DISTINCTLY DIGITAL:
Subjectivity and Recognition in Teenage Girls’ Online Self-Presentations

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the ways that teenage girls’ online interactions reflect their psychic and social struggles to negotiate contradictory and constricting discourses regarding contemporary American girlhood. Literature on girls’ online interactions has tended to fall into one of two categories. In the first, scholars sound alarms about the ubiquity of risk in digital spaces (for instance, on websites that supposedly promote eating disorders). In the second, scholars celebrate the ways that teenagers engage in social activism online. In contrast, I argue that emergent media scholarship often fails to question the messages of autonomous selfhood that characterize girls’ digital personas. I utilize feminist and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity to suggest that girls’ voices and agencies are always embedded in normative ideals of gender, race, sexuality, and class.

I examine a variety of digital spaces that cover a diverse range of contemporary American girlhoods, including queer girls’ MySpace pages, pro-bulimia message boards, and fan sites for young musicians such as Taylor Swift. I utilize a three-pronged methodology: analysis of the textual and visual elements of websites, instant messenger interviews with girls, and a research blog that explains my project to my research subjects in understandable language. Website analysis and interviews reveal that girls feel personally empowered by the ability to express themselves and demonstrate “who they really are” online in ways they cannot offline, but their digital personas are deeply embedded in discourses that privilege normative femininity, whiteness, heterosexuality, thinness, and middle-class status as conditions to aspire to. This
research shows that despite girls’ proclamations about articulating independent selves online, their self-presentations are consciously and unconsciously motivated by a yearning for recognition by real and fantasy online audiences. Elucidating girls’ desire for recognition illustrates the limited range of possible subjectivities to girls under post-feminism and hegemonic white consumption ideals. My dissertation thus points to the inadequacy of media scholars’ reliance on teenage girls’ explicit statements about their intentions for their online personas, demonstrating the importance of a psychoanalytic perspective to reveal the ways that allusive and unspoken desires—especially the subject’s fundamental longing for recognition—underpin girls’ digital self-presentations.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.
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Katie, a nineteen-year-old Taylor Swift fan, has been a vibrant part of the Taylor Connect website community since the forum’s inception in 2010. Nearly every day, Katie writes posts about her favorite Taylor Swift songs, her desire to meet Taylor, and the influence that Swift has had on her life. In many ways, Katie was exactly like the hundreds of other adolescent female users I encountered on Taylor Swift fan sites—sentimental, optimistic, emotional, and obsessed with Taylor Swift. However, I quickly learned that Katie possessed one trait that set her apart from the typical Taylor Swift fan—she publicly identified as a lesbian. I expected that Katie’s sexual identification would compel her to take a more critical view of Swift’s wholesome, heteronormative image, but as I read through her posts, I learned that Katie viewed Swift as both an object of desire and as a positive role model. In our interview, Katie said that she admired Taylor for not “whoring herself out” and insisted that she could personally relate to many of Swift’s songs. Yet, she also told me about the ways that she has been ostracized and even bullied on Taylor Connect because of her openness about her sexuality, and she expressed frustration with the often-homophobic character of the forums. I was perplexed about why Katie continued to actively participate in a website community that did not seem to want her, and I wondered: What did Katie gain from her involvement with the forums? Why did Katie valorize Swift’s sexually pure image when this limited discourse of girls’ sexuality so clearly
shaped her own treatment on the site? Why did these particular girls’ opinions (and Taylor Swift’s supposed opinion) matter so much to her?

In recent years, intense attention has been devoted to teenage girls’ activities on the web. Both the media and academic literature have focused primarily on girls’ explicit words and behaviors, typically either sounding alarms about the ubiquity of sexual predators on teen-dominated sites like MySpace.com or Facebook or, in past years, in internet chat rooms (Belenkaya 2008; Burchell 2007; Cattabiani 2008; Doneman 2008; Masis 2009; Rahn 2009; Teutsch 2007; Violante 2007; Zwartz 2007) or celebrating the ways that teenagers have utilized cyberspace to start companies and engage in social activism (Duggan 2007; Krieger 2005; Mindlin 2007; Parker 2008; Rosenbloom 2008; Sole-Smith 2007; Spicer and Taher 2008). This body of work shares an assumption with other academic studies of digital media that the web is a place where users can share their life stories, play with different identities, or blog their personal thoughts without the constraints of formal publishing (Hardey 2004; McNeill 2003; Podnieks 2002; Turkle 1997). Thus, literature on girls’ online interactions has particularly focused on the ways in which girls can push against social boundaries such as normative femininity, forging different identities and new meanings about what it means to be a girl in this contemporary moment (Davies 2004; Day and Keys 2008; Grisso and Weiss 2005; Thiel 2005). Yet, within literature on girlhood and digital media, girls are often understood as static subjects, alternately revealing and concealing aspects of their “real” selves in their online activities (Currie et al 2006; Kearney 2006; Leage and Chalmers 2010; Vickery 2010).

These texts suggest that girls are knowable, transparent subjects who can be empowered by feminist principles and through the use of digital technologies. The internet,
then, is primarily marked as a tool of self-expression and personal liberation for girls, and while attention is given to the particularities of different digital spaces, these variations are not understood to impact the formation of the subject as much as the revelation of an already-formed girl subject. Thus, there is little understanding of the ways in which the self is not simply expressed, but actually made, through digital self-presentations and interactions with other subjects. Moreover, self-presentations in digital contexts are rarely cohesive, but rather frequently incoherent and contradictory, but feminist texts on girls’ media productions often look for a clear narrative of the girl self rather than embracing and exploring these contradictory self-images. Finally, though feminist texts importantly validate girls’ own explanations of their behaviors and identities, it is equally important to consider the unintentional and unconscious processes that motivate particular types of self-presentations.

This dissertation thus seeks to develop an understanding of the ways that girls are formed as digital subjects, informed by both psychic and social processes. I focus particularly on the subject’s desire for recognition, arguing that this desire compels subjects to present themselves within legible frameworks in order to be understood by particular audiences. I turn to psychoanalytic and feminist theories of subjectivity to provide a framework for my analysis of girls’ gendered, racial, and sexual subjectivities in online spaces, conceiving of subjectivity not as an already-achieved state but as a process that is constantly articulated, negotiated, and reworked through dialogue with other subjects. Fundamental to my analysis is an attention to the multimedia character of digital spaces, which incorporates graphics, photography, poetry, autobiographical blog entries, bulletin board communities, private messaging, music, and videos. I utilize visual culture theory and life narrative theory to contextualize these different modes of self-presentation, considering the ways in which these varying modes of description and
narration offer both complementary and contradictory accounts of the self. Bringing these disparate fields together provides an opportunity to address the following research questions: How do girls engage or resist dominant or normative representations of femininity, whiteness, thinness, and heterosexuality? Are alternative self-presentations for girls enabled by the ease of accessing and producing a variety of visual, textual, and aural modes of media? How do girls represent, produce, and disseminate ideals and fantasies about their bodies in online spaces? And finally, how does the subject’s desire for recognition impact the ways that she presents herself and interacts in digital arenas?

I address these questions by examining girls’ productions of self in three digital arenas: lesbian and queer girls’ MySpace.com profiles, pro-bulimia message boards, and Taylor Swift fan forums. Each contributes a different piece to my analysis of girls’ digital subjectivities. The popularity of MySpace provides a window into the self-making processes of the “every-girl,” providing a useful starting point for theorizing the ways that girls represent themselves online. Pro-bulimia message boards illustrate the ways that girls engage complexly with notions of consumption, corporeality, and normative femininity. And examining the production of Taylor Swift as a celebrity on fan forums, meanwhile, offering insight into the construction of ideal girlhood through both the valorization of Swift and through fans’ descriptions of their own identifications and actions.

I utilize Butler’s conception of subjectivity (1997b; 2005) in order to consider how the girl subject’s desire for recognition emerges and shapes her digital self-presentations. Digital spaces rely on and reinscribe hegemonic discourses of gender, race, class, and sexuality, and the girl subject’s desire for recognition forces her to articulate her identification within these limited and constraining discourses. However, the internet also provides unique spaces for girls to
intersubjectively negotiate these discourses and to manipulate cultural visual and textual artifacts and imbue them with unintended meanings. Thus, while girls’ identifications and presentations of self are inevitably constrained by normative discourses that narrowly proscribe teenage femininity, the inability of these discourses to fully capture the girl subject enables her to stretch the boundaries of normative femininity in ways that are neither necessarily voluntary nor conscious. Ultimately, though, I contend that there are significant limitations to the ways that adolescent femininity is challenged online, and I caution against overly optimistic viewpoints on the potential of girls’ digital activities. Fundamentally, I argue that processes of subjectivity are never self-contained; rather, I situate subjectivity as an inherently social production, such that digital subjects are visibly constituted in relation to each other and to offline subjects, discourses, and institutions. I contend that girls’ self-presentations are always already constrained by normative discourses that situate femininity, whiteness, heterosexuality, thinness, and middle-class status as conditions to aspire to.

In this chapter, I suggest that Butler’s understanding of the ambivalent subject enables a consideration of the ways that girls’ gendered, racial, and sexual identifications constitute complex and contradictory digital subjects. While literature on girlhood typically offers a simplified view of agency in general—a view which unquestionably informs and permeates literature that focuses specifically on girls’ online activities—there is a strong body of literature in digital media studies that examines the ways that digital subjectivities are formed through both the particularities of digital technologies and through the salience of racist offline discourses, which permeate online environments. I then turn to psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, a body of work which has not yet been specifically applied to girls’ digital activities. Insisting on the importance of grounding psychoanalytic theory in the social, I suggest that the
subject’s desire for recognition is not disembodied or universally experienced in the same ways, but rather, that this desire emerges in varied and particular ways to inform the subject’s social behaviors. In the case of girls’ online activities, I contend that the desire for recognition compels girls to present themselves in ways that vary based on the particularities of different digital communities; however, I argue that across different types of websites, a devotion to normative ideals of girlhood underpins girls’ self-presentations and interactions. I apply subjectivity theory to the realm of representation, contending that the gaps, ruptures, and dissonances among the visual, textual, and aural elements of girls’ online self-presentations demonstrate the ways in which the subject negotiates with normative discourses in a manner that is not self-contained, but is inherently social. Fundamentally, I consider the significance of recognition in processes of subjectivity, asking how the subject’s passionate attachment to the Other compels her to express particular identifications and take up various affects. Finally, I ground my analysis in the theoretical and methodological insights of visual culture and life narrative literatures, considering how specific characteristics of digital spaces—multimedia environments, ephemeral websites, and fragmented self-presentations—both draw upon and alter traditional ways of theorizing visual and textual items.

**Girling the Subject in Feminist Thought**

My study makes contributions to several fields of literature. First, I seek to enter into discussions among girlhood scholars about subjectivity. Rather than addressing questions about the ways that subjectivity itself produces positive and negative effects for girls, the majority of feminist literature on girlhood has focused intensely on the issue of agency. These literatures have been primarily organized by two seemingly competing discourses: one that points to the
possibilities of girls’ empowerment through individualized actions such as creating art, engaging in non-normative gender behaviors, or voicing one’s opinions, and one that emphasizes the constraints of sexist discourse and the resulting victimization of girls. Yet, the two strands are not as disparate as they may seem—both work to create a particular model of subjectivity in which the victimized girl is one who has failed to take advantage of the tools of empowerment, while the empowered girl represents the ideal neoliberal girl subject (Gonick 2006; Harris 2004; Thomas 2008). Thomas suggests that, “The irony of these two approaches, as a sum body of work, is that girls seem to have a gender power that is actually withheld from them by gender relations. Girls fall victim to sexism but coincidentally have the feminine power to overcome it, via gender power” (4). Thus, while girls are constrained by sexist forces, they are supposedly able to claim a kind of feminist agency by individually challenging the strictures of normative femininity, speaking their minds, and becoming successful neoliberal citizens. Yet, this oversimplifies the contours of girl subjectivity by primarily locating sexism in formal structures and institutions and overlooking the ways in which discourse already always acts as a constitutive constraint.

While current academic girlhood literature has largely moved away from completely casting girls as powerless victims, many continue to emphasize the salience of structural constraints to girls’ agency, focusing on the ways in which girls remain subject to power (Chambers et al 2004; Currie 1999; Currie 2001; Duncan 2004; McRobbie 2000; Nielsen 2004). Feminist scholars have long considered the ways in which girls utilize critical reading strategies and alternative means of expression, laying the groundwork for girlhood media scholars’ debates over agency. In the updated edition of her classic book Feminism and Youth Culture, Angela McRobbie (2000) examines girls’ negotiation with different cultural texts, including
magazines and popular music. McRobbie’s subjects express their pleasure at reading magazines not simply for their explicit content, but also for their enjoyment of reading against intended meanings—for example, criticizing a diet ad model for being too thin. However, she concludes that girls’ appropriations of popular culture artifacts are insignificant, because the girls have no structural control over the items’ content or commercial circulation. Dawn Currie’s (1999) book *Girl Talk* also looks at girls’ engagements with popular magazines, particularly emphasizing the importance of understanding girls’ own interpretations of these texts. Currie asserts that girls’ everyday reading practices are not as critical as many academics assert, and that girls are more likely to defer to the normative discourses present in magazines than to prioritize their own experiences. While she attributes some significance to girls imbuing advertisements and articles with different meanings, she primarily contends that girls’ relative lack of power in relation to the capitalist magazine publishing industry prevents any real alterations to the ways in which adolescent femininity is popularly constituted in magazine culture as thin, white, pretty, heterosexual, passive, and wealthy. This emphasis on the ways in which girls’ agency is constrained provides an important counterpoint to those who attempt to unproblematically focus on girls’ empowerment, but it also limits full subjectivity to those with enough formal power to make changes in the content of magazines and belies the importance of resignification as a method for coping with the demands that normative femininity places on girls. McRobbie and Currie raise a number of important points which continue to emerge in literature on girls’ digital media interactions, particularly in their attempt to negotiate girls’ beliefs that they are empowered through their supposedly critical reading practices with the authors’ assertions that girls still tend to firmly cling to normative frameworks.
Currie and McRobbie are important predecessors for authors who examine the ways that the internet acts as a space for girls to potentially reject the strictures of traditional publishing formats (Currie et al. 2006; Davies 2003; Driver 2007; Grisso and Weiss 2005; Kearney 2006; Kelly et al. 2006; Leage and Chalmers 2010; Livingstone 2008; Summers 2010; Thiel 2005; Vickery 2010). The agential perspective on girls’ media productions is perhaps most emphatically stated by the essays in the edited collection Girl Wide Web (2005), which share a foundational claim that the web provides an important forum for girls to express themselves and to negotiate their identities in spaces that feel “safe.” The follow-up, Girl Wide Web 2.0 (2010) works more to emphasize diversity in girls’ digital experiences and to acknowledge that the internet is not an unqualified feminist success for girls, but the introduction to the collection still emphasizes that “girls do explore new opportunities to express their voices and so the Internet is involved in self-growth” (xi). In Queer Girls and Popular Culture, Susan Driver (2007) contends that queer girls “articulate gender and sexuality by deploying mobile languages that resist unification and closure...queer youth use online communities as tools for overcoming cultural devaluation and marginalization.” Similarly, Kearney (2006) suggests that “those female youth who insist on their authority to create and control their own representations, particularly representations that do not adhere to traditional notions of girlhood, exponentially multiply the subversive potential of female unruliness” (12). She makes a passing acknowledgement to the sexist, racist, classist, and heterosexist discourses that girls must negotiate, but she asserts that spaces such as the internet enable girls to appropriate sexist media and turn it to their own ends, suggesting that the only real barrier to girls overcoming these discourses is differential access to technology. Vickery (2010) points out the importance of digital communities to girls, and she importantly argues that girls’ desires to fit into communities shapes the character of their online
interactions. However, Vickery’s piece primarily validates the importance of these communities without fully considering the ways that “community” is formed through discursive norms and exclusions that implicitly privilege whiteness, heterosexuality, normative femininity, and thinness. Generally, these authors see digital spaces as sources of empowerment for girls, offering girl subjects the opportunity to speak out and find themselves online.

These girlhood media scholars draw upon a broader tendency in girlhood scholarship to emphasize the agency girls can access by rejecting the social constraints of normative femininity (Danesi 1994; Garrison 2000; Harris 2004; Inness 1998; Kelly et al 2006; Lesko 1996; Pomerantz et al 2004). However, feminist academic analyses of “girl power” have remained largely uncritical, relying on the veracity and authority of their research subjects’ claims and neglecting to critically analyze the ways in which “girl power” does not place girls outside of or above power relations (for exceptions, see Bettie 2003; Day and Keys 2008; Gonick 2003; Thomas 2008). These authors seem to presume a coherent girl subject, focusing on those “exceptional” girls who are able to transcend the limitations of adolescent femininity and empower themselves. Much of the literature in this category implies a view of subjectivity that articulates agency as intentional, limiting case studies to those girls who purposely engage in behaviors that most girls do not typically engage in, and attributing a feminist or pre-feminist consciousness to the girls they study (Driscoll 2002). They also implicitly code agency as voluntaristic, neglecting to look beyond these overtly transgressive actions to examine the unconscious processes of subjectivation that similarly work to challenge the limits of normative girlhood. And the focus on girls who are able to overcome obstacles through “girl power” without opposition or contradiction implies that girls’ agency is essentially unfettered and uncategorical, and fails to consider the impact of race, class, and sexuality on adolescent
femininity—for instance, in the ways that coming-of-age experiences like the prom are organized by heteronormativity and middle-class status, or in the ways that the “exceptional girls” in popular representations of girlhood are often white and middle-class. Thus, in focusing primarily on heterosexual white girls who are supposedly able to transcend the bounds of normative femininity, these authors neglect to consider the ways in which whiteness and heterosexuality define hegemonic femininity.

I argue that the overuse of agency, the application of the term to any situation or action that seems to contest a norm, ultimately makes it impossible to pin down the meaning of agency and even works to evacuate it of meaning. In girlhood literature, agency is typically attributed to girls who transgress normative femininity, marking them as successful feminist or pre-feminist subjects (Currie et al 2006; Grisso and Weiss 2005; Harris 2004; Kearney 2006; Kelly et al 2006; Lesko 1996; Pomerantz et al 2004; Thiel 2005). Since normative femininity is markedly white in this literature, feminist girl subjects are often predominantly white. However, this contention that gender non-conformity is inherently agential implies that girls’ identifications with normative subject positions hold little potential for destabilizing femininity and whiteness, ignoring the complex and contradictory identifications that different girls possess—for example, this model of agency seems unable to complexly theorize the contours of gender identification for teenage femmes. Moreover, this perspective sets up a false dichotomy between girls expressing normative and non-normative gendered identifications, implying that, for example, lesbian girls are able to move outside of the constraints of heteronormativity in a way that heterosexual girls cannot. Yet, it is impossible to move beyond the ways that heteronormativity shapes the societal conditions that enable certain kinds of relationships and not others, privileging ideas such as monogamy, which also shape same-sex relationships.
Similarly, the impacts and processes of white hegemony and racism are not explored for all racial subjects, including white girls.

My dissertation is also critical of the notion that academic research on girlhood can achieve the goal of privileging girls’ “authentic” voices. Girlhood literature has also frequently argued that giving voice to girls is a laudable project that should be a part of feminist research on girls. For instance, Dafna Lemish’s Foreword to *Girl Wide Web 2.0* asserts that “this collection of research studies makes a major contribution to understanding and theorizing the field of girlhood studies as well as to honing our capacity to listen to, make sense of, acknowledge, and respect ALL GIRLS” (xii). A number of texts have insisted upon the importance of researchers speaking to “real girls” rather than only conducting textual analyses, contending that girls themselves are the only ones who can understand their own lived experiences (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Brown 1997; Currie 1993; Driver 2007; Garrison 2003 McRobbie and Gardner 1976).

Literature that looks at girls in digital spaces is particularly invested in the notion of voice as a mode of agency, situating the internet as a space where girls can escape material conditions, such as lack of access to publishing outlets, which prevent girls from publicly expressing their ideas. Many authors situate this as a form of unfettered agency, arguing that girls can use these spaces to successfully defy the conventions of normative gender and explode the boundaries of adolescent femininity (Currie *et al* 2006; Grisso and Weiss 2005; Kearney 2006; Kelly *et al* 2006; Thiel 2005). These authors also take internet users’ words as authentic and truthful, rarely engaging in a critical analysis of their subjects’ statements and instead prioritizing the value of giving voice to teenage girls. Some texts indicate that the project of giving voice to girls ultimately fails because girls cannot be accurately represented by adult
researchers, and thus offer studying girls’ self-presentations as a method that allows girls to speak of their own volition, allegedly without incitements to speak in particular ways, and giving an unadulterated account of girlhood or allowing girls to speak more freely than they otherwise would. However, these authors neglect to recognize that the ways in which sexist and racist discourses shape girls’ statements, behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings, means that there is no unmediated account of girlhood; thus, recovering a real or authentic girl voice is impossible. I firmly reject the notion that there is any way to fully “give voice” to girls; I contend that girls are not only opaque to researchers, peers, and parents, but also to themselves. While girls continually tell stories online about who they are and who they want people to believe they are, these stories are always partial and incomplete. My research aims to amplify girls’ voices, but this is not an end in itself. Instead, I amplify them so that I can uncover the desires for recognition that are embedded in girls’ online personas.

Digitizing Subjectivity

Research on girls’ online activities tends to primarily rely on girlhood literature for theoretical frameworks, but I also turn to literature on digital subjectivities to contextualize my project. This body of work is characterized by a divide that closely mirrors the agency debates in girlhood studies—those who see the internet as a free-flowing space of identity play, and those who emphasize the ways in which offline sexist and racist discourses inevitably affect the formation of digital subjectivities. However, within digital media literatures, the divide is also temporal: few contemporary authors still regard the internet as a space of unfettered experimentation, so a focus on agency alone is frequently cast aside as outdated. Early analyses
of online subjectivities were influenced by cyberpunk novels, such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, which detailed the exploits of white male characters moving seamlessly in and out of different cyberspaces, writing about the potential for life beyond gender, beyond bodies (Haraway 1991; Plant 1998; Stone 1996). Donna Haraway’s seminal piece, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” takes up the figure of the cyborg as the future of feminist politics, arguing that the cyborg engages in a contingent politics of affinity that shifts identifications when necessary, appropriating tools not intended for its use in order to stretch boundaries of meaning. Both Stone and Plant take up the cyborg to explore the possibilities of online identity play, arguing that women in particular can avoid the trappings of sexist discourse in cyberspace by taking control of technology, and where the possibilities for blurring lines between male and female, human and machine seem endless. Sherry Turkle (1997) is continually cited as the most fervent advocate of the fluidity of online identities. Primarily relying on the ways that users self-describe their online experiences, she contends that users can “try on” different subject positions since their bodies are not visible to other users (and, in her view, cease to be important). She constitutes the internet as a liminal space where offline constitutive constraints no longer apply, where individuals can self-identify as a variety of genders, races, classes, and sexualities. Further, Turkle’s analysis of children’s uses of computing technologies concludes that their tendency to explore games without first reading the rules exemplifies the ways in which the internet represents an opening up of power. Certainly, the invisibility of the body to other internet users provides a different context than an offline world where bodies are always visible, but these authors overestimate both the ability and the willingness of digital subjects to leave sex and gender completely behind, and many subsequent studies have found that internet users generally present themselves in a
manner continuous with their offline lives (Bell 2001; Catanese 2005; Kennedy 2006; Gies 2008; Leung 2005; Robinson 2007; Sunden 2003). Bell also notes that early studies of cyberspace relied on a model internet user who was white, male, and middle-class, and who seemed much more interested in trying on different identities than users who embodied marginalized positions offline. Nakamura (2002) labels this phenomenon “identity tourism,” since it “allows a player to appropriate [a]...racial identity without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life” (40).

Over the past ten years, however, digital media scholarship has been increasingly characterized by an attentiveness to the ways in which online actions are neither a simple reflection of offline lives and identities nor a complete revision and retreat from “real life.” Rather, digital technologies provide the opportunity for bodies and identities to emerge and insert themselves into online environments in various ways. Hillis (2009) points to the ubiquity of both avatars and photographs in various digital spaces, noting that these are visual representations of the user. He writes, “The sign/body is indexical; it points back to the operator’s body on this side of the screen or display” (13). Thus, the body itself does not disappear, but rather makes itself known through users’ desires to visually represent themselves. And while avatars are often not exact depictions or sometimes even closely related to the user’s physical appearance, the avatar is still illustrative of a user’s fantasy of self-image, which is itself grounded in its departure from the user’s own body. Fantasy representations of bodies online do not make the body irrelevant, then, but rather point back to the user’s body. Dianne Currier’s “Assembling Bodies in Cyberspace: Technologies, Bodies, and Sexual Difference” (2010) utilizes the Deleuzian concept of assemblage in order to think past traditional questions about the mind/body split that supposedly emerges when a person interacts with other internet users.
through the computer screen. She suggests that identities emerge not only through the body, but through a configuration that includes bodies, technologies, institutions, and relations of power. Thus, Currier moves past traditional debates over whether or not the body “matters” in digital spaces (where it is potentially invisible) and demonstrates that identities will emerge and morph in digital spaces, varying based on the particular power dynamics, technological formats, and purposes of different digital communities and contexts.

Significantly, many critiques of digital agency specifically contest the notion that race ceases to be salient when the body is not visible (Catanese 2005; Foster 1998; Gonzalez 2003; Hansen 2004; Nakamura 2002; Nakamura 2007). Nakamura (2002) coins the term “cybertypes” to describe the ways that images of race circulate in cyberspace, contending that racial imagery and discourse online rely on stereotypes, and that far from disappearing, the raced body continually reappears in written interactions between internet users, in the images and avatars employed by users, in advertisements, and on a variety of websites that gear content toward specific racial groups. Moreover, she argues that offline meanings about race are not simply reiterated verbatim in cyberspace, but the ease of creation, reproduction, and dissemination online have reshaped (and reified) discourses about the differential relationships between racial groups and technology and more generally, about the ways in which people of color “really are.” Hansen (2004) agrees with Nakamura’s assessment of the dynamics of race in cyberspace, but contends that the invisibility of the body in cyberspace forces all users to “pass,” since no one’s self-presentation can be authenticated. For Hansen, this means not that all users are equally free to play with identity, but that it reveals the contours of racism offline. He writes,

If we all must imitate cultural images of how particular bodies should appear in order to acquire agency – if we must give up our own singular bodily experiences to occupy a constituted textual body – then we all must live the
erasure of our lived bodies. We might say then that what is most significant about the transcendence of visibility in on-line interpellation is less the possibility it affords for new modes of represented agency than its exposure of the violence exerted on bodily life by generic categories of social intelligibility. By severing imitation from visual appearance, on-line passing allows cultural signifiers to appear as what they are, social codings that have no natural correlation to any particular body and are profoundly reductive of bodily singularity (113-114).

Hansen’s formulation of the absence of the visible body in cyberspace moves beyond Turkle’s contention that invisibility begets an explosion of subjectivities; he contends that the contours of online “embodiment” demonstrate the extent to which racial categories always fail to approximate individual identifications and thus perpetrate a form of psychic violence by forcing subjects to align themselves with fictional formations. Moreover, while neither Nakamura nor Hansen explicitly takes up the question of ambivalence, their theorizations of the interplay between discourse and identification reveals that the invisibility of the body online can provoke a dialogue about the salience and impact of racist discourse.

Finally, in a departure from the typical theorization of the internet as a space of agential empowerment for girls, Day and Keys (2008) draw more on the tradition of digital media scholarship than girlhood scholarship. They challenge the frequent trend in girlhood literature to equate agency with feminist sentiments by exploring the ways that girls in the pro-eating disorder movement appropriate mainstream discourses of beauty, health, and diet to articulate their anorexic identifications. The authors remain critical of eating disorders and the discourses that contribute to girls’ bodily fixations, but they challenge the notion that these girls are passive victims and instead emphasize the way that they see themselves resisting dominant understandings of anorexics and bulimics. In complicating the picture of girls who have been typically understood by feminists as victims, Day and Keys demonstrate the ways in which the
internet allows girls to articulate marginalized subjectivities but also continue to emphasize the ways in which these subjectivities are enabled and constrained by discourses that connect girls’ (and women’s) worth to physical appearance. Thus, while digital media scholarship has not explicitly taken up psychoanalytic theory to explore processes of subjectivity that take place on the internet, these texts offer important critiques of digital agency and point to the ways that identities and bodies emerge and reinsert themselves in digital environments.

Subjectivity and Recognition

“It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’ am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who ‘am’ I, without you?” (Butler 2005, 22).

The focus on agency in girlhood literature fails to provide a complex framework for theorizing the relationship that girls have to discourses that privilege femininity, whiteness, thinness, and heterosexuality (or to the role of individuals and institutions in shaping these discourses). Several girlhood authors have noted this lapse and have explicitly taken up questions of girl subjectivity in their work (Driscoll 1999; Driscoll 2002; Driver 2007; Gonick 2003; Thomas 2008), but none of these texts investigate digital media. And while digital media literature provides important perspectives on the ways that embodied subjectivity emerges in online environments, this body of work focuses primarily on the social causes and consequences of embodied subjectivities without considering the role that psychic processes play. I draw on the subjectivity theory of Judith Butler to argue that digital subjects’ interactions and self-presentations are invariably informed by the desire to be known and recognized by other subjects—a desire which, as my dissertation shows, emerges in various ways throughout
different digital contexts. Butler (1997a) indicates that individuals become socially intelligible through subjectivation, suggesting that existence is predicated upon subjecting oneself to the terms and conditions of power by articulating one’s identifications in language that is widely understood and accepted. However, this vocabulary is always limited and constraining—few people can be neatly encompassed and summarized through generalized identarian terms of masculine/feminine, gay/straight, or thin/fat—and fails to capture the entirety of the subject. The inadequacy of this vocabulary results in a foreclosure of those qualities that cannot be accounted for by existing narratives; however, the very conditions of power that constrain the subject are also enabling (Butler 1993; Butler 1997b). The very fact that the subject cannot be completely accounted for by the terms of power also results in an agency whereby power can be wielded in unintended ways (Butler 1997a; Butler 2005). However, this does not mean that agency is always and only intentional—subjects may often stretch boundaries of intelligibility without meaning to do so (Butler 1993). Butler emphasizes that subjectivation is ambivalent, both requiring the subject to submit to the terms of power and enabling agential opportunities for subjects to affect moments of change (1997b), informing an analysis of the complex ways in which girls engage and resist discourses of normative femininity.

Among feminist texts on girls which have employed subjectivity theory (Driscoll 1999; Driscoll 2002; Driver 2007; Gonick 2003; Thomas 2008), none have centrally interrogated the role that recognition plays in relation to adolescent girlhood. Butler contends that recognition is critical to understanding the subject’s complicity in its own subjugation. She draws upon Althusser’s concept of interpellation, which locates the installment of subjectivity in the moment one is hailed by power (the police officer’s “Hey you!”) and turns toward it (1997b). She maintains that the subject’s passionate attachment to subjectivity, which is linked to the
subject’s psychic and social desire for recognition by the Other (as well as recognition by the self), compels one to turn toward power, even though responding to power necessarily subjugates one to it. Discourse constitutes the terms by which one becomes legible, so submitting to these terms through the process of subjectification is necessary in order to be recognized by the other (Butler 2005).

Subjectivity is an inherently social process. Kruks (2001) asserts that there is a pervasive modern “notion of the ‘authentic’ self: that is, the self as a unique and ‘inner’ being that can find its fulfillment only in personal self-expression” (84). However, the self never emerges completely from within, and it cannot form or sustain itself in isolation. Rather, as Taylor argues, “The thing about inwardly derived, personal, original identity is that it doesn’t enjoy this recognition a priori. It has to win it through exchange, and it can fail” (48). The desire for recognition fundamentally shapes the subject’s understanding of the self—being misrecognized deeply affects one’s sense of self, so believing that oneself is accurately recognized is critically important (Fraser 2000). Butler suggests that the act of seeking recognition is utterly transformative: “Recognition is an act in which the ‘return to self’ becomes possible for another reason as well. An encounter with an other effects a transformation of the self from which there is no return. What is recognized about a self in the course of this exchange is that the self is the sort of being for whom staying inside itself proves impossible” (2005, 28). Seeking recognition requires the acceptance of the falseness of complete autonomy and the acknowledgement of dependence on others, which Butler marks as an irrevocably transformative experience. Recognition cannot be one-sided, though. Drawing on Hegel, Butler asserts that seeking recognition is a reciprocal action—in the moment we offer recognition to another, we also
receive it. Thus, offering recognition holds benefits for the subject because it also entails receiving recognition from others.

Recognition is no simple dialogical exchange, however—we cannot simply ask someone to acknowledge us and then receive that acknowledgement. We can only achieve social existence through norms, and so the possibilities of any exchange, whether dyadic, public, or figurative will always be conditioned by norms. Thus, recognition is predicated upon representing oneself within legible terms, and since these terms are constraining and inadequate, it is impossible for the subject to give an account of herself in a way that is fully descriptive and encompassing. However, a subject’s inability to recognize the other through normative frameworks, Butler suggests, “establishes a critical point of departure for the interrogation of available norms” (2005, 24).

Fundamentally, though, in the terms of psychoanalytic theory, the desire for recognition can never be satisfied—first, because we never present a full account of ourselves; any self-presentation is always partial, selective, and audience-dependent. Second, we are never fully self-evident, and are motivated by psychic as well as social processes. And finally, the desire is premised on a false investment in the wholeness and coherency of the self. The subject’s belief in the possibility of recognition is based on the notion that there is a core self that remains stable and knowable, yet this belief in a stable or true subjectivity is a myth. Moreover, Butler suggests that this investment in stable identity enacts “a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same” (2005, 42). It is not only that recognition cannot be received because there is no stable self, but the assertion that identities must be stable and legible is constricting for the subject.
Thus, while desiring recognition is an inherent condition of subjectivity, it is a desire that can
never be fulfilled.

In Against Recognition, Lois McNay makes an incisive critique of recognition. She
contends that recognition is conceptualized as a disembodied process divorced from the
salience of social inequalities.

I am not against recognition in that I do not disagree with the basic
claims made about the dialogical nature of subjectivity, identity and
agency by thinkers of recognition. I am against recognition, however, in
so far as these insights are not sufficiently embedded in a sociological
understanding of power relations. The consequent ways in which the
idea of recognition is naturalized and universalized foreclose anything
but the most limited understanding of identity and agency in the

McNay asserts that recognition theorists universalize the experience of seeking and offering
recognition, which fails to account for the ways that unequal power relations differently affect
embodied experiences. She makes a specific critique of Butler, insisting that Butler conceives of
the individual as the “passive effect of discourse” (167). She asserts, “Although Butler certainly
stresses the complexities inherent in all identities, these are conceived, by and large, in the
abstract terms of the effects of the relational nature of language. A consequence of regarding
gender largely as a question of position within language and not as embodied social relations is
that dominant identities are left under-problematized” (169). However, McNay’s analysis of
Butler’s position is largely limited to Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter, and so she does
not consider the ways that Butler takes up the question of recognition in more specific ways in
her later work. Moreover, McNay’s critique does not render Butler’s theoretical framework
unusable, but rather suggests that it be modified in the context of specific embodied processes
of subjectivity. This is what my dissertation aims to do.
I agree wholeheartedly with McNay’s insistence that psychoanalytic theory cannot be applied without attention to the particularities of structural and discursive power formations. However, I disagree with her conclusion that recognition theory should be discarded. Instead, I assert that recognition is a useful concept in analyzing the ways that subjects present themselves in context, and that gender, race, sexuality, age, and class critically shape the ways that subjects attempt to seek and offer recognition in particular locations. My work bears out Butler’s assertion that “we feel more properly recognized by some people than we do by others” (2005, 33). As the following chapters will demonstrate, specific digital communities appeal to girls because they believe that other users in these groups “really understand” them; yet, this understanding is predicated upon adherence to normative frameworks of femininity, whiteness, heterosexuality, middle-class consumption, and thinness.

Recognition is a particularly important tool for theorizing girlhood because it offers a lens for interrogating the popular notion of “peer pressure,” which implies that teens are highly malleable and easily influenced by the opinions of their friends. While peer pressure is a term that is applied almost exclusively to adolescents, psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity suggest that the subject’s passionate desire for recognition compels her to articulate herself in terms that are understandable and acceptable to the other. Thus, while teens are singled out as being unduly influenced by the opinions of others, turning to psychoanalytic theories of recognition allows us to draw connections between adolescent and adult subjects, acknowledging the ways in which all subjects are dependent on others for psychic and social existence:

[N]o subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent. [...] It is not simply that one requires the recognition of the other and that a form of recognition is conferred through subordination, but rather that one is dependent on power for one’s very formation, that that formation is impossible without dependency, and that the
posture of the adult subject consists precisely in the denial and reenactment of this dependency. The ‘I’ emerges upon the condition that it deny its formation in dependency, the conditions of its own possibility (Butler 1997b, 9).

While maturation into independent adulthood demands the denial of dependencies, subjects are fundamentally dependent on others for validation—that they “really” are who they believe they are—and for understanding—that other people see them for who they believe they are. The assertion that teenagers are uniquely in need of recognition from others creates a false distinction between adolescent subjects-in-the-making and supposedly mature adults who are secure in their own right. Instead, as Butler, Taylor, and Fraser insist, we are all deeply reliant upon feeling as though others know and understand us. Moreover, recognition theory offers a perspective on the interactive character of subjectivity while avoiding the simplification of teens’ conscious and explicit responses to peer influences. Finally, reconceptualizing susceptibility to peer pressure as the desire for recognition also helps to reshape negative perceptions about teenagers. Peer pressure is popularly conceptualized as a negative influence that teens must learn to overcome, but my dissertation asserts that reconceptualizing girls’ desires to please their friends as recognition can open up a more positive or productive understanding of this desire.

**Visual Culture Theory**

This dissertation also draws upon visual culture studies for both theoretical and methodological insights. A number of texts have considered the representation of girlhood in popular films and television shows, broadly asking how meanings about girlhood are created, reproduced, and challenged in texts directed specifically toward teen audiences (Byers 2005;
Feasey 2006; Fuchs 2002; Hentges 2005; Kearney 2006; Levine 2007; Middleton 2007; Ross and Stein 2008; Woodward 2002). However, these texts share two significant problems: they lack strong theoretical grounding, and they tend to focus on particular texts or groups of texts rather than exploring the significance of these texts for broader discourses of normative girlhood. For example, Sarah Hentges’ *Pictures of Girlhood: Modern Adolescence on Film* analyzes the ways that teen movies have continually reproduced particular images of teenage girlhood, such as the promiscuous bad girl and the chaste good girl, and draws on a number of films to provide evidence. However, the book lacks a strong theoretical framework, instead relying almost entirely on Hentges’ own analysis to make its claims. Moreover, though Hentges produces a comprehensive discussion of the filmic construction of girlhood, she analyzes cinematic texts apart from their larger cultural and social contexts, neglecting to consider the ways that cinematic discourse reflects, reproduces, challenges, and shapes broader cultural discourses of girlhood. Hentges’ book is indicative of much of the scholarship on the representation of girlhood in visual culture, and while these texts offer comprehensive analyses of the ways that the girl has been constituted in particular popular culture phenomena, they do not offer insights into the broader implications of these representations. Finally, though a significant amount of literature discusses the salience of race in visual representations of adult women, these theoretical contributions have not been reproduced in studies of girlhood—largely, analytical discussions of girls in visual culture have neglected the ways that representations of femininity and heterosexuality are also implicitly imbued with whiteness.

While film and television literature on girlhood has narrowly focused on the representation of the girl, and magazine literature has emphasized the girl’s response to representations of girlhood, digital media provides a unique arena for bringing these two modes
of interrogation together productively. Websites like MySpace act as an explicit representation of the different ways that girls take up popular culture and integrate them into their online self-presentations, demonstrating the ways in which imagery and popular culture are constitutive of girls’ subjectivities. Yet, Lisa Nakamura (2008) indicates that visual culture theory has not been widely applied to cyberspace studies; rather, most academic research on the internet tends to focus solely on non-visual communication and interactivity. However, visual culture theory offers tools for conceptualizing the reproduction and circulation of images, the salience of varied spectatorial positions, the historicity of particular kinds of images, and the representation of the body. Digital media poses a unique challenge to visual culture studies because webpages are ultimately ephemeral, and thus do not constitute the same kind of archive that other visual artifacts do. Diana Taylor (2007) suggests that there has traditionally been a perceptual rift between the archive—items that leave a lasting and tangible physical record, such as letters, artifacts, and documents—and the repertoire—embodied, supposedly ephemeral practices such as spoken words, dances, and rituals. She asserts that the archive has historically been privileged because scholars (incorrectly) assert that it is unbiased and unchanged by time, and that the repertoire is generally valued and studied through its representation in the archive. The repertoire, she suggests, is typically situated in the past (prior to recorded history), since these previously ephemeral instances have been preserved through the archive. However, digital media challenges these categories—while the internet can constitute an archive through the ability to store old blogs, news articles, or forum posts, it also carries distinct notes of the repertoire because of the potentially ephemeral nature of websites, which can easily disappear without leaving a trace. This blurring of the lines between archive and repertoire suggests the need for a new paradigm for approaching and studying digital visual culture. The ephemeral
character of the web does not render particular websites obsolete as an object of study or mark images as irrelevant to visual culture studies, but rather suggests that transience is itself a trait worth excavating—one which I argue is characteristic of subjectivity itself.

One important aspect of theorizing digital visual culture is the overwhelming use of many kinds of images in a single webpage. While visual culture has largely been historically confined to individual mediums—painting, photography, film, and the like—digital media allows users to incorporate self-produced graphics, “found” graphics (those taken from a graphics website or another user’s profile), photographs, wallpaper, different font styles, and videos. Nakamura (2008) outlines a concern among some visual culture theorists that visual cyberstudies could collapse the analysis of images into an undifferentiated digital mass, so it is important to theorize the various meanings attached to different types of images, both in isolation and in conjunction with each other.

I conceptualize the basic artistic strategy of the girls in this study as bricolage (alternately referred to as assemblage or pastiche)—combining elements from many different sources to form a unique image or item. Bricolage implies the use of found objects rather than just a collection of newly-created items—in traditional artmaking, the bricoleur collects discarded objects to create a new piece of artwork. In bricolage, the emphasis is placed on the act of producing more so than the finished product, allegorizing the ways in which subjectivity is a process of becoming and undoing rather than a completed condition. Dezeuze writes, “While the concrete nature of assemblage allowed it to underscore the new dominance of the commodity, it was its emphasis on process that suggested the ways in which subjects are formed through this changing set of relations” (32, 2008). In digital contexts, “found” graphics represent the ubiquity of the digital image, the internet equivalent of mass-produced goods—
shoddily made, easily obtained, quickly consumed, and thoughtlessly discarded when they no longer prove useful. However, these same qualities reflect the ephemeral nature of the subject’s identifications, which constantly shift, often erasing the traces of former identifications when new ones emerge. Thus, while the ease of accessing graphics, placing them on a webpage, and deleting them may seem to be a unique feature of digital subjectivity, it is merely that the internet provides a uniquely visual metaphor for the temporal nature of subjectivities in general. Moreover, like traditional bricoleurs, digital bricoleurs take “undesirable” elements and revalue them, imbuing them with new meanings. As I discuss further in Chapters 3 and 5, graphics are widely considered gaudy and unattractive, but teenage girls utilize graphics to enhance their webpages and forum signatures, offering a visual representation of who they believe themselves to be and who they want others to recognize them as. Teenage girls’ uses of these graphics asserts the images’ worth, emphasizing the ways in which identities do not simply emerge from within but rather take shape through the use of a variety of visual tools.

The other significant visual component of webpages that I analyze is photography. Photographs were a significant form of self-presentation and expression on each of the three types of websites that I examined. The cultural purchase of the photograph is, as Barthes (1981) notes, that it is an attempted referent to something “real”—an event that “really” took place, a person who truly existed, or a location that was actually visited. Though paintings are considered corruptible as sources of ethnographic information, the photograph is thought to capture the “truth,” and the photographer is understood to be a disinterested observer of truth. However, Barthes reminds us that photographers intentionally seek to capture particular images and evoke specific responses from viewers, so a photograph is never impartially created. Moreover, he suggests, the subjects of photographs also interfere with the inability to produce
an image that is “real” or “authentic.” Barthes asserts that the awareness of being photographed invariably creates an impact. “Now once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the practice of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (1981, 10). The subject of the photograph attempts to create herself as an image, which already marks the photograph as artifice. The majority of photographs on both MySpace and Pro-Mia Community are taken by girls themselves, either using a timer or a reverse point-and-click technique in which the user extends her arm out and turns the camera on herself. The fact that few of girls’ photographs are candid underscores Barthes’ points—while girls utilize photographs to provide evidence that they are who they say they are (in appearance, attitude, and interests), the posed nature of the photographs cancels out the impact of referencing reality.

Yet, Ortega (2008) suggests that regardless of the validity of truth claims regarding photography, the processes of taking, sharing, and viewing photographs hold psychic significance. She writes,

Barthes’s initial investigation into the nature of photography turns out to be an exercise in self-discovery and in the nature of interpersonal life. It is a disclosure of self with others. What he calls his ontological desire to expose photography as such turns into an existential excursion into what it means to be, to be as other (since the camera turns me into an object), and to be with others (as a photograph reconnects him to his mother)” (237).

While Barthes questions the ontological significance assigned to photographs, Camera Lucida demonstrates that photographs house a great deal of emotional weight, connecting individuals to moments in their past and providing visual evidence of the ways that photographic subjects hope to be viewed. It is in this light that I consider girls’ digital uses of photography—what do girls hope to convey? How do other users respond to these photographs? What is the
significance of publicly sharing particular images of the self, and what do girls hope to gain by maintaining a visual public internet persona?

Teenage girls’ comfort with distributing photographs of themselves has come under fire in the press recently, as sexting (text messaging that involves sexual messages) scandals involved unintended distribution (at least by the girls) of naked photographs of underage girls have caught fire, even resulting in threats of child pornography charges (Gaznik 2011; Mandak 2011; O’Brien 2011). Girls are popularly understood to be uninformed about the possible impact of displaying images of themselves publicly on the web, particularly since so many websites’ privacy settings vary. Among the girls I studied, there were varying levels of awareness of the possible reach of their web presences, with some completely stunned that a researcher had accessed their pages and others fully aware of the public nature of their photographs. However, even girls who intentionally display sexualized images of themselves for public consumption are often deemed cluelessly naïve by the media, unaware of the potential consequences of their actions. Some feminists, however, understand these girls to be agentially empowered through their uses of their own images. Writing about webcam girls, Knight writes, “The producers are the subjects of the image, and in this way challenge the to-be-looked-at-ness” (2001, 22-23). My research attempts to strike a balance between the two viewpoints, acknowledging the potential hazards that accompany public exposure on the web (whether through sexualized pictured on MySpace, identifying photographs on pro-bulimia message boards, or age-revealing images on Taylor Swift fan forums) as well as the feelings of empowerment that can result from controlling one’s own bodily exposure and receiving compliments for it.

However, few visual texts are entirely and only visual—many, such as films, include aural or written components—but the internet provides a space where mixed-media formats
are the norm. Webpages often include graphics, photographs, videos, and music, and thus, theorizing the ways that these items come together is crucial (Bal 2003; Nakamura 2008; Sterne 2003). Bal insists that studying the visual in isolation from the textual aspects of online environments could not produce a complete analysis, and thus practitioners of digital-visual culture studies need to attend to the ways that visual and textual elements each tell different stories. Further, Smith and Watson (2003) suggest that in autobiographical practices, “the relationship of the visual and the textual is intimate, inextricable, and multivalent,” sometimes complimenting and sometimes contradicting each other (19). Thus, my dissertation considers the ways that different elements of webpages speak to one another, putting images into conversation with text and asking what these different elements reveal about the complicated nature of subjectivities. While the visual is sometimes a simple reflection of the textual, I assert that the visual is often imbued with overwhelming affect, wordlessly conveying attachments and desires that text only hints at. Yet, sometimes I find that the visual and textual are in complete contradiction, with textual elements claiming a complete disregard for something (such as sexual objectification) while visual elements tell an entirely different story (such as a MySpace user posting sexually provocative images of herself for other users to look at and comment on). Thus, I rely on the insights of visual culture theory to ground my discussion of the ways that the desire for recognition emerges through various types of digital media.

Life Narrative Theory

The final body of literature that informs my theoretical framework is feminist autobiography theory (or life narrative theory), which Smith and Watson (1998) suggest does not situate the life narrative as an unblemished reflection of an already-lived past. Rather, life
narrative theorists conceptualize autobiographical works as complex self-representations that are mediated by memory, perception, discourse, narrative conventions, and a desire for a certain kind of self-presentation to others. Sidonie Smith (1998) takes this a step further to contend that the self is actually performatively constituted in the process of writing a life narrative. Rejecting the traditional understanding of autobiography as the narration of already-lived experiences, Smith contends that the “I” which purports to be coherent, stable, and knowledgeable is actually constructed in the process of telling one’s life story. In accordance with Butler, Smith contends that agency lies in the multifarious interpellations into subjectivity, writing, “It is as if the autobiographical subject finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity. These multiple calls never align perfectly. Rather they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits, and other transgressions” (110). These gaps allow the autobiographer to articulate her subject positions in ways that do not completely align with the norm (of gendered, racial, and sexual subjectivity), expanding understandings of both subjectivity and the genre of autobiography.

Smith, it should be noted, does not suggest that large-scale social change results from these small gaps and ruptures—the agency she suggests is possible through writing one’s life narrative is individualized. Thus, I contest popularly-held notions within girlhood studies that girls who attempt to contest norms are somehow heroic or subversive. Instead, I suggest that the performative nature of autobiography actually gives academic analysts of girlhood a false sense of the larger resignificatory potential of these supposedly defiant uses of text and imagery. Yet, interestingly, girls themselves do not understand themselves as being particularly influential or as trying to stretch the boundaries of normative gender and sexuality—the most that any of
them hopes for is to be better understood by her internet peers or to have a digital space of self-expression.

Thus, this dissertation utilizes Smith’s framework to situate girls’ digital self-presentations as narratives that constitute them as “girls.” Rather than retrieving past experiences of girlhood and simply recounting them, I assert that girls engage in important meaning-making processes in digital spaces which actually shape personal and social definitions of modern girlhood. Examining girls’ online life narratives provides unique insight into the self-making practices of contemporary adolescent girls. While feminist theorists of autobiography have analyzed a significant number of coming-of-age texts, such as Dorothy Allison’s Two or Three Things I Know for Sure, Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis, and Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, these narratives discuss girlhood in retrospect rather than in process. Since girls have rarely had access to formal publishing, girls’ autobiographical narratives have not frequently been available, except through a few published diaries such as Anne Frank’s The Diary of a Young Girl.

However, the popularity of personal websites, internet forums, and blogs have made girls’ self-presentations and life narratives widely available, and life narrative theory offers essential tools for analyzing these productions. Smith and Watson understand “the autobiographical” as emerging in a number of sites outside of traditional autobiographies, and a number of theorists have considered the emergence of the autobiographical on the internet. Moreover, Smith and Watson (2002) call for analyses of the ways in which the autobiographical emerges from a number of visual texts, and in a vein similar to several of the visual culture theorists mentioned above, they particularly emphasize the need to look at the “interfaces” of visual and textual elements to understand the ways in which these modes are implicated in one
another, though not repetitive and not necessarily cohesive. Yet, while a strong body of literature on digital life narratives exists (Douglas 2006; Hansen 2005; McNeill 2003; Hardey 2004; Podnieks 2002; Rak 2005; Lathem et al 2006; Sorapure 2003; Zalis 2003) girls’ digital narratives have not been a significant focus of these analyses. And while a number of authors have studied girls’ online interactions (Grisso and Weiss 2005; Kearney 2006; Kelly et al 2006; Thiel 2005), life narrative theory offers a fruitful tool to examine the ways in which the girl self is produced through online interactions.

Like visual culture theorists, life writing scholars have raised concerns about the ephemeral quality of digital productions. McNeill (2003) writes,

> Since diarists can post entries immediately after writing them, they have less opportunity to “tamper” with their texts, less time for hindsight to “alter” the “true” version of experiences. Of course, the ability to make seamless emendations to entries, or even delete them altogether without the telltale signs of a ripped page, can undercut readers’ confidence in the “stable” text (37).

For McNeill, the primary distinction between traditionally published autobiographies and web-based life writing is the relationship that the author has with the audience. Readers of an online diary cannot know whether the author has altered previous entries in order to delete an offensive statement or unflattering comment, so there is an air of distrust that surrounds digital life writing. However, as McNeill’s quotation marks point out, the belief that there ever could be a “true” version or a “stable” text is a myth—though a published text cannot be seamlessly edited, life writing is always partial and selective. Though diaries are a supposedly uncensored account of a life, Lejeune (1999) suggests that the diarist always writes with an imaginary audience in mind, and so there is no unmediated, unbiased account of a life.

Whitlock and Poletti (2008) suggest that this fear of the ephemeral has produced a reliance on visual means of “proving” the truth of one’s story by seemingly unalterable means,
such as photographs, so that the illusion of a coherent “core” self remains despite changes to the aesthetics of a profile. Critiquing the insistence on stable, knowable identity, they question “the kinds of self-representational limits and strategies this focus on visual identification produces: the emphasis on legible and consistent self-representations, the expectation that one “is” who one’s picture ‘says’ one is” (xv). While, as psychoanalytic theory suggests, there is no stable self, readers expect an autobiographer to adhere to a consistent and legible account of the self—a restrictive expectation which Butler deems “ethical violence.” Moreover, as Barthes notes, this usage draws on a discursive construction of photography’s ability to capture the “real,” yet users can remove or change photo albums at whim (not to mention the widespread accessibility of editing software such as Photoshop). Thus, even beyond Barthes’ initial skepticism of the photograph as a referent to reality, digital spaces further trouble the stability of the image.

While MySpace is most easily understood as an autobiographical production among my three case studies (since the purpose is for users to produce personal pages that tell about themselves), I also assert that self-making practices occur on pro-bulimia message boards and Taylor Swift fan sites. In both of these arenas, girls write extensively about their lives, sharing personal details and asking for advice and understanding. Both types of sites are notable for the ways in which the presumed topics—eating disorders and Taylor Swift—are often subsumed under users’ larger desires to write about themselves for a particular online audience and receive validation for their stories. Many life narrative theorists (Eakin 1999; Smith and Watson 1998; Wong 1998) have emphasized the intersubjective construction of the self, noting that we never form an understanding of who we are, but rather that we do so through dialogue with others. Eakin (1999) asserts that the self is always formed in relation to the other and that much
Life writing makes this intersubjectivity evident through the prevalent use of other people’s stories (such as Carolyn Steedman’s integration of her mother’s life story with her own autobiographical narrative in Landscape for a Good Woman: A Tale of Two Lives). Drawing on Jessica Benjamin, he contends that even claims of autonomy are grounded in relationality, because they must be recognized and validated by those from whom we seek independence.

While traditionally-published autobiographies have often emphasized the intersubjective nature of lived experience, digital life writing evidences the relational nature of life writing itself. Laurie McNeill (2003) suggests that the interactivity of the web suggests an ultimate inability to define the boundaries of the self, since internet users constantly participate in each others’ self-making processes. The websites I study here provide explicit confirmation of the ways that the digital self forms interactively—girls tentatively pose questions about whether anyone else has had a similar experience (for example, an embarrassing bulimic story), and other users jump to validate the user’s experience by sharing their own story. Often, the original poster replies to thank others for their help, and the original feelings they had about themselves are confirmed. Recognition theory is instructive here—Taylor (2007) and Butler (2005) both insist that subjects’ own self-identifications must be placed into a dialogical relationship with others in order to be validated.

Life writing theory provides important insights into the ways in which the self is actually created, not simply reflected, through the process of telling one’s story. This dissertation, then, is not concerned with whether or not the stories that girls tell are “true” (i.e., whether they closely resemble or reflect girls’ lived experiences). Rather, I focus on the ways in which the internet provides the technological tools for girls to produce meanings about girlhood and narrate processes of adolescent subjectivity through textual and visual means.
Chapter Overview

In the following chapters, I apply the theoretical framework laid out here to the specific context of girls’ digital self-presentations and interactions. In Chapter 2, I lay out my methodology, explaining the ways that my three-pronged approach (which includes visual and textual analyses of websites, instant messenger interviews, and a research blog) provides a uniquely nuanced perspective on the conditions of contemporary American digital girlhood. I discuss the advantages of using the internet as a site of analysis and means of data collection, particularly for studying adolescents, as well as the unexpected challenges that I faced while trying to conduct digitally-based research on teenagers.

In Chapter 3, “’I Hope Sum1 Out There Understands Me’: Girlhood, Recognition, and Identification on MySpace.com,” I turn to the first of my three major sites of analysis. MySpace is unique among social networking sites in its facilitation of the prominent inclusion of multiple kinds of media into personal webpages. While current studies have primarily focused on the social networking aspect of MySpace, I instead focus on the ways in which the self is intersubjectively formed through the construction and maintenance of the MySpace profile and through interactions with other MySpace users. I suggest that the queer digital girl subject’s unconscious desire for recognition compels her to conduct her online interactions in ways that engage with normative discourses surrounding girlhood, using graphics, photographs, written text, and music that draw upon narratives of heterosexuality, monogamy, and sentimentality in order to depict herself in terms that are legible to other cyber-subjects. Academic literature on girlhood has often sought to cast girls with non-normative identities, such as queer girls, as proto-feminist subjects, but my analysis of lesbian and queer girls’ MySpace pages suggests that
they cannot be understood as more heroic or admirable than straight girls. Rather, these pages give evidence of the subject’s mandate to make herself legible through the very discourses that seek to exclude her.

Chapter 4, titled “‘What’s Your Grossest Purging Experience?’ Recognition, Jouissance, and Intimacy with the Abject in Pro-Mia Digital Spaces,” examines the ways that girls on pro-bulimia forums seek recognition through explicit discussions of their eating disorders. While literature on pro-ana/mia (anorexia/bulimia) has focused significantly more on anorexia than bulimia (Morag 2006), analyzing the discursive construction of bulimia reveals the ambivalence evident in the ways that pro-mia girls struggle with normative demands of thinness. I suggest that pro-mia cyberspace reveals the bulimic’s intimate relationship with the abject, resisting bodily boundaries and societal taboos surrounding bodily refuse (especially vomit) and instead embracing the abject as a source of comfort and as a basis for soliciting recognition from other digital subjects. Yet, this relationship with abjection is ambivalent—while bulimic girls describe the pleasure they receive from both aspects of the binge-purge cycle, they also express feeling out of control and wishing that they had never started purging.

In Chapter 5, “‘If you listen to my albums, it’s just like reading my diary’: Identification, Recognition, and ‘Authentic’ American Girlhood on Taylor Swift Fan Forums,” I discuss the ways that the language of recognition emerges on Taylor Swift fan sites. Swift’s music and her media presence (including her Twitter, online journal, and forum posts on her official website) ask fans to recognize her as a girl just like them, enabling their identification with her as well their belief that she recognizes them. However, the capitalist marketing strategy that underpins this image of ordinariness is also made invisible: Swift’s “authentic” image validates the fantasy that Taylor is the subject of her songs in a completely genuine way, that she experiences what “normal”
teens do, and that “everyone” can relate to her, regardless of their gender, race, social class, or sexuality. Fans express affinities with Swift and her music, seeking and offering recognition through articulations of sameness, particularly regarding white heteronormative propriety. While fans assert that their communities are open and welcoming, they offer each other recognition on the basis of qualities that are not available to everyone.

Finally, the conclusion discusses my dissertation’s impact on both subjectivity theory and girlhood studies. I suggest that my analysis of girls’ digital media productions demonstrates the need to ground psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity in social context, and that my work demonstrates the impossibility of articulating a consistent, coherent, feminist agency for girls. While feminist scholars are deeply invested in girls’ potential as future feminist changemakers, I assert that this kind of investment in futurity is ultimately untenable because girls often use their agencies and voices to reaffirm the centrality of normative conceptions of gender, race, sexuality, and age.
CHAPTER 2:
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN CONDUCTING ONLINE RESEARCH WITH TEENAGE GIRLS

Constructing the Project

When I began the seminar paper that would eventually lead to this dissertation in the spring of 2007, I was interested in analyzing the types of autobiographical practices that emerged on girls’ MySpace pages. I was almost immediately struck by the need to consider the ways that the self was constituted through visual and textual means and through very explicit and visible interactions with other MySpace users. When I decided to analyze girls’ online self-presentations for my dissertation, I decided that I wanted to examine websites that represented these themes of multimedia and intersubjective self-presentations in varied ways and to different degrees. I wanted to continue on with MySpace because of its popularity as a social networking site (particularly from 2003-2008) and because of the ways that it facilitated the use of multiple kinds of media in users’ webpages, so I decided to expand my horizons beyond social networking sites. Many of the images I encountered on MySpace (discussed further in Chapter 3) prompted questions about the representation of the body in digital spaces. I initially conceived of doing companion chapters on pro-eating disorder and fat-positive websites, but after extensive searching, I discovered that while the former was ubiquitous, the latter was nearly impossible to find, particularly given my desire to focus on teenage girls. So instead I chose to examine pro-bulimia websites, which offered a complex perspective on girls’ conflicting
representations of and relationships with corporeality, consumption, and idealized femininity.

Finally, I wanted to examine the production of fandom and celebrity in digital spaces. I initially planned to study Lily Allen and Adele, both of whom are young female musicians who started their music careers online. However, during the course of researching and writing my dissertation, pop country musician Taylor Swift exploded in popularity, and I found myself repeatedly drawn to her official website as well as to fan sites. Thus, I eventually decided to focus my final chapter solely on Swift and her fans.

The first website I examined was MySpace, which, as a social networking site, reveals the everyday processes of self-making that occur in digital spaces. The girls I interviewed visited their pages almost daily, frequently updating pictures and information to more closely represent the ways that they saw themselves. Thus, MySpace provides an important entry point into my discussion of digital subjectivities. Yet, I chose to begin my discussion of digitized desires for recognition not with normatively-identified girls, but with lesbian and queer girls. Compulsory heterosexuality defines normative adolescence, and so I chose to center the everyday digital practices of lesbian and queer girls in order to explore the ways that heteronormativity shapes the ways that all, not just straight-identified, girls seek recognition. MySpace also makes evident the ways in which processes of subjectivity are always interactive—girls’ pages do not exist in isolation, but rather feature links to other pages (through the “Friends” section) and display friends’ comments on their pages.

Moreover, MySpace is unique among social networking sites for the way that it allows users to significantly personalize their layouts, embed graphics, and permanently post media to their pages. In contrast to the visually sterile Facebook (which requires all users to maintain
identical layouts using black typeface on white backgrounds), the aesthetics of MySpace pages vary wildly, emphasizing users’ own creativity and personalities (see Figure 1). Thus, MySpace presents a unique perspective on the role of the visual in social networking technologies; however, the rarity of images in these other digital spaces also raises questions about the ways that aesthetics are connected to privileged modes of viewing—questions which I explore in relation to class, race, and heterosexuality in Chapter 3. Finally, from a research standpoint, MySpace is easier to study because pages are more accessible. On MySpace, users can browse for pages using demographic cues (such as age, location, and sexual orientation), and many users choose to keep completely public pages. This is distinctly different from Facebook, which does not feature a broad search tool and only permits users to search for friends that they already know (for instance, by entering an email address) or for other users in their school or city. Thus, MySpace yielded a much broader and more diverse set of pages and research subjects, and I likely would not have been able to focus the chapter on lesbian and queer girls’ pages if I had chosen a site such as Facebook.

Figure 1: Whitney’s MySpace page
Second, I identified pro-bulimia websites as a study site because I was interested in the ways that meaningful recognition is sought and offered on the basis of negative behaviors and identifications. While a significant amount of academic literature on pro-eating disorder websites exists (Bordo 1993; Brotsky and Giles 2007; Day and Keys 2007; Dias 2003; Ferreday 2003; Fox et al 2005; Gailey 2009; Gavin et al 2008; Norris et al 2006; Orbach 1986; Pollack 2003), this literature focuses almost solely on pro-anorexia (pro-ana) websites. Although authors sometimes gesture toward bulimic girls, the pro-mia community is subsumed under the umbrella of pro-anas, and the issues are assumed to be identical. However, bulimics and anorexics have drastically different relationships with food—while anorexics focus on restricting intake, bulimics consume large quantities of food and then purge it by vomiting or sometimes by using laxatives. These divergent practices reveal distinctly dissimilar relationships with corporeality and consumption (Morag 2006), and in digital spaces, these differences mean that pro-mia girls seek recognition in particular ways—for instance, through explicit discussions of vomit—that pro-ana girls find repulsive. Thus, I chose to focus specifically on pro-mia digital spaces in order to consider the specific ways that bulimic subjectivity is produced and enacted online.

The bulk of Chapter 4 focuses specifically on messages posted to the forum section of Pro-Mia Community (or PMC; not the site’s real name), a website that explicitly identifies as pro-bulimia. This is a completely unique website, since every other currently active pro-ED (Eating Disorder) community I encountered was either completely or mostly dominated by pro-ana users. PMC has a uniquely large number of daily posts and users in comparison with the few other pro-mia communities I located. I compare the content of Pro-Mia Community to that of other pro-ED websites, considering how the absence of pro-ana users on these sites contributes
to a less condemnatory discussion of bulimia than what is present on other websites. I analyzed the content of the main page for a pro-mia Livejournal group, Live2Purge. The group has been mostly inactive since 2008 (averaging less than one post per month in 2010), but I found the group’s archived material useful in gaining broader perspectives on pro-mia digital spaces. I also analyzed the pro-mia section of NoEating.com, a generalized pro-eating disorder website (which also featured forums for pro-ana, EDNOS [eating disorder not otherwise specified], binge eating disorder, diet, exercise, and recovery). Analyzing a pro-mia subgroup within the context of a broader pro-eating disorder community illuminated some of the important connections and disjunctures between the ways that pro-anas and pro-mias function in online spaces. Finally, I draw examples from pro-ana websites in order to emphasize some distinctions between pro-ana and pro-mia digital spaces—for instance, toward the end of this chapter, I discuss the ways that pro-ana communities are more tightly policed than pro-mia forums. So while I give priority to the only existing website solely devoted to pro-mia content, I also place PMC in the broader context of pro-mia content in other digital spaces.

Finally, I examined fan sites for pop-country musician Taylor Swift in order to examine the production of fandom and celebrity on the internet in order to consider the ways that idealized girlhood is produced in digital spaces. The celebrity girl represents the embodiment of both girls’ and adults’ cultural fantasies about who girls are and who they should be, and there is no celebrity girl who currently fulfills these fantasies more than Taylor Swift. In 2010, she was Billboard’s top selling and most played artist of the year, and in both 2010 and 2011, she won the Country Music Awards’ Entertainer of the Year award, a prize typically reserved for artists who have been successful for decades. Although at age 20, Swift is on the border between adolescence and adulthood, media and fan rhetoric still explicitly and implicitly references her
girlness, labeling her “the girl next door,” and “ordinary girl,” and “a girl just like me.” Swift’s demure attitude, conservative dress, and valorization of romantic (but not sexual) love situate her as an ideal carrier for societal investments in protecting, upholding, and promoting the propriety of middle class white girls. My chapter weaves analysis of Swift’s lyrics, public persona, and music videos in with a discussion of the message boards of two different fan sites devoted to Taylor Swift. Focusing on adolescent female fans’ words reveals the ways that Swift’s cultural appeal is embedded in normative femininity, whiteness, and heterosexual propriety, as well as the ways that Swift’s music and persona impact fans’ own beliefs and behaviors.

I examine both Taylor Swift’s official website, which is produced by her management company, and one unofficial site, which is produced and maintained by fans. Taylor Connect is the forum section of taylorswift.com, Swift’s official website. In addition to the forums, the website also includes a biographical statement about Taylor, song lyrics and explanations, music videos, concert dates, photo galleries, a Taylor merchandise store, and an online journal supposedly written by Taylor. Amazingly Talented is the forum section of the most popular fan-created Taylor Swift site, taylorswiftweb.net. Fans express the perception in several forum threads that this website is more youth-dominated than Taylor Connect or other Taylor Swift fansites, with a number of users self-identifying in the 11-15 age range. I chose to focus on this fansite because of its large number of adolescent users, its active forum community, and its encouragement of users employing imagery as a means of expressing fandom (such as distributing monthly awards for “Best Signature”). The analysis within this chapter considers the ways that the official and unofficial websites differ in the ways that fandom is articulated.
Timeline and procedures

I used a three-part approach to conducting my research: visual and textual analyses of websites, instant messenger interviews, and autoethnographic blogging. I began each chapter by analyzing the websites in order to identify which profiles and posts fit the parameters of my study, and I then moved into identifying possible interview subjects and contacting them. I started my blog while completing my MySpace chapter in early 2010 and continued posting entries throughout my data gathering process. Website research for the MySpace chapter occurred from 2008-2009. I conducted my initial textual analysis by searching through hundreds of MySpace pages using the “Browse People” tool. The pages I chose to analyze met several criteria; they were: constructed by girls who claimed to be between the ages of 14 and 19; self-identified as lesbians in the “Sexual Orientation” section of their profiles; updated (by posting new pictures or changing status updates) within the previous week; and used a combination of visual and textual elements to construct their profile. The youngest age I could search for was 18, though I found that many users listed themselves as 18 in order to show up in searches and avoid the privacy controls placed on younger users. I also found a number of pages suitable for analysis by following users’ friend lists. Over the course of my research, I discarded many pages that did not have recent updates or activities, as well as a number that did not have enough information on their profiles to conduct any analysis.

I spent approximately eight months in 2009 and 2010 analyzing the forums of PMC and other pro-eating disorder websites. I began by broadly reading the forums and then started to try to determine which users were within the 14-19 age range of my study’s parameters. I clicked on user profiles to see whether users had listed their ages, though many had not. On PMC, I came across a particularly helpful thread in which users revealed their ages, which
yielded around a dozen user names. Anytime I found a female teenage user, I wrote her screen name down and started following her posts. I copied and pasted from the forums when I found text that I wanted to document and took screen captures when I wanted to preserve the visual elements of pages. While the ages of users vary from early teens to late 30s, I focus specifically on messages posted by and about teenage girls in order to interrogate the popular belief that teenagers are especially susceptible to peer pressure (and particularly the notion that pro-eating disorder websites influence girls to develop or escalate their eating disorders).

Research for the Taylor Swift chapter occurred in 2010. I spent approximately four months analyzing the websites: monitoring topic trends on the forums, doing targeted searches for particular topics (such as the Kanye West incident), and posting discussion questions on the forums. These sites were similar to the pro-mia sites in the broad range of users’ ages, so I used a similar process of determining which posts were made by teenage girls. On both sites, fewer users listed their ages in their profiles, and many users had private profiles, so I had to rely on threads in which users revealed their ages. I used numerical search terms (“15”) as well as phrases (“how old are you”), and successfully located several lengthy threads on each site in which users revealed their ages. This process, however, was more difficult on Taylor Connect than it was on either the pro-mia websites or on Amazingly Talented. As part of TC’s stringent decency policies (further discussed in Chapter 5), numerical age search terms (“16”) are non-functional—the search simply returns with a “No Results” notification, even though I came across a number of posts where girls listed their ages using numeric digits. However, I discovered that if I spelled out the age (“Sixteen”), my searches worked, linking me to threads in which users discussed their ages.
Visual and Textual Analysis

I faced a number of methodological challenges in conducting internet-based research. First, the ephemeral character of webpages meant that I had to make my own archive by creating screen captures. I used a free program, GIMP (the GNU Image Manipulation Program), to take and prepare my screen captures. This program offered me the advantage of being able to focus in on one area of a webpage and take a snapshot, as well as providing important manipulation tools (such as the smudge tool, which allowed me to blur facial features) that help protect girls’ identities (see Figure 2). Over the course of my study, girls’ pages, signatures, and posts were constantly being slightly altered, drastically changed, or completely removed without a trace of their former incarnations, so my screenshot archive became critically important in being able to revisit my notes and analyze the way that pages changed over time. This was especially important for my pro-mia website analysis, since I was kicked off of one of these websites ostensibly after a user complained about my interview solicitations (an incident I discuss later in this chapter). The ephemeral character of webpage imagery centrally dictated when I could or could not provide images in this dissertation—at the beginning of my research, I relied more heavily on bookmarking sites and taking notes, but I began noticing that girls were deleting MySpace pages or changing forum signatures, making it impossible for me to provide the images that informed my analysis. Thus, keeping a meticulous archive of visual screenshots became an essential part of my process. As much as possible, the quotations included in this dissertation are directly copied and pasted from the sites I examined (in order to fully preserve the visual impact of users’ specific statements), but some quotations are transcribed from screenshots.
Since a webpage never exists in isolation, but rather explicitly and implicitly refers to and draws upon other webpages, I analyzed girls’ uses of visual and textual self-representational modes in relation to both specific and imagined audiences. This focus on interactivity was informed by my use of recognition theory, which suggests that subjectivities always take shape through the Other. Users also directly interact with one another, so I looked at posts both individually and in the context of an entire thread, considering how a conversation among website users developed through the sharing of individual experiences. I also situated threads within the context of an entire forum, discussing the specific bases upon which different digital communities are formed. Thus, I consider how girls’ self-presentation emerge intersubjectively through dialogue with other website users, through a desire to present themselves in a
particular way to real and imagined audiences, and through their own assertions of “who they really are.”

Though I drew upon the methodological insights of feminist scholarship on life writing, applying this to digital contexts presented its own set of challenges. While diaries in book form are self-contained, many internet blogs, personal webpages, and bulletin board postings prominently use hypertext (clickable links to other websites), destabilizing the boundaries of the life narrative and extending it to other, externally-produced resources (Sorapure 2003; Zuern 2003). Sorapure states that links create both conceptual and literal transitions, noting that while clicking a link is analogous to turning the page of a book, the linearity of books does not apply to digital spaces. Instead, viewers of an online diary decide what order to read both the entries and the links contained therein (Sorapure 2003). In my research, this was broadened even further because I studied self-presentation in the context of several message boards. Thus, while girls often wrote about their lives, these narratives were fragmented, offering only a piece of a story which could be continued in a different thread at a later date. While I spent many hours tracing different users’ stories, it is unlikely that all users went to the same lengths to find coherency or contradiction in someone’s stories (though some users, I found, were extensively knowledgeable about forum content), so I acknowledge that my position as a researcher differs from that of the typical website audience member. While diarists have always written for an imagined audience, the authors of blogs, personal webpages, and bulletin board posts explicitly write for a digital audience, crafting their self-presentations for these readers (McNeill 2003; Sorapure 2003; Zuern 2003). Users on the sites varied wildly in their understanding of each other’s digital selves—some spoke to each other as if they had been friends for many years, citing personal details and asking about recent events, while others only stopped by the site to
read a few threads and make a few posts. Thus, I consider the role of readership, asking how girls seek recognition by crafting self-presentations that address the permeable and transitory nature of digital communities.

I also had to be attentive to several specific issues in my analysis of the visual components of webpages. First, I had to carefully distinguish among the panoply of different images that I encountered (Nakamura 2008). Girls most frequently displayed photographs of themselves (both candid and posed), edited photographs (for example, merging a picture of themselves with one of Taylor Swift), graphics produced by a website user, and graphics found elsewhere on the internet. I considered the ways that these various types of images convey different meanings about authenticity, ownership, capital, and artistry, drawing upon different theories of visual culture to appropriately analyze each. Moreover, the ways that these different images are housed together in single webpages required me to analyze the ways that they both complement and contradict each other (as well as the ways that they interacted with written text). Nakamura suggests that most analyses of digital visual culture have failed to analyze the salience of networking. Since images are frequently and easily shared, it was essential for me to consider the ways that an image travels between different users, rather than simply adopting the traditional model of visual culture studies that assumes that viewers only interact with the image itself rather than each other, and with the creators of particular images.

A final issue that I considered regarding digital visual culture was context. While an image may have one meaning on a particular website, it often has a completely different connotation elsewhere—for example, a photograph of a fat woman in a bikini may be used on a fat-positive girl’s MySpace page to demonstrate that women of size are sexually appealing, while the exact same image on a pro-eating disorder site serves as “thinspiration,” encouraging
users to lose weight by attempting to provoke disgust. Thus, it was essential for me to consider the ways that teenage internet users’ different subject positions may compel them to utilize images differently. However, it is just as critical to avoid assuming that occupying a marginalized subject position automatically compels a user to use images in a transgressive or disidentificatory sense; rather, it is essential to recognize girls’ continued attachments to normative discourses and conservative practices (Thomas 2008).

**Instant Messenger Interviews**

When I initially conceived of my project, I only planned to engage in the first part of my three-pronged methodological approach. However, it became evident to me that in order to be conversant with girlhood scholars’ preoccupation with “giving voice to girls,” I needed to actually speak to girls. I solicited interviews with hundreds of girls but eventually conducted 12, 10 of which are featured in this dissertation (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MySpace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MySpace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MySpace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Myspace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pro-Mia Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallie</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Amazingly Talented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Taylor Connect</td>
</tr>
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<td>Allison</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Taylor Connect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlin</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Taylor Connect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Taylor Connect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Table 1: Interview participants*
As discussed in Chapter 1, however, I do not simply present girls voices without analyzing them. Instead, I approach my research without attempting to recuperate some kind of essential, ideally representative, or “real” girl subject. I situate girls’ interview responses in context, considering the ways that their words are constrained by the need to be socially and discursively legible.

I also trouble the notion that girls’ perceptions are more “authentic” than researchers’ analyses of girls’ words. Instead, I see these interview transcripts as opportunities to think about the ambivalence of the subject. Interview responses, like webpages, are situated as a text open to analysis, and I employ them to consider the processes of subjectivation that occur in girls’ descriptions of their attempts to construct particular online personas. Throughout my dissertation, I consider what the conditions and constraints are under which girls attempt to speak, asking about the particular ways that race, sexuality, and class differences confound attempts to recover a universal adolescent girl subject.

Instant messenger was the most ideal format for me to utilize in conducting my research. Mann and Stewart (2002) suggest that participants in digital research studies see instant messenger (IM) as the most “natural” and comfortable way to be interviewed about internet-based activities. Additionally, IM maintains the semi-private nature of web interactivity, allowing users to only partially reveal their offline identities to researchers if they so choose (Luders 2004; Opdenakker 2006; Steiger & Goritz 2006). A convenient aspect of IM interviewing is that it is self-transcribing—IM programs keep a log of both parties’ responses, eliminating the need for the researcher to engage in laborious manual transcription after the interview (Foster 1994; Herring 1996; Curasi 2001; Mann & Stewart 2002; Meho 2006). This feature was also particularly helpful in representing my research subjects’ digital displays of affect (through
exclamation points, capital letters, or ellipses [which indicate pauses and hesitation in IM conversations]). Interview responses are presented exactly as girls typed them—the only modifications I made were to erase time stamps (for ease of reading) and to enter pseudonyms. Thus, IM interviewing offers readers the unique opportunity to encounter participants’ responses in exactly the same way that I did. And unlike email, IM preserves the conversational style of face-to-face interviews, which allowed me to craft follow-up questions and shift the direction of the interview if warranted by the participant’s responses. For two different users, I was forced to communicate with them through private message (message systems of individual websites which closely resemble email), and the lag in response time significantly impeded the conversational feel of those interviews compared to my other interviews.

However, I encountered many significant obstacles that I did not anticipate in conducting IM interviews. First, soliciting interview participants was much more difficult and time-consuming than I thought it would be. For the MySpace chapter, I sent out over 300 interview requests over the course of several months, and only about 15 girls contacted me—and of those, only 5 girls ended up actually conducting an interview (with one of the 5 interviews yielding no useful data). Of the other 10 girls, I generally only received one message expressing interest and then no further responses to subsequent inquiries. Two of the ten girls exchanged several private messages with me, but they were ultimately unable to find time to participate in the interviews.

The process of conducting interviews with Pro-Mia Community website users was quite complicated. While my original intent was to conduct interviews on PMC while simultaneously performing textual analysis, I grew concerned that I would be banned from the site as soon as I outed myself as a researcher. So, anticipating my ousting from the site, I spent months taking
copious notes and countless screen shots in an attempt to store up all of the information I thought I could possibly need for my analysis. By the time I was ready to conduct interviews, I had a list of thirty potential interview subjects. I sent private messages to all of them individually, and within twelve hours, four girls had responded, all of whom were interested in participating. One of them, Cassie, warned me that while she was happy to do an interview, someone else might report me to the site administrator. I was able to conduct an interview with seventeen-year-old Emily the morning after I sent out my recruitment message, but by that afternoon, my account had been deactivated. I received no emails about or explanations for the deactivation, though one of the girls who responded to my message indicated that they had had researchers on the site before who were not well-received and were subsequently banned. A statement on the forum’s rules indicated that the users were tired of being treated like “lab rats” (though it did not explicitly ban researchers) and other parts of the forum expressed frustration with the way that websites like theirs were characterized in the media. My recruitment message explained the purpose of the interview and my project in general (to ask why the site was important to them, not to try to shut it down), so I hoped that they would perceive my research as less threatening. The four who responded directly to me did interpret it in the way I had hoped, and at the end of her interview, Emily volunteered to post on the forum and let everyone know that I meant “no harm.” After I was banned, I emailed Emily and asked her to pass my email address along to the other girls who had agreed to do interviews. While Emily kept me on her IM friends list, she never contacted me about the project again. Though I only obtained one interview for this chapter, I still include it as part of my analysis, supplementing my discussion of forum content.
Overall, the Taylor Swift websites proved easiest in securing interviews. On both websites, I decided to start discussion board threads in order to openly solicit interviews from girls whom my forum searches did not locate. Initially, though, my thread on Amazingly Talented was deleted, ostensibly because the site’s moderators did not believe that I was a legitimate researcher. I emailed the moderators, explaining my study and offering my university contact information, and my post reappeared shortly thereafter (without explanation from the moderators). Several of my interview subjects approached me because of these messages, and a number of other users who were not teenage girls from the US contacted me to wish me well with my study and to inform me that they would be willing to be interviewed if I extended the parameters of my study.

Scheduling IM interviews proved very difficult—I had to account not only for participants’ school, homework, and activity schedules, but also for time zone differences. Many times, users were hesitant to specifically schedule an interview time, and a number of participants failed to “show up” at their agreed-upon time. The casualness of online interactions in general (and IM in particular) unquestionably influenced girls’ attitudes toward interviews—while they might have recognized that failing to show up for an in-person meeting might be inconsiderate, they did not seem to recognize that even in an IM format, I still “waited” for them. Initially, I found this incredibly frustrating, but as I progressed, I realized that if I wanted interviews, I had to reconcile myself with the realities of the format I had chosen. I began to remain constantly signed into my IM programs so that girls could contact me anytime, and I offered to either schedule interviews or conduct them anytime they had a few free minutes. I had to be extremely flexible and perpetually available—most of my interviews occurred when I unexpectedly received an IM from a girl saying “Can we do it now?” I once took my laptop to
dinner with friends because a girl (Allison, featured in Chapter 5) said that that was the only time she was available, but she missed the interview. She finally messaged me at 10:30 that night, asking if we could start the interview, so I pushed off my bedtime and conducted the interview.

Finally, the difficulty of reading nonverbal cues (such as pauses, facial expressions, and vocal tones) in a virtual environment void of face-to-face contact meant that I had to be both exceptionally familiar with norms of IM communication and thoroughly proactive in asking for clarification about participants’ intended meanings (Kazmer and Xie 2008). Sometimes girls conveyed tone through ellipses (hesitation) and capital letters (EXCITEMENT!!!), but often, I had to ask what they meant or how they felt. I also had to learn to relax my language. While I still spelled words out (“you” instead of “u”) and used punctuation, I adjusted the formality of my questions and tried to “speak” with girls in a more conversational manner, since my previously-formulated questions seemed stuffy and out of place in an IM conversation. Overall, while using instant messenger for interviews offered a number of convenient advantages, it posed a number of difficulties in scheduling that I was unprepared for.

**Research Blog**

The final component of my research methods was an autoethnographic research blog (Appendix A). Autoethnography broadly incorporates modes of self-reflexive writing and may include evocative accounts (in which the researcher describes her subjective experience of the research process in a way that compels readers to emotionally identify with research subjects) or analytic projects (which seek to position the researcher as a subject within the text) (Anderson 2006; Chang 2008). My approach was decidedly analytic—I viewed my blog as a
space where I could explore my role in the research process, and I sought to situate myself within my research. I spent hundreds of hours analyzing teenage girls’ webpages, and over this amount of time, I vacillated between identifying with girls’ intense desires to be recognized and being completely confounded at the approaches they took in seeking recognition. In my blog, I wanted to consider how these vacillations affected my work, and I noticed that on the days I was able to identify with the girls, my analysis was more sympathetic, but on days when I felt distant from them, my writing reflected that distance. The first draft of Chapter 5 strongly exemplified this—I wrote it during a period of frustration and I found girls’ intense devotion to Taylor Swift difficult to comprehend. However, upon rereading my work, I was able to reach a middle ground where I could both sympathize with the girls and adopt a critical lens.

The blog also served as an important outlet during times when I felt too immersed in the project. Several times, I felt inundated with the details and minutiae of reading hundreds of bulletin board posts per day, and I used the blog as a space to discuss my ideas in a way that was accessible to both my research subjects (whom I invited to read the blog) and my friends and colleagues who followed the blog and discussed entries with me. These blog entries helped me to work back to the “big picture” and also helped me to more fully grasp the concepts I wanted to employ, since I was forced to explain my ideas without the “help” of academic jargon. Additionally, while researching the pro-mia chapter, I found (as have other scholars studying pro-eating disorder websites; see Brotsky and Giles 2007) that spending several hours a day reading messages about girls’ intense bodily anxieties and weight loss strategies began to affect my own self-image. I turned to the blog to discuss some of the emotions that I was experiencing, and I was able to move into a more analytical consideration of the pro-mia forums, which improved both the chapter and my research experience significantly.
Initially, I intended the blog to be a space where I would reflect on the research process and my role in it, but the blog took on an unexpected purpose with my research subjects. Throughout my study, I was frequently confronted with the cynicism that informs girls’ online participation. Far from the naïve children that they are often characterized as (Belenkaya 2008; Burchell 2007; Cattabiani 2008; Cheston 2007; Doneman 2008; Masis 2009; Rahn 2009; Teutsch 2007; Violante 2007; Zwartz 2007), I found that girls were quite skeptical of my motives in contacting them. On all three types of sites, at least one girl sent me a message explicitly questioning whether I was actually a researcher. On MySpace, one girl simply said “I don’t think you are who you say you are,” and on Taylor Connect, one user publicly chastised me on the message boards for attempting to speak to teenage girls without their parents’ permission. In both cases, I wrote back, acknowledging the basis for their disbelief (“I’m sure you get lots of messages from creepy guys who want to talk to you”) and providing evidence of my identity. While in-person interviews would have provided obvious clarification that I was not, as some suspected, a “creeper,” the digital context of my research required that I provide online validation that I was the person I claimed to be. My personal page on The Ohio State University’s humanities page provided one important source of validation, but increasingly, I discovered that girls were visiting my blog in order to determine my identity. Girls also visited the blog to read about my project, and two girls commented on my entries (responses which are discussed in later chapters). By inviting girls to read parts of my research and make comments, I incorporated my research subjects into the analytical portion of my project.
Research Ethics

I took ethical concerns about my project very seriously. I did not engage in deception on any of the websites I studied, but I did lurk (reading the forums but never posting) on a majority of the sites. On MySpace, this was out of necessity—it would have been nearly impossible to contact every girl whose page I examined, and it would have been even more difficult to get enough responses back from girls to determine whether or not I had their permission. I only examined public profiles (pages that were completely accessible to anyone on the internet), though, so girls who wanted their pages kept private were not a part of my study. I believed it was necessary to lurk on pro-mia forums because many academic researchers and news reporters have faced angry messages from pro-ana website users when they were discovered (Brotsky & Giles 2007). While I knew the implications of this—that my presence on the website would likely be unwelcomed by some members of the community I was studying—I believed that the understudied and often misunderstood nature of the community justified my work.

Lotz and Ross (2004) identify lurking as a potential ethical concern because many users perceive a degree of privacy in online communities and because it is impossible to obtain informed consent without outing oneself as a researcher. I considered the potential ethical implications of my particular forum community in both my research design and practices.

I accounted for ethical concerns in my research design in several ways. I never practiced deception in my work; however, PMC and Amazingly Talented did have a simple user name and password registration. On AT (as well as on Taylor Connect, which does not require a user name and password to read the boards), I outed myself as a researcher toward the beginning of my research, and I posted several discussion topics, so users were aware of my presence. In exploratory stages of the project, I discovered that pro-eating disorder websites had widely
varying levels of privacy protections. Some sites were completely public, others required potential users to explain their reasons for wanting to join, and one website required all new users to post their identifying information (age, sex, and BMI) within 24 hours of approval. PMC only required a simple user name and password, as many non-eating disorder forum communities do, and since this level of access could be obtained by any internet user, I weighed the potential societal benefits of my research against the difficulty I would have had in obtaining informed consent, and I believed that my entrance into the community aligned with ethical research standards (Association of Internet Researchers 2002; Brotsky & Giles 2007). The other pro-mia communities I examined did not require a user name or password, so everything that I examined was completely public. I kept all notes and screen captures on a password-protected computer, and I assigned pseudonyms to the pro-mia websites and to all individual users on all websites. For the pro-mia chapter, the single interviewee’s responses have been disaggregated from her forum posts, so that if any forum members read my research, they cannot easily determine who gave the interview.

Anticipating that my own interpretations of research ethics may not be shared by my research subjects, I provided several outlets for forum users to express their feelings about my research. First and foremost, I shared my research blog address with every girl that I contacted about conducting an interview. I invited all potential interviewees to read and comment on my blog, and I enabled anonymous comments so that anyone could post without fear of repercussions from other forum users or from me. The research blog was important in holding me publicly accountable to my research subjects—if they felt that I had wrongly entered into their community or misinterpreted their words, they could state their objections in a public forum accessible to my colleagues who follow my blog. While I cannot know whether or not any
users from PMC read the blog, no one chose to comment on it (however, one MySpace subject and one Taylor Connect subject did post responses). Additionally, I provided potential interviewees with my email address, so even outside of the websites’ private message systems (which I used to solicit interviews), they were able to contact me to inform me of any potential objections. Finally, I gave them contact information for human subjects personnel at my university, so if they were particularly concerned about my research ethics, they had a formal outlet for complaint. Again, no one raised concerns.

Finally, I was aware of the sensitive nature of studying a community that involved women and girls with eating disorders. In developing study protocol, I consulted with David Dagg, Clinical Director for the Center for Balanced Living, a highly-regarded eating disorder treatment facility in Worthington, Ohio. He provided critically important guidance particularly in developing protocol for the interview portion of my research, offering advice on how to conduct interviews without triggering harmful behaviors. Specifically, I informed potential subjects that if they were actively exhibiting symptoms of eating disorders, they could not participate in the study and gave all potential subjects links to websites that promoted recovery. Thus, in having carefully thought about my research design, in providing multiple checks on my own definition of ethical research, and in consulting with a specialist in the field, my study demonstrates several ways that responsible research can be practiced in sensitive youth communities.

Conclusion

Conducting web-based research with girls poses challenges regarding access, privacy, scheduling, and response rates. Generally, I found that the most salient qualities of the internet—ephemerality of webpages, casualness of interactions, and ubiquity of solicitations—
were reflected in my research experiences. Pages frequently changed from one time to the next, and the complete disappearance of deleted text and images required me to keep a meticulous archive of content—a process that was more intense and time-consuming than I anticipated it would be. Girls often approached interviews in a way that seemingly demonstrated the lack of seriousness attached to web-based pursuits, and they regarded me with a greater degree of cynicism than I had anticipated. The process of securing and conducting interviews posed a number of unforeseen challenges regarding scheduling and responses. Overall, the research process itself was much more onerous than I could have imagined.

However, the three-pronged approach that I utilized yielded fascinating results. Comparing my own website analysis with girls’ interview responses illuminated the contradictions that are inherent in all self-presentations and revealed the ways that processes of subjectivity are differently negotiated in various online spaces. Though I was initially hesitant to do a blog, I found that the reflective space it offered was incredibly helpful in allowing me to work through my ideas before committing to them in chapter form, and the entries proved quite valuable in my interactions with my research subjects. And although the interviews consumed much more of my time and energy than I thought they would, they were one of the most exciting parts of the project. I wanted to undertake a project that employed the feminist sensibilities of scholars who recognize the significance of listening to girls’ perspectives while still maintaining the importance of feminist analysis, and I believe that my methodological approach allowed me to achieve this goal in ways that I never expected.
CHAPTER 3:
“I HOPE SUM1 OUT THERE UNDERSTANDS ME”:
GIRLHOOD, RECOGNITION, AND IDENTIFICATION ON MYSPACE.COM

One year ago, MySpace user Traviesa identified herself as an eighteen-year-old married Latina lesbian. Her profile was drenched with found graphics taken from the internet, song lyrics, photographs, and poems, all offering contradictory messages about who the webpage designer considered herself to be. A graphic with the phrase “True Love Waits” was featured prominently on Traviesa’s profile, sitting next to a graphic with the phrase, “Ready 2 B Ur Wifey” and a rainbow flag graphic (see Figure 3). She also displayed a digital photo album, including a series of posed, professional pictures which stylistically appeared to be engagement photos depicting Traviesa standing behind her seated girlfriend, arms wrapped around her. Another album featured pictures of Traviesa alone, stoically staring at the camera and standing imposingly. Her blog contained lyrics from songs as diverse as Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On,” a song Traviesa dedicated to her girlfriend, and Kanye West’s “Golddigger,” which resonated with other aspects of her profile displaying her masculine gender identifications, such as photographs of her wearing men’s clothing and statements about wanting to be a financial provider for her wife. Traviesa’s “About Me” section vividly described the importance of her relationships with others, particularly emphasizing her love of her girlfriend, friends, and family in both English and Spanish. Her comments (a section of the profile where friends can leave messages) featured bilingual messages which complimented Traviesa on her profile, asked about upcoming plans, and, in the case of her wife, professed love and affection.
One year later, nearly all of this is gone. Traviesa and her wife have broken up, so all reminders of her previous relationship status have been purged, including photographs, graphics, and some song lyrics. The previous incarnation of Traviesa’s page is no longer available—she presents herself as if her former life never existed. She still professes love for her family and friends and identifies herself as a lesbian, but her profile now mostly contains graphics with sayings such as “Single and Loving It” and sexually suggestive photographs of herself.

Traviesa’s MySpace profile raises a number of questions surrounding the ways that teenage girls present themselves in online environments. Most importantly, how are digital self-presentations shaped by the subject’s desire for recognition? What do the dramatic changes to Traviesa’s profile over the course of a year say about the cohesiveness and stability of the subject, and in this case, the queer adolescent girl subject? How can we make sense of Traviesa’s use of conservative and heteronormative visual iconography, such as True Love Waits, a conservative Christian campaign promoting abstinence until marriage (implicitly and explicitly coded as only heterosexual marriage)? How does the bilingual character of Traviesa’s page...
complicate readings of her performances of race-ethnicity, femininity, masculinity, and queerness?

MySpace’s status as a social networking website, as well as the overall interactive character of the web, suggests the need to consider the intersubjective construction of the self and the ways that online self-presentations are explicitly constructed for both a real and an imagined audience. In this chapter, I suggest that the cyber girl subject’s unconscious desire for recognition shapes the ways that she presents herself on her MySpace page, the items she chooses to include on her page, the changes she makes to her page over time, and even her decision to have a MySpace page at all. Thus, framing Traviesa’s seemingly contradictory and significantly altered MySpace page in terms of the subject’s desire for recognition reveals that what may appear to be a confused and incoherent self-presentation is actually the visible manifestation of an attempt to be recognized and understood by other MySpace users. The desire to be recognized by other digital subjects compels Traviesa to frame herself within legible discourses of adolescence, hegemonic femininity, queerness, masculinity, and Latina identity. The conflicting nature of these discourses, as well as Traviesa’s shifting identifications with each of these categories, lead her to craft her page in a way that attempts to align her self-presentation with contradictory subject positions simultaneously.

MySpace is unique among social networking sites in its facilitation of the prominent inclusion of multiple kinds of media into personal webpages. This website provides a window into the self-making processes of the “every-girl,” providing a useful starting point for theorizing the ways that girls represent themselves online. Closely analyzing several MySpace pages, I consider how the complicated and contradictory ways in which girls utilize photographs, graphics, videos, blogs, and music on their pages can be understood through the desire for
recognition. Specifically, I suggest that queer girls’ gendered, racial, and sexual identifications are articulated within normative discourses of femininity, such as monogamy, sentimentality, and familial devotion, in order to be recognized by other digital subjects. Moreover, I argue that the visual and textual components of other users’ comments on queer girls’ Myspace pages reveal the intersubjective constitution of the girl subject, illuminating discursive communities of multiple teenage femininities and exposing the ways in which girlhood is continuously maintained through disciplinary mechanisms. I also supplement my own analysis of these pages with the perspectives of the girl authors themselves through instant messenger (IM) interviews, analyzing girls’ descriptions of why MySpace is important for them, and suggesting that the particular web personas that girls attempt to create are not necessarily read in line with their intentions.

**Digitizing Queer Girlhoods**

Within studies of girlhood, queer girls are frequently marginalized. Susan Driver (2007) importantly notes that while sexuality has been a major focus of girlhood studies, these discussions are frequently heteronormative. And though a vast expanse of literature on girls’ digital media interactions exists, lesbian and queer girls have been left almost entirely out of this formulation. In fact, Driver’s work, including her 2007 book *Queer Girls and Popular Culture*, is the only scholarly work that focuses specifically on queer girls’ online activities. Driver situates her discussion of emergent media within the broader framework of queer girls’ engagements with popular culture, contending that queer girls “articulate gender and sexuality by deploying mobile languages that resist unification and closure...queer youth use online communities as tools for overcoming cultural devaluation and marginalization” (23). My introductory chapter
detailed the ways in which discourses of American girlhood idealize white, middle-class, heterosexual, normatively feminine subjects, constituting girls who fall into these categories as desirable, empowered, and “all-American.” The heteronormative content and salience of these discourses are particularly evident in popular culture, where “media commodification centers on conventional images of beautiful white rich youthful slender feminine girls...who become the defining sexualized appeal of mass-marketed visibility and seduction” (Driver 9).

Jose Munoz (1999) conceptualizes unintended uses of popular culture, such as those employed by many of the girls in my study, as disidentifications. His concept of disidentification shares some important affinities with Butler’s conception of performativity (1989), though Munoz relies more heavily on intentionality than does Butler. He focuses especially on the ways in which queers of color identify with certain aspects of mainstream cultural productions not intended for them and reappropriate them to their own ends. He writes,

To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the “harmful” or contradictory components of any identity (12).

He and Butler both importantly maintain that one instance of misused power or disidentification does not result in a broad resignification of meaning because agency is always constrained by discourse—Butler (1997a) indicates that these momentary lapses build over time, though, and can stretch the boundaries of legibility.

Driver extends Munoz’s theory of disidentification, arguing that queer girls can identify with certain aspects of mainstream media not created explicitly for them. Driver’s theoretical
framework rests on Butler’s theorization of the contingency of identification and the ambivalence of subjectivity—for Driver, queer girls’ investments in popular culture are not to be read as failures of “empowerment,” but rather as ambiguous (and necessary) engagements with hegemonic discourses that allow girls to work through certain aspects of growing up queer. Critical to Driver’s formulation of subjectivity is the ephemeral nature of identification, particularly in regard to the mutability of the term “queer” among her research subjects and in the ways in which imbricating identifications with gender, race, sexual, and class positions resist the ability to articulate a singular girl subject. Accordingly, Traviesa’s use of these images could be read as a disidentification with the heteronormative content of the imagery and an identification with the affect imbued in each image. The profile does not simply write over the heterosexuality of the images, but rather taps into the romantic notions of love, affection, and monogamy contained within them, refusing to be constricted by the images’ dominant meaning and imbuing them with an affective connection to lesbian love.

Throughout this chapter, I discuss the ways that lesbian and queer girls utilize strategies of disidentification on MySpace, considering the ways that the desire for recognition unconsciously compels them to employ this tactic. Girls’ pages are visually characterized by bricolage, an intentional combination of many different types of artifacts. I suggest that the process of constructing, deleting, and editing different aspects of a MySpace page is reflective of the malleable nature of subjectivity, and that girls utilize heterosexual imagery in order to engage with normative discourses surrounding girlhood, particularly regarding monogamy, sentimentality, and nonsexual romantic love. Lesbian and queer girls frequently express desires to be understood for “who they really are” in both their offline and online lives, and in order to do this, they must constitute themselves within frameworks that are legible to others. Thus, the
strategy of disidentification allows girls to represent themselves in terms that align with heteronormative expectations without having to completely acquiesce to those terms—while they utilize straight imagery on their pages, they also explicitly constitute themselves as queer subjects who do not meet many standards of normative (heterosexual) femininity.

Thus, while Driver’s work provides an essential perspective on queer girlhood, her exploration of queer girls’ engagements with popular culture marks out queer girls as idealized subjects. She suggests that queer girls can critically engage with media images in ways that deviate from intended meanings; yet, I assert that it is important to dig beneath queer girls’ explicit and stated intentions because the subject is never fully self-aware. Repeatedly, girls in my study expressed written perspectives that were contradicted by the images on their pages as well as expressing contradictory self-presentations in uses of different types of images, and so I frequently point to these slippages and contradictions. And while Driver focuses on the ways that the interactive character of the web creates community for marginalized queer youth, I claim that it is necessary to consider the terms under which communal bonds are formed. Among the lesbian and queer youth in my study, race played a critical role in shaping girls’ self-presentations, and I assert that a girl’s espousal of a queer or lesbian identity does not necessarily mean that she is broadly invested in anti-racist or feminist politics. While Driver’s queer girl subject is almost always resistant and self-aware, my study reveals that many queer girls are deeply invested in heteronormative configurations of gender, romantic love, and monogamy. Finally, though sites like MySpace provide lesbian girls with a space for directly engaging with popular representations by contesting their dominant meanings and employing them for their own ends, it is critical to recognize the ways in which resignification is always already constrained by the meanings imbued in images and phrases. So while websites like
MySpace provide a way for users to manipulate words and images and act as cultural producers, self-representation ultimately does not enable girls to redefine the ways that girlhood is coded in normative meanings of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

“MySpace Is So 2005”: Making the Case for Studying Yesterday’s Technology

In August 2003, several employees of the internet marketing company eUniverse with accounts on Friendster, an early social networking site, recognized the potential of the site’s concept and decided to launch their own site, which copied many of Friendster’s popular features and branded the site as MySpace, using eUniverse’s resources to market the site (Mitchell 2006). MySpace first launched in 2004 as a social networking website where users could create profiles, meet other users from all over the world, and listen to music from up and coming artists (in fact, several musical artists have actually launched their careers through MySpace, including Lily Allen and Adele). It purports itself to be “a technology company connecting people through personal expression, content, and culture. MySpace empowers its global community to experience the Internet through a social lens by integrating personal profiles, photos, videos, mobile, messaging, games, and the world’s largest music community” (“Fact Sheet” 2009). Features of the MySpace profile include (see Figure 4) text boxes (under *Username*’s Interests, the sections are “General,” “Music,” “Movies,” “Television,” “Books,” and “Heroes,” and under the heading *Username*’s blurbs are the sections “About Me” and “Who I’d Like to Meet”), blogs, picture albums, videos, playlists (complete with embedded music players to provide a soundtrack while perusing someone’s profile), Friend Space (a section with links to the user’s MySpace friends’ profiles), and Comments (a section where a user’s friends post messages, though friends can also post comments on blog entries and photographs).
Though not a part of the site’s original design plans, users learned that the text boxes were HTML-friendly, so many users paste HTML codes for mass-produced graphics into their profiles.

The most significant academic work on MySpace has been conducted by danah boyd, who utilized interview data to consider how social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook can be understood as networked publics, finding that teens’ online interactions are often closely linked to and driven by their offline social lives, though she emphasizes that somewhat different rules govern the social hierarchies of these websites (boyd 2007). Agreeing with Nakamura (2002, 2007), Hansen (2004), Foster (1998), Davies (2004), and Gonzalez (2003), she asserts that
inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality that exist in offline environments are perpetuated and reinscribed online. Far from the free-floating space of identity play that critical theorists hoped for in the early years of the internet (Haraway 1991; Plant 1998; Stone 1996; Turkle 1997), and contrary to the claims made by some contemporary girlhood studies scholars that teenage girls are able to use these spaces to successfully defy the conventions of normative gender and explode the boundaries of adolescent femininity (Grisso and Weiss 2005; Kearney 2006; Kelly et al 2006; Thiel 2005), then, users on websites like MySpace often reaffirm racist, sexist, and heterosexist discourses through their online practices.

One particularly prevalent way in which this is visible on MySpace is through the widespread use of heteronormative imagery and text on queer girls’ pages. For instance, Lesbian Sex Kitten’s page is loaded with several dozen graphics, mostly black-and-white photographic images of couples kissing. While the image at the top of her profile depicts two young women lying on a bed, embracing and kissing, almost every other image on Lesbian Sex Kitten’s page pictures an opposite-sex couple. Some are of contemporary celebrities (such as High School Musical’s Zac Efron and Vanessa Hudgens), others are of anonymous adults, and many are pictures of children holding hands, hugging, or kissing (see Figure 5). Many of the pictures serve as backgrounds for song lyrics, love poems, or messages like, “Love is a moment that will last forever,” emblazoned on a picture of a young boy and girl (approximately six years old), the girl kissing the boy as she wraps her arms around his neck, his hands around her waist. The pictures of opposite-sex couples are all clearly situated as romantic in similar ways (physically affectionate, accompanied by poems and maxims on love), and the vast disparity in number of these photos compared to the single lesbian scene seems to create a dissonance between Lesbian Sex Kitten’s self-identification as a lesbian and the largely heteronormative
character of her page. However, the textual aspects of her page assert that she is a lesbian who is in love with her girlfriend Amy and who enjoys having sex with girls, and her screen name similarly proclaims her sexual attraction to women (as other statements declare her aversion to men).

Figure 5: Images on Lesbian Sex Kitten's MySpace page

Thus, mapping the visual imagery onto the textual elements of the profile indicates that these images may be read less as desire for a relationship with a man than as a complex negotiation with hegemonic narratives of girlhood which constitute heterosexual relationships as primary to coming-of-age experiences. The romantic poetry and imagery available online for inclusion on MySpace pages is largely immersed in heteronormative discourse, and, given the frequent uses of heteronormative imagery on queer girls’ pages, it appears that romantic, non-sexualized images of same-sex couples are either in relatively limited supply or difficult to locate. These images are centrally important to Lesbian Sex Kitten’s ability to seek recognition. While
her user name casts her as a sexually desirous girl, the images on her page suggest that she also wants to be understood as sentimentally romantic. However, images of same-sex couples showing even a minor degree of affection are often coded as “adult¹,” and pure, nonsexual queer desire is unrepresentable because queerness is always already assumed to revolve around sex acts. Thus, the only way for this user to express her identification with (or desire for) a simple, innocent kind of romantic relationship is to utilize heteronormative images.

While MySpace was the most popular networking site from 2004 until late 2006, Facebook now surpasses it in number of unique users. Media coverage of MySpace now largely regards it as passé and instead focuses on Facebook, often asserting that MySpace is dead and that hardly anyone is on it anymore. Many teenage users have in fact migrated from MySpace to Facebook, but the ways in which this migration has happened and the reasons for the transition are implicitly coded with racialized and classed meanings. Through conducting interviews with hundreds of teenagers, boyd (2010) has concluded that the mass exodus of youth from MySpace has largely fallen along racial and class lines, such that white, middle class adolescents have now largely moved to Facebook and characterize MySpace not just as uncool or behind the times, but as “ghetto,” describing MySpace users in implicitly racial terms such as “hip hop [and] rap lovers” (1). Arguing that teenagers are often drawn to cultural trends followed by adults slightly older than them, boyd suggests that while MySpace’s original appeal derived from twenty-something musicians and other subcultural groups frequenting the website, Facebook’s more elitist beginnings as a Harvard-only social networking group appealed to a different market of youth—those white, middle class, upwardly mobile teenagers headed for

¹ For instance, the American Library Association’s most commonly contested book is And Tango Makes Three, a children’s book about two male penguins in the Bronx Zoo who raise a chick together. Parents
college—at the same time that it repelled those who were not part of the same social categories.

When Facebook became open to all internet users in September 2006, boyd suggests that the teens who began switching over to Facebook were mostly white, supporting her interview data with survey data compiled by several bloggers and market research firms. The reasons given for using either website vary from issues of aesthetic preference to the perception of greater safety on Facebook (in light of public panic over alleged MySpace predators), though most of boyd’s research subjects chose one website over the other because of the presence of their friends. boyd importantly notes that all of these notions are highly classed and racialized, particularly in the ways that MySpace profiles are often characterized by Facebook users as ugly and garish. The discourse of safety surrounding Facebook and its greater privacy protection (such as more limited search features and the ability to make specific parts of one’s profile completely private or viewable only to certain users) leads boyd to describe it as a suburb and to label the migration toward Facebook as white flight. The belief that Facebook is “safer” than MySpace was bolstered by my study. Many MySpace users indicated that they had been harassed by straight male users who found their queerness and youth appealing, either in interviews or on their actual pages. Annie, one of my interview subjects, had a Facebook page that her parents knew about, but they were unaware of her MySpace profile because they had previously discovered sexually suggestive pictures on her old profile. While her current profile did not have any such pictures, her parents remained fearful of MySpace as a predator’s paradise.

Thus, the popular perception that MySpace is dead is based largely on the fact that those teenagers who are considered to be at the forefront of technology, those whom media consistently remark that the book is “inappropriate” for children because of its same-sex content (Lee 2011).
attention is often focused on, have left, rather than that MySpace actually has few users left. Harris (2004) asserts that the media typically highlights the achievements of white, middle-class can-do girls, while at-risk girls—girls of color and poor white girls—are most likely to be seen in stories about teen pregnancy and dropout rates. Thus, the technological pursuits of girls who are not white or middle class are likely to be ignored by the media, and so it is critical to take to task the popular notion that MySpace is past its prime or that it is unimportant to think about MySpace at this moment—in fact, the movement of college prep-oriented teenagers away from MySpace provides a unique opportunity to consider how MySpace functions as a digital gathering place for marginalized youth. However, neither boyd nor Harris discusses the ways in which sexuality also defines how girls’ technological and leisure activities are understood. This elision is telling—while both authors provide evidence of the ways that race and class identities impact how adolescents’ engagements with new media are discussed, the paucity of data on the impact of adolescent queerness on this subject suggests that sexuality is not understood to impact the “digital divide” in the same ways that race and class do. It is vitally important to consider the ways that marginalized sexual identifications compel teens to select one form of technology over another, and to how the qualities of a website like MySpace appeal to queer teenage girls specifically.

“’I’m Gay and I Like It That Way‘: Lesbian and Queer Girls’ Self-Presentations on MySpace

On MySpace, girls write their life stories using their own words and self-photography,

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2 “Digital divide” is a term used to describe the ways that access to and knowledge about information technology create a gap that largely falls along racial and class lines, with people of color and working class whites facing a
and employ disidentificatory strategies by borrowing mass-produced images found elsewhere on the internet. Because these images are so easily acquired, MySpace users can reappropriate them for their own ends, disregarding the item’s original intent and resignifying it in the context of their own life narratives. I suggest that lesbian and queer girls’ digital self-presentations on MySpace must be framed through the subject’s desire for recognition. While these girls often explicitly cast themselves as resistant to heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexuality, the visual and textual content of their pages reveals the ways in which the desire for recognition shapes girls’ self-presentations as sexually desirable, a quality that is particularly valorized in online spaces. Frequently, girls’ MySpace pages—especially in photographs, graphics, and blogs—feature idealized representations of a page’s author as sexually empowered. However, girls’ reliance on self-objectification as a mode of exercising agency veers into an “uneasy domain of contagion, where conditions of objecthood merge into the possibilities of subjectivity” (Cheng 2009).

Though 19-year-old Annie’s page proclaimed the virtues of lesbian girls over boys and straight girls, this belied her adherence to normative discourses surrounding adolescent female sexuality which was revealed in her interview responses and photographs:

Annie: [...]i got in trouble with so i have one now that my parents dont know about [...]
adrianejbrown: So why did you get in trouble?
Annie: Well last time i had some pictures that were sexual. not revealing but just some gestures i had done in the poses

Annie’s explanation of her experiences with MySpace largely reiterates widely-held assumptions about what girls do on MySpace—post sexually suggestive pictures of themselves, interact with boys who want to exchange pictures or meet up with them, and potentially encounter sexual marked disadvantage compared to their white, middle class counterparts (Eamon 2004).
predators. While much girlhood literature has lauded girls who defy normative categories of femininity, whiteness, and/or heterosexuality as agential and defiant in ways that girls who conform to those categories are not, pages like Annie’s refute this claim. Annie’s use of MySpace as a digital arena for posting sexy pictures of herself mirrors the exact online photo-posting practices that heterosexual girls are so often criticized for because they ostensibly amount to self-objectification. Yet, Annie describes a sexual gesture (specifically, one that mimics performing oral sex on another girl), and so she clearly intends her photographic sexualization to visually mark her queer desire rather than to mark her as an unqualified object of heterosexual male desire. At the same time, the ubiquity of the male spectatorial presence on MySpace (particularly since her page was public at the time of our interview) means that her enactment of lesbian subjectivity is not confined only to other queer users. Several of the girls I contacted about the possibility of conducting interviews, as well as a number of the pages I analyzed, indicated that they had received a number of friend requests from straight male MySpace users who thought lesbians were “hot.” Yet, many girls (such as Annie) have kept their profiles public, demonstrating that they construct their self-presentations in ways that are meant to appeal not only to people they already know offline, but to imagined online audiences.

Interviews and textual analyses of queer girls’ MySpace pages also revealed a number of girls who sought to resist hegemonic narratives of adolescent girls’ sexualized self-presentations on the web. Alexis, an 18-year-old who said that she primarily used MySpace to communicate with other fans of the band Heart and with her girlfriend, made a point of separating herself from girls who post sexualized pictures of themselves on their pages:

Alexis: Not every girl who has a myspace is a slut, or is an attention whore. and its not myspace’s fault for girls who do use myspace to publicly humiliate
themselves. I just hate how myspace is judged as this bad place because of girls like that.

Yet, while Alexis does not visually sexualize herself on her page, her page’s various dedications to Heart, and specifically to lead singer Ann Wilson, are loaded with sexual longing (see Figure 6). A blog entry titled “60 things” lists 60 different traits (in honor of Wilson’s 60th birthday) Alexis loves about Ann Wilson, such as:

4. Her sensuality *shivers*

6. Her ability to make me stop breathing for minutes on end without even trying!

22. HER LAUGH! (Sexy one, giggle, and her true laugh all give me the chills)

36. HER SEXINESS. *cannot breathe*

42. Her amazing ability to shake her ass ever so sexily, My GOD! (Alive in Seattle)

Alexis’s devotion to Wilson in this blog and in others seems less like a fan dedicated to a rock star and more like a girl listing the things she adores about her lover, particularly in the bodily responses she describes (shivering, melting, not being able to breathe), in the way that she feels emotionally connected to Wilson, and in descriptions that seem like she has a personal relationship with the rocker (“60. Her ability to make me happier more than anyone has by just breathing.”).
Butler’s (2005) suggestion that the subject values recognition more from certain subjects than from others is informative—in a fantastical sense, Alexis posits her ideal audience as Ann Wilson herself, repeatedly stating throughout blog entries that no one understands her like Ann does. Since my interview with her, Alexis has had a messy breakup with her girlfriend and juxtaposed her unfavorably with Wilson, calling her ex-girlfriend “an ugly, fake, lying, deceitful, backstabbing, heartless bitch” and writing of Wilson, “You are my idol, you are everything I aspire to be. I want to be just like you...I want to be YOU. I want to be with
you....You changed my life in every way possible. I havent loved you forever but I will love you from here until the day I take my last breath.” Yet, while Alexis’s fantasy relationship with Ann is one that cannot be fulfilled, her idolization of the rock star illustrates the ways in which the relational constitution of subjectivity is not only about “real” relationships and encounters, but also about imagined ones. Alexis’s subjectivity is relational to Ann Wilson as an idealized woman, exemplifying the fantasies of the self. Her fantastical relationship with Wilson blurs lines between identification and desire—she both wants to be Ann and wants to be with her. Wilson represents a mode of femininity that encompasses sexual prowess, coyness, body acceptance, celebrity, and a strong, even masculinized musical presence—traits that Alexis aspires to.

Redmond and Holmes (2006) suggest that identification with a celebrity figure provides an important sense of validation for fans, particularly when the fan and the celebrity share a marginalized identity. Wilson was frequently criticized in the media for her weight, and Alexis’s constant proclamations that Wilson is sexy refute hegemonic discourses that link thinness to attractiveness. Alexis’s photographs reveal that she is not normatively thin, and so her validation of Wilson’s sexiness may also be read as a declaration of her own sexual appeal. Yet, it is also important to consider how Ann’s incorporation of all of these traits into a heterosexual subjectivity enables Alexis’s idolization of her—while lesbian women who are outspoken or “overweight” are socially marked as “too present” (Bordo 1993), Wilson’s occupation of these traits is tempered by her heterosexuality, which offers a source of feminization. Embedded in Alexis’s proclamations of desire and appreciation for Wilson, then, is a psychic longing for a mode of publicly acceptable subjectivity that Alexis can only access through her attachment to Ann Wilson.
“Ready 2B Ur Wifey:” Queering Imagery on MySpace

A number of queer girls used graphics in ways that seem contradictory to their intended meanings, raising questions about the potential implications of such resignifications. While Driver (2007) and Munoz (1999) suggest that disidentification is a viable and important strategy for queer subjects to engage in, I suggest that these instances have little effect on broader discourses regarding girlhood, sexuality, and race. And although the desire for recognition frequently emerges through girls’ MySpace pages, it is unlikely that the majority of their online audience interprets their uses of iconography in the ways that girls intend them to be understood. For example, a number of adolescent lesbian users refer to themselves as married, using graphics with sayings such as “Ready 2 B Your Wifey” superimposed on a background image of a wedding ring. And while Traviesa’s MySpace page contained a number of images that indicate a self-presentation of normative heterosexuality (such as the True Love Waits and Ready 2 B Ur Wifey icons), her stated sexual orientation indicates that she identifies as a lesbian, and her blog entries talk about her relationship with her girlfriend. Traviesa’s use of True Love Waits iconography is particularly notable given the movement’s context. Started in 1993 and sponsored by LifeWay, the main product distribution offshoot of the Southern Baptist Convention, True Love Waits is an abstinence-only campaign that encourages teenagers and college students to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. TLW claims that pre-marital sex, pornography, and even sexual thoughts are sinful and ultimately harmful to young people’s future marital relationships. Purity is articulated as a way of showing respect, honor, and love toward one’s future spouse. The campaign’s official website claims that over a million teenagers and young adults have signed cards stating: “Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to
be sexually abstinent from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship” (“TLW FAQ for Leaders”). While the main TLW curriculum does not explicitly address queerness, there is a supplement available called “Designed by God: Answering Students’ Questions About Homosexuality,” which is described as proving a biblical perspective on homosexuality and as something that “can also be useful for the anonymous teen who is struggling with the issue and who needs answers” (“Designed by God” 2007). Additionally, the Southern Baptist Convention explicitly condemns homosexuality (“Sexuality” 2010).

Thus, Traviesa’s use of this imagery which clearly condemns her relationship is particularly notable. Mapping out the contradictions between the visual and textual components of her page reveals the ambivalent nature of subjectivity—although abstinence-only programs and marriage exclude queer girls like Traviesa, she must utilize discourses of monogamy and marriage in order to render her relationship legible within heteronormative discourses of adolescent girlhood. Moreover, referring to her girlfriend as her wife despite Traviesa’s home state’s refusal to acknowledge same-sex relationships as legally valid challenges the ways in which legitimacy is tied to legal marriage and instead recodes marriage in terms of emotional commitment. Lesbian uses of these discourses work to queer the notion of marriage, decoupling it from state sanction and resignifying it as a marker of commitment. Thus, while marriage is hegemonically coded as a legal, heterosexual, and religious tradition, this discourse proves to be mutable because of the ways in which certain aspects of this discourse—love, commitment, celebration—can be transmitted into other contexts. Finally, her use of this imagery may be connected to her Latina heritage, since Latino/a ethnic identity is also heavily connected to Catholic Christianity, particularly in perspectives on the family. While TLW is a mostly Protestant movement, her use of this imagery may also be read as an attempt to
negotiate her family and ethnic backgrounds with her sexual identity, demonstrating the possibility of affirming the value of a long-term monogamous or even abstinent relationship, albeit with a member of her own sex.

The politics of recognition circulate through girls’ uses of imagery, suggesting that girls want their lesbian and queer relationships to be validated in the same way that heterosexual marriages are. The publicness of MySpace pages suggests that it is not simply private identification or self-expression that is at stake in girls’ uses of these images, but rather that the role of approval from online friends and even strangers is crucially important. Traviesa’s engagement with these discourses makes her culturally legible, constituting her lesbian identity and relationship within recognizable terms of religiosity and monogamy. Butler (2005) suggests that we are passionately attached to those on whom we depend for recognition, and Traviesa’s desire to reappropriate the legal and religious institutions which formally exclude her demonstrates this. Rather than attempting to completely discard legal marriage or True Love Waits as irrelevant to her life, she seeks to make them part of the framework through which she presents her relationship to others.

However, Traviesa’s attempt to resignify these discourses can never be finally and fully successful. While she refers to her girlfriend as her wife, the meaning of marriage and the True Love Waits campaign are already overdetermined through political debates over legalizing gay marriage, through the Christian Right’s rhetoric surrounding the supposed sanctity of legal heterosexual marriage, and through TLW’s association with fundamentalist Christianity. Thus, Traviesa’s use of this imagery and rhetoric ultimately cannot overcome the citational legacy that they draw upon and thus do not likely grant her relationship the recognition she likely hoped that her readers would bestow upon her. This is compounded by Traviesa’s breakup and
subsequent erasure of her marriage, which seems to legitimize discourses that trivialize both teenage and lesbian relationships as fleeting and unserious.

Among the lesbian and queer girls’ pages I examined, there was a huge diversity of gender presentations and identifications. A number of queer femme girls’ profiles are excessively feminine, saturated with hearts and flowers, covered in love poems, and dotted with graphics and quizzes involving clothes, shoes, and makeup. For example, Cynthia’s profile is washed in a pink background, featuring glittery graphics, a prominent image of the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*, blogs reciting love song lyrics, quotes from hyperfeminine figures like Marilyn Monroe, and an assortment of pictures of herself wearing dresses and makeup, posing in withholding yet seductive positions (see Figure 7).

![Figure 7: Images from Cynthia's profile](image)

“Yeah, I’m good... but I’m no angel. I do sin... but I’m got a devil. I’m just a small girl in a big world... trying to find somebody to love.”

Marilyn Monroe

Taken separately, these elements signify femininity, but the inclusion of so many signifiers produces an excess and renders her performance hyperbolic and demonstrating femininity to be only in these elements of performance. The function of hyperbole is to reveal the
constructedness of the norm itself. In citing the norm of gender excessively, a performance can highlight the degree to which femininity itself is an exaggerated production. Butler writes,

> The hyperbolic conformity to the command can reveal the hyperbolic status of the norm itself, indeed, can become the cultural sign by which that cultural imperative might become legible. Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of “man” and “woman” (1993b, 237).

While femininity is often conceived as metonymic with heterosexuality, viewing a hyperfeminine gender identification through the lens of a lesbian sexual identification illustrates the ultimate inaccessibility of feminine subjectivity. Femme girls’ pages are notable because the presence of feminine images and text is so overpresent, but on a heterosexual girl’s page, feminine excess more easily fades into the background of heteronormative gender. However, these Myspace pages demonstrate that the feminine norm is itself excessive in its inapproximability and also draw attention to the slippages among sex, gender, and sexuality, negating the ability to draw clear lines from one to the other (for example, the inability to characterize teenage lesbian sexuality as connected to masculine or androgynous gender performance). Thus, although the profiles themselves may perform a hyperbolic mode of femininity, the excessiveness is enabled by the excessiveness of the norm they cite.

However, I contend that the disruptive potential of hyperbole is ultimately undermined by the citational legacy it relies upon and by potential misreadings of the MySpace page. While the presence of so many feminine signifiers on a teenage femme’s page challenges femininity’s supposed link to heterosexuality, it also could be read within the popular narrative of super feminine adolescent girls who make out for the pleasure of male spectators, contributing to the ways in which teenage lesbianism is often trivialized. The presence of the straight male
spectator on MySpace is ubiquitous, particularly for young women who identify as lesbians. Of the many dozens of pages I looked at, a majority had some sort of statement such as “No guys please” or “Ur not gonna turn me, guys, so don’t try to add me.” Thus, while there may be in-group recognition of the femme identity as one that challenges heteronormative gender performances, pages such as Cynthia’s cannot be touted as revelatory explosions of the ways in which gender and sexuality are discursively connected.

Also, while her page may trouble the continuities between gender and sexuality, it is also critical to consider the ways that race factors into her self-presentation. Idealized femininity—particularly the ability to project an image of sexual innocence while also projecting seductiveness—is always already embedded in and articulated through whiteness. Thus, it is also critical to consider the ways that Cynthia, as a white girl, can appropriate the trappings of white femininity more easily and believably than a lesbian of color.

My research also revealed the ubiquity of butch and boi lesbian self-presentations on MySpace. For instance, JC’s page reveals a complex negotiation with discourses of masculinity, sexuality, and national belonging. Her page is filled with images of icons of hegemonic masculinity like Al Pacino in Scarface and Marlon Brando in The Godfather, and also features the text of a poem called, “A Gangster’s Prayer” (see Figure 8). The two cinematic characters are both powerful white gangsters, emblematic of a particular kind of violent masculinity that demands respect and compliance. JC’s use of these images can be read through the subject’s desire for recognition, as a claim to a particular mode of power that is socially unavailable to her, and as an assertion that despite her female sex, Chicana ethnicity, and lesbian sexuality, she can believably incorporate these characteristics of white, heterosexual masculinity into her own self-representation. This connection between the mass-produced images on her page and her
autobiographical performance is particularly evident in JC’s photo albums. JC’s MySpace profile includes around twenty self-portraits, most of which feature her standing and sitting in masculine poses—arms folded, legs spread out, slouching or leaning back, staring stoically at the camera—wearing baggy t-shirts, jeans, and sideways baseball caps, and featuring captions like, “WAT U THINK...” One picture, captioned, “WAT U KNO BOUT DA KIDD JC I SHYNE ALL DAY GOT YALL CHIKZ GOIN CRAZY,” displays JC facing the camera, with her head tilted back and her arms crossed, wearing sunglasses, an oversized white t-shirt, a baseball cap, earrings, a large, wooden cross necklace, and a loose American flag bandanna around her neck. Yet, JC’s masculine performance is not simply a reflection of the cinematic images on her main page, but rather a complex negotiation with these images and with discourses that characterize Chicano masculinity as tough, stoic, and potentially violent.

Figure 8: A Gangster's Prayer, from JC’s MySpace page
However, JC cannot be understood as expressing uncomplicatedly masculine gendered identifications—several aspects of her page express complex and contradictory affiliations. While some aspects of the image discussed above signify the same kind of gangster masculinity prominently displayed on her main profile page, others complicate such a reading. The cross necklace and earrings seem to render the masculine gender performance ambiguous, and the American flag serves as a visual reminder of JC’s complicated national allegiances. On her main page, she displays graphics promoting her Puerto Rican heritage and pride, though her donning of an American flag bandanna in a photograph intended to exhibit her sexual prowess indicates the ambivalence of national identity. Moreover, JC’s photo album contains a number of pictures of her family members, including her baby nephew, whom she refers to as “sweet.” The captions on these images are written differently than the self-portraits, without slang or capital letters. Her inclusion of images of her family on her MySpace page demonstrates her affection for others and refuses a reading of her self-representation as a simple recitation of rugged, individualistic masculinity. Finally, JC’s page does not merely mimic hegemonic masculinity—rather, she includes several graphics highlighting her sexuality, such as a rainbow flag emblazoned with the words, “Gay Pride,” drawing attention to the fact that her masculine performance should not be read as a reiteration of old patriarchal scripts, but rather as a complex desire to be recognized as a masculine subject.

Other users, such as Love, perform masculinity through their visual demonstration of sexual prowess, showcasing an abundance of nearly-pornographic images of women and expressing their interest in “getting laid.” Most of Love’s profile is covered with photographs of supermodels, celebrities, and anonymous women in various states of undress. Each photograph stylistically recalls pornography, some seeming to come from more mainstream men’s
magazines (such as a photograph of Jessica Biel, fingers barely covering the nipples of her bare breasts), while others appear to be from explicitly pornographic magazines and websites (see Figure 9). Love’s profile contains dozens of such pictures under her “About Me” section, indicating that her sexual attraction to other women is the most important part of her self-presentation (particularly since the section contains no other information, other than that her hobby is “getting laid”). It is also significant that even on this Latina user’s page, most of the pictures are of white women, indicating the extent to which beauty ideals are highly racialized. On a teenage boy’s MySpace page, a surfeit of sexualized photographs of women would seem more “natural” and possibly even go unnoticed, but such publicly displayed sexual desire challenges discourses of teenage girlhood as a time of resistance to or ambivalence about sex. Moreover, Love’s Latina identity suggests that her page can be read as a racialized expression of cholo masculinity, in which heteronormative prowess and objectification of women demonstrate toughness and machismo. Thus, Love’s prominent use of sexual images of women in her profile can be seen as demonstrating that she, as a lesbian girl, wants to be recognized as someone who can summon the same kind of Latino masculine swagger that men can.

Figure 9: Images of women from Love's page
Just as femmes’ pages reveal the performative nature of femininity by exposing it as artifice, butch and boi girls’ profiles illuminate masculinity’s performative constitution by establishing a discontinuity between their biological sex (self-identified as female) and their gender performance. Judith Halberstam’s text, *Female Masculinity* (1998), contends that female performances of masculinity reveal the ways in which masculinity is always a construction. Hegemonic masculinity is typically perceived as nonperformative because it seemingly lacks the obvious trappings of femininity (such as intensive grooming rituals and defined social strictures), but looking to instances of masculinity that lie outside the white, male, middle-class body makes masculinity itself visible and legible. Thus, the lesbian body seems to offer particularly transgressive possibilities for theorizing masculinity, and focusing on the visual self-representations contained in MySpace pages enables movement beyond static notions of gender identity. Instead, the contradictions and slippages contained within the pages are always already visible, and point to the shifting and heterogeneous ways in which the self is constantly interpellated into different identities. These masculine performances negotiate complex meanings surrounding gender, race, and sexuality, refusing to cleanly adhere to hegemonic narratives of teenage girlhood or boyhood, and destabilizing connections among sex, gender, and sexuality.

However, it is important to underscore the limitations on girls’ appropriations of masculinity. While these girls want to be recognized as masculine subjects, lesbian masculinity is often simply discarded as “girls who want to be guys.” Halberstam (1998) suggests that “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (1), and it is important to consider the ways that normative linkages between masculinity and heterosexual male bodies limit girls’ ability to be
recognized as thoroughly masculine subjects. While girls put tremendous effort into publicly casting themselves as dominant, stoic, and sexual, it is important not to overstate the potential of their masculine gender performances to stretch the boundaries of normative gender.

Finally, I encountered one other MySpace user whose self-presentation thoroughly confounded clear interpretations of gendered, sexual, and racial subjectivities. Leslie’s gender identification shifted significantly over the course of my study. When I first interviewed Leslie, she self-identified as a genderqueer lesbian and spoke extensively about her experiences on “the lesbian club scene.” She also revealed in her interview and on her profile that she was a drag king, though she had only performed in a few shows and primarily dressed in drag for club events. When I looked at Leslie’s profile almost a year later, his “About Me” described him as transgender, and he had changed his profile name from Leslie to James. However, both before and after James’s transition, his profile was characterized by a gendered ambiguity that did not significantly change over time. Throughout my periods of analysis, sie frequently used masculine terminology in reference to his position in romantic relationships, such as repeatedly describing his aspiration to be his girlfriend’s “prince.”

When I initially interviewed Leslie, she had a photo album titled “Boi” which featured masculine photos posted prior to transition (which she referred to as “drag king” photos). The photos featured Leslie wearing short, spiked hair, open flannel shirts over t-shirts, baggy pants held up by sturdy belts, and a thin beard drawn around her chin (see Figure 10). When featured on Leslie’s page, this album shores up Leslie’s identification (in her “About Me” section and in her interview) as a genderqueer person who ranged toward the butch end of the spectrum.

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3 Because of Leslie’s/James’s shift in gender identity, I use the feminine name and pronouns in reference to the period in which I conducted the interview and initially analyzed the profile, and the masculine name and pronouns in
(though at the time of our interview, her page emphasized that she was “both masculine and feminine,” which changed to “I play both dom and sub roles” on James’s profile). This album—along with all other photo albums—remained intact and unchanged on James’s profile, nodding to a continuity between the user’s identities as Leslie and as James. James’s main profile photo album now contains many more masculine photos, including several in which he is shirtless (though the photos only reveal down to a few inches below his collar bone).

Figure 10: Photos from Leslie's "Boi" album

The positioning of these pictures in the main album rather than just the “Boi” album indicates that James wants other users to understand the centrality of his masculine identification rather than continuing to see it as a drag persona. However, the profile also contained a number of feminized elements at both stages of analysis (see Figure 11), including a photograph of Disney characters and a quote from Marilyn Monroe which states, “The real lover is the man who can thrill you by kissing your forehead or smiling into your eyes or just staring into space.” This reference to the period after I learned about the profile author’s transition. In instances where I discuss both time periods, I use the gender-neutral pronouns “sie” and “hir.”
fusion of masculine and feminine elements demonstrates the mutable, fluid character of gender identifications and suggests that as a trans man, James continues to embrace his feminine qualities without fear of seeming “girly.”

However, this user also explicitly points to the difficulty in casting queer youth as transgressive heroes. James’s frequent use of “prince” and “princess” metaphors in his blog posts and photo captions, along with the Marilyn Monroe quote, demonstrates that he is fully invested in the fantasy of heteronormative monogamy in which he, the prince, rescues and protects his girlfriend, the princess. James does not question the utility of strict gender roles, but rather inserts himself into a privileged masculinist position in this system. James wants to be recognized not just as a man, but as a man who is entitled to occupy the same privileged protector role that genetic males are able to. Additionally, one album featured a series of pictures in which Leslie wore a Hitler moustache (see Figure 12), and both she and her friends
explicitly recognized this. The caption on the first photo read, “These pictures are not tryin to offend anyone or anything. We were simply playin around and dressing up. And my girl thought it was cute.” Leslie clearly acknowledges that the particular type of facial hair she wore in this picture was one that users would inevitably link to Adolf Hitler, which might “offend” them. If Leslie, a non-Jewish white individual, were actually concerned about the potentially offensive nature of the photographs, she would not have posted them to her profile. However, she chose to upload the photos because she and her girlfriend thought the pictures were “cute,” illustrating the degree to which the MySpace pages of even politically-minded queer individuals are still primarily about self-promotion. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the transgressive potential of queer self-representation is potentially hampered by other ways in which these representations shore up normative and oppressive frameworks.

Figure 12: One of Leslie's Hitler moustache photos
“It’s easier to meet girls on the internet”: Digitizing Lesbian Dating

The most commonly recurring theme in both the websites and interviews regarded the importance of MySpace in queer girls’ interactions with their girlfriends. For many girls, MySpace importantly functions as a place to meet other queer girls. For instance, during my interview with Leslie, the subject of girlfriends came up in the context of discussing why MySpace was important to her:

adrianejbrown: How long have you and your girlfriend been together?
leslie: i've know her for 9 months. i met her through a friend whom my best friend met on myspace. but we've only ben datin since last week. the girl i met before i started dating her. Sam. we met on myspace. and the girl before that met her through a friend who found her on myspace
adrianejbrown: Oh, awesome. So MySpace has been really important for your dating life, then? Do you prefer to meet people online or is it just hard to meet other lesbian girls in your area?
leslie: its not that i like it. its like every lesbain is so connected at the clubs and there is drama. and they lesbains that i'm attracted to. some times you wouldn't be able to tell they were gay in public.

Leslie points to two ways in which MySpace provides an easier source of potential dates than her offline like. First, she indicates that she wants to avoid the “drama” that results from the interconnectivity of lesbian girls at her local club scene. MySpace enables her to extend far beyond her geographic location to find girls whom neither she nor her friends have dated before. Second, outside of lesbian clubs, she suggests that it is difficult for her to find desirable girls because she is primarily attracted to girls who “you wouldn't be able to tell they were gay in public”—in other words, girls who are normatively gendered. On MySpace, though, Leslie can easily conduct a search for all girls who self-identify as lesbian, the majority of whom display pictures of themselves, and then cruise for girls she might want to contact.
Leslie’s frustration and experience with the club scene was much more extensive than other interview subjects or MySpace users discussed in this chapter, but the pattern of meeting girls through MySpace (either randomly or through mutual friends) was a common one.

Regarding her own girlfriend, Alexis said:

“I actually met her over the internet and without things like Email and myspace and stuff i don’t think our relationship would have survived as long as it has. I mean we talk on the phone and stuff but a while back when she was in school we couldnt talk on the phone all the time so we relied on MSN and Myspace and stuff so we could communicate. She lives 1400 miles away from me.”

Many girls conducted their relationships either partly or wholly online, dedicating substantial portions of their profiles to information about their relationships with their girlfriends. Both in interviews and in my textual analysis, MySpace was proven to be a critically important place for girls to communicate with their girlfriends. This was particularly amplified for girls like Leslie, who was in a relationship with a girl who lived more than 1,000 miles away and could rarely visit her. Wall and photo comments were frequently exchanged, often consisting of simple messages of affection and adoration such as “I love you” or “u r beautiful.” Most girls had photo albums dedicated to pictures of themselves and their girlfriends, depicting them hugging, kissing, and holding hands, often with captions such as “luv of my life” or “im gonna marry her one day.” Leslie had over 250 photos just of herself and her girlfriend on several of the rare occasions that they’ve met in person.

Over the course of my study, there were a number of girls who, like Traviesa, went from declaring eternal love to breaking up and then making the same declarations to other girls. When I interviewed Kat, she told me that she and her girlfriend had made plans to be together for the rest of their lives, but when I looked back at her page a few months later, she had a new
girlfriend, Rachel, and claimed that she was forming a deeper emotional connection with Rachel than she had had with anyone before. The pictures of her old girlfriend were removed, and all traces of her were eradicated from Kat’s profile. While I acknowledge the fleeting nature of many girls’ relationships, I contest the notion that adolescents are particularly susceptible to “hormones” or any other purported causes of “acting like a teenager.” It is especially important to interrogate this commonly-held belief in the context of adolescent lesbian relationships, since lesbian desire is especially trivialized and often regarded as an adolescent phase that will be outgrown upon maturation into heterosexual adulthood (Driver 2007). Instead, I suggest that users like Kat are simply narrating their desires within existing discursive frameworks that prioritize monogamy and declarations of lasting commitment as the ultimate markers of valuable relationships. So particularly for queer youth, who are often faced with family and friends who do not take their relationships seriously, firmly and publicly asserting a relationship’s supposedly permanent status is a means to acceptance and a tangible visual marker of the subject’s unconscious desire for recognition. Moreover, the ability to sustain a relationship is often marked as a characteristic of reaching adulthood, compounding the queer girl subject’s desire for recognition as both a lesbian and as an adult.

The public forum of MySpace might indicate that girls primarily want a large viewership, but in actuality, girls look much closer to home for commentary, feedback, and recognition. Girls in relationships invariably said in interviews that their girlfriends’ opinions were most influential. For instance, Alexis indicated that most of her MySpace friends’ opinions of her page were relatively unimportant, “if my Girlfriend were to tell me that something on my page was stupid or bad then i’d take it off.” Kat’s then-girlfriend was particularly influential over the content of her page. A significant portion of our second interview was devoted to the conflicts that she
and her girlfriend have had over the content of their MySpace pages, with Kat objecting when her girlfriend posted pictures of herself in low-cut tops, and Kat’s girlfriend becoming upset when Kat posted pictures of herself with her tongue sticking out (according to Kat, because “i have a very long tongue and take pics of it and she just thinks its inappropriate”). Kat and her girlfriend also had each other’s MySpace passwords and periodically went through each other’s messages in order to find out who the other person had been talking about, and several times had caught the other person flirting with someone else.

A number of users shared and edited the content of their girlfriends’ profiles. Anna (whom I was not able to interview) allowed her girlfriend to have a formative influence over her profile’s content. Under “Interests,” Anna has a picture of her girlfriend, Miranda, with the words “My Other Half” and a heart emblazoned across the bottom of the photograph, followed by a long blurb about her and how she makes Anna “feel like I’m somebody.” Under this, though, is a graphic of Winnie the Pooh hugging Piglet and another long blurb that begins with the phrase, “baby, you have been hacked,” which was written by Miranda about Anna. The practice of actually signing into someone else’s MySpace profile and editing it (rather than simply posting a comment to someone’s page) was something I observed a number of times, both from best friends and especially from girlfriends. Anna and Miranda use Anna’s profile to publicly share their feelings for each other, proclaiming their happiness at having worked out their troubles and expressing their excitement about their engagement and eventual marriage. Miranda’s “Interests” section is similar, featuring a picture of Anna with the words “Princess Baby” printed across the top, though the text blurb in this section is entirely written by Anna, starting with the phrase, “well too everyone that doesnt know. miranda is taken by meeee. and im never letting her go. so dont even try and getting with her cuz its not gna work.” While any
of a user’s MySpace friends can post a comment to her page, only someone who is close enough
to the user to know her password can actually make changes to her profile. Thus, Anna and
Miranda’s joint editorship of both of their profiles demonstrates the ways in which the two of
them wish to be recognized as a cohesive unit rather than two disparate individuals and as
sharing a strong relationship. Additionally, all of the comments on Anna’s page are poems,
sentimental graphics, and love notes posted by Miranda. The degree to which the girls’ digital
selves are intertwined visibly demonstrates the ways in which the girl subject is explicitly
constituted through the other and how these two particularly desire to be recognized as a
permanent, serious, legitimate couple by other internet users.

“U Look Hott!!!”: Photographs, Friends’ Comments, and Desires for Recognition

Looking at comments from other users on teenage girls’ pages, blogs, and photographs
reveals the ways in which girls’ self-presentations are explicitly constructed for the benefit of
both a real and an imagined audience. Generally, my interview subjects assigned varying levels
of importance to other users’ comments on their pages. For all of the girls, it was more
important that people who knew them well, such as girlfriends or close friends, liked their
profile content and made positive comments on it. For Annie, a girl who identified herself as “a
completely different person offline,” her MySpace profile served the important function of
expressing herself in ways that she could not do verbally. In response to a question about
whether she wanted people to comment on her photos, she wrote,

not that i want them to, i just like knowing they can look at it and relize who i
really am rather then the person i am outside in the real world. i dont mind the
comments though they make me smile when i do get them.
Thus, for Annie, the actual comments were not as important as feeling like other users understood and appreciated her. Both Alexis and Leslie indicated that they primarily cared about people who were closest to them, though Alexis emphasized that she was mostly interested in whether her girlfriend thought that different elements of her profile were cool. Leslie, however, said that she cared most about what people thought about her pictures, and that she wanted people to post comments indicating that they thought that her hair or clothing looked good in pictures “so i know what looks good on me.” Kat, however, claimed to not care at all what other people thought about her profile. In response to my question about other people’s opinions of her page, she simply said “i dont care what people think of me but i know im well liked so i dont think much about what i post.”

While representations of feminine sexuality typically involve women gazing at the camera, inviting male viewers to look at them, a number of queer girls’ photographs depict female subjects who reappropriate masculinized poses that attempt to convey stoic apathy for the spectator. Sarah has photos entitled “Just bored” and “Bored az hell” in which she stares at the camera, very clearly posing for it. In one, she sits on the floor with one leg raised and an arm resting on it, and another shows her sitting on her bed with legs outstretched and one crossed over the other. While the passive feminine figure staring at the camera is a centuries-old trope of visual culture, Sarah is both the photographer and the model, reconfiguring power differentials between the creator and the object of the image. She also becomes museum curator in posting the pictures to her page, deciding how to caption them, which album to post them to, and whether or not to make them public. Thus, Sarah actively constitutes herself as an object of sexual desire. This, then, points to the inability to equate technological creation with proto-feminist empowerment—while queer girls such as Sarah use tools like MySpace to tell
real and imagined online audiences “who they really are,” they often do so in ways that affirm normative representations of feminine sexual objectification. Sarah has become the creator and distributor of the image, but she is not telling different stories about girlhood, as Kearney and Driver might hope that she would. Instead, she suggests that lesbian girls are also accessible as points of desire and objectification.

Both of Sarah’s pictures have over twenty comments (an unusually large number for this user’s pictures) from both male and female users praising the picture, writing things like “Sexy,” “Such a cutie,” and “nice pic lol.” Sarah thus receives affirmation of her attractiveness through other users’ photo comments. Interestingly, one user points out that Sarah’s attempt at stoicism is largely unsuccessful, stating “OMG U ARE SO STRUTTING YOUR STUFF IN THIS PIC.” The “I don’t care” picture was a common theme on the pages I examined, in which a user stares at the camera in disinterest or looks away completely. While the intention is to convey the notion that a user does not care about her online peers’ opinions of her, the effort involved in taking photographs, uploading them to a computer, posting them on MySpace, captioning them, and enabling comments (as well as having a MySpace page in general) demonstrate that the user wants other people to see the pictures and comment on them. For Sarah in particular, these pictures were obviously posed, and the sexualized nature of the photos makes it evident that she wanted to be seen as sexually desirable.

In another picture captioned “damn yo!”, Sarah is wearing a camisole and boyshort-style underwear, the camera placed below her and angled upward at her body as she juts her hip out to the side, hand on her backside, lips pursed slightly as she stares blankly at the camera (see Figure 13). This picture also received a number of comments, primarily from male users calling her “hot” and “sexy” and asking her to trade pictures with them (a practice in which
people take sexy pictures of themselves and exchange them for other sexy pictures). One user, Kurt, even posted “hey there i like to lick on that” three times. However, several users expressed disapproval, one male telling her “you better put some damn shorts on lol besides ur to liitle to be taking photos like that lol” and a female writing “no no no!”

![Figure 13: Sarah's "damn yo!" photo](image)

Laurie McNeill (2003; see also Hardey 2004; Podnieks 2002; Sorapure 2003; Zalis 2003) emphasizes the ways that the interactivity of the web suggests an ultimate inability to define the boundaries of the self, since internet users constantly participate in each others’ self-making processes. Butler (2005) indicates that the boundedness of the ‘I’ is called into question through the vulnerability to the Other to the extent that part of what composes the ‘I’ is bound up in ‘you.’ The pictures that Sarah and other MySpace users choose to post on their pages are inevitably written for a real and an imagined audience, and so the desire to construct a particular self-presentation is implicitly an act of asking the Other for recognition. Considering
the ways in which this act reconstitutes the self and the terms under which the self is constituted in the first place, Butler writes,

When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one’s being, and one’s own persistence in one’s own being, in the struggle for recognition (2005, 44).

It is not simply that the subject asks for recognition on the basis of a current understanding of the self; rather, the subject also seeks recognition for future transformations of selfhood. For Sarah, these sexualized pictures may not reflect her current level of sexual activity, but rather her desire to be recognized as a potentially sexual subject. Butler suggests that asking for recognition “instigate[s] a transformation, and so Sarah’s future transformation into an adult sexual subject is staked in her ability to receive recognition now as a believably and desirably sexual subject. Thus, the positive comments that Sarah receives for the stoic and sexy pictures encourage her to maintain these images and to continue posting those kinds of pictures, assuring her that she will continue to receive validation for these kinds of images. Her self-presentation is inevitably constructed in line with her desire for recognition, though Sarah herself might not recognize her actions as being explicitly connected to the opinions of her peers.
“i just like knowing they can look at it and relize who i really am”:
Girls’ Desires for Recognition

Repeatedly, the girls I interviewed claimed that their MySpace pages were an important
forum for showing people who they “really” were, asserting that they were able to use
photographs, graphics, and text to reveal important things about them. Alexis particularly
enjoyed being able to tell people about herself online as opposed to in person:

Alexis: I like it because i get to express my self in a way i want to, you know
with my profile and stuff. Like with pictures of people i love. and it also helps
me to explain to people who i am because i have a hard time doin that
Adriane: So why do you think Myspace helps you tell people who you are? Like,
is it about being able to use graphics and pictures? Or is it that you’re more
comfortable telling people who you are online that in person?
Alexis: I’d say both actually. because for some reason its just easier for me to
talk to people when i can write it down. because when im talking my words get
all frazzled sometimes.
and being able to put things like graphics on my profile helps me to let people
know what i like and what im interested in.

Similarly, Annie felt that her MySpace persona was a more accurate reflection of her “true self”
than her “real life” persona:

adrianejbrown: Do you want people to comment on your pics,
your wall, or how your page looks? How much does it matter
what other people think of your MySpace?
Annie: not that i want them to, i just like knowing they can look
at it and relize who i really am rather then the person i am
outside in the real world. i dont mind the comments though
they make me smile when i do get them.
adrianejbrown: So you feel like your page is a more authentic
reflection of who you are than the way you appear or present
yourself offline?
Annie: yeah... i have been told several times i am a completely
different person offline. and i believe it, i guess i worry to much
about what people think about me and so i try to act differently
In some ways, Annie’s greater comfort with expressing herself online reflects widely-held beliefs during the early years of the internet that the lack of physicality online freed users from the constraints of embodiment, permitting them to more freely explore different enactments of identity. And while MySpace does place a computer screen between Alexis and other users who view her page, which may make her feel like she can “be herself” in ways that she cannot in her offline life, her MySpace self is still connected to her offline self—she posts photographs of herself and lists her real name and school information, and many of her MySpace friends are people she knows in “real life.” However, Alexis and Annie express somewhat different understandings of the self—while Alexis sees MySpace as a place where she can more easily articulate her thoughts and feelings, Annie sees her online persona as “who [she] really [is]” while she believes herself to be “a completely different person online.” Annie expresses a belief common among my research subjects—that there is a “real me,” a core subjectivity that lies beneath the surface and exists outside of actions and behaviors. Girls long to be understood for “who they really are,” and I suggest that they attempt to resolve contradictions in their subjectivities by delineating between behaviors that are authentic and inauthentic.

My interviews also challenge commonly-held notions in girlhood studies that girls intentionally exercise agency—among my subjects, girls rarely knew why they constructed their page in a particular way or why they chose a particular photograph. Frequently, they returned to their belief in an authentic self that can be reflected in digital spaces. In all of the interviews, I asked girls why they displayed particular photographs and graphics, and in each of the interviews, I received similarly vague responses:

Annie: mostly i let my emotions take over when i do it. i dont really think about it is just done.
leslie: yes. i decide by the things that i like graphics and all that attract me. i'll go on different websites such as photobucket. or i'll make my own
adrianejbrown: so do you feel like you're trying to project a particular image of yourself?
leslie: no, i'm just me. how i feel is how i want it to look.

the girls in my study often claimed to put little thought into the images and text they chose for their pages, asserting that their choices emanated from an authentically emotional place that defied intellectual processes. they all firmly clung to the idea that their myspace pages authentically reflected a "true self" that preexisted the creation of the myspace page and that could be easily recalled and put into a form that would be viewed and understood by all. yet, as smith (1993) indicates, the self is actually created in the process of narrating one's experiences; there is no 'i' that precedes the writing.

while girls expressed wanting to be understood and accepted, they also sometimes attempted to construct themselves as complicated, nuanced subjects. kat, for example, writes in her "about me" section,

people ask me who i am id rather be asked what i am. i'm a daughter, a sister, a grand-daughter, a niece, a cousin, a friend, i am a partner, a student, a girlfriend, a mistake, an ex, a heart breaker, a lover, a failure. i'm young and yet fully grown. i am confident and scared, terrified and excited. i am loving and caring, thoughtful and hopeful. i am sick and tired, strong and healthy, i'm confusing but obvious and simple. i am broken and yet whole. i'm misunderstood, misguided and mislead. i am hardworking and determined, but a little scared on the inside. i wish on stars and daydream of you. i pray to god and cry my own tears. i smile on the inside to cover up that i'm dying on the inside. i listen to those who don't listen to me. i walk on eggshells and run through fire. i believe in passion but not true love. i love you and yet i push you away. i want you, but not all the time. i am everything and nothing all at once and all i want is for you to love me for me.

she emphasizes her contradictions, painting herself as a complicated and difficult person to understand. yet at the same time, she does so using familiar tropes within recognizable
discourses—both broken and whole, smiling on the outside but sad on the inside, loving people but pushing them away—and so her play at articulating a complex, misunderstood subjectivity is one that actually draws on normative ideas of a complicated self. Girls want to be recognized as the complex subjects they are, even as they reduce that complexity to ‘the inner me’. They claim that “I’m just being myself” and assert the transparency of their online self-presentations, but at the same time, they make great efforts to get their pages exactly right, frequently updating pictures, altering graphics, and changing status updates to ensure that the page reflected the person they wanted to be seen as. Thus, the labor involved in constructing a particular image of the self belies girls’ assertions that “it’s just me.”

While the girls I interviewed claimed not to care what others thought of their pages, the actual content of their profiles contradicted these statements. Repeatedly, they told me that they did not care or think about others’ opinions of their pages:

adrianejbrown: How important are people's opinions of your page, pictures, etc.?
Kat: I don't care what people think of me but I know I'm well liked so I don't think much about what I post

Adriane: How important are your MySpace friends' opinions of your page, photos, etc.?
Alexis: Hmm...it depends on who they are. Because if my Girlfriend were to tell me that something on my page was stupid or bad then I'd take it off. But if like some girl that I have only known for a month goes and says "Hey that's really lame" then I'd just delete her instead of deleting whatever it was off my page. Because my page is like a part of me like a little window into my mind and if someone doesn't like it then that means they don't like what I represent and I am totally not the kind of person who cares what others think. Motto: You don't like me, then you can go away.

However, the care taken in constructing particular images and the amount of time spent constructing pages provided a contrast to their assertions. For instance, Kat had a number of pictures in which she seemed apathetic about her picture being taken, either blankly gazing at
the camera or looking away from it in boredom. Similarly, in her interview, Kat claimed, “i dont care what people think of me but i know im well liked so i dont think much about what i post.”

Yet, Kat has posted over 200 pictures to various photo albums (see Figure 14), and when I asked about how she decided which pictures to post, she replied:

kat: oh yea i basically post whateve pic tells the story of
the event or whatever pic i look the best in 😊
kat: i take alot of pictures but only end up posting
maybe 1 outta every 200 or so
The explicit narrative of these photos and comments—apathy, boredom, disinterest in others’ opinions—is negated by the photos themselves. Kat claims to not care, but she takes hundreds of pictures in hopes of capturing only a few to post on her MySpace page, so she has spent countless hours posing, shooting, browsing through, editing, and posting pictures in order to convey a particular image of herself: that she is confident, well-liked, and too cool to care about other’s opinions of her. This belies her claims of apathy, since a more believably disinterested response would be to not take or post the pictures at all. These enactments of gendered
subjectivity, then, suggest not a rejection of the desire for recognition but as a desire to be recognized as a particular kind of subject, reiterating Butler’s claim that the subject’s desire for recognition is specific and contingent.

Leslie was the only interview subject who admitted to caring about people’s opinions of her page.

adrianejbrown: Right. So do you pay a lot of attention to people’s picture comments? Like, is it important that people like them?
leslie: yes. and yes.
adrianejbrown: Are there some people who are more important than others?
leslie: yes of course. the people that i’m closer to or have known longer
adrianejbrown: What do you hope they think?
leslie: maybe they comment on my hair. or clothing. that way i know what looks good on me

For Leslie, then, photo comments are particularly important. She indicated that she was mostly unconcerned with people’s comments about her graphics and her page layout in general, but she saw her MySpace photo album as a place to try out new looks and receive feedback from friends. She situates friends’ opinions as extremely important, stating that their comments let her “know what looks good” on her, implying that she would not be able to form opinions about her own appearance without others’ perspectives. While my other research subjects may not be as explicitly and consciously swayed by others’ opinions, Leslie’s perspective points to the ways that desires for recognition are embedded in girls’ online activities, including posting photographs, crafting a profile, and even simply having a MySpace page.

Adolescent Queer Sexuality and Trauma

Finally, Ellie’s MySpace profile demonstrates the ways in which queer youth use MySpace as a forum for venting and discussing homophobic encounters that occur in their
offline lives. Over the course of a single weekend, Ellie changed her main profile picture, wallpaper, background music, screen name (from Ellie [sunshine], to Ellie [she is my better half], to Ellie [your addiction]), and her “About Me” section. The latter reveals Ellie’s engagement with trauma, particularly through her recent experiences with coming out to her family. This section detailed her coming out story for several days, stating that,

Ever since as long as ive known the word gay, I always knew it meant different...But then I saw how friends and family would react and it hurt me because I figured out who I was. So scared at the thought of who I was I began to hate myself inside cause other people convinced me my life would be to hard and it just wasnt right....I have lost alot of my family due to my coming out...Anyways along the way I have found new friends to support me and that even live and love the way I do.

Ellie’s blogs similarly detail the pain she has felt at losing her family due to her coming out—yet, she changed her status to “really really sad and hurt” and updated her “About Me” section to add a plea to parents to accept their gay children. This alteration implies that some event made Ellie reconnect with the pain of losing her parents’ affection, but her profile does not indicate exactly what happened. Lejeune (1999) notes that diaries are allusive, providing only partial information because they are not intended for wide readership. While MySpace profiles are arguably intended for public consumption, they nonetheless provide incomplete information, perhaps intending that their friends will understand their profiles in the context of their offline lives, and perhaps preferring to keep their statements ambiguous even to their friends. Generally, Ellie’s characterization of the psychic trauma of her family’s homophobia represents the cyberspace presentation of the girl in progress, providing access to her life as she lives it and offering no assurance that her problems will eventually be resolved.

Ellie’s most recent blog entry expresses anger at people who cheat on their partners. She asserts that cheating is “a touchy subject” for her and attempts to console readers who
might have been deceived, claiming, “In the end it is those people that are alone forever. They fuck their way to eventually getting aids and dieing or they fuck so much that they lose who they are as a person.” Here, Ellie draws upon normative discourses that situate sex as an inherently emotive act, insisting that promiscuity has far-reaching consequences for a person’s soul, and validating the connection between monogamous sex and individual worth. Like the girls who utilize True Love Waits imagery to legitimize their relationships, Ellie also situates her views on love and sex within a heteronormative framework, lending credence to her personal experience by appealing to broader ideals about monogamy. She further emphasizes the destructive effects of cheating by stating that she used to cut herself as a mechanism for coping with pain.

Cvetkovich (2005) suggests that the unspeakability of trauma often seems to leave no official records, and thus it is critical to consider how trauma is encoded in personal transmissions and in public cultures. For lesbian subjects specifically, the excavation of traumatic narratives is critical because queer women’s stories are often relegated to alternative spaces rather than given the same kind of public spaces as heterosexual narratives of trauma and loss. Thus, it is important to situate Ellie’s public discussion of her personal pain within a broader context of queer subjects’ painful encounters with homophobia. She calls out for other queer adolescents to acknowledge and identify with her pain, drawing upon coming out narratives of familial exclusion to find readers who could empathize with her. Yet, her request for recognition is based on ideals of sex and love that are entrenched in normative discourses that prioritize the heterosexual, middle-class value of monogamy as a means of deep emotional and sexual connection and authorize hateful punishment for sexual promiscuity. Situating queer MySpace users’ activities in light of the broader exclusion of queer trauma narratives illuminates the reasons that MySpace users like Ellie turn to a public forum to reveal what have traditionally
been understood as intensely painful and private matters, such as coming out to a homophobic family. But it also drives home the message that self-presentations on MySpace are deeply mired in normative meanings about sex, gender, age, class, and race-ethnicity.

**Conclusion**

Queer girls’ MySpace pages demonstrate how digital media facilitates the subject’s ability to constitute herself in and through a variety of discourses using both visual and textual means. Yet, while the mixed-media format seemingly enables marginalized subjects to present themselves in ways that challenge the ways that whiteness and heterosexuality are representationally privileged in visual culture, my analysis suggests that the subject’s desire for recognition compels queer subjects to constitute themselves in ways that validate the legitimacy of normative concepts such as monogamy, Christianity, binary gender schemes, and heterosexuality. So while digital spaces seemingly provide the means for subjects to stretch the boundaries of normative identifications, this technology is still always limited by the ways in which subjects must make themselves legible using images, words, and ideas that have already been discursively tied to heterosexuality.

While the MySpace pages examined here are promising as evidence of the rapidly-spreading availability of different modes of self-representation, the limitations of relying on technology for this purpose must be addressed. Turning to Jose Munoz’s advocacy of disidentification, it is important to ask whether these performances can be understood as affecting a destabilization of gender norms in a broader sense, particularly since they rely largely on images that are widely associated with heterosexuality. If the meanings of these graphics are already overdetermined, as with the True Love Waits image, is it possible to resignify their
meanings in any significant sense? Do those who view the page actually understand uses of these images as resignifications, or are they simply understood as repetitions of hegemonic gendered and sexual subjectivity? In many cases, the ways in which queer girls use this imagery undermines attempts at resignification and reifies the intended meaning of the image, shoring up normative discourses that characterize adolescent lesbian relationships as fleeting (such as Traviesa’s use of marital terminology) or situate heterosexual relationships as primary (such as Love’s prominent use of heterosexual images).

In particular, the pages I examine demonstrate the ambivalence of the digital queer girl subject. While users’ pages utilize imagery in ways that did not adhere to their intended purposes (e.g., explicitly heterosexual images to convey queer desires for romance), ultimately these usages cannot fully decontextualize images from their original circulations and thus fail to broadly destabilize heteronormativity, adultism, hegemonic whiteness, or binary sexual and gender categories. Moreover, use of these images reifies the centrality of whiteness, heterosexuality, and middle-class status in the constitution of adolescent girlhood. Girls’ self-presentations on MySpace are complicit with a complicated array of discourses that situate heterosexuality, monogamy, and sentimentality as conditions that are central to the experience of contemporary adolescent girlhood.
“Today I had a pretty awkward moment. I was expecting a package from fedex. I looked online and it said it would be delivered at 4:30. About 12:00 I binge and purge. The doorbell rings while I'm purging (ack!). I go answer it knowing my face is probably red, but no caring. When I take the package he looks at me in disgust. I really didn't have any clue why, until I got back inside. I looked down and there were puke chunks on my shirt. gross.” --Jenn

Significant media and academic attention has been trained on pro-eating disorder websites, where users resist pressures to recover from their eating disorders and instead discuss how to manageably live with the disorder, how to hide it from friends and family, and how their weight loss is progressing. News media has tended to sensationalize these websites, alternately portraying pro-ana (pro-anorexia) and pro-mia (pro-bulimia) internet users as either helpless victims of their own behaviors or as vicious temptresses who bait young girls into visiting the websites and then teach them to develop eating disorders. The logical solution is, according to these stories, to shut these websites down so that their damaging messages will no longer be spread (‘Doctors demand...’ 2009; Heffernan 2008; Masurat 2008; Schwartz 2009; Springen 2006; Watkins 2010). However, contrary to popular notions that women and girls on pro-eating disorder websites tout anorexia and bulimia as perfectly acceptable lifestyle choices, users by and large do not consider themselves to be healthy. In fact, pro-mias often acknowledge the difficulties that bulimia causes them in both physical and mental health, as well as in their
relationships with family and friends. Yet, while recovery is often held up as an ideal, pro-mias assert that they cannot or do not want to recover, and pro-mia websites provide a place for internet users with eating disorders to gather together and provide support for each other.

I contend that extreme depictions of pro-ana and pro-mia websites only alienate users on these websites and further push them into the comfort of disordered eating online communities. Moreover, attempts to shut these websites down are ultimately unproductive because they do not engender insight into the reasons that they are so popular and so fiercely defended by the women and girls who populate them. While academic and popular discussions about pro-eating disorder websites have focused almost exclusively on pro-ana sites, here I focus specifically on several pro-mia websites, such as Pro-Mia Community⁴ (PMC), a website that explicitly identifies as pro-bulimia. I also analyzed the content of the main page for a pro-mia Livejournal group, Live2Purge, as well as the pro-mia section of NoEating.com, a generalized pro-eating disorder website (which also featured forums for pro-ana, EDNOS [eating disorder not otherwise specified], binge eating disorder, diet, exercise, and recovery). I contend that the bulimic subject’s desire for recognition underpins her involvement on these forums, compelling her to craft her web presence in ways that make her legible to the online bulimic community. I assert that users on pro-mia sites offer each other acceptance, understanding, and recognition in ways that differ from the kinds of well-intentioned support that girls receive in their offline lives. Girls present themselves on pro-mia forums in ways that contrast starkly to their offline lives, particularly around individuals who do not have eating disorders.

⁴ All website names in this chapter are pseudonyms.
More specifically, I analyze the ways that frank and specific discussions of vomiting, laxative-induced defecation, and tooth decay play an important role in girls’ interactions in pro-mia cyberspace. I suggest that pro-mia cyberspace reveals the bulimic’s intimate relationship with the abject, resisting bodily boundaries and societal taboos surrounding bodily refuse (especially vomit) and instead embracing the abject as a source of comfort and as a basis for soliciting recognition from other cyber subjects. Yet, this relationship with abjection is ambivalent—while bulimic girls describe the pleasure they receive from both aspects of the binge-purge cycle, they also express feeling out of control and wishing that they had never started purging. Additionally, I explore the ways that mias’ descriptions of the pleasures of the binge-purge cycle represent a complex pursuit of jouissance, a quest for ultimate gastronomical pleasure in both consumption and expulsion of food. I also consider the ways that the visual plays a vital role in the articulation of digital bulimic subjectivities, arguing that images offer important sources of inspiration, admiration, desire, and revulsion. Finally, I consider the limitations of pro-mia digital spaces, critiquing the notion that meaningful recognition can be gained from other bulimic subjects on the basis of a disordered identification.

**Framing digital representations of bulimia**

While most academic analyses of eating disorders and of pro-ED (pro-eating disorder) websites have focused on anorexia (Bordo 1993; Brotsky and Giles 2007; Day and Keys 2007; Dias 2003; Ferreday 2003; Fox et al 2005; Gailey 2009; Gavin et al 2008; Norris et al 2006; Orbach 1986; Pollack 2003), I specifically analyze digital representations of bulimia

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5 In line with The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, I “Refusal to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height: Weight loss leading to maintenance of body weight <85% of that
of the anorexic body has become a powerful visual symbol of women’s willingness to acquiesce to normative standards of beauty, and so its repetition within feminist literature has served an important purpose in demarcating the physical harms of oppressive standards of thinness. Bordo (2002) contends that societal preferences for thinness are implicitly linked to anxieties about women’s increasing power and position in society at large. Both, she says, express and engender in women a fear of excess, of being “too present, too hungry, too overbearing, too needy, overflowing with unsightly desire, or simply ‘too much’” (462). The anorexic body dwells in this avoidance of excess, embraces it as motivation to severely restrict food intake and continually make itself less and less present. Similarly, Orbach (1986) situates anorexia as a denial of the pleasures of food and an exaltation of the feminine trait of self-sacrifice. Yet, she also frames anorexic food restriction as a form of embodied social protest against restrictions on young women’s autonomy. Thus, within feminist literature, the anorexic body has come to metaphorize societal proscriptions against female excess, as well as the sexist discourses that have subjugated women.

Bulimics, however, defy easy categorizations. Squire (2003) suggests that the dearth of feminist literature on bulimia reveals the difficulty in theorizing the disorder as broadly relevant to feminist concerns beyond the disorder itself. The bulimic body cannot symbolize oppression

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expected or failure to make expected weight gain during period of growth, leading to body weight less than 85% of that expected; Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though under weight; Disturbance in the way one’s body weight or shape are experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight; Amenorrhea (at least three consecutive cycles) in postmenarchal girls and women.” I define bulimia as “Recurrent episodes of binge eating characterized by both: Eating, in a discrete period of time (e.g., within any 2-hour period), an amount of food that is definitely larger than most people would eat during a similar period of time and under similar circumstances; A sense of lack of control over eating during the episode, defined by a feeling that one cannot stop eating or control what or how much one is eating; Recurrent inappropriate compensatory behavior to prevent weight gain; Self-induced vomiting; Misuse of laxatives, diuretics, enemas, or other medications; Fasting; Excessive exercise. The binge eating and inappropriate compensatory behavior both occur, on average, at least twice a week for 3 months. Self evaluation is unduly influenced by body shape and weight. The disturbance does not occur exclusively during episodes of anorexia nervosa.”

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in the same way that the anorexic body can, since bulimics are typically within a normal weight range. Moreover, bulimic behaviors are typically completed in secret, so bulimia does not lend itself to the same kind of visual representation as anorexic emaciation does. Though anorexia is understood to represent an extreme attempt at controlling one’s body (and by extension, one’s entire life), bulimia is often depicted as a lack of control. Thus, the bulimic body is understood to be one that lacks discipline and ultimately fails in its attempts to conform to hegemonic standards of thinness. And while both anorexia and bulimia tend to be discussed in psychological literature as unhealthy coping mechanisms for dealing with circumstances unrelated to food, clinical literature frequently cites childhood sexual abuse as a causative factor in the development of bulimia (Baker et al 2007; Fischer et al 2010; Perkins 2008). This further marks bulimia as a disorder that is not related to feminist concerns about body image in the same ways as anorexia and marginalizes it in feminist literature on eating disorders.

While many examinations of anorexia make a passing reference to bulimia, scholarly analyses of anorexia cannot easily incorporate bulimia into the same theoretical frameworks. Morag contends that contemporary representations and academic analyses of bulimia fail to distinguish the disorder from anorexia, which receives the majority of cultural attention on eating disorders. She importantly suggests that while anorexics and bulimics both struggle with body image, the particular psychological struggles they experience are distinct. Specifically, bulimics exist in a state of practical and emotional ambivalence that differs from the relationships anorexics have with their bodies. She writes,

Another characteristic of the disorder is the tension the bulimic maintains between two competing body images: that of the external and that of the internal. This is not the tension that determines anorexic behavior, between “how she wants to look” and “how she looks” (“too fat”). It is the tension
between the internal body image based on feelings of depression, guilt, self-criticism, lack of control, satiation, disgust, connectedness-to-the-bathroom, mess, fear of weight gain, and dysphoric mood states — and the external body image, which projects emotional balance, acceptance, control, lightness, cleanliness, aesthetic diligence, order, and postcatharsis (150).

The anorexic’s straightforward relationship with food (to eat as little as possible) is fundamentally different from the bulimic’s indulgence in massive binges and subsequent compulsion to purge. Thus, the equation of bulimia with anorexia, the transposition of analyses of anorexia to bulimia, fails to account for the specificities of the bulimic condition.

This theoretical pitfall extends to academic analyses of pro-eating disorder websites. While a number of articles on pro-ED cyberspace have examined the content of websites and users’ interactions on bulletin boards, they tend to blend pro-ana and pro-mia web content together, failing to account for the differences between these types of content. Specifically, the “tips and tricks” sections, which often contain a significant amount of information on hiding binge food and covertly purging (through vomiting or laxatives), are not distinguished as a particularly different phenomenon than message board discussions about food restriction or thinspirational pictures, but rather are folded into general discussions about pro-ED communities on the web. This chapter suggests, however, that it is critically important to distinguish between restricting and binging/purging behaviors. While many girls with eating disorders vacillate between anorexic and bulimic behaviors, the affective impulse behind each type of behavior differs, and as Morag notes, the binge-purge cycle specifically results in feelings of ambivalence, attempting to project an outward image of cleanliness and control while engaging in private behaviors that bring the bulimic into an intimate relationship with the abject.

Finally, the literature on pro-ED cyberspace fails to account for the psychoanalytic processes that inform the reasons that girls frequent certain websites and the ways that they
present themselves on these websites. This, ultimately, is the gap in the literature that my study attempts to fill. Pro-ED websites are constantly characterized in terms of peer pressure, particularly in the media—girls are supposedly drawn into the websites out of curiosity, where other users then give them tips on how to develop eating disorders. The danger of these websites, it is often said, lies in the community they provide—supposedly, finding other women and girls who suffer from eating disorders encourages girls to avoid recovery, and shutting the sites down would curb this process (Csipke 2007; ‘Doctors demand…’ 2009; Heffernan 2008; Martin 2005; Masurat 2008; Schwartz 2009; Springen 2006; Watkins 2010). Some feminist literature is less condemnatory, though. For instance, Day and Keys (2008) perform a discourse analysis of pro-ana bulletin boards, suggesting that women on these boards perform counter-hegemonic work in reconstructing the anorexic body as powerful and framing anorexia itself as a way of life. While Day and Keys are more skeptical of anorexics’ assertions of power than Orbach’s somewhat amoralist perspective on anorexia, their Foucauldian approach directs them to focus on self-surveillance and does not enable them to consider the underlying reasons beyond body image concerns that compel anorexics and bulimics to participate in these communities.

I argue that it is vitally important to consider how the acceptance offered in pro-eating disorder communities appeals to the subject’s fundamental longing for recognition. I suggest that the bulimic’s desire for recognition fundamentally shapes her existence as a subject, framing not only her interactions with other users but also her broader self-presentation and even her desire to participate in a pro-mia online community in the first place. Bulimics assert their desire to conceal their eating disorder from their family and friends, claiming that these people would not understand them and would force them to stop binging and purging.
However, pro-mia cyberspace fulfills this need for recognition—other users understand what it means to admit to having an eating disorder while actively refusing recovery. Butler suggests that the desire for recognition is not blind; rather “we feel more properly recognized by some people than we do by others” (33). While pro-mia girls do not actively seek recognition from their family and friends, they attempt to fulfill their desire for recognition through other pro-mia internet users. Thus, the character of their online participation—especially the vivid descriptions of different aspects of the binge-purge cycle—is consciously and unconsciously directed toward obtaining recognition from other subjects.

**Race, Pro-Mia Forums, and Therapeutic Culture**

While there is little to no statistical variation across racial groups for eating disorders (Daniels 2006; Thompson 1992), my research overwhelmingly revealed that active participants on pro-ana and pro-mia sites are white. Race was not a topic of discussion on any of the websites I examined, but users’ frequent use of self-photography to document their body size revealed almost exclusively white bodies. Given the extensive scholarship that documents the frequency of eating disorders—especially bulimia—for girls of color, I wondered: why does it seem that all of the girls on these sites are white? Of course, it is entirely possible that there are women and girls of color among the lurkers, but these users do not actively post, or at least do not share photographs of themselves.

Thus, I contend that it is critically important to distinguish between girls with eating disorders and girls who become actively involved in digital communities focusing on eating disorders. I suggest that the racial disparity that exists on these sites is due to two major factors. First, the popularity of these sites is inextricably tied to the rise of therapeutic culture—a culture
which is largely limited to white, middle class communities. Becker (2005) notes that historically, the women most immersed in therapeutic culture have been middle and upper class white women; however, contemporarily, women of all racial and class backgrounds are exposed to therapeutic ideas through television and self-help books. The promise of therapeutic culture is empowerment—the “talking cure” supposedly helps women work through their problems and find strength within themselves. Yet, the benefits of therapeutic culture are not equally available to all—poor women, women of color, and single mothers are often referred to already-overworked social services or family members to help with their practical needs, while middle and upper class white women can talk about their feelings on a private therapist’s couch.

Given the inaccessibility of private therapists, it seems that spaces such as pro-mia forums would offer an appealing type of “free group therapy” in which individuals can discuss their problems without having to leave their homes or pay a therapist. However, I suggest that the character of pro-mia digital spaces, which invoke the confessional mode, are implicitly linked to and influenced by therapeutic culture, which alienates women and girls who do not feel incorporated by the more mainstream modes of that culture. On the surface, it seems that pro-mia spaces are in direct opposition to therapeutic spaces: website users actively reject the notion that they should seek immediate treatment, and they frequently remark on their frustrations with physicians and therapists who fail to understand them. However, a deeper look reveals that pro-mia forums are implicitly embedded in a number of principles of therapeutic culture. One of the most apparent places is through users’ reliance on diagnostic criteria, which is uniformly understood to be some combination of the DSM-IV’s guidelines and a psychiatrist’s official diagnosis. While users on these sites initially seem to reject the authority of medical and psychiatric officials, they actually shore up that authority in the ways that they define their own
eating disorders and police the boundaries of their communities. Moreover, the tone of the sites is heavily confessional—users disclose behaviors that they would not admit to engaging in outside of that “safe space,” often in vivid detail. Confession is culturally coded as a way to get at the “truth” of one’s story, and therapeutic confessions are ostensibly important because they uncover the reasons that a particular feeling or behavior exists and enable the extinction of that feeling or behavior. In pro-mia forums, though, the confession serves as a mode of seeking recognition rather than attempting to root out disordered eating practices. Yet, despite the fact that the particularities of the confessional mode shift in pro-mia spaces, the compulsion to talk about one’s feelings and to spend endless hours communicating with others about emotional issues nonetheless emanates from a therapeutic culture which is largely inaccessible and unrelatable for women of color. The draw of the confessional mode is predicated upon colonialist modes of appropriation in which white subjects live out fantasies and fears of otherness through racialized subjects’ narratives of selfhood (Ahmed 2000; Bhabha 1994; Blackman 2004), so white investments in eliciting autobiographical stories from women and girls of color operate within this framework. Girls of color may act as exotic specimens of otherness, proof that eating disorders affect racialized subjects as well, and their absence from pro-mia websites can be partially understood as a rejection of white bulimic subjects’ possible desires to elicit stories about lives which differ from their own (largely middle class) upbringings.

The second factor I identify as salient to the disproportionate whiteness on pro-mia sites relates to racialized histories of the body. White women and women of color—especially black women—have drastically different historical legacies in terms of the ways that their bodies have been understood as private or public entities. The legacy of white middle-class women is steeped in cultural notions of bodily propriety (a concept that is explored at much greater length
in the next chapter) which have insisted that women’s bodies are to be kept covered, pure, and unexposed. Feminist concerns about white women’s bodily autonomy have been inspired by an insistence that female bodily processes are not shameful or secret, but rather that women should be able to speak openly about their health concerns and sexual desires (Brumberg 1998; Tolman 2005; Valenti 2009). However, black women’s bodies were forcibly exposed through the supposedly scientific use of naked black female bodies to justify slavery, particularly through the iconization of the female Hottentot figure (Gilman 1985). And while First and Second Wave white feminists complained about being put on pedestals and kept from “men’s work”, women of color pointed out that their own bodies were forced into difficult manual labor out of financial necessity. This legacy of exposure is reflected in popular culture today—while white women are sexualized in cultural representations such as music videos, black women’s bodies are unquestionably put on display in more extreme and explicit ways (Jhally 2007). While white women have been concerned about bodily privacy in the area of abortion, there has been a general distinction between white women’s insistence that they should be able to talk about and publicly display their bodies and black women’s desire to remove their bodies as public spectacles.

I argue that these different legacies have a distinctive impact on women’s and girls’ willingness to talk about their bodily processes on pro-mia websites. While white, middle class women may find the prospect of sharing explicit information about their bodies liberating, black women and girls may view it as a loss of bodily privacy. Moreover, the whiteness of the digital community likely perpetuates itself—because the forums appear to be white, lurkers of color may not feel comfortable becoming active participants in communities that currently do not
have any active members of color, and so even if someone did want to join, they may not feel comfortable doing so.

“What's your most embarrassing bulimic experience?”
Embracing the Abject in Pro-Mia Digital Spaces

Throughout the remainder of the chapter, I discuss the ways that bulimic girls seek recognition in digital spaces. While vomit is a substance that is typically marked with disgust, mias engage in open and explicit discussions of purging habits. Bulimic girls’ failure to conform to idealized standards of feminine cleanliness and control limits their ability to seek recognition from non-bulimics, since the bulimic’s embrace of bingeing and purging is socially illegible. While they hide their practices from their non-eating disordered friends and family, pro-mia digital spaces provide a place where girls can openly discuss the details of their purges and express the pleasure that they receive from bingeing and purging. Yet, I suggest that the recognition that girls seek through digital affirmations of bulimic behavior is ultimately limited. First, the pursuit of bulimic pleasure is ultimately a quest for jouissance, and the inevitable pain that results from this pleasure prohibits any recuperation of the value of bulimia, thus rendering the recognition that they grant and receive incomplete. Second, the illegibility of bulimic pleasure means that only other bulimics could even attempt to offer recognition, and ultimately, the fact that bulimia is a mental illness makes the temporary psychic rewards of recognition from other bulimics both physically and mentally untenable in the long term. Finally, recognition is only offered on the basis of adherence to established narratives regarding specific bulimic practices, language usage, and attitude toward recovery; thus, girls can never really be recognized for the entirety of “who they are.”
In her analysis of cultural rituals surrounding bodily cleanliness, Douglas (1966) suggests that the boundedness of the human body is heavily guarded. Blood, spit, excrement, breast milk, and the link all represent the tearing of the body and the potential for the body’s contents to spill out into the outside world. Thus, a variety of cleansing rituals have developed in an attempt to prevent fluids from leaking out of the body’s boundaries and polluting the outside world. Douglas asserts that anxieties about the borders of the body are not merely literal or specific, but that they symbolize broader anxieties about the dangers of crossing borders: “All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of functional experience is altered...The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from other margins” (121). Kristeva (1982) contends that the only way a boundary can be formed is by articulating what is supposed to lie outside of it—the elements which she categorizes as the abject. The abject is that which is cast out in order to enter into the symbolic order, and as such, is inassimilable. The abject is opposed to the ‘I’ and actually forms its boundaries, demarcating the edges of subjectivity. The response to encountering the abject, she suggests, is revulsion, since it is understood as a violation of societal proscriptions about cleanliness, bodily boundaries, and propriety. The physiological response to encountering the physically abject (such as a corpse or spoiled food) is a bodily sickness, ultimately culminating in a desire to vomit or actually vomiting.

For Kristeva, vomiting is primarily a response to encountering the abject, but I suggest that vomit itself is also abjected. It is concealed in bathrooms, buried in trash cans, or covered in sawdust, and it is removed as quickly as possible—flushed, taken to the dumpster, swept up and mopped away, all traces eradicated from the human body by brushing teeth and washing the face. Vomiting is considered an unquestionably unpleasant act, one that is associated with illness, drunkenness, and embarrassment. Vomit removes undesirable elements from the
body—elements which are even more grotesque upon leaving the body than they were inside. The repulsiveness of both the act and product of vomiting marks it as a private act, and it is unacceptable to vomit in a public space (hence, the cultural practice of quickly running from a room in an attempt to conceal the act). Encountering someone else’s vomit often incites a desire to vomit even in a healthy person, and cleaning another person’s vomit is a duty generally reserved for those who regularly interact with other abjected substances (urine, feces, spit)—namely, janitors and mothers. Vomit violates the normal functioning of the body’s digestive system, expelling the contents of the stomach through the mouth (another repulsive element, since it passes over the taste buds) and into the outside world.

The revulsion associated with vomiting, then, marks it as an abject act, one that most people attempt to avoid at all costs. Bulimics, however, self-induce vomiting regularly, both after binges and after regular meals, and girls on pro-mia websites do not express disgust at the act of vomiting. Instead, I contend that far from rejecting or pulling away from the abjected substance, the bulimic draws herself into an intimate relationship with it, using vomit as a source of pleasure and comfort. This intimacy with abjection is apparent on the message boards of Pro-Mia Community. Throughout the various forums on the website, girls give detailed, descriptive accounts of their purging activities, including which foods they most like to binge on because of the relative ease of vomiting them back up. In a thread titled “NEVER binge on noodles,” the girls debate whether or not pasta is a good purge food based on the way that it tastes “coming back,” and an extensive discussion develops about the use of mayonnaise as a purge aid, with multiple girls claiming that “it makes everything slide right up.” Cassie said that she hated mayonnaise and used it in binges because eating it made her nauseous (and thus made purging easier). Several other girls responded, saying, “OMG, I hate mayo too! I’m totally
going to try that” and “I’m going to dump mayo on my pasta next time so that it comes up easier.”

Throughout the forums, users expressed similar levels of enjoyment in both bingeing and purging. One thread offered a poll: “Do you purge to binge or binge to purge?”, and users both voted and commented upon their responses. Though the outcome was very slightly in favor of bingeing, an almost equal number of users indicated that they actually engaged in binge eating because they loved purging so much, rather than the other way around. Typically, users indicated that their preference for one or the other shifted at different times, but almost all of them admitted that they enjoyed vomiting, so purging is not understood as repulsive, but as even a source of pleasure. For instance, seventeen-year-old user Cassie writes, “I binged and purged twice in a row at a buffet today. The food was pretty tasty but what I loved was when I went to the bathroom to purge. I love purging when everything slides right up.” Users on Pro-Mia Community describe a “successful” purging experience with a sense of pride, describing feelings of catharsis and accomplishment. It is not simply the sudden empty feeling of the stomach that creates pleasure, but also the process of vomiting itself. Thus, the abject becomes a source of comfort rather than disgust, and while the food itself is expelled, the abject is symbolically drawn in as a substitute for healthy affective responses to traumatic situations, breaking down the boundaries between subject and abject. Kristeva suggests that:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection...’I’ want none of that element, sign of their desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it. But since the food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me,’ who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself...’I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violent sobs, of vomit.
While Kristeva was not writing explicitly about bulimia, her description of the ways that expelling undesired elements enables one to become something else bears an uncanny resemblance to the ways in which bulimics describe the binge-purge cycle as emotional catharsis, binging to indulge temporarily in overwhelming feelings and purging to expunge those same emotions. Bulimic girls frequently describe an increased number of binge-purge cycles during times of crisis, such as death or divorce in the family. For instance, one user wrote about how she coped with the grief she felt over her grandmother’s death and funeral by engaging in massive binges and purges, claiming that both eating and vomiting “felt really good.” However, emotional stressors often affect non-eating disordered teenage girls’ eating habits, either through a sharp decrease or an increase compared to typical consumption levels (Fryer, Waller, and Kroese 1997). Thus, while bulimic girls’ particular coping mechanisms are atypical, the turn to food as a source of comfort (or the rejection of that comfort) represents a broader feminine adolescent mode of coping.

The comfort pro-mia girls have in sharing intensely personal stories about their bodily processes is an important point to consider. Vomit and feces are taboo topics of discussion in American culture, and the open and frank discussion of these subjects among girls in pro-mia cyberspace directly contests the ways that hegemonic femininity is tied to bodily cleanliness and perfumed scents. Bulimia challenges the boundedness of the body, bringing the internal contents of the body—partially digested food, bile, excrement—into the external world, both physically and discursively, and in pro-mia digital spaces. The bulimic girl subject violates the societal idealization of adolescent feminine bodies—especially white bodies—as thin, pretty, clean, and controlled. Although adolescent boys are allowed and even expected to be dirty and smelly, girls are required to maintain a constant image of carefully concealed cleanliness,
making beautification procedures invisible and removing all traces of the previous unkempt state (Brumberg 1998). Girls are trained to tame their appetites both to avoid gaining weight and to appear in control of their bodies and lives, exemplifying the middle and upper class conception of food as a widely-available luxury that can be consumed or avoided at will. The embrace of excess is culturally linked to working class girls, girls of color, and lesbians, and thus excessive noise, consumption, and body size stand in marked contrast to normative femininity (Bordo 1993; Skeggs 2001). While the anorexic represents the apex of feminine control, overcoming hunger pains and refusing food in order to achieve a culturally ideal body type, the bulimic is a failed feminine subject—she fully embodies and temporarily embraces the kind of consumptive excess that girls are culturally expected to avoid. The implication of consumptive control is embedded in the aesthetic ideal of the thin body, but the bulimic’s attempt to acquire that body through vomiting is at odds with that ideal.

“Emptying my stomach felt sooooooooooooo good”: The Binge/Purge Cycle and Jouissance

Freud (1922) suggests that the subject’s pursuit of enjoyment is limited by the pleasure principle, by which the psyche seeks to reduce tension by constantly returning to a state of equilibrium. Thus, the pleasure principle attempts to limit enjoyment because experiencing too much pleasure would permit the id, the instinctual, pleasure-seeking component of the psyche, to overwhelm the ego, the realistic component that prioritizes long-term benefits over immediate pleasures. Lacan (1959-1960) contends that the pleasure principle’s command is to “enjoy as little as possible”; yet, the subject attempts to push past the limits set by the ego. 

_Jouissance_, however, exceeds, transgresses, and violates the pleasure principle. The ego forbids access to _jouissance_, and according to Lacan, _jouissance_ is incompatible with and inaccessible to
the speaking subject. Since too much pleasure results in pain, the subject’s pursuit of jouissance is not simply a pursuit of extreme pleasure, but rather of pleasure-pain.

Yet, the subject does not simply avoid the pursuit of jouissance; rather, the pleasure-pain promised by jouissance is intensely compelling. Lacan (1977) contends that the subject can approach (though not reach) jouissance through the erotogenic zones. While this has often been interpreted in terms of sex acts, Dean (2000) insists that jouissance is not necessarily sexual; rather, sex is culturally coded as the highest degree of physical pleasure possible. I suggest, then that jouissance provides an important conceptual tool in understanding the physical pleasures of bulimic behavior. The concept of jouissance provides unique insight into the ways in which pleasure and pain are closely related, particularly when the subject seeks a degree of pleasure that is unhealthy. While non-bulimics understand bingeing and purging as painful and disgusting paths to thinness and emotional control, pro-mia forums are overflowing with intensely pleasure-filled descriptions of both modes of bulimic behavior. The physical and psychic pleasure that accompanies bingeing and purging has not been adequately theorized in eating disorder literature, so jouissance offers an important theoretical tool for explaining a critically important aspect of girls’ bulimic practices. The bulimic pleasure of bingeing is described as intensely physical, a craving for food (in both type and quantity) that approaches the sacred and sexual dimensions of other people’s descriptions of pleasure. For instance, in a thread titled “I love purging” on noeating.com, Meredith wrote,

I always knew I loved purging, i hate the feeling of the sore throat. But when its all coming up I feel like a winner. Like I finally did something right, I love it. I was reading a book called love sick. And one of the girls in the book said it feels like three mini orgasms in a row, i think i agreee..

Celia agreed with Meredith’s sexualized description of purging:
These girls’ responses illuminate the distinct physical pleasure that they achieve from the act of purging. Both girls use sexual metaphors to describe the feeling of purging—it is not simply enjoyable; it is orgasmic. While the pleasure that accompanies “a good purge” is often described in terms that imply a psychic release, these two girls suggest that the process of purging grants them a physical release as well. While many girls note the negative parts of purging, such as sore throats, accidentally choosing a “bad” purge food, and making a mess, purging is often not seen as an unpleasant way to achieve weight loss. Rather, the act of vomiting produces physical and mental ecstasy for many bulimics:

a good purge is like floating on air, like forgiving yourself for mistakes, like forgetting about the f’d up day you had, like feeling successful, like being happy. a good purge is like knowing I CAN DO ANYTHING. (Sarah, “I love purging” thread)

The pleasure of purging is not only figurative—while the possibility of weight loss produces psychic pleasure for bulimic girls, pleasure is also experienced in a distinctly physical way, particularly through the erotogenic zones of the mouth and the tongue. For instance, girls frequently have vivid and explicit discussions about the kind of food they enjoy bingeing on. One thread on PMC discussed the best purging foods, and several girls mentioned that they particularly enjoy purging ice cream because “it’s so nice and cold and tastes sooo good coming back up.” The user finds enjoyment both in the binge (in a culturally legible mode of achieving pleasure through eating) as well as the purge, which both feels good (since ice cream is cold and smooth) and tastes good. Similarly, some foods are marked as “bad” purging foods
because of their undesirable taste and texture. In a thread titled “Foods difficult to purge” on NoEating.com, Megan writes,

> I agree with the comment on chili- anything flavored with hot pepper is dreadful. Burritos are the worst, between the thick bean/cheese filling, the doughy wrap, and the hot pepper- UGH! The worst.

And Wendy writes:

> Like Renee said, bread. Any doughy food like pizza or baked goods (cinnamon rolls) are extremely hard, if not impossible.

Interestingly, while the ostensible goal of bulimia is weight loss, bulimic girls do not avoid foods that are particularly high in fat or calories, even though message boards users constantly note that purging does not eliminate all food from the stomach. Instead, the foods marked as “bad” are those that do not taste good “coming back up” or those that have an undesirable texture, such as “doughy” bread products. The binge-purge process is marked not only as a mechanism for emotional catharsis or weight loss, but as a pursuit of physical *jouissance*, seeking the greatest amount of pleasure possible through physically and mentally harmful practices. Thus, pro-mia girls do not simply seek to avoid particular foods on the basis of weight loss benefits, but rather on the relative levels of pleasure that they bring during the processes of bingeing and purging.

The binge-purge cycle itself can also be conceived as *jouissance*. Bingeing is often coded as complete pleasure seeking, fulfilling a desire to consume food without thinking about the consequences. Frequently, threads emerge on many of the sites in which girls make lists of the foods they consumed in their most recent binges. Kendra, a user on the Livejournal group Live2purge, listed the components of the previous evening’s two-part binge-purge cycle:
I b/p'd. TWICE. And BOTH were smooth as hell.

THIS NEVER HAPPENS TO ME.

I ate 2 pounds of tater tots with ranch
8 cream cheese wantons
8 cheese-filled pretzel nuggets also with ranch dip
a quart of Reese's ice cream (don't do it, it's nasty. I leave peanut butter, but not peanut butter flavored ice cream)
two big Polar bars (squares of rich chocolate cake with a layer of thick whipped cream, coated in melted chocolate)
2 liter of Mountain Dew

Seeing as how ice cream makes me feel really sick, both purges were splendid and involved minimal choking and hacking. Marvelous.

The contents and pleasure associated with binges are often described with vivid, ecstatic detail, up until a point of painful, sickening fullness is reached. Binges involve the consumption of a quantity of food far beyond the amount that the stomach is meant to contain, and girls also frequently describe the overwhelming nausea that results from the amount of food that they have consumed. As Kendra points out, though, this feeling is an essential part of the binge-purge process—girls intentionally reach a point of sickening fullness in order to make the purging process easier. The pleasure of bingeing devolves into the inevitable pain of a stomach filled past its capacity, and this pain is then relieved through the process of purging. Purging is itself both pleasurable and painful, bringing ecstasy through the process of emptying the stomach and the avoiding consequences of ingesting mass quantities of food, but ultimately also bringing physical pain and discomfort through throat soreness, intense pressure in the eyes, and bite marks on the hand, in addition to many long-term health consequences.

Lacan (1977) suggests that striving for jouissance is based on a false belief that we once had a primary experience of satisfaction; however, this belief is a myth. The continual return to the binge/purge cycle can be seen as a quest for the ultimate binge—the ultimate fulfillment of
gastronomical desires through the exact combination of foods that will make the bulimic subject feel full and whole—as well as a quest for the illusive purge that removes all of the stomach’s contents and makes one feel completely empty. Yet, these goals are not achievable. The pro-mia subject continually returns to the binge as a source of comfort and fulfillment not because it provides a sense of wholeness, but precisely because it fails to do so.

Moreover, Dean (2000) points out that “jouissance remains so far beyond the pleasure principle that it works against the subject’s well-being” (125). Kendra describes her massive double binge-purge session as “marvelous” and “splendid,” but these practices are both physically and mentally unhealthy. And while Meredith and Celia assert that purging feels “orgasmic,” the physical pleasure that they receive from self-induced vomiting is inevitably abated by the tremendous health risks that accompany this practice. The pursuit of bulimic pleasure evidences the incompatibility of the pursuit of jouissance with the subject’s desire to survive and thrive. While bingeing and purging provide temporary physical and emotional pleasures, the very serious long-term consequences of this behavior—severe tooth decay, vocal cord damage, hormonal imbalances, kidney failure, and even death—mark them as pleasures that are against the subject’s best physical interests. The pursuit of jouissance, then, is inextricably linked to the death drive, particularly in the instance of the bulimic subject. Freud (1922) suggests that individuals constantly return to traumatic events because of “an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of things” (308) — thus, the death drive compels the subject to attempt to return to a pre-life state. According to Dean, death represents not punishment for the pursuit of jouissance, but rather the ultimate payoff, the proof that desire was finally and completely fulfilled.
The possibility of death is a constant specter on pro-eating disorder message boards. Girls frequently acknowledge the health risks of engaging in bulimic behavior, and some threads even discuss the odds of dying. For instance, one thread on PMC discussed a made-for-television movie, *A Secret Between Friends*, in which a bulimic character dies from complications related to her eating disorder. Several girls praised the film, saying “It’s nice to see a realistic image of bulimia on TV,” and “I hope this movie helps other girls not to be bulimic. I wish I’d never started.” Girls acknowledge death as a possible effect of bulimia, and occasionally (but rarely) the fear of death emerges in message board threads. For instance, in a thread about the “positive and negative aspects of bulimia” on NoEating, Kelsey writes:

> It's a coping mechanism for me- an outlet for my anxiety. However, as it could kill me, I should probably look into a different method of stress relief, don't you think?

And Snowflake writes in her “Cons” column that there is a “strong possibility of death.”

However, among both pro-mias and pro-anas, the threat of death is rarely a motivator for seeking treatment. Among bulimics, the possibility of death is perhaps more a phantasm than a reality—statistically, bulimics are at less risk of dying from their illnesses than their anorexic counterparts because bulimia does not typically result in extreme weight loss, and complications such as a ruptured esophagus are rare (National Eating Disorders Association 2005). For bulimics, then, it is not so much a drive toward literal death as much as toward self-destruction. The belief that death is possible perhaps serves not so much as a warning sign (particularly since it is a rare complication) but rather as a badge of honor for girls who continually refuse treatments despite the potential negative consequences. Girls overstate the likelihood of dying from bulimia, asserting that the potentially fatal complications are “negative,” yet the affect
conveyed through posts like the ones above is largely flat—even when girls talk about death as a possibility, it does not seem to frighten them. Death itself is not the goal—girls on many of the sites referred to those who die from eating disorders as “sad” and “stupid”—but rather, avoiding death while maintaining self-destructive behaviors.

However, the bulimic pursuit of jouissance is often explicitly denied. One of the most common types of threads I encountered was the “warning” thread. On PMC, there was an entire section devoted to the discussion of “Bulimic Reality,” and a sticky thread (one permanently maintained at the top of the forum) on NoEating.com was titled “So you want an eating disorder...” In both cases, the topic was ostensibly directed toward women and girls who came to the site wanting to develop an eating disorder. They included information about the negative physical and social effects of eating disorders, such as the following tongue-in-cheek suggestions from the NoEating thread:

3) If you plan on purging you should visit your dentist and ask them to grind all the enamel off your teeth. While there also ask if they can pull out a couple of existing fillings. Your teeth will be wrecked soon anyway so you may as well get a head start and learn what it feels like to have super sensitive teeth once your enamel is gone.

[...] 
7) Throw away your calendar. Stop asking people their name. Leave your backpack and purse at home every time you go out. You need to learn what it’s like to live without a memory. As well as making you stupid malnutrition will rob you of your memory. Stand up every ten minutes to make sure you turned off the kettle/iron/tap. You know you are forgetful and you are anxious about that. Do this all day every day. You will soon forget why anyway as your memory becomes utterly useless.

Billie responded:

oh you left out the bruising, the bleeding, the crippling depression, the hysteria, the anxiety, the panic attacks, the smells, the physical pain...

but other than that...pretty much what [you] said
And Piper replied:

i think a round of applause is due.
brutal honesty--sometimes one dose is all you need.

While the forums unquestionably provide a unique space for girls to discuss the side effects of their eating disorders, the ubiquity and the casual tone of these discussions suggested that girls derived a kind of pleasure from being “hard core” enough to suffer side effects. While “wanas” (girls who came to the sites hoping to learn to be bulimic) were decried for trying to develop eating disorders, the tone that these proscriptions took (“If you’re here looking to get an ED, get out!”) often came across less as concern for potentially vulnerable young girls and more as attempts to demarcate who was a “real” bulimic and who was not (a topic that I explore further in a later section). While these threads caution wanatas that these side effects are undesirable and should be avoided at all costs, mias offer each other recognition and share camaraderie on the basis of the health effects and horror stories that they experience and discuss. Thus, the bulimic’s pursuit of jouissance also becomes a mechanism for seeking and offering recognition in pro-mia digital spaces—while girls must explicitly deny that they take pleasure in purging, affective undercurrents of pleasure and desire radiate from their discussions of their purges.

Dean (2000) notes that jouissance is not merely psychic, but also social: “The Lacanian concept of jouissance moves this familiar idea of pleasure-in-danger out of the realm of individual psychology into the field of social relations. Lacan does this by showing how pleasure always bears some relation to the Other’s jouissance” (163). On pro-mia message boards, the connection between jouissance and recognition is evident. In much the same way that girls receive validation from other users for sharing explicit stories of their experiences with the abject, they also receive recognition from other bulimic girls by discussing the pleasure-pain of
bingeing and purging. Threads are filled with girls validating each others’ comments, as in the “I love purging” discussion above. Yet, users do not always express the same opinions—for instance, in that thread, Lily dissents:

I fail to see what makes you happy about puking up your guts, looking like you’ve just been bawling your eyes out and feeling like you’ve swallowed razors. Just my opinion, but it's not that glamorous or that Woot!¹⁶ I don’t like purging, I’m addicted to it, there’s a difference.

However, even when girls do not agree on some specific aspects of bulimia, the forums still function as important sources of recognition because they are not condemned for their desires in the way that they often are condemned by non-bulimics. While Lily admits that she does not understand why other girls find purging pleasurable, she also does not tell these girls that their pleasure in purging is disgusting or deranged—it is simply “not that glamorous.”

However, the bulimic subject has to give up the pursuit of jouissance via the pleasure of the binge-purge cycle in order to be recognized as a healthy (non-eating disordered) subject. Girls constantly express wanting to be healthy, have positive relationships, and live normal lives, but they also express fears that people outside of pro-eating disorder communities can never understand the significance of bulimia in their lives (which will be discussed further in the next section). Finding pleasure in the abject is unrecognizable and illegible to non-bulimics, and so pro-mia girls cannot seek recognition from their friends and family members. Bulimic subjects cannot admit the pleasure they receive from bingeing and especially from purging because of the abjected nature of vomit. The fear of being discovered as a bulimic overwhelms many girls,

¹⁶ “Woot” is an expression of excitement.
and many cannot imagine simply admitting to their disorder, much less acknowledging the pleasure that they experience from purging.

“No one understands me like you guys do”:
Failures and Refusals of Recognition from Non-Bulimics

It is important to note that pro-mia girls are only comfortable openly discussing purging within the confines of pro-mia message boards, among other bulimics. Users repeatedly refer to the shame and embarrassment they feel when someone catches them purging or smells vomit on their breath, and they go to great lengths to conceal their purging habits from non-bulimics. On PMC, the “Health Concerns” forum specifically addresses physical issues that bulimics have with tooth erosion, bloody vomit, mouth sores, diarrhea, and hair loss, while the “Bulimic Reality” forum (the only forum able to be viewed by non-registered users) contains many messages describing in detail their most negative experiences with bulimia. For instance, Allison writes, “i was in 10th grade and had just purged my lunch. my bf kissed me and said i tasted like puke. he confronted me and said he knew i was bulimic amd it was so disgusting that i would do it and not brush me teeth after(enamel erosion duhhh) i broke up with him two days later.” Common stories include vomiting outside of the toilet (including vivid descriptions of the color and content of the vomit), clogging the toilet with either excessive amounts of vomit or laxative-induced defecation, and being caught purging by a loved one, either directly or because of a telltale smell.

One of the most popular threads revolved around stories of being caught in the act of vomiting, and many girls shared their embarrassment at being discovered. Beckie wrote:

Just a few months ago, I went on a trip for sophmores and juniors from my high school, the trip was to tour colleges and we had just finished touring one and they gave each of us a meal ticket for the cafeteria. Of course I binged on...
everything I could find, the pizza, cheese burgers, ice cream, and god knows what else. Anyway, my friend left to go get some ice cream after I told her I was going to the bathroom (this was before she found out I am bulimic) and I found a single occupancy bathroom right outside the cafeteria went in and locked the door and turned on the water to cover any choking sound up even though I am normally very quite, anyway like 15 mins later I hear knocking on the door and people asking if I am okay, I naturally stop immediately for fear that I have been caught. I flushed and took my hair down out of my pony tail and sprayed some body mist to cover up any smell. I opened up the door and there are 15 people standing outside the bathroom waiting on me and the group chaperones were there too. They told me they thought I was dead because I had been in there so long, completely embarassed I slip off to the side and the first girl went to the door to go in and it had locked. I was mortified! Not only had they probably suspected what I was doing, but now they had to round up the other 10 kids who were still in the cafeteria and we had to walk to the other end of campus for everyone else to go because I forgot to hit the unlock button on my rush out of the bathroom. Needless to say this was quite embarrassing and I was so ashamed.

Beckie’s account illuminates several themes that ran through discovery-centered posts: using standard bulimic tricks, such as running water, to cover the sound of vomiting, spending lengthy amounts of time in the bathroom, attempting to cover the physical signs of purging (such as red, swollen faces, bad breath, or traces of vomit on the face or hand), and interestingly, the assumption of being caught without actually having been confronted. While many users discussed instances of being explicitly confronted, a great number of posters asserted that they had been found out because of a look or just an assumption that people must have known what was going on. Freud (1909) suggests that shame is a guardian of morality, a means by which the superego attempts to channel desires into appropriate channels. Shame is distinct from guilt in that while guilt is focused on action, shame is focused upon the self (Lewis 1971). Bulimics’ fear of being discovered is rooted in shame that emerges from the violation of feminine bodily norms. Girls understand that their bingeing and purging behaviors are in direct opposition to social expectations of feminine cleanliness and control, and the shame they feel over their failure to approximate these norms compels them to conceal their bulimic behaviors.
No one ever admitted to wanting to be caught—unequivocally, being discovered by non-bulimics was understood to be an embarrassing and horrifying event. Some were worried that they would be forced into treatment, while others simply understood that they would be stigmatized for their eating disorder, that vomiting was broadly considered repulsive and that they, by extension, were disgusting for intentionally inducing it. Yet, while users express fears of being discovered, Beckie’s post exemplifies the contradiction in this fear: she is embarrassed about being caught, but she binged in full view of her classmates and then purged in a cafeteria bathroom, which other students would inevitably be waiting to use. While she turns on the sink to muffle sounds, she does not consider how her fifteen minute purging session would similarly draw attention to her actions. The frequency with which this type of incident appeared on the forums—a public binge coupled with a semi-private purge—suggests that girls’ explicitly expressed fear of being caught is complicated by a not-entirely-conscious desire to be discovered.

Girls often said that the feeling that only other bulimics could understand them was a strong motivation for joining pro-mia digital communities. Emily had been posting on PMC for over a year at the time of our interview. She explained that she sought the website out because she was frustrated with the ways that her non-eating disordered friends and family reacted to her bulimia:

Adriane says:
So what made you start posting?

Emily says:
I've been bulimic since I was 14/15, I "recovered" in a sense for about 11 months when I was 16. But the mentality of the eating disorder never left me and I was tired of being surrounded by people that didn't understand and didn't want to.
People say they want to understand an eating disorder, but that's not entirely it.
They want to understand how to cure it. But the cure isn’t always the most important part. Sometimes you just need people to understand and empathise.

Later in the interview, we began talking about how her friends and family responded when they learned she was bulimic. She described them as generally “supportive but worried,” and I reflected on the ways that many girls on Pro-Mia Community had lamented their parents’ and friends’ attitudes about their eating disorders. Uniformly, all users expressed their frustration with others’ responses—no one ever offered a story of someone who had reacted in what they deemed an appropriate way, so I asked Emily:

Adriane says:
How do you wish they'd respond?

Emily says:
I don't. I don't think there's a good way someone can really react to an eating disorder. But personally, i never wanted them to find out, it causes both myself and them grief.

This point is critical to understanding the reasons that internet users seek out pro-mia websites and the ways that they present themselves on these sites. While media and popular dialogue about these websites express disbelief and disgust at their content, bulimic girls frequently express a sense of belonging, remarking that, for example, “PMC is my favorite place on the web” or “No one understands me like you guys do.” Within the message boards, sharing stories about the contents of a purge or the embarrassment of clogging a toilet with vomit cements a distinct sense of camaraderie—a thread often begins with one user sharing an embarrassing story of a purging incident and asking other users to offer their own stories. Other users comply, offering empathetic responses such as “I know what you mean” or “I’ve been there,” and then sharing their stories and asking whether anyone else has ever has a similar experience. Thus, sharing embarrassing stories becomes a way to bond over the least desirable aspects of being bulimic, and users gain both credibility and acceptance by participating in these exchanges.
So while parents, friends, and significant others see themselves as expressing love and concern in their admonitions about girls’ disordered eating behaviors, girls perceive this behavior as a failure to understand them. The black-and-white understanding of disordered eating as a problem that must be eradicated is one that seems insensitive to bulimic girls who, as discussed above, have incorporated their eating disorders into their identities in ways that make it seem that eradicating the eating disorder would be erasing them. They do not believe their fundamental need for recognition can be met by their families and friends, but rather by other users in internet communities who similarly see bulimia as an essential part of their self-concepts which cannot be easily extricated. Many bulimic girls believe that their eating disorder is not simply a mechanism to cope with overwhelming emotions or a result of a dysfunctional body image, but rather something that cannot be chosen or changed. Thus, the promise of recognition offered by girls who share the same feelings about bulimia, who do not dismiss it as a disorder that must be eradicated, is the most meaningful source of validation for mias.

Repeatedly, in both the forums and in my interview with Emily, pro-mias asserted that they wanted to be understood, and any attempt to “cure” them was deemed a failure of understanding.

“Get Out, Wanas!”: Policing the boundaries of the Pro-Eating Disorder Community

However, the bulimic subject’s desire to be recognized also compels her to juxtapose herself to those she does not identify with. Pro-ana and pro-mia girls’ complete disgust at “wannarexics”—girls who come to the message boards seeking information about how to develop an eating disorder or who do not demonstrate a level of knowledge that validates their claim of having an eating disorder—shows the extent to which anorexics and bulimics perceive
themselves as members of an elite club. A thread on PMC titled “A ‘friend’ is using mia to gain
attention!” expresses disbelief and disgust at Sarah, a friend of Amy, a regular PMC poster, who
openly discusses purging with her friends and boyfriend. Amy asserts that her own boyfriend of
a year and a half is clueless about her bulimia and decries Sarah for not purging frequently
enough to be considered a real bulimic. Other users quickly agree with Amy, asserting that they
(as ‘real’ bulimics) are embarrassed about their conditions, and rather than suggesting that
Sarah is brave for sharing her struggles, implying that she is only using bulimia as an attention-
grabbing tactic and repeatedly calling her an attention whore. They suggest that bulimia is not
Sarah’s “real” problem, but rather that she has an underlying psychological issue that compels
her to claim a bulimic identity. Similarly, in a thread discussing pop star Kelly Clarkson’s struggles
with binging and purging, PMC users expressed frustration that Clarkson called herself bulimic
because she claimed to have simply “snapped out of it” after six months. Identifying as a
bulimic (as opposed to just a girl who binges and purges) connects an adolescent girl to a
broader community of similarly-identified subjects, providing a basis upon which she can seek
recognition from other girls and women. While bingeing and purging are socially condemned
behaviors, girls still find a degree of legibility through claiming a bulimic identity—to outsiders,
they can explain their behaviors as an outgrowth of inner turmoil over body image and
emotional trauma, and to bulimics, they can find camaraderie through the shared
understanding of bulimia as a deeply important part of themselves. Girl subjects only come to
recognize themselves through the Other, and so the process of articulating and negotiating a
bulimic identity online is an essential component of subjectivation.

This process of constructing a bulimic identity necessarily involves a demarcation
between those who can claim such a subject position and those who cannot. Kristeva (1982)
suggests that both individual and group identity can only exist through the production and maintenance of boundaries, clearly marking those who belong and excluding or marginalizing those who threaten these borders. These exclusions are abjected, cast aside from social legibility. While societal proscriptions regarding feminine control and cleanliness abject the bulimic body, bulimics themselves also produce abjected subjects through the policing of their group identity. Following Kristeva, Butler indicates that the domain of the abject is critical to the formation of the ideal subject, for “The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (1993, 3). Thus, in order to articulate a pro-mia identity, girls must make explicit not only what counts as bulimic behavior but also what does not—and what is at stake is not only excluding wanatas, but also girls’ desire to avoid the wana label themselves. The threat of abjection (which bulimics have already experienced from both anorexics and non-eating disordered family and friends) looms within the pro-mia community, marking out acceptable practices, discursive conventions, and narrative structures that “real” mias adhere to. Typically, users fall back on the guidelines listed in the DSM-IV (which many of them are familiar with because of their treatment histories), though they also draw from experiential knowledge in order to exclude people who are not “really” bulimic, particularly in discussing what they deemed to be appropriate reactions to the possibility of being discovered by non-bulimics. Embarrassment and shame were consistently cited as responses to being caught purging by a friend or family member, and as the Sarah example above demonstrates, the absence of these emotions was cause for suspicion.

However, I suggest that the blurring of bodily boundaries and the embracing of the abject that characterize bulimia also lead to a figurative loosening of the borders of the pro-mia...
community. Bulimic practices of bingeing and purging inherently challenge the notion of tightly controlled borders of the body, and I suggest that this rejection of bodily boundedness enables comfort with a more generalized loosening of borders. Moreover, bulimics’ intimate relationship with vomit—a substance that non-bulimics shudder at and avoid—compels them to broadly consider possible points of identification, since they have found an unlikely source of comfort in something that is broadly panned. Finally, mias’ secondary positioning in the pro-eating disorder community leads to a broader community ethic of inclusion, prioritizing other members’ feelings of comfort over the articulation of a strictly defined group identity. Kristeva writes, “We may call abjection a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from that which threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives” (9-10). This, then, is the threat of the bulimic subject—its refusal to adhere to distinct boundaries of communities and bodies does not cast it completely away from the austere anorexic or even the non-disordered subject; rather, the bulimic subject illuminates the fictive and illusory nature of all boundaries.

Unlike many pro-ana sites (see Brotsky & Giles 2007; Day & Keys 2008; Pollack 2003), however, the pro-mia websites I studied do not actively ban users who do not conform to strict diagnostic criteria. For the most part, these sites are fairly inclusive of anyone who exhibits binging/purging behaviors, though users who do not meet the DSM-IV guidelines tend to describe themselves as having “mia tendencies” rather than espousing a fully bulimic identity.

The relatively open nature of these websites stands in marked contrast to the pro-ana websites I encountered (as well as those discussed in the pro-eating disorder website literature).
For instance, Pro-Anas Unite requires new users to post an introductory message before posting any other message on the bulletin boards, and this introductory message must include the user’s BMI. If the BMI listed is not 17 or below (the requirement for a clinical diagnosis of anorexia), other users make fun of the newbie, and a site administrator subsequently bans her. There is an entire forum on PAU titled “Wanarexia + Fauxlimia + ED DON’T’S,” which details all of the behaviors that users should avoid and mocks everyone who has tried to join the site without having an acceptably low BMI. The site owner also hosts a site specifically devoted to exposing and making fun of “wannarexics,” which posts screen captures of posts from chats and forums where users have failed to meet the requirements to qualify as pro-ana. One user was banned not only for having a slightly-higher-than-anorexic BMI, but also because the PAU site administrators found a math error:

From: StillFightingIt
Subject: banned
To: SuperThin
banned: hangingaround
reason: says she has Anorexia (restrictive type) and an 18.8 BMI. 
whats also funny is that she is 22 and says she has had an ED for 15 years but she says she continued by saying:
I’ve been struggling with anorexia and bulimia off and on since I was about 8 years old.

8+15=23 not 22.

Girls on pro-mia forums often remark that they feel alienated by the extreme policing that occurs on pro-ana sites. In a thread titled “Does anyone else not visit the ana section?” users discuss the differences between the ana and mia forums of NoEating.com. Elizabeth, who started the thread, writes:
i dont look at it anymore, because it makes me feel depressed seeing all these new skinny mini's on there being all depressed because they ate half a carrot before they went to bed, or seeing threads like 'OMG i ate 500cals today am such a pig!' it just really annoys me i know its a eating disorder but it just makes the mia's like myself feel like whales! because we can consume 20x more.

Bridget replies:

I NEVER look at ana side of forum nemore, too many people, a handful of wana's, thread move by 2 quick, it depresses me cuz of how big I am now, etc etc.

Girls commonly lament that pro-ana forums are “depressing” because pro-anas are intensely concerned with weight loss and often ridicule girls who are considered “too fat.”

Moreover, anorexia is often situated as a more admirable eating disorder than bulimia by both pro-ana and pro-mia girls: pro-ana girls often characterize their own bulimic phases as “falls” or failures of self-control, and pro-mia girls often express their desire to be anorexic in statements such as PMC user Sally’s succinct statement, “I wish I had the control to be ana.” Warin (2010) confirms that on pro-ana sites, “Those who binged and vomited […] were disparaged for their messiness and weakness—their loss of control, their falling prey to the desire of appetite” (94).

While DSM-IV guidelines for anorexics are relatively strict (requiring a BMI of 17 or below), guidelines for the diagnosis of bulimia are much more subjective, defining anorexics as a more “exclusive club” than bulimics. Thus, digital pro-ana discourses abject the bulimic subject, forming the boundary between acceptable anorexic control and unacceptable excess. This hierarchization of anorexia and bulimia bears out the ways that idealized white femininity is hegemonically coded in terms of control and cleanliness. Overconsumption, gluttony, and messiness, however, are linked to adolescent masculinity and thus marked as deviant attributes for adolescent females. The bulimic’s embrace of bingeing and purging behaviors are marked by pro-ana and pro-mia girls as failures of control and ultimately as failures of femininity, and even
bulimic girls mark their own behaviors as inferior to the strictness and cleanliness of anorexic control. Pro-mia spaces thus become important for the construction and maintenance of group identity—while mias are abjected in pro-ana digital spaces, pro-mia forums are a space where girls can recuperate the validity of their own identity. Anas rarely venture into mia territory, so a “mia-only space” forms by default, enabling mias to openly discuss the pleasures they take in the binge-purge process without fear of criticism from anas. The bulimic group identity acts not just as a support mechanism for individuals who engage in bulimic practices, but also as a means of expressing connection to others who experience similar types of abjection, both from non-eating disordered individuals and from anorexics. Recognition is centrally important within pro-mia spaces because bulimics ostensibly offer each other a level of understanding that they cannot receive elsewhere, making other bulimics the most important source of validation.

Though many pro-mia girls express admiration for anorexics, they do not always identify with pro-anas or feel at ease visiting forums geared toward anorexics. A number of users express feeling more comfortable on mia forums, including Bridget:

I much prefer it this side, cuz I am mia, there is only a select few of us, esp regulars, we have a laff, and yeah, don't depress me on this side of the forum. and i dont feel as bad about being fat atm on this part of the forum.

Indeed, refraining from judgment was a cornerstone of the pro-mia groups I encountered. On PMC’s Site Rules, an official statement explicitly bans denigrating comments toward fat people:

Please be respectful of others in your replies to "reverse thinspo" threads. We have members here of all shapes and sizes, judgemental comments-even if not directly at someone- can be extremely hurtful...Comments such as "eeew", "how could someone let themselves get like that", "that's disgusting!" etc. will NOT be tolerated.
While users on many pro-ana sites openly express disgust toward fat people, pro-mia communities tend to be more accepting of fat bodies (though users still comment negatively about their own perceived fatness). This attempt at acceptance is likely because bulimics are usually of average or even above average weight (National Eating Disorders Association 2005), and there are frequently users in pro-mia communities who identify their BMI in the overweight category.

While pro-mia digital spaces tend to be less closely policed than pro-ana communities, mias still seek to enforce some boundaries around who gets to claim a bulimic identity. Anyone who engages in bulimic practices is welcome on most forums, but actually calling oneself a bulimic requires a degree of experience and devotion to “prove” someone’s bulimic status. This marking out of group identity, however, serves an important purpose in maintaining the significance of the group—if girls feel that they can only meaningfully receive recognition from those who relate to them, then it is important to police the group’s boundaries in order to ensure that everyone present on the site can relate to similar narratives of binge-purge experiences.

**Picturing Consumption: Pro-Mia Uses of the Visual**

The visual elements of pro-mia websites play an important role in the ways that bulimic identifications are articulated and in the ways that girls seek recognition from other pro-mia website users. In general, the sites tend to use very basic visual schemes with few graphics or animations (see Figure 15), likely because they are designed and operated by women and girls who want to use the site rather than by professional web designers. Users, however, employ images in several important ways. While there are some occasional uses of graphics (such as
weight loss tickers), the primary mode of visual narration employed is photography. Specifically, pro-mia forums users employ three primary types of photography: thinspiration, food porn, and self-photography.

Figure 15: Pro-Mia Community’s home page

“Thinspiration,” also referred to as “thinspo,” denotes the use of images of celebrities, models, and everyday thin women to provide inspiration for weight loss (Ferreday 2003; Gailey 2009; Norris et al 2006). While this practice extends far beyond pro-ana and pro-mia communities, it has become a critically important part of these digital spaces. Every website I encountered incorporated a section on thinspiration, either through a devoted forum section

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7 Materials meant to warn of the dangers of eating disorders, such as the documentary Thin and the Lifetime movie A Secret Between Friends, were also cited as sources of thinspiration on pro-ana and pro-mia forums. Thus, it is not only those images that seek to invoke desire through the exaltation of the thin body, but also images that are intended to provoke fear and disgust at the anorexic body or at bulimic excess, that inspire girls to continue their disordered eating patterns.
where users can submit the photographs that inspire them, or through user-created threads within other forums. In the Livejournal group that I analyzed, users periodically posted thinspo to the main group page. Additionally, there were a number of threads in which users posted links to their favorite thinspo sites—websites, blogs, and Tumblrs that are entirely devoted to housing thinspirational imagery, such as pro-thinspo.com (see Figure 16), which does not have a forum section but instead offers pro-ana and pro-mia internet users a place where they can go to find thousands of photographs, as well as tips and tricks on staying thin. Ferreday (2003) asserts that pro-anas’ use of celebrity bodies as thinspiration allows them to claim celebrities as members of the pro-ana community, demonstrating the disjuncture between the cultural idealization of extremely thin bodies and the frequently horrified reactions to images of anorexic bodies. She writes:

While mainstream culture may present some extremely thin bodies as ideal, pro-ana claims that these bodies are no different from the headless torsos that characterize its own visual economy. The implication is that women like [British model Jodie] Kidd may be engaging in practices such as bingeing and vomiting and that the combination of these practices, together with a celebratory attitude to the resulting thin body, mean that they are always already pro-ana (287).

For anorexics, then, images of thin bodies affirm their own quest for thinness, particularly when those thin bodies are broadly validated (as in the case of celebrities).
The use of reverse thinspo—in which girls look at images of supposedly fat women in order to remind themselves of the consequences of forsaking their disordered eating practices—was also common. Responding to a girl’s query on Live2Purge, about how to fight the urge to binge, Love2Starve wrote:

look at reverse thinspo and think to your self if i eat (insert food) i will look fat like her! (it works for me anyway)

Even though PMC and NoEating.com banned most kinds of reverse thinspo because they considered them “mean,” girls get around these bans by simply encouraging each other to look at these images elsewhere. SkinAndBones wrote about using the film *Hairspray* as reverse thinspo:

There’s a scene where Blonsky is wearing a tight tank dress and dear god her arms made me want to puke. I had a job at one point in my life where I had to touch these super fat people on their fat rolls (it was part of the job, unfortunately), and their fat feels different from mine. It’s super light and spongy feeling and just gross...makes me think of blubber.
Every time I think of her body, it actually induces nausea in me and I feel physically sick. It's some pretty good reverse thinspo (I don't like a lot of the typical reverse thinspo pics floating around the interwebs because they seem photoshopped and some are also vile/demeaning for other reasons).

Another user warned that the thread was against site policy and might be deleted (particularly because a self-diagnosed EDNOS user who described her body as similar to Nikki Blonsky’s wrote “I apologize for being so sickening and triggering” in response to the post), but the post remained open on the site.

The concern that SkinAndBones raises about images possibly being Photoshopped was a common concern among anas and mias that some images of bodies that they aspired to were “fake.” Images from magazines that appeared airbrushed or obviously retouched were not as inspirational as images that appeared authentic, though images of celebrities or images that had been broadly validated as “hot” often held the most currency because of the public acceptance that they signified. Interviewee Emily affirmed the appeal of “real” thinspo:

Adriane says:
Do you look at thinspo? In general, do you use images or pics (of yourself or others) as inspiration for weight loss?

Emily says:
definitely. Though I personally find real "thinspo" as inspiration. Seeing girls in the street that are a small size than myself. Or even seeing very large people and aiming not to look the same. Yes, unfortunately that is very shallow, but my mind judges my body against their's.

For Emily, seeing someone in everyday, offline circumstances also provided an important source of motivation because it solidified the relation between these bodies and hers. In general, thinspo and reverse thinspo define possible outcomes for girls’ bodies—maintaining their disordered behaviors was seen as a means of achieving the body type depicted in thinspo.
imagery, while falling out of these behaviors put one in danger of becoming a source of reverse thinspo for others.

Yet, it is important to consider the ways that these images function differently for bulimics than for anorexics. While both pro-ana and pro-mia girls use thinspo, these images are much more commonly used on pro-ana forums. On NoEating.com, a site which includes both ana and mia forums, around 95% of thinspo threads were housed on the anorexia forums. However, several girls on the mia forum indicated that rather than posting their own thinspo, they simply clicked over to the ana forums to view the thinspo that had already been posted. Moreover, the type of thinspo tends to differ: while pro-ana sites feature images of women with protruding ribs and collar bones, pro-mia forums much more commonly feature images of women who are slim rather than utterly emaciated (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: An example of bulimic thinspo

Moreover, while pro-anas used reverse thinspo, these images seemed to provoke more tangible and explicit fears of fatness among mias, particularly since their weight and BMIs were generally higher than anas. At the same time, though, pro-mia forums more commonly banned
reverse thinspo, and mias seemed to have more sympathy for those depicted in reverse thinspo images. A thread on the bulimia section of NoEating titled “Some motivation against binging” linked to a dating website connecting men with fat women which also featured a large photo gallery with sexualized pictures of fat women. While some users harshly responded, calling the women “disgusting,” others expressed admiration and even envy for the women on the dating site. Skinny wrote:

This is awesome.
Bit of a turn off aha, at the same time tho I’m jealous. The fact that they’re obviously happy being that big, and happy within themselves etccc...
I almost wish i could be like that whatever size I was.
Truth is I know it'll never happen.

Nellie agreed with Skinny’s assessment of the women’s happiness, writing:

The atmosphere on those forums is amazing tho. I had some laughs there for a couple of hours. Ofcourse i didnt post or hurt anyones feelings. But its amazing how everyone is happy there, and getting along share there love for food. There are no trolls, no assholes, no mean people, everyone is happy and welcome to grab a seat and join the buffet. Most people here are unhappy and feel sad 😞

While mia girls still viewed these images as motivation to be thin, they also openly acknowledged that the body acceptance that these fat women seemed to possess was different than the comfort that they received from their eating disorders. While anas were more likely to be simply repulsed by images of fatness, mias were more easily able to imagine that happiness was not inextricably linked to thinness. Here, mias also exemplify a contradiction that emerges from the distorted self-image created by eating disorders: while these girls see themselves as utterly undesirable and disgusting, they can look at other people with a more nuanced perspective. Skinny says that the pictures are “a bit of a turn off” for her personally, but she also expresses jealousy at the women’s happiness, and Nellie notes that the atmosphere on the
dating forums is primarily one of acceptance. The girls initially and instinctively link sexual desirability to thinness, but upon reflection, they see the women as full subjects rather than just fat bodies, and they concede that the fat women seem happier than they are.

The second major type of imagery used on pro-mia forums was food porn, or mass collections of images of different kinds of food (see Figure 18). Coward writes, “Like sexual porn, food pornography is a sex-specific mobilizing of desire or appetite...Like sexual pornography, there’s a hard-core and soft-core to food pornography. [...] In food porn, there are the pictures [of] the forbidden fruits, the cream cakes and pancakes” (1985, 27).

![Figure 18: Food porn](image)

Thus, food porn primarily consists of images of high-fat foods, which are considered dangerous, off-limits, and in the case of bulimics, binge-worthy. In a PMC thread titled “Must Have Sandwich :p”, Courtney posted a series of photographs of gourmet sandwiches (see Figure 19), and dozens of users responded, including Susan:

Those sandwiches are so much more than sandwiches—they are art. Too beautiful for this world.
Firefly commented:

So when you said sandwich...you meant sandwitch!!! Because such a thing needs a hex-ish character to go with it. I am hereby naming the sandwich the Sandwitch because it’s obviously too good to be wonderful, and so evil it’s still delectable.

Firefly later also added:

especially that #4 bitch I want to take down a thousand times

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Food porn thus evokes deep consumptive desires, compelling users to respond in ways that both praise the food and decry its seductive powers. Interestingly, the sexual metaphor extends beyond the “food porn” label itself and into descriptions of the function of the images. In users’
discussions of whether food porn was a binge trigger, words like “desire,” “satisfaction,” and “relief” often took on distinctly sexual tones, in much the same way as the threads about bingeing and purging that I discussed earlier. At times, the connection between images of food and images of sex was made explicit. On a food porn thread on the bulimia section of NoEating, Frannie writes:

I used to watch the Food Network all the time and thought this was weird, but apparently a lot of anas find themselves obsessed with food and hypothetically "masturbating" constantly, haha. Looking at well prepared, carb-infused food actually QUENCHES my appetite though...talk about weird.

In the same way that genital masturbation with the aid of pornography is used as a means of curbing one’s sexual appetite, images of high-fat food provide some pro-ana girls with a kind of masturbatory relief of gastronomical desires. Yet, while Frannie juxtaposes herself to the “weird” pro-anas who “masturbate” to food porn, her description of the way that these images quench her appetite for food is actually an exact description of the masturbatory function of food porn.

Again, though, I assert that there are differences in the ways that food porn functions on pro-ana and pro-mia forums. For pro-anas, food porn enables a kind of denial of desire, a jouissance-like experience of pleasure that is experienced through the pain of denying oneself access to food. Among anas, food porn threads feature substances that are off-limits, so they achieve pleasure through looking at things that they cannot eat. On pro-mia sites, food porn is potentially much more connected to eating practices. The stigma that surrounds the consumption of “bad” foods on pro-ana sites does not translate directly to pro-mia sites, since many mias regularly consume high-fat foods. Moreover, while anas’ engagements with food porn result in a denial of consumptive desires, mias do not insist upon the same kind of denial.
The desire for fattening foods is enabled and even encouraged. On pro-ana sites, users comment that these foods look good but they can’t eat them, and they encourage each other to avoid the foods. On pro-mia forums, though, comments are much more affirming of the food or at least allow boundaries to be blurred—the food can be eaten so long as it is purged. Gastronomical desires can be pursued, but with a price.

In several ways, food porn functions similarly to thinspo. Both kinds of images incite desire in eating disordered individuals, either to continue on one’s diet or to consider breaking it. And both kinds of images elicit massive strings of comments from users who express appreