poetry or sayings into one’s own compositions is rooted in commonplace bookkeeping. While the
practice was first popular among male students building their own library from existing cultural knowledge and references (Havens, 2002), it eventually spread to women producing not academic storehouses but instead collections of codes and rules culled from popular media for acting the proper lady of a given age (Lockridge, 2003). This gathering of the tropes of womanhood was later seen in scrapbooks as a young woman’s means to “construct an idealized life by isolating a set of values that she found around her. She preserved marks of her inner identity and her best self within a scrapbook,” write the editors of The Scrapbook in American Life (Buckler, Ott, & Tucker, 2006, p. 2). This practice seems to be replicated in online spaces with young women no longer required to cut and paste relevant passages but to instead drag and drop mass-produced images and sayings into their own online compositions. Profile 11, like so many of the profiles in the pilot study, included a poem discussing what it is to be a woman (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15:** Screen Capture: “I Am …” Poem.
Romantic love is another popular theme of discussion and representation for girls of this age and appears to be important in regards to the ways they define themselves online with many discussing their roles as girlfriends, future wives, mothers, and sexual partners. Profile 23, for example, seems almost entirely devoted to romantic love with representations of heterosexual love evident in images (see Figure 16) and in words. The opening quote for her page, located near the main profile image, reads, “so there’s this guy and he’s just … fucking amazing.” The page is filled with stylized hearts, pictures, and drawings of couples and several sayings about love. Other images on this page – which totaled eight and were categorized as dealing with womanly topics (6) and sexuality (2) – include images of the female body in pieces or as sexual commodity. Pictures of a woman’s lips and a heavily made-up face with smoky eyes and long hair seem to reinscribe notions of woman as body, as object of desire rather than desirer.

Figure 16: Screen Capture. Romantic Couple Image.

The other category of feminine images considered in this study make up a much smaller percentage of the images than might be expected in light of recent media coverage and parental warnings. Although MySpace and similar social networking sites are often portrayed as overly and overtly sexualized, I found only about 15 percent of the images in this study (or 12 of 76)
seemed purposefully sexual or concerned mainly with body as object of gaze. In fact, only seven
of the profiles included in the sample 25 contained images categorized as overtly sexual. For
three of those profiles, images of sexuality seem to be tied to rebellion and the dark emo
movement. The other four profiles posting images in this category seem to focus on popular
ideas of femininity referencing being a “princess” (Profile 16) or involved in romantic
heterosexual love (Profile 23).

These visual representations, whether intended to categorize users as lovers, friends,
caretakers, students, tech users, or otherwise, are surely important to ways modern girls identify
themselves both personally and for others. Such identification is and has been an important step
in identity construction and performance for generations and while many of the decisions made
regarding visual representations of gender – especially those involving images and color choices
– are often subconscious or transparent for users, textual analysis of the 25 profiles revealed
several overt references made regarding gender via profile creators’ posts and the comments left
on profiles by visitors. Like many other women’s literacy artifacts, MySpace constructs texts and
profile creators’ identities within the context of a community. As was the case with friendship
albums and sometimes scrapbooks constructed at parties or other events, MySpace composing is
very rarely a solitary act and the young women in this study are written as much by others as
they write themselves.

**Girl Talk: Communal Gender, Identity Construction**

In order to consider the ways gender is represented, replicated, and written in such
communal settings as MySpace, I looked for comments and posts containing “feminine”
language. Although many of the profiles contained archives housing hundreds of comments and
posts left on the profile Wall, I chose to concentrate only on the comments made visible on the main page of the profile. Of the 25 sites in the sample, four profiles had Wall posts set to private and therefore none were visible on the main page. Additionally, Profile 15 changed to private in the middle of the study and so her posts were visible only to her MySpace “friends.” Of the 20 remaining sites, a total of 845 visible comments were left by those visiting the sites and 165, or nearly 20 percent, included some reference to gender or sexuality (See Table 3). I broke these feminine comments into four categories: graphics, womanly topics, body or sexualized, and names. The graphics category includes photographs, cartoons, text manipulated to form a graphic representation (see Figure 17), video, and emoticons.

![Figure 17: Screen Capture: Heart Created With Text.](image)

While graphics as comments are noticeably popular in this multi-modal space, my discussion here focuses on textual references to gender present in MySpace. Visuals and graphics are often mass produced and will therefore be addressed mainly in a later discussion of MySpace chain letters in reference to Research Question 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile No.</th>
<th>Comments Visible on Main Page</th>
<th>Comments Related to Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Private</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Profile</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Totals** | 845 | 165 |

*Table 3 – Total Visible Posts on Profile Main Pages and Percentage of Posts Pertaining to Gender*
Disregarding graphic comments, three categories emerged among the remaining 116 textual comments posted to users (see Table 4). I coded such comments into the following categories: womanly topics; references to the female body or sexuality; naming conventions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Textual Comments</th>
<th>Womanly Topics Comments</th>
<th>Body / Sexualized Comments</th>
<th>Naming Convention Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>116</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total</td>
<td>14 %</td>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>56 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 – Categories of Textual Comments Related to Gender, Less Graphic Comments

Womanly topics were discussed earlier in this study and are similar to those identified in earlier feminine literacy practices like scrapbooks and commonplace books and include friendship, romance, marriage, etc. The sexualized and body references are fairly obvious and within the names category, consistent with the work of Subrahmanyam, et al. (2004), I concentrated on "…terms commonly used to refer to females” (p. 656) or associated with women’s language (ex. “awww”).

Of the 116 total textual references marked as feminine, naming conventions accounted for the largest percentage of comments, or about 56 percent. Naming conventions for MySpace users of this age and gender range from “hey girl” and “hey cutie” to “you dirty ho” and “u whore”. There exists a tension between naming conventions and sexualized terms. Often nomenclature used for women refers directly to woman as sexual object (“hooker”) or as an example of standardized beauty (“hey gorgeous”). Another interesting phenomenon included the profile user’s name being replaced with a signifier for a role she filled or may eventually fill. The creator of Profile 20, for example, is referred to as “sister” and “mama” and the creator of Profile 14 is called “darling,” “wifey,” and “sista.” It seems even when naming gets overtly sexual and possibly derogatory, the names are used as friendly banter and as part of playful talk associated
with growing up. This trend to reduce women to sexual commodity is not limited to online discussions and is evident in the face-to-face conversations of teens throughout the country and is clearly rooted in larger cultural conventions. Delores D. Liston and Regina E. Moore-Rahimi (2005), report this sort of “…labeling and stigmatizing occurs through the cultural regulation of female sexuality” (p. 213). While the girls in this study seem to regard such exchanges as little more than play, more research is needed in this area to discern what sort of impact this labeling and verbal sparring has on girls’ identity construction.

Around one-third of the feminized comments left make direct references to the feminine body or to sexuality. Interestingly, many of the graphic comments reduce women to single body parts with two video clips posted on Profile 3 of a woman’s breasts and another focusing on a slim woman wearing bikini underwear and visible only from her navel to upper thigh. Two such posts were left by men and one was posted by a female. This study seems to suggest that both men and women utilize and exemplify the concept of person as sexual object. A post on Profile 4 reading, “you have my penis at your house” suggests that young women participate in objectifying men as well and may at least be moving woman from object only to objectifier. Placing anyone in the role of objectified is not ideal, but allowing women to begin to expand the borders of feminine sexuality once confining women to objects of gaze only is an interesting byproduct of this online space.

The final category of feminized language consists of 16 of 116 textual comments, or roughly 14 percent, referring to womanly topics like those referred to earlier as represented via images. While two of the comments reference romantic love – in the form of two chain emails referring to the boys in all girls’ pasts – the overwhelming majority of such comments focus on friendship. Fourteen of the sixteen comments concerning womanly topics seem intended to
strengthen relationships or build community. Several of these comments came in the form of online chain letters sending “Hugs” or “i love you”s to other MySpace users. Other reoccurring language relating directly to the theme of friendship was seen in a shorthand, girl-centered language with terms like “BFFL” or “Best Friends For Life” and “lylas” or “Love Ya Like a Sister” cropping up as either signatures at the end of messages or sometimes as the entire content of the post. Such codes seem evolutions of secret language often used in note passing like that described in Finders’ work (1997). The practice is also a continuation of the prescribed signatures used by girls for decades when signing autograph albums and even yearbooks (Morrison, 2003, 1961; Cole & Calmenson, 1995). Just as mass-produced books have long offered codified sayings as representations of appropriate sentiments regarding relationships, especially among females, it seems that young MySpace users are taking advantage of shorthand phrases used to express the complexities of friendships and sometimes romance. Such comments are important in reflecting cultural expectations that women’s friendships will last for life and are as close as that of familial bonds. By passing on these impersonal messages MySpace users build their own ethos and identity as good friends and help build the ethos of those they are “posting” at the same time.

In Her Words: Creators Use Text to Define Gendered Selves

While the communal building of identity is prominent in such spaces, profile creators themselves continue to have a lot to say about gender. Self-references regarding gender abound on MySpace with young women often defining themselves in terms of sexuality, relationship status, and future parental roles. While placing usernames at the top of profiles is paramount to the ways profile creators identify themselves, designers also include allusions in “About Me” and
“Details” boxes as well as in headlines displayed at the top of profiles alongside the main profile images and usernames. The headline is arguably very important to how the profile – and thus the profile creator – is read because it is the only text, along with the username, that appears even when a profile is set to private. Twenty-one of the profiles included in this study display a headline while four do not. Seven of the headlines cannot easily be relegated to categories as they appear to reference personal stories (i.e. seagulls in a parking lot, nights out with friends) or more general statements about life (“people don’t always see eye to eye”). The remaining fourteen may, however, represent some larger trends when it comes to performing femininity online.

Of the 21 profiles displaying a headline, eight may be categorized as dealing with womanly topics like those identified earlier. Four headlines refer to romantic, heterosexual love (i.e. “the worst thing a guy can do is make a girl fall for him without any intention of catching her” and “…I want to tell you I really like you but I’m afraid you’ll break my heart”). Whether or not these profile creators are actually in such a romantic relationship – two list themselves as “in a relationship,” one is “single” and one reports to be “married” – does not seem to matter. The point is that the profile creators are read as being interested in and aware of romantic love and its conventions. Discussions of romantic partners who disappoint and emotionally injure the women who love them fill the profiles and the comments left to and by young women in this cyberspace. Notions of romantic love as dangerous but ultimately worth it are culturally embedded and are clearly reinscribed in this online space. Another reoccurring trope of womanhood that appears in this space – and in three profile headlines – are ideas of woman as powerless or possibly mentally ill. One profile headline references paranoia while another reports “I don’t even care anymore.” The final profile headline reports a willingness by the
creator to “forget” who she is. Women are often portrayed as overly emotional and irrational on MySpace, whether as a result of romantic love, naiveté, or cruelty from others. The rhetorical move to represent oneself as weak or inferior is an interesting one in building feminine ethos online and may be traced back to medieval female rhetors like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe who used mental illness and fragility as tropes of both Christianity and womanhood (Ritche & Ronald, 2001). In order to get their message heard, these women couched it in terms of divine inspiration and hysterical visions. Julian of Norwich “received a series of sixteen ‘showings’, or revelations, from God” (p. 23) and this direct conversation with God allowed her to write and interpret scripture at a time when women were forbidden by the church to do so. Kempe also received “a vision of Christ” and had “regular bouts of uncontrollable weeping over the sufferings of Jesus” (Ritchie & Ronald, 2001, p. 43). Both female rhetors based their message and delivery on the concept of their female bodies as vessels and instruments somehow controlled by other forces rather than their own volition. This highly emotional and often uncontrollable means of discovery and representation has not disappeared from modern writings and many of the young female writers on MySpace seem to recognize confusion and unhappiness as conventions not only of MySpace, but perhaps also of adolescence and of femininity itself.

The final six headlines are categorized as relating to naming conventions. These headlines seem to directly rename the profile creator with two of the profile users repeating their actual name, while six others offer alternative names for themselves. Only one of those names seems negative as it contains the word “loser” and an additional name is a traditional descriptor often used in reference to women (“sweet”). The final two headlines used as names are interesting in that they seem to represent not only the profile user but maybe also feminine roles
as well with one headline depicting women as secret keepers and one showing women as entertainers. Such references are similar to those seen in commonplace books and conduct books and manuals intended to train women to be modest and useful future wives and hostesses. In fact, the actual construction of such texts, like scrapbooks, was often seen as an important occupation for women. “Although ideally all family members were included in the scrapbook-making circle, much album making fell to the female gender,” report Bucker, Ott, and Tucker (2006, p. 9). “In general, scrapbook and album making was considered a female activity, linked to traditional female concerns of holding families together and preserving nostalgic items” (p. 10).

Construction of artifacts like scrapbooks, commonplace books, and MySpace profiles then not only helps young women identify cultural expectations for women, but compiling such artifacts also fulfills one such expectation.

The urge to look to future selves is an important part of female adolescence, and the “Details” box on each MySpace profile provides an interesting window into the ways girls define themselves, particularly in regards to relationship status and desire to take on maternal roles. All of the public profiles in this study chose to define their relationship status, with the exception of the profile switched to private during the study period, leaving 12 of 24 users listed as single, 10 as in a relationship, and two as married. The married listings are significant because they seem to be purposely chosen rather than merely reporting facts about the profile creators. For example, the creator of Profile 14 lists herself as married and also “here for dating, serious dating and friends” while claiming to be “not sure” about her sexual orientation. Her apparent disregard for adherence to titles and categories is interesting and may suggest a rejection of cultural expectations, but obviously it is impossible to know the author’s intention without augmenting this project with interviews or surveys. It is possible, however, to note that this inconsistency in
personal labeling is read as somewhat defiant. Although relationship status is most often a reflection of current situation rather than a forward-looking prophecy or dress rehearsal for adulthood, the template-provided question about children asks profile creators to list their parental status and opinions by allowing responses ranging from wanting kids eventually to never wanting kids. Six of the profiles in this study (and Profile 15 that switched to private) contained no information in this category while 14 report that the profile creator “wants kids someday.” The ability and perhaps pressure to vision oneself as a mother seems apparent with 78 percent of those responding expecting to bear children eventually and only two profiles choosing “don’t know” to describe their opinions on having children. Finally, two of the profiles in the study report, “I don’t want kids.” The inclusion of this question obviously has an immediate impact, especially among older users seeking to find or avoid others who have children, but the question also aligns this literacy practice with so many earlier women’s compositions. Commonplace bookkeeping, scrapbooking, and even friendship albums are often predicated on encouraging motherhood and family life. Just as poems praising mothers and mass-produced miniature baby booties and dresses for decorating scrapbooks relay societal expectations for and valuing of motherhood, it seems MySpace is also asking young women to at least consider the baby question. This casting of oneself into such future roles and communities is also important for placing girls in existing teen female societies.

*Question 2: What role does MySpace play in adolescence and is participating in the literacy practice a marker of modern American girlhood?*

As earlier chapters have suggested, MySpace participation seems to be central to modern adolescence, a time filled with technological rites of passage like first cell phones, IM screen
names, video games, and iPods. MySpace is an interesting technological practice because it combines several other relevant technologies and mediums in one location and practice. The communication central to IM-ing and cell phone use is material to MySpace and the music-obsessed iPod users often include songs on their MySpace profile sites. Additionally, the graphics and visuals that make so many video games popular are incorporated into many personal profiles. In fact, photography as a technology has been associated with adolescence since the boom in popularity of photo albums in the late 1860s. “Young people who were in transition between households, relationships, and identities used photograph albums to give abstract networks of affection concrete form,” writes Sarah McNair Vosmeier (2006, p. 219). With modern digital photography, collecting and displaying photos is even more common and affordable and sites like MySpace are quick to incorporate template options to display albums as part of teens’ online identities. Just as MySpace seems to be remediating existing media important to modern teenage life, the site also may remediate adolescence in general. For many high school users, creating a MySpace profile on one’s fourteenth birthday (or even offering up a bogus birth date in order to meet the minimum age requirement sooner) may represent another step toward adulthood where things like R-rated movies, driving privileges, and voting are no longer restricted due to age. The findings of this study suggest that MySpace access and participation are highly valued within many adolescent social circles and that the practice may change ways those within such circles communicate and relate to one another and the technologies around them.

While adolescence seems to be an increasingly popular scholarly topic, the term itself remains contested with researchers disagreeing on what experiences and spaces serve as benchmarks of the maturation phase. Bettis and Adams discuss adolescence as an “in-between”
space and time (2005, p. 5) necessary for emergent identities and personalities to flourish and espouse “the transformative possibilities of the liminal period, one in which the social conventions and hierarchies are shed” (p. 6). Their study of girlhood goes on to report: “During these rites of passage, then, persons can try on new ways of being and identity, even if only temporarily. … Thus, we see the liminal spaces of being an adolescent and of being female as offering possibilities, uncertainties, play, and performance” (p. 6). MySpace and similar online locales seem to emerge as spaces within the adolescent space, spaces where young people can and to a large part are expected to experiment with and construct their future identities. As such, online spaces seem inseparable from modern adolescence.

Online activities are often time-consuming with many role-play gamers logging countless hours in parallel online worlds and Web designers and bloggers updating sites daily. MySpace is no different with many users, maybe especially younger users, updating their profiles multiple times each day. Many of those included in this pilot study often changed their user names and headlines and pictures, and new songs and video clips were frequently added or replaced. Because this study did not incorporate surveys or interviews, it is impossible to estimate how much time those maintaining the 25 sample profiles spent on their pages, but it is possible to note the emphasis placed on membership and activity by both the application template and the community of users. This preoccupation with currency, use, and readership are built into the MySpace template itself with a box showing traffic to each profile (see Figure 18) visible at the top right corner of a standard profile homepage. Demonstrating participation in this adolescent pastime is not limited to merely maintaining a personal site or tracking hits, but also seems tied to the number of posts and comments left by others for the profile user and made visible to visitors to one’s site. Although comments may be sent privately and users may also delete
comments, several of the young women in this study chose to save posts dated back two years or more.

![Profile Information](image)

In fact, Profile 12 has a total of 806 comments archived on her Wall, not to mention countless comments made concerning photos and blogs housed on the profile. It seems then, by studying this profile document, that participation in this practice is only as important as the ability to publicly display this participation. Like friendship albums and diaries, there seems to be some power in the physical – in this case virtual – manifestation of feminine writing practices, especially in their role as entry ticket to more adult society. Like note passing in high school, MySpace is done for the benefit of peers and forms a sort of pre-adult community unregulated by parents, teachers, and other adults. Finders notes literacies like note passing are important for “marking the passage [into womanhood]. Girls use literacy to control, moderate, and measure their growth into adulthood” (1997, p. 18-19). Such literacy practices did and continue to “document an official passage into adolescence” (Finders, 1997, p. 79), to provide substantive proof of involvement and belonging in this pre-adult world.
Talking the Talk: Performance, Language Use Proves Membership

While the overwhelming majority of profiles included in this study preferred to exchange communications in this space in public, four of the profile users had their Wall posts set to private and visible to friends only. The 21 profiles with public posts showed 5,503 visible posts at the end of October 2007. This is an average of 262 posts for each user although actual usage varies greatly with some profiles garnering several hundred posts while others display only a handful. Not only the frequency then, but also the archiving of these communications suggests that MySpace participation is valued in this community and perhaps in the larger adolescent realm in general. MySpace is more public and performative than previous women’s literacy practices, but several had some public use attached. Friendship albums, for example, could not be completed unless circulated, albeit within a much smaller and more tightly controlled community. Commonplace books and scrapbooks also were often constructed alone, but were intended to eventually be viewed by others. Similarly, photograph albums, a literacy practice tied closely to scrapbooks and often serving as friendship albums, blurred “the boundaries between private and public spheres, [with] individual selection and the directions of industry, the images of family and the portraits of a nation and world” (Siegel, 2006, p. 253) existing in one practice and in one artifact. While communication is at the heart of all such practices, archiving and documentation are the desired outcome, even if that documentation is as informal as a shoebox full of intricately folded paper notes hoarded during middle and high school. If display were not important, all the profiles on MySpace would be private or girls would be using blogs and instant messaging to communicate. Documentation is, however, proof of membership not only in the online MySpace community but also in the wider adolescent community.
In the month of October alone, more than 379 Wall comments were left for the 21 profile creators in this study whose comments are public. Additionally, three comments were left on blog posts and 126 comments referred to images made public by the 21 profile creators. Seven of the profile creators received 10 or more comments in a single month and 11 profile creators received between 1 and 9 comments in October 2007 and all chose to publicly document the interactions taking place with their online friends and community members. The display of such comments not only suggests the importance of documenting this literacy practice, but also suggests that those receiving comments are actively leaving posts for other users. Many posts are direct responses to posts left by the original profile creator for others and those who do not comment on others’ pages seem quickly to fall out of favor in this community and therefore receive few new comments themselves.

Not only are sites visited and updated often, but also the comments left on the profiles frequently refer to the literacy practice itself. Thus, like note passing, it seems that the act of posting on MySpace is often more important than the content of such posts. Just as “albums were seen as the perfect genteel accompaniment to the lady’s table” (Siegel, 2006, p. 254) and notes offer girls “play time away from adults and … opportunity to try on and test out more adult roles” (Finders, 1997, p. 24-25), MySpace appears to be important not in the information that is circulated but in what participation in the literacy event says about the composer / writer herself. In the same way that notes and albums are often more important than the actual content they contain, MySpace commenting is often filled with inane references to the literacy practice itself that seem only useful in continuing the literacy act. To gauge the impact of the MySpace practice I counted and coded comments referencing the practice or specific actions within the practice. Of the 5,503 total comments posted on the Walls of the 21 profiles whose comments are designated
public, 18 percent – or 992 comments – made mention of the literacy practice itself (see Table 5 below). In fact, the fewer posts a profile included the more likely they were to contain references to MySpace or some facet of the discourse community practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice-Related Comments</th>
<th>“Comment”</th>
<th>“MySpace”</th>
<th>“the Add”</th>
<th>Design Related</th>
<th>Chain Letters</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>992</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>74</td>
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<td>26 %</td>
<td>8.5 %</td>
<td>4.5 %</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>28.5 %</td>
<td>7.5 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 – Total Comments Relating to MySpace Literacy Practice, Coded Into Categories

To further consider this metadiscursive facet of teens’ MySpace usage I coded the 992 comments referring to the practice into six categories. These include direct language references to “comment,” “the add,” and “MySpace” as well as chain letters, design discussions, and an “other” category. While all such comments demonstrate the emphasis those within the MySpace community place on participation in this literacy practice, the posts most germane to establishing MySpace-ing as a marker of modern adolescence are posts referring to commenting, adding friends, and including the term “MySpace.” The presence of chain letters and design comments are perhaps more relevant to discussions of MySpace as building teen communities and remediating users as technology experts, respectively. Findings regarding these two categories, therefore, are introduced in this section but will be more fully analyzed under discussions of Research Questions 3 and 4.

Proof of the importance of the MySpace literacy practice is not only evident in hours logged on such sites, but also in the frequency of mentions of the practice itself within the communications taking place at the site. While communication is clearly relevant on MySpace, much cultural currency seems to be found in mere presence on the space. Just as many modern
teens own cellular phones as much for the ability to decorate them and show off as for actually talking, MySpace profiles and posts often concern the technology more than the actual content of the communications taking place via the technology. Posts referring to commenting itself accounted for 26 percent, or 257, of the metadiscursive comments. The posts containing the word “comment” often either encourage others to “comment back” or remind readers that the commenter was “bored” and so “decided to comment you.” There are even mass-produced graphic comments available for those who really have nothing to say but nevertheless wish to leave evidence of their participation in the practice (see Figure 19 from Profile 12). Leaving a message referring to commenting seems to be a commonplace within the discourse community and implies caring via the action rather than the content of the message, similar to an email chain letter. On Profile 14, for example, a visitor leaves several comments in a row with the last one reading, “haha … last two comments!! wooot woot. So commenting spree is happening right now cause I am bored and need to do something.” Other messages on this profile

![Figure 19: Screen Capture. Rabbit With Pancake Comment Image.](image)
remind the profile owner to “Comment My Pictures Twat Waffel!!!!” and to “stop commenting
me with gay comments!” Such transactions seem to have little to do with communicating
information, but rather seem to demonstrate membership in the MySpace community by
adhering to the language and playful tone of the discourse. Another commenting trend seems to
come in the sheer number of comments left to or from a MySpacer. Thirty-four percent of the
comments categorized as pertaining to the MySpace practice left on Profile 2 directly refer to
commenting with several strings of comments like the three posts below:

“imma give you 40 comments to get you to 400…”

“oooooooono imma be your 400th comment!”

“this be your last comment … for now!! MUWHAAHAHAHA! its numero 400! i win!”

Such commenting conventions are reminiscent of signing practices on yearbooks or note passing
where often numbers and not messages mean the most.

Numerical positioning on the MySpace Wall is also very important with the first
comment receiving special attention from many users. Interestingly, the first comment has
become highly sexualized, maybe especially within adolescent friendship circles. A comment on
Profile 19 displays the salacious nature of such references saying, “I had to take your comment
virginity and I feel sooooo special!” On Profile 17, this banter is carried on long after the first
comment is left. One poster says, “well it looks like ur comment cherry has long since been
popped, so I missed out there lol. oh well, I can still embarrass you w/an akward comment.”

Sexualized comments like these have long been seen in adolescent literacy practices like
yearbooks and notes. Finders discusses yearbook signing, an important literacy practice at both
the junior and senior high level, and the often sexualized comments written and received. She
notes ways some male comments specifically reduce girls to "anatomical commodity" (1997, p.
42) with girls often viewing this as complimentary. This focus on sexuality seems to go hand-in-hand with adolescence, a time when relationships are always at the forefront. Those involved in such communities understand the values and mores of the given discourse communities and so the kairotic appropriateness of this sort of comment is bound not only to the audience, but also to the MySpace practice itself. Attention to the practice rather than the message is further seen in profile commenters’ posts directed not at the profile site creator but rather at other posts. On Profile 3, for example, a female leaves the comment, “Got any hott friends??” and is promptly answered by a comment from a young male saying, “Tell that … chick im pretty hott”. On Profile 20, posters notice the “nice comment at the beginning of your page” and echo sentiments of others saying, “I agree with the girl below me…” Not only do users seem to internalize the rhetorical strategies, linguistic norms, and commonplaces of the MySpace discourse community and practice, but several are savvy enough to critique the practice itself. For example, on Profile 24 a playful and sexualized comment is delivered with a wink to other readers saying, “…ur goin to be my new lover. lol but dont tell anyone its a secret between me and u and anyone who reads this comment lol.” Commenting practices like this suggest the ability to converse in this community is necessary to modern teenhood.

Other direct references to the MySpace literacy practice come in the form of mentions of MySpace, as seen in 8.5 percent of the categorized comments, and “the add”, accounting for 4.5 percent of such comments. Like the comment posts, mention of MySpace is often highly sexualized. “III WANTED TO TAKE YOUR MYSPACE VIRGINITY!!!” writes a visitor to Profile 1’s site and a standardized graphic on Profile 20 notes that the profile creator’s “MySpace is gay.” Additionally, mentions of MySpace, like references to comments, often rest more on frequency than content to make meaning. For example, graphic comments (see Figure 20) are
sometimes used when those posting seem to have no content to offer at the profile site but still want to leave a post. Direct mentions of “MySpace” are used not only to alert users to new friends’ profile sites and to encourage people to “friend” one another, but also to promote traffic and activity on the profiles themselves. A visitor to Profile 11, for example, chides the profile creator, “I never see you on here” while the creator of Profile 12 is urged, “yea yo def. need to check out ur myspace MOREby like a lot.” Similarly, the Profile 20 creator is congratulated for “changing your myspace FINALLY.” Such internal, albeit lighthearted, policing of the community shows membership alone does not keep one in the good graces of the adolescent MySpace community and that currency seems to be as highly valued on personal profiles as it might be on public webpages used for scholarship or entertainment. Like offline relationships, MySpace “friendships” require attention and time, but this effort is not reserved for communication alone. Judging from such comments, it seems just as important for profile creators to constantly critique and revise the ethos they express via their personal profiles as it is to contact others directly.

Other direct references to MySpace foreground the cultural value, for adolescents involved in the discourse community, of participating in the literacy practice. “So I see you
joined the ‘COOL’ people on myspace!! Wahooo!!” says a visitor to Profile 20. The creator of Profile 16 receives a playful warning, “you’ve joined all of us in the addicting site called myspace. Lol” while Profile 17 is warned, “Oh god you and myspace isn’t a good combo.” Other users employ such references to explain or apologize for their previous absences on the cyberspace. “So I finally found you on myspace. It took me awhile,” says a visitor to Profile 2 and a post on Profile 12 alerts, “hey guess what I got on myspace who knew.” Such comments suggest that, at least within this community, teen participation in MySpace is expected and requires some sort of explanation if not done. In the same way, commonplace books were once fashionable among young women of a certain age and class (Miller, 1998) and scrapbooks and photo albums enjoyed iconic status among American families at the turn of the nineteenth century. As “symbol of both family unity and middle-class status,” according to Elizabeth E. Siegel (2006, p. 255), “the family album … rapidly joined the family Bible on the center table, becoming an indispensable fixture of the household parlor” (p. 254). Owning one not only proved respect for tradition and memory, but also the sanctity of the home, patriotism, and progress (Sigel, 2006, p. 253). The users of literacy practices, like MySpace, are thus often less concerned with the intrinsic value of said practices and more with connotation attached to the practice.

Another expectation on MySpace is seen in the reoccurring language of “the add”. As a first step to “friending” people, profile creators receive email alerts when new people want to join their MySpace friend list. Profile users have the option of ignoring or accepting a friend request. Once a request has been accepted, users frequently respond with a public “thaanx for the add!” (Profile 1). The nonstandard spellings seen in many such messages – “hey thanx for addin
me” on Profile 5 and “Thanx 4 da add” on Profile 10 – are reminiscent of spelling conventions seen in text messages, IM-ing, and note passing practices. For those who do not wish to pen their own messages, graphics (see Figure 21 posted to Profile 21) are available to demonstrate gratitude for being “friended”. Such stock images illustrate expectations of MySpace etiquette regarding some sort of acknowledgement for being accepted into a profile creator’s personal online friendship circle. This practice is also similar to the yearbook and autograph album signing practices that make exchanging signatures preferable to merely receiving them. Amassing friends, Wall posts, and image and blog comments are all important ways to build the online community rooted in this literacy practice.

**Question 3: What impact does MySpace have on building community (online and off)?**

Gathering friends, whether online or off, is the goal of most MySpace profiles and the relationships represented by the profiles in this study suggest the MySpace literacy practice is invaluable in building and maintaining modern teen social circles. MySpace comments and posts, whether standardized chain letters or more personalized comments, are useful in creating
and feeding the friendships this “Place for Friends” clearly privileges. Connection and
communication are demonstrated by many of the young women on MySpace by the number of
“friends” displayed on each profile site. One of the advantages often touted about MySpace –
and one of the things some parents and educators worry about – is the ability to connect with
“friends” from all over the globe. Of the 21 profiles in this study showing a complete list of
friends, a total of 3,890 friends were amassed, making the average 155 friends per profile.
Although this number may suggest that many profile creators are collecting hundreds of friends,
many that they will never meet offline, the average is not necessarily very telling due to the wide
variance among profiles in this study in regards to total friends. Seven of the profiles studied
have 50 or fewer friends while 11 have more than 100. Profile 3 lists 335 friends and Profile 7
has 1,499. Many of those with the most online friends include musical artists, film and television
stars, and other popular culture icons.

Merging Worlds: Online and Offline Relationships Overlap

Although profile users, and the MySpace application, promote the accumulation of
networked friends, many comments circulate among those who share offline existences as well.
For this reason, the 25 profiles selected for the pilot study are basically linked through three
major friendship circles. To further investigate the link that may exist between these online
friendships and offline ones, I coded visible profile posts on each profile’s main page on a
Tuesday in early December for references to offline relationships in words like “at school” and
“at church.” Twenty of the profiles contained visible comments on their main pages for a total of
845 visible comments and 12.5 percent, or 106, of those comments referred to offline
relationships. Although over half of such comments were sorted into an “other” category, some
trends emerged when it came to profile creators’ educational, vocational, and religious affiliations. Thirty-three comments directly referenced school, including a comment on Profile 5 reading, "we should go in before skewl on Monday …” and a reference to Profile 11’s creator as an “American history friend” being urged to "come back to study hall" and "you better be at school tomorrow". Other direct references to school dances, athletic events, specific classes and even class projects suggest MySpace is sometimes used as a social calendar and sort of assignment manual for several of the adolescent women in this pilot study. Another popular topic of discussion for some users was church. Profile 1, for example, includes several reminder comments about missing church and Profile 3 contained three messages wondering whether or not the creator would “be at the church the next two Saturdays”. Additionally, three of the profiles in the study contain references to work schedules and exchanges between co-workers.

The final references to offline relationships include a variety of topics with everything from scheduling trips to movies, to hang, or to “see ya @ bowling” (Profile 21). Such references not only schedule future meetings, but also are often made to recall past events like the reminder on Profile 2 that "we need to have another 'ROCK OUT' session in ur car." This revelation about the ways the MySpace community reflects and often facilitates offline relationships in an online space is important especially in linking this modern literacy practice to feminine literacy practices of the past. Just as scrapbooks often serve as physical representations of experiences and life’s milestones and friendship albums are manifestations of the bonds of friendship, MySpace appears to serve as a public documentation of personal, offline relationships. Vosmeier discusses the role of photograph albums, in particular, in Victorian-era courtship practices. She notes the significance of the photograph / friendship album “as a marker of gentility and as a prop for social interaction” (2006, p. 210) with albums spurring conversations and physical
proximity between young men and women of proper families. These albums then not only
documented friendship circles and other relationships, but were also useful in facilitating such
relationships and even served as keepsakes and tokens of affection when lovers and friends were
physically separated from one another (Vosmeier, 2006, p. 217). In similar ways, MySpace
interactions seem to mediate offline love and friend relationships with users often flirting,
planning dates, chatting and otherwise displacing telephone calls, letters, and other earlier and
more traditional tools of courtship and friendship.

*Personal Goes Public: Chain Letters Document Online Friendship*

Although offline relationships are often a part of the MySpace community, it seems
possible for users to nurture friendships without ever leaving the site. A popular, and perhaps
expected, marker of this MySpace community mentioned briefly in Research Question 2’s focus
on the literacy practice itself is the MySpace chain letter. These forwards are circulated among
profile creators as Wall posts and account for nearly 30 percent, or 285, of the comments coded
for this study as referencing the literacy practice itself. The chain letters vary greatly in subject
matter but many mimic the womanly topics seen in scrapbooks and commonplace books for
centuries and appear to serve the main purpose of building and reinforcing community and
camaraderie online. Friendship, love, sexuality, and physical attractiveness are common themes
among posts and, just as standardized signatures for signing autograph albums and yearbooks
taught users the appropriate ways to express relationship connections in earlier literacy practices,
such letters seem sanctioned avenues for expressing caring within the confines of MySpace. For
several of the profiles included in this study, chain letters are a major mode of communication.
Profile 22, for example, contains only three comments and two of those are chain letters.
Although Profile 22 contains next to the fewest comments of any of the profiles in the study and therefore may not be representative of standard usage among the population, the popularity of chain letters is seen in several of the profiles included in this pilot study. In fact, three of the five most active profiles as far as posts contain significant numbers of chain letters. Profile 12, for example, which has 806 visible comments, contains 63 chain letters. Chain letters appear in bunches on her profile with four or five of the same posts, all sent by different readers, appearing in clusters throughout the profile site. One particular post, an “I love you to death” comment, appears seven times in a row on Profile 12 with the post encouraging those receiving it to “send it to 15 people that you really care about” in the hopes that at least seven will be returned to the sender thereby proving “you are loved.” Additionally, Profiles 2 and 4 each display chain letter posts numbering in the upper 30s with 5 to 8 percent of their total comments categorized as chain letters.

Similar to other comment categories, chain letters can be broken into topic categories parallel to those identified in earlier women’s literacy practices. Probably the most popular topic for chain letters is friendship, alluding to the posts’ usefulness in generating communal bonds among online users. Just as scrapbooks, commonplace books, autograph albums and note passing practices privileged girl-centric communities, it seems the importance of feminine friendships is being reinscribed in the MySpace environment. Many of the chain letters are guides to being a good friend including a “TRUE FRIEND” anagram which assigns a positive aspect of friendship to each letter of the alphabet including “Accepts you as you are”, “Believes in you,” etc. and the “FAKE FRIENDS versus REAL FRIENDS” scenarios list. Both serve as simplified conduct manuals for modern friendship and simultaneously express friendly affection while also instructing on the cultural expectations of such friendships. Several chain letters go so far as to
ask “what would you do if your best friend died tomorrow and you never got to tell them how you felt?” or imagine a situation where the sender is shot in the place of the receiver and reports “I’m happy I took that bullet for you, because it would have hurt even more to see you lying in this hospital bed.” This ideal of self-sacrifice and service to others is echoed again and again in friendship chain letters with extreme scenarios created in order to express the depths of camaraderie. One letter says “I Love you so much that I would rather take my life than watch u die … send this to all ur friends that u would kill urself to keep them alive” (Profile 4). While many are extreme, these chain letters echo sentiments long prescribed in female literacy practices regarding friendship. Just as albums once offered “tangible form to an intangible network of affection” (Vosmeier, 2006, p. 211), MySpace chain letters now serve as public and substantial proof of the bonds of friendship.

One of the most popular chain letters circulated among several of those within this pilot study is one informing the receiver that they are “one of my 14 fav. Girlz” and asking the receiver to prove her friendship by passing the letter on and returning it to the original sender. “If I don’t get this back Im obviously not a good friend *sniffle*,” the chain letter reads. The letter reportedly originated in 1977 and if the receiver passes it on to the required 15 girls in five days she will not only prove her worth as a friend but also “on the 5th day the male of your choice will either ask you out, or say I love you.” Such MySpace communications privilege the importance of women as both model friends and desired lovers. This particular communication also recalls what Finders (1997) believed attracted many young females to note passing practices. “Note-passing was clearly a gendered activity. It functioned to control male voices and to try out women’s voices,” Finders notes. “Circulation of notes was controlled exclusively by girls” (p. 68). This emphasis on control is interesting when reading chain letters filled with orders to be
passed on to so many people so wishes will be fulfilled, friendships will be saved, and boys will come calling. Such MySpace commenting practices thus seem linked to earlier female uses of writing intended to empower and offer mastery over seemingly uncontrollable forces like relationships.

Several of the friendship letters, like so many of the comments on MySpace, are highly sexualized. Many profiles in this study contain a post reading, “F.U.C.K. Stands for (F)riends (U) (C)an (K)eep. So promise me we’ll F.U.C.K 4ever!” Receivers are urged to forward the message on to 10 others to know “who your true F.U.C.K. buddies are!!” (Profile 12). Including graphic language and images seems fairly commonplace both within the MySpace community and among adolescents in general. The topic of sexuality is repeatedly explored in this space whether under the guise of wifely duties or physical beauty. Another widely circulated post alerts the receiver, “YOU HAVE BEEN FUCKED! Spread the legs and go at it!” This explicit description is similar thematically to the F.U.C.K. posts but also includes “rules” for spreading the letter including directives to “fuck in public,” “don’t worry about same gender fucking,” and be assured that “random fucking is perfectly okay.” Such posts demonstrate again the interesting link between feminine friendships and sexuality. Rather than exploring sexual desire, the posts serve mainly as entry into the literacy practice, as proof that MySpacers understand the value the space places on both friendship and sexuality. Another popular post – sent to a female by a female on Profile 14 – offers a variations of the “roses are red” rhyme reading, “Eat me, Beat me, Blow me, Suck me, Fuck me …” and promises that if a receiver is sent this message at least five times he or she is “a SEXY beast”. The exchange of such sexually explicit materials among women is interesting and suggests sexual desirability may be linked as much to female communities as to hetero and homosexual relationships. It is also relevant to consider the
importance desirability has and it seems continues to play in other women’s literacy practices. "Girls ... presented the self through the male gaze, finding a place in the social order through one's ability to attract male attention," Finders reports of yearbook signing in particular (1997, p. 42). Desirability is not a new concern for adolescents but perhaps these concepts are being more openly and readily expressed in places like MySpace.

Another womanly topic tied closely to sexuality and circulated among online “friends” focuses on the theme of attractiveness. Receivers of one particular chain letter are told “You’ve been considered one of my 15 prettiest girls! Once You’ve been hit, you have to hit 15 pretty girls.” The emphasis on physical beauty seen in the larger American culture is repeated in such messages, but the young women’s willingness to compliment rather than compete with one another in this arena may suggest that friendship is as much valued in this discourse community as is attractiveness. Another hugely popular chain letter circulated repeatedly among the profile creators involved in this pilot study is the “Sexy Truck.” The post is accompanied by a graphic created using letters and other icons and special characters (see Figure 22) and the letter informs the receiver that they have:

BEEN CONSIDERED ONE OF THE SEXIEST ON MY LIST! ONCE YOU’VE BEEN HIT YOU HAVE TO HIT THE SEXIEST PEOPLE. IF YOU GET HIT AGAIN YOU KNOW THAT YOU ARE REALLY SEXY. IF YOU BREAK THE CHAIN YOU HAVE UGLINESS FOR 15 YEARS ..........SO HIT 15 SEXY PEOPLE AND LET THEM KNOW THEY ARE SEXY...
SEND THIS TO ALL THE PEOPLE THAT YOU THINK ARE SEXY...
-IF YOU GOT 1 BACK THEN YOU ARE UGLY PEOPLE, JUST SENT YOU THIS TO BE NICE
-IF YOU GOT 2 BACK YOU’RE BETTER THAN UGLY
-IF YOU GET 3 BACK YOU’RE OKAY
-IF YOU GET 4 BACK THEN YOU’RE PRETTY
-IF YOU GET 5 BACK THEN YOU’RE FREAKIN SEXY
-AND IF YOU GET MORE THAN THAT EVERYBODY THINKS YOU’RE #1 FINE.
Perhaps the most interesting thing about this letter is that personal attractiveness is assigned and in a sense constructed by the profile user’s female community, specifically by friends rather than romantic interests or via standards of beauty found in popular culture and media so often used as measures and guides.

The MySpace community also offers guidance for users when it comes to attaining, retaining, and performing romantic love relationships. Some of the romantic MySpace chain letters communicate affection via graphic representations like a digital long-stemmed rose or tulip, nine continuous lines of “ii LOVE YOU”, and optical illusion messages that mimic movement within a repeating “I love you” message when receivers scroll down their computer screens. While such exchanges might have previously gone on in private, it seems that in this space performing and documenting love relationships is expected in the same way one performs friendship and technological literary. Other letters promise receivers they can simply “scroll down [to] find your true love!!” or offer advice and rules for love. For example, one post advises, “it takes a minute / to find a special person, / an hour to appreciate them, / a day to love them, / an entire lifetime / to forget them.” Another reads, “I promise you my heart / I promise you my life / I promise we’ll never be apart.” Such notions of eternal, predestined love are evident not only in larger societal systems but also can be seen in historic documents like commonplace books and scrapbooks. Searching for and training to attain true love has been a pastime of girls
for centuries and seems an important part of feminine identity construction and negotiation. One particular chain letter, passed from one female to another, even offers condolences when love remains out of reach saying, “girls are like apples on a tree. The best ones are at the top of the tree … The boys don’t want to reach for the good ones because they are afraid of falling and getting hurt.” Such girls, according to this post on Profile 24, must “wait for the right boy to come along, the one who’s brave enough to climb all the way to the top of the tree.” This sort of practiced public advice and commiserating, whether done concerning romantic love, friendship, beauty, or other feminine topics, seems an important and expected way to build community in this online space.

**Question 4: In what ways does it appear that the multiple media present on MySpace remediate female users as writers/composers, women, technology users?**

Just as MySpace use seems to impact both online and offline relationships and communication practices, the practice clearly has an impact on several areas of a user’s life, not limited to life in cyberspace. In order to foreground discussion of ways girls are using multiple media in these everyday settings, this pilot study first considered what sorts of media and technologies were present on each profile. This numerical data, accompanied by screen captures of some of the more popular media utilized by and shared among those in the study group, is then added to textual evidence posted to the users in order to begin to understand ways the MySpace medium appears to influence young women’s gendered, authorial, and technological identities. The categories of media represented on MySpace settings for the purposes of this study include blogs (text), video, audio, interactive media, and still images. A sixth category labeled “other” includes less frequent subsets of such categories including photo slideshows, Flash animation, and avatar
representations.

The most popular medium in this study was still images with 20 of the 25 profile creators in the study relying upon images – beyond the profile picture – to communicate messages on their personal spaces. Such images obviously include photographs, but also include mass produced sayings and images intended both to represent the profile creator and perhaps also to educate those visiting the site. Profile creator 2, for example, relies heavily on still images as a means of personalizing her profile. Many of her images seem to repeat cultural stereotypes about women, but others resist the gender roles and expectations girls often seem to inherit from previous generations. One particularly poignant image remediates both the media involved – by combining text and a photograph – and also seems to remake expectations for well-behaved, happy little girls. The image shows a young girl, arms crossed with her back to the camera and says “Can’t be your little princess anymore / I’m not perfect anymore / And I hurt too much”. Not only do visuals like this contribute to the ways the profile creator defines herself, but many also make direct reference to ways others should act. Several such images offer advice as to how to be a significant other (“Listen to her. Take her out to dinner…”, etc.), a friend, a woman, a student and even a parent (“tell me what to do & i’ll tell you off,” reads one image on Profile 2). Such images remake existing media by combining photographs, cartoons, and other images with text to create new media, and also remake scrapbooks and commonplace books as media in that these images serve many of the same purposes as those texts (identity construction, adherence to social norms, chronicling participation in gendered adolescence, etc.) but are doing so in new modes and within new multi-modal spaces.

The next most common medium represented in this sample of profiles is the use of audio components. Fourteen of the 25 profiles incorporate at least one song and sometimes many songs
(see Figure 23) as part of their personal sites. This trend is perhaps not surprising given the history of MySpace as a space originally designed to allow musicians to share their work, but it is important to consider the sorts of songs young women incorporate in their online representations. Two particularly interesting uses of audio come in an ethereal, chant-like song on Profile 12 and a dedication on Profile 8. The song *Lux Aurumque* by Eric Whitacre is slow and serene and the perfect compliment to Profile 12’s cursive script and old-fashioned image from the classic cartoon *Alice in Wonderland*. Although the song seems to fit with the elements around it, it is a departure from many of the love songs and hard rock ballads chosen by other young women represented in this study. Perhaps the profile creator simply chose a song she enjoys, but it is important to note that the song is “read” as an intentional rhetorical act shaping the creator’s ethos. Another interesting example of audio elements comes in the dedication of the classic Charlie Daniels Band song, *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*, from Profile 8 creator to her grandfather. It is interesting first of all to note the reappropriation of a 1979 southern rock standard by someone who was not even born when the song was released.

![Screen Capture. Songs Icon on Profile.](image)
It is also noteworthy that the song is remediating the girl’s relationship and role as granddaughter in this new media space, a space it is feasible to imagine her grandfather never visits and yet it seems important for this young woman to include “granddaughter” as a marker of her online identity.

The next two categories of media represented within the MySpace medium are blogs and interactive media, both present on 12 of the 25 profiles in the study sample. Both mediums promote purposeful, active composition – one privileges composition as a mainly solitary act while the other promotes community composing practices. Blogging seems a fairly popular practice in the MySpace discourse community with some profile creators posting routinely and others posting only to mark significant occasions or milestones like birthdays, break-ups, or holidays. Profile creator 12 seems to blog fairly frequently and covers a variety of topics from schoolwork to romance (see Figure 24).

![Figure 24: Screen Capture. Blog Entry Titles.](image)

Although such compositions are the work mainly of a single author – much like a journal or diary entry in the offline world – this new space and technology remedies such single-author writing by encouraging comments from readers who will thus change and expand the material
and meaning presented in such posts. In this way it is similar to the communal knowledge making undertaken in friendship albums.

This move to create content and knowledge in tandem with others seems at the heart of another popular medium in MySpace. Interactive media, in the form of quizzes, surveys, message boards, and commenting sites, do not simply encourage but in fact require communal input to shape messages and experiences in these online spaces. Several quizzes can be seen on multiple profiles including quizzes about the profile creator (Who knows me best, etc.) and about the profile visitor (Are you a good kisser?, What superhero are you?, What serial killer would you be?, What kind of truck are you?, etc.). One very popular interactive application is the refrigerator magnet function that allows visitors to leave public messages by spelling out words with virtual magnetic shaped letters. Not only does this application remediate the original magnetized text, but it also emerges as a variation on note passing and text messaging – often including abbreviations and acronyms. Like many of the comments left on the Wall, much of the significance of such online “fridge magnet” messages comes in the act of messaging rather than in the content of the messages. This merging of text and community knowledge making is further changed by the ephemeral nature of such a message. While autograph albums also generated meaning through circulation and community input, they were meant to be lasting keepsakes while it is presumed that an online message left on a virtual refrigerator will be wiped away in a few short hours by the next visitor’s offering. This communal and very transitional medium seems unique to a space that privileges connection and currency. Both blogging and interactive media also highlight the emphasis this discourse community places on active, responsive composition and technology practices. No longer content simply to be readers, MySpace users expect to shape and be shaped by the media they interact with.
The final categories of media incorporated into the MySpace application require more advanced technological skill and this may contribute to them being less common. Video was used in five of the 25 profiles in this study while five profiles utilized other applications like slideshows, Flash, and avatars. Not only do such media shape the ways the profile creators are read in regards to their competency as technology users and designers, but such technologies seem often used to resist and reject standardized feminine roles or expectations. Profile 16, for example, is identified only by an avatar and her page contains no photographic images of either herself or her friends. This sole representation may be read as a refusal to follow the discourse community’s expectation to post photos – sometimes explicit or sexualized – of a profile creator’s actual female body. Instead, this profile creator chooses to fully digitize her being in this space. Similarly, Profile 13 includes a dancing anime figure set in motion by Flash under her “Interests” heading. Anime is undoubtedly popular amongst teenagers, but remains strongly marked as masculine. By inserting anime and actual animation into her “Interests” section, this profile user may be read as being tech-savvy and not intimidated by the masculinity associated with such technologies. A final example of the multiple media and modes represented on MySpace comes in video posted on Profile 4. The video combines film footage of the Iraq War with a popular song by the singer Pink called *Dear Mr. President*. The video itself, downloaded from YouTube, is a reappropriation of film footage originally used for news coverage or as political advertising now edited and added to audio in order to critique the war and the presidency. By adding this video to her site, the profile creator also seems to be remaking her role as citizen and technofeminist. While it is possible she includes the video only because she likes the song, it seems more likely that she shares the songwriter’s values and is consciously speaking out – through video and technology. This rhetorical move may be read as both
resistance and also the revisionining of a young woman as a techno-rhetorician able to command multiple media in order to communicate her opinions and identity.

You Are Your Technology: MySpace Shapes Tech Users, Rhetors

Evidence of ways the multiple media present in MySpace may be shaping profile creators is perhaps most apparent in comments provided on profile Walls. Several of the comments coded for question two of this study refer directly to design matters relating to MySpace and suggest not only a preoccupation with the MySpace medium but also user perception of self as technologically literate. Twenty-five percent, or 246, of the nearly 1,000 comments identified in this study as relating directly to MySpace as a practice talked specifically about design and technological matters. Although these comments range from the aesthetic (“i love the new space”) to the technical (“I took that from online and then placed it in html”, posted on Profile 3), this focus on the mode of communication suggests an awareness of self as both technology user and also effective rhetorician. Like many of the comments about commenting, it seems discussing layout is an accepted commonplace within this discourse community and often provides content when the only reason for posting a comment is to participate in the literacy practice. A comment posted on Profile 4 reads, “i am liking the new background girly” and a comment to Profile 23 reports, “I love what you’ve doen with the space!!” Such comments suggest that both readers and profile creators share similar design and composition values and speak the same MySpace “language.” Just as “friend,” “comment,” and “Wall” have unique meanings in this space, the terms “layout,” “headline,” “background,” and “default” have specialized meaning within this community and serve to identify users as technologically literate.

Such comments reinforce membership in this discourse community and also ask users to
see themselves as technical specialists, new media designers, and multi-modal communicators. Comments on Profile 12, for example, not only offer praise to the overall site design but also single out specific kinds of media on the space that work well. “I luv ur slide show it’s really sweet!!” reports one commenter and another posts, “dude I’m loving the awesome video!!” Still another comments on interactive media at the site saying, “YAY! I knoe you the bestest so far!! *points to your quiz score thingy*.” These sorts of comments, repeated on multiple profiles included in this study, suggest the multiple media in the MySpace application is fostering users’ ability to communicate in multiple modes and to further evaluate which modes work best in which situations.

This ability to evaluate media being repurposed in the MySpace application is obvious in frequent comments serving as design critique. Some comments focus on surface design matters like when a visitor to Profile 18 posts, “dude … get something as a picture .. something .. i hate looking at a ‘no-photo’..its sorta depressing” or when the creator of Profile 11 is encouraged to “change your background to Christmas stuff.” But more often the comments demonstrate some technical knowledge. Issues of usability, as might be privileged in technical writing and writing for the Web courses, occur naturally as one visitor to Profile 2 offers advice about the profile design: “Go and view your profile … your page is very wide … those comments from … jj? Make your profile wide … im not saying anything but its annoying.” The creator of Profile 14 received similar criticism in a post reading, “I just dnt like how it streches all ur comments out ya no so u have to scroll all da way ova.” Such comments suggest those in this space possess at least functional technical literacy. When a visitor to Profile 20 offers criticism of an interactive media survey on the page saying, “that had to be the hardest survey i think i have ever read, and probably one of the longest, lol, but at least u finally have one up,” the visitor emphasizes issues
of audience awareness and appropriateness of subject matter. Such discussions suggest both
visitors and profile creators may view themselves differently as rhetoricians and technology
users due in part to the interaction with the multiple media present on MySpace.

This act of communal artifact creation and knowledge making occurs not only in
unsolicited critique, but also can be seen in the many design-related posts encouraging action on
the part of the receiver. Several design comments encourage others to “look at my new layout
and tell me what ya think!” (Profile 4) or to offer feedback on photos, video, or songs included
on a profile. Even when critique is unsolicited it is easy to see what an impact peer review has in
this space. “Srry that u don’t like my page but im not thinking in changing it for a while” a
visitor to Profile 23 replies in response to an apparent critique from the profile creator. “Plus,”
the post continues, “I might add some more videos or pics idk yet but if i find a new layout i
might change it.” Such comments suggest that MySpace users are acutely aware of who they
write and design for and make deliberate decisions regarding how they are read by others.

Responding to audience needs, as well as personal representation desires, often requires specific
technical skill that MySpace users often discuss in comments to one another. “i can’t seem to get
the pictures to copy onto a comment box,” a visitor to Profile 3 laments. While frustration and
failure are sometimes at the heart of comments like this one and a post on Profile 10, “that never
works for me i try and it never goes pass the loading screen!,” still others seek advice and
feedback from fellow techno-rhetoricians. “You should tell me how to make that little heart
thingy. because im an idiot and have no idea … haha,” says a visitor to Profile 10 and a response
on Profile 3 suggests “I just figured out that scert symbols u gave me in my pics.” Links to online
surveys, downloadable video, songs and images, and code for new backgrounds are frequently
circulated among users suggesting those in this space often see themselves not only as
communicators, but also as troubleshooters able to offer technical support to other users. I suggest that this ability for young women in this cyberspace to revision themselves as effective female technology users is important to the continuing work of closing the gender gap regarding technology.

**MySpace Contributes to Modern Feminine Identity Construction**

Although more and more women are obviously using technological applications, there still remains a gap in the number of women going into hard science fields such as computer programming. A 2003 study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) reports that “women find themselves on the margins of new and high-status fields and occupations, including systems analysts, software designers, computer scientists, engineers and information technology professionals” (p. 3). An article by Elena Silva confirms that women account for only 25 percent of IT workers (2003, p. 20) and this gender gap in the workforce may begin in classrooms and homes. The 2000 AAUW study *Tech Savvy: Educating Girls in the Computer Age* reports, “Girls are not well-represented in computer laboratories and clubs, and have taken dramatically fewer programming and computer science courses at the high school and postsecondary level” (p. x). Repeated interaction with technologies and multiple media like those available in MySpace may be worth considering for piquing more young women’s interest in technological fields. In the study, the AAUW suggests recognizing “multiple entry points” into technology saying, “Different children will encounter different entry points into computing. … These multiple entry points need to be respected and encouraged, while remaining sensitive to activities and perspectives that are appealing to girls and young women” (p. xii). MySpace usage is not a cure for closing the gender gap in technological fields, but the space offers opportunity to
consider and construct identities that include and are in fact predicated on notions of technological literacy.

Not only is MySpace a pertinent subject of study in terms of encouraging more females to become competent technology users, but the MySpace practice is also clearly built on earlier women’s literacy practices resulting in women’s identity construction and representation. Just as the AAUW calls for respecting multiple entry points into technology, MySpace demands respect for the multiple voices and rhetorics represented within such technologies. Young women’s ability to construct multiple identities and feminine roles in the multi-modal MySpace setting and the subsequent need for academics to recognize and validate such new media rhetorics will be the focus of the next chapter. Just as scholars have recently reclaimed many women’s literacies and rhetorics formerly considered meaningful only personally or within the home, my findings suggest that MySpace is more than teenage time wasting or vehicle for policing or alternately stalking young people. The final chapter of this study considers ways MySpace functions as a gendered new media space and literacy practice involved in modern feminine identity construction. The chapter also identifies future research needed in this area and possible implications for the composition classroom and the field of rhetoric and writing.
CHAPTER FIVE:
WRITING HERSPACE AND SHAPING WOMEN’S WORLDS THROUGH NEW MEDIA

The chance to play, to share, and to be part of the cool crowd utilizing the latest technological toy is what leads many users to MySpace and is also what inspired my interest as a researcher. Endless media warnings tell me MySpace is dangerous and wasteful and yet I, and millions of others, cannot seem to stay away from the site. With security measures and ever-increasing monitoring taking place on the site, things for MySpace may be changing, but there are still many lessons that users and scholars can learn from the lives being lived in this and similar new media spaces. The multi-modal emphasis of such cyberspaces and practices place them at the heart of modern communication and rhetorical strategies and foreground the hypertextual and wired approach taking root in modern universities. In this chapter, I will consider the scholarly implications for new media research as well as the impact such practices have on new media producers. This chapter will first reaffirm MySpace as a new media practice – one historically grounded and often highly gendered – and will consider ways revisioning MySpace as a locus of scholarship regarding composition and gendered identity construction may change the way we research and react to such spaces. My findings lead me to insist MySpace be validated as a meaningful, rhetorically rich practice of communication and knowledge building, consistent with the work of previous feminist rhetoricians “remapping” (Glenn, 1997) the rhetorical landscape to include the voices of the marginalized. This scholarly awareness suggests a need to foreground discussions of digital and critical literacies not only in our professional journals, but also in classrooms and communities where users are participating in such practices. This chapter, then, ends with suggestions for continued research and discussion of the changing landscape of literacies in our modern world.
Scholarly Significance: Assigning Worth to New Media Practices

The push to consume and produce new media documents can be seen everywhere from the classroom to the boardroom and drives writing instructors to constantly expand the concept of what it means to “write” or to compose. Still there persists a hierarchy amongst new media compositions with some considered productive and scholarly (blogs, wikis, webpages) and others mere navel gazing. Looking down at or ignoring MySpace and other new media practices we consider beneath or beyond the consideration of the academy will not erase such practices from our culture. MySpace continues to attract millions of users each day with 5.9 percent of all Internet users visiting the site in late March of 2008 (Alexa, 2008). The site is now ranked fifth most visited on the Web only behind sites like google.com and yahoo.com and ahead of a sixth ranked facebook.com (Alexa, 2008). Thelwall confirms the “significant youth bias to MySpace” (in press, p. 11), suggesting that the majority of those millions peopling the MySpace cyber-community are teens and young adults. Sheer numbers, as well as information from this study and other qualitative projects (boyd, 2008), would suggest that this space is important to millions of teenagers and is therefore impacting the way young people spend their time online and how they build relationships and communicate with one another. This study, then, is useful in its ability to intersect the ever-growing field of girlhood studies (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Bortree, 2005; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Curry, 2006) with the theories posited by those privileging digital literacy (Selfe, 1999; Alexander, 2006). Though studies focusing on MySpace are beginning to emerge in the field (boyd, 2008; Thelwall, in press) this study seeks to fill the gap that persists concerning deliberate gender representations constructed by and constructing MySpace users. Careful textual and visual analysis of fewer sites is more useful in this area than massive samplings relying only on data reported by users. In Thelwall’s study (in press), for example, he
recognizes that users’ ability “to create a new online identity that is unrelated to their offline identity” (p. 16) may skew the massive amounts of personal data reported through template-embedded questions about gender, age, location, etc. Thus, small-scale studies like this one are necessary for gathering more complete pictures of online identities by reading such data in tandem with visuals, video, and audio representations. As is true with any communicative act, self-representation is at the heart of the MySpace practice and study of such spaces clearly demonstrates the impact new media practices have on gender and identity construction (Bortree, 2005; Addison & Hilligoss, 1999; Agosto, 2002). This study does not profess to represent the links between on- and offline identities, but does begin to share richer representations of womanhood online and also uncovers some of the codes of femininity present in this new media space.

This pilot study, as well as other recent scholarship, shows the undeniable relationship between technologies and gender. As was the case with the general Internet boom, it is tempting to see only the best or only the worst in cyberspaces like MySpace when it comes to representations of femininity. In her 2004 work, *Technofeminism*, Judy Wajcman considers the technology question for modern feminists. “Can feminism steer a path between technophobia and technophilia?” (p. 6). Just as there is not one feminism or one right way to perform femininity, there is not one way for technology to affect feminism and feminist writers. MySpace is but one of an ever-growing technological landscape filled with discourse communities offering both challenges and opportunities to modern women. And while there are persistent stereotypes and gender limitations present in MySpace, and most any other new media application, recent scholarship also identifies potential for challenging such boundaries in cyberspace. A 2006 study of 16 teen girls self-identifying as computer enthusiasts found young women exploring issues of
femininity “in the presence of others online, connected through chatrooms, instant messaging, and role-playing games” (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, p. 3). The study, which conceptualizes “femininities as ‘communities of practice’” (p. 6), found girls participating in various versions of womanhood within online female communities and outside of the constraints of the master narrative. “We 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,” according to Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie (2006, p. 22). Being a techy girl is just one of the feminine narratives available for experimentation, adoption, or rejection online as young women participate in the MySpace discourse community and literacy practice. Visioning MySpace as one of the “discourses” of femininity allows for recognition of the multiple ways to “do” and perform feminine identities in such spaces and practices. Additionally, we may also begin to see ways females are shaping the media and technologies around them. Wajcman (2004), in line with Bolter and Grusin (2000) and other new media scholars, reminds us of the reciprocal nature existing between technologies and users:

We have begun to conceive of a mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology, in which technology is both a source and a consequence of gender relations. This is what I will describe as the emerging technofeminist framework. … [and] such an analysis introduces space for women’s agency in transforming technologies. (p. 7)

When considered through such a technofeminist lens, MySpace is an example of a site shaped by and simultaneously shaping existing media as well as users. Studies like this are thus useful in scrutinizing isolated incidences of this reciprocal relationship.
By combining existing textual, visual, audio, and interactive media, MySpace emerges as a medium transforming and transformed by women. The desire for responsive and malleable technologies and media has been previously documented as particularly feminine (Agosto, 2002; AAUW, 2000; Passig & Levin, 2000) and MySpace is all-too-ready to provide multiple existing media in one site in order to allow users freedom in communicating and representing themselves. Bolter and Grusin (2000) examine the power of text as medium in that as users we "continue to define ourselves through characterizations in popular written fiction … to identify with the voices in which those written narratives are told" (2000, p. 231). Comparatively, MySpace and similar new media discourses seem to be teaching users to identify with and define themselves with the voices expressed in the multiple media surrounding them. Jonathan Alexander, in Digital Youth (2006), notes the particular ways adolescents and young adults combine and manipulate new media to craft their own identities and representations. As discussed in the previous chapter, MySpace brings together several existing media – like instant messaging, YouTube video technologies, and advanced graphics applications like Flash – for new purposes and to encourage users to continue to define themselves through the media surrounding them. Lev Manovich (2001) describes this new media composing practice as “compositing” or the act of bringing “together a number of elements to create a single seamless object” (p. 139). MySpace “compositing” then is not just the combining of existing media, but rather the creation of an entirely new media object, one capable of transforming users through both functionality and form.

Although the point of much new media is transparency, as defined earlier by Bolter and Grusin (2000), MySpace and similar social networking sites often foreground rather than erase
the medium users interact with. "Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium," according to Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 19). While the MySpace discourse community clearly values immediacy and ease and validates the online world and experiences as just as “authentic” as those experiences and relationships available offline, the medium never seeks to completely erase itself. Instead, it offers up to users a sort of mirror by which to reflect users and their communities. MySpace, like other digital media, is always culturally bound but never fixed. Just as the medium itself remade existing media for new purposes, the MySpace interface and user community continue to be remade to meet the needs of users, officials concerned with security, and even advertisers. As the medium evolves, then, it not only reflects existing society but also contributes to changes in users and the wider culture. Use of such media may expand the expectations of the surrounding culture just as it has expanded opportunities for communication and representation, especially in regards to users lived on- and offline experiences. For example, Myspace seems to privilege “media user” as a viable and somewhat new role for women and in this way gender assumptions may be one of the areas expanding thanks to the new media practice. “The link between technological competence and the construction of gendered identity” (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006, p. 5) seen in previous digital literacy scholarship seems to support the idea that new media spaces like MySpace are important texts useful in women’s gender exploration and performance. Through the visual and textual analysis of the profiles in this study, we begin to understand ways that modern womanhood is tied up in technological representations. Through the display of pastels and feminine images, for example, many of the young women in this study seem to cling to dominant ideologies representing women as emotional, sexual, and maternal, while new concepts
of womanhood may also arise in this space including woman as technically proficient and rhetorically savvy.

**Crafting Gender: Looking Back to Look Forward**

Identity, particularly gendered identity, construction through composition is not a new idea. As discussed in Chapter Two, women have long explored and crafted the social and personal roles assigned to them via commonplace books, scrapbooks, friendship and photograph albums, and note passing. Mary Kelley notes the ways “letters, commonplace books, journals, and diaries constitute an archive that illuminates … the process through which an individual subjectivity was crafted” (2008, p. 59) by women for many generations. Such composition practices and artifacts offer women safe, private venues for developing public selves. While parlors and bedrooms were once the site of much gender identity construction, online spaces now provide opportunities for users to perform and craft gendered identities alone or within a community. This sort of gender identification and experimentation can be seen in several new media practices including webpage design (Papacharissi, 2002), blogging, instant messaging, and chatroom participation. Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie’s study (2006) found girls using several technologies and modes in order to test out future identities while securing membership in existing teen communities:

Many reported that online activities allowed them to rehearse different ways of being before trying them out in offline situations, where they might have been (or were) reined in or shut down for going against perceived expectations for their gender. Some experimented with playing the “bad girl” or taking on masculine and/or gay personas. (p. 11)
Although there are certainly some risks involved in sharing personal information online, generally speaking MySpace and similar new media practices offer women places to practice and perform multiple femininities in relative security. In this small sampling alone, young women are presenting themselves as jocks, scholars, tech enthusiasts, flirts, and friends. Just as hypermedia offers new opportunities for writing the self (Bolter, 2001), it seems MySpace and other multi-media spaces also offer new ways to write feminine identity. “Rather than expect that there are no gender boundaries online or, conversely, that offline boundaries are simply recreated anew online, we theorize the two environments as influencing each other … and also foreground ongoing constructedness of gender in both sites,” according to Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie (2006, p. 7). Thus, the gendered identity construction rhetorical scholars have long identified in earlier women’s rhetorics is replicated and remediated in online spaces. While a girl might once have “realized herself through the scrapbook” (Buckler & Leeper, 1991, p. 2) girls are now finding themselves and their place in modern teen society in online spaces.

_Composing Community: MySpace Key to Building Teen Society_

Just as author Virginia Woolf (1929) once decried woman’s need to find “a room of one’s own” for expressing ideas in print and gaining access to the masculine world of creative writing, teens seem to require a similar space to prepare them for entrance into the adult world. MySpace emerges as a room of one’s own for teens, a place away from the control and judgments of the adult word that too often censures or ignores young voices. Just as this study and previous scholarship have noted the importance of hearing and honoring young women’s voices (Pipher, 1994; Shandler, 1999), MySpace appears a place where girls can speak out and find society with others playing and experimenting with identity construction. This study, in line
with feminist calls to validate marginalized voices, considers ways young women are constructing themselves and their communities online. Consistent with standpoint theory (Harding, 1992) calling for research to start “from the margins”, we must first recognize the importance of the marginalized adolescent communities being built in online spaces. Although in many ways MySpace is just a new venue for expressing traditional social connections and affiliations, new media practices are also remaking the concept of community in much the same ways it may be expanding the concept of femininity. "The virtual community is the community as both subject and object of the process of remediation" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 232) and while community was once defined by physical proximity or shared heritage, technologies including telephones, email, and text messaging now define who is connected to whom. As media continues to evolve, so too do the sorts of communities and relationships supported by such media. Bortree (2005), for example, identifies blogging communities as important teenage social networks bound by links to and textual mentions of other blogs. “Through the use of weblogs, teenage girls are bridging their offline and online relationships,” writes Bortree (p. 25). Blogs then are altering feminine communal bonds and remediating existing offline relationships for many young women. This blurring of off- and online communities is even more obvious on MySpace with teens forming associations around any number of personal and cultural affinities. Friend lists, online groups, shared photos, videos, and links all prove connection based on anything from high school affiliation to interest in popular culture represented in movies and music. Finding acceptance in groups has always been a part of identity development and adolescence and participation in MySpace allows users to both perform adolescent roles while simultaneously preparing for an adulthood that will undoubtedly be remediated by new media practices. It is interesting to note, for example, that Mike Thelwall’s study (in press) suggests
that the youngest users on MySpace have the most online friends. Could this be because that generation is most remediated by existing computer culture and therefore vision their friendships differently because of their new media usage? Previous scholarship has discussed the feminine bias toward online friendship (boyd, 2008; Thelwall, in press) and this seems unsurprising as friendship has long been at the heart of female identity. Chapter Four considered many of the womanly topics represented both textually and in images on profile sites and found the role of friend as one of the most often enacted and discussed among the profile designers in this study. Chain letters accounted for nearly a third of the comments coded as pertaining to the MySpace literacy practice itself and the majority of those chain letters referred to friendship. Friendship, in this “place for friends”, clearly persists as paramount to femininity, but the space allows new and expanding definitions of friendship and therefore may also expand the other roles female friends may adopt. While many of the profiles contained evidence of friendships existing both on- and offline in the form of references to school, work, and church meetings, others focused on virtual manifestations of friend bonds. Just as female friendship is remediated in this space, perhaps various other ideals and markers of womanhood are also remediated and expanded. MySpace appears to emerge as a place for modern teens to encounter representations of feminine community and womanhood that may replicate, challenge, or trouble existing cultural norms. New media communities and practices may offers girls “access to feminist and other oppositional discourses that name their experiences and feelings” (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006, p. 22) and allow them to more accurately represent cultural and gender norm changes manifest in evolving media.
Making the Invisible Visible: Teaching Scholars, Users to See New Media

Educating young women about the power inherent in new media formats like MySpace first requires that scholars legitimize such forums as worthy of users’ time and scholarly attention. A recent publication focusing on young women’s lives foregrounds everyday practices and places in order to show their relevance to individuals’ lives, the academy, and the larger culture. Editors Pamela J. Bettis and Natalie G. Adams’s 2005 Geographies of Girlhood explores “how a variety of local contexts and discursive practices … influence how girls construct their identities” (p. 4). The editors go on to explain that by looking at these previously ignored spaces and practices, scholars may gain a richer understanding of the ways women are constructing themselves and their world through ritual, rehearsal, and customs. By analyzing “daily material concerns” of young women “the authors attempt to provoke new possibilities for understanding girls and their transition to womanhood, how they produced and how they produce themselves” (Bettis & Adams, 2005, p. 3). MySpace is just such a “daily material concern” and locale for many teenage girls. Interrogating such “in-between spaces and places found within and outside the formal domain of schools” is not only “central to how girls make sense of themselves” (Bettis & Adams, 2005, p. 5), but also how scholars make sense of modern technologies and rhetorical acts and how we begin to include these new practices and artifacts within the rhetorical canon. The need for the academy to respond and adapt to new technologies and ways of knowing has long been discussed (Prensky, 2001; Best & Kellner, 2003) and it seems similar adaptations are necessary for understanding and validating new ways of being online. Researching these everyday, often mundane customs of cyberspaces and girls’ lives requires a new lens for considering scholarly projects and approaches. As posited in Chapter Three, multi-modal approaches to research must embrace best practices from several research methodologies in order
to interrogate multi-modal spaces and practices undertaken online. Not only are multiple methodologies helpful in triangulating data in such settings, but also we must first realign our overall view of what sorts of projects are worthy investments of time and resources, as well deserving of space in our scholarly journals and online publications. A deeper understanding of new media practices and products is important not only in allowing educators to connect with and honor students’ voices and practices, but also is indispensable for allowing users to situate themselves within the larger computer culture. While many, both inside and outside of the academy, are proficient technicians, few are equipped to be truly critical of the multi-modal environments and rhetorical tools available to them. Users are populating these new media worlds and producing countless textual, visual, video, and audio artifacts, but because this first “cybergeneration” (Best & Kellner, 2003, p. 85) has never known a time without computers it is often impossible for them to spontaneously critique technologies that have become transparent and naturalized to them. The first step in encouraging MySpace and similar new media practices as potential sites of resistance and renegotiation rather than mere reinscription of cultural mores comes in making the practice visible to scholars. Through projects like this study and other research focused both internally and outside the academy, scholars may begin to truly expand the opportunities available to young women in new media spaces.

Talking New Media: Taking Discussions to Users

Though access to technology continues to increase in our schools, homes, and workplaces, access to the critical approaches and understandings of such technologies is lacking. Because the current generation of young people specifically have grown up with computers at the heart of many of their social, recreational, and educational activities it is often much harder
for these “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) to be critical of the technologies that seem to have always existed for them while other “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001) still remember a time before computing. This lack of distance from technologies and the sense that the Internet and similar applications are neutral is not a product of age and exposure alone. The very structures of new media applications are often designed to make users feel they are as natural as the world offline. Samuels’ work reminds us that "structure and control is hidden by the production of spatial environments where the audience or user becomes immersed in the virtual digital environment" (2006, p. 144) and therefore has more difficulty objectively judging the constraints and limitations of such digital spaces. For young new media practitioners "new computer technologies create the constant illusion of personal control when users are merely choosing from a predetermined set of alternatives" (Samuels, 2006, p. 120).

Even scholarly work sometimes glosses over the tendency for online applications to control users’ responses and representations. In Thelwall’s analysis (in press) of MySpace users for example, he notes “data may also have been affected by design choices in MySpace, such as the default settings for the answers to some of the questions” (p. 16). Referring to such gender biased identity prescriptions and constraints as “design choices” erases any power or agency the application has in limiting on- and offline user identity. The concepts of immediacy and transparency, as discussed by Bolter and Grusin (2000), are important in understanding the ease with which digital practices particularly may come to feel neutral rather than forged by and fostering cultural codes and standards. Media with the goal of immediacy and transparency erase their very presence and so it seems users interact only with content. Bolter and Grusin discuss the absence of visible human invention from pictures and films as examples of this phenomenon and MySpace continues this tradition by supplanting the presence of an overarching system
design or control by including Tom Anderson as just another online friend rather than a system administrator. This erasure also exists in offline formats with empty scrapbooks and albums seemingly void of any prescribed approach for construction, while simultaneously filled with preformatted questions and categories and mass-produced decorations, all serving as agents of cultural control in media supposedly dedicated to personal representations and knowledge making. Rendering such media, and therefore its creators, invisible reduces the chance to question and resist cultural constraints being repeated by these new media products and practices. For this project, it is important to recognize the ways the MySpace application is designed to guide gendered experiences as well as the ways the MySpace community often works to reinscribe cultural ideals for gender.

It seems, then, that making modern new media users more critically aware of media leads naturally to a better understanding of ways such new media silently shape how we define ourselves and are defined by others. Best and Kellner (2003) posit a need for “critical computer literacy” (p. 86) in order to demonstrate to users ways “computer culture enables individuals to actively participate in the production of culture” (p. 87). While many users are aware of the consequences of posting certain information and the positive and negative personal ramifications to their lives (i.e. increased hits on a personal webpage or blog or conversely lost jobs and sullied reputations) many do not realize the ways media help users define themselves internally and also the larger culture around them. Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie (2006) explain the need for further investigation and discussion of the impact of new media practice on gender and identity construction:

The social construction of gender online is not obvious on the face of it. Thus, our findings suggest a role for teachers to structure learning opportunities to spotlight
directly gender and power issues because the online experiences of the girls in our study did not necessarily prompt them to inquire into the sexist standards that police boundaries between what is an acceptable versus a rebellious gender performance. (p. 23)

Although users frequently reject or reshape prescribed gender roles and performances, few have access to the language of resistance and reform that might help them to understand the social systems they are unintentionally changing. While digital new media offer countless examples of unquestioned but unquestionably powerful schemata for modern womanhood, previous new media practices like note passing and scrapbooking also offer prescribed notions of gender for users who often consider these absolutes rather than options for performing womanhood.

Finders’ 1997 work warns the dangers of ignoring such ubiquitous gendering practices:

> Such messages, while quite overt to critical scholars, remain invisible to these young women. Behind closed doors, these girls were left to their own devices to interpret, integrate, and mediate the images and text. These messages read over and over became scripts for the girls. (p. 65)

Left unchecked, new media artifacts and practices for young women only perpetuate existing feminine stereotypes and limitations. Open discussions – in classrooms and communities – may allow young women to actively rather than unwittingly utilize new media for crafting personal and cultural gendered identities.

Though this study focuses on a new media practice taking placing largely outside of the educational system, women’s new media composition practices clearly have repercussions on the ways young people are learning to write and communicate academically. Being informed about such practices as both educators and users is important in creating a generation of critically
technically literate young people. Ten years ago, Finders recognized the need for “an addition of layers of critical reflection” in writing curriculum, for “an examination of how discourse and the metaphors embedded within it situate individuals” (1997, p. 126). Ideally, such curriculum would help young men and women better understand the ways they construct themselves in writing in both virtual and offline spaces. Multi-modal composition has already made its way into the writing classroom, but focus on skills is not sufficient to prepare students to be technologically literate. Beyond introducing new modes and tools in the writing classroom, we must respond to the tools that young people are already using in their daily lives. In the spirit of the Conference of College Composition and Communication’s 1974 resolution for “Students’ Right to Language,” students have the right to engage in technologies that interest them and allow them to express and explore their own voices. As noted in Chapter One, it is vital to record and encourage young women to share their personal stories and one of the strengths of MySpace is the ease with which users can share stories in ways that make them feel validated and a part of a discourse community with similar interests and values. Such a safe haven for expression is an extension of the stories collected in Reviving Ophelia (Pipher, 1994) and Ophelia Speaks (Shandler, 1999). Those publications were important not only in preserving the experiences and feelings of specific young women, but perhaps more importantly in validating the voices of a population often ignored because of their age and gender. Work in this area should continue to explore ways young people – an often underrepresented population – are using these sorts of communication and representational practices. This pilot study is necessarily narrow in scope and so unable to fully represent the diversity of young MySpace users, and so similar approaches should be undertaken in different populations and subject groups to allow for differences in geographic location, economic status, and race. Additionally, work is needed to consider
masculine uses and manifestations on MySpace in the same way that this study focused on femininity.

Just as the stories told by young women are worthy of study and preservation, so too are the modes and tools they choose for those expressions. Like Shandler’s collection (1999) and the scrapbooks, commonplace books, albums, notes and other new media texts shaped by young women in private and in girl-centric communities, MySpace offers an adult-free environment with none of the restrictions and evaluations that so often accompany school-based new media projects. Best and Kellner (2003) note the access this generation has to “exciting realms of cyberspace and the possibilities of technologies, identities, and entrepreneurial adventures unimagined by previous generations” (p. 75). Incorporating these cyber-vistas in our classrooms and research keeps our practices and scholarship relevant and allows an awareness and responsiveness to cultural trends. This study is a good first step in carefully examining ways at least a segment of our future and current student body may be using such modes of communication and representation. By studying young women’s use of new media applications we may encourage more to take part in the digital and computer culture. This study suggests a need to engage larger numbers of females online in order to gain a richer understanding of their practices and also foster better awareness amongst users about ways they are using and being used by technology.

Where We Go From Here: Research Agenda

In their recommendations for responding to the persistent gender gap in technological use and confidence, the American Association of University Women calls upon educators and others not only to provide safe havens and spaces for young women to gain computer literacy but also
to reconsider what skills and knowledges are necessary to make women truly computer literate.

“Computer literacy needs to be redefined to include the lifelong applications of relevant concepts, skills, and problem-solving abilities,” according to findings in *Tech Savvy* (2000, p. xii). Conceptualizing digital literacy in terms of “lifelong” practices easily places MySpace among literacy practices relevant for training students to be “literate citizens in a culture increasingly dependent on computers” (AAUW, 2000, p. xii). Providing conceptual frameworks for understanding the influence everyday literacies – whether online or offline – have on users’ lives and perceptions of self allows users to be more successful communicators, technology users, and active agents in defining themselves for others. By grounding modern new media practices in historical women’s literacy practices of the past, we gain a new focus on the medium itself. While online technologies like MySpace have in large part become naturalized and transparent to users, texts like commonplace books, scrapbooks, and albums are far enough removed from modern users as to elicit scrutiny more readily. By situating MySpace in relation to earlier women’s rhetorical practices, we not only find acceptance in the rhetorical canon, but also allow distance and increased examination of a space and practice that is all-too-often feared but less often critically questioned.

This study is a first step in establishing the link to historical women’s literacies. Comparing feminine use of MySpace with Facebook and similar social networking sites might prove to strengthen the connection of modern technological practices to earlier rhetorical ones. Additional work like this with girlhood and technology will augment a growing body of work (Bettis & Adams, 2005; Bortree, 2005; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006) considering ways young women see and project themselves into the larger computer culture. The study’s focus in size, geographic reach, racial diversity, and economic variance also suggest a need to replicate
this sort of project in new locations and with differing populations. Future work might also acknowledge the multi-modal, new media practices of a wider range of user across other online applications and settings. For example, concentrating on specific uses for new media texts including representations of religious affiliation and school-related practices might also contribute to a better understanding of young new media users of all genders.

The work of previous scholars to reclaim women’s writing and voices within the rhetorical canon (Glenn, 1997; Foss, Foss, & Griffin, 2004) succeeds in reestablishing women’s experiences and influence regarding rhetorical history and also encourages more women to write themselves – sometimes as part of a community – into the modern rhetorical tradition. This study of MySpace hopes to continue this work of reclaiming women’s voices, allowing them entrance not only to the rhetorical tradition but also to the computer culture. That “girls need to recognize themselves in the culture of computing” (AAUW, 2000, p. xiii) may be linked to other ways of writing one’s identity. By validating ways young women are already active within this culture – including MySpace and similar new media practices – scholars legitimize girls’ online activities and may encourage them to use these spaces as entry points into the larger digital arena. Such an approach may not only impact individual technology users, but may also shape larger cultural gender norms. Just as idealized womanhood is now and has been consistently marked as maternal, well-behaved, and romantic, perhaps a focus on women’s online new media practices will add “technologically proficient” to the list of characteristics expected in the “proper” woman of the 21st century. By supporting a view of womanhood that includes the role of critical tech user girls and women may be afforded more options in constructing a womanhood that better reflects and enables who they are rather than limiting them.
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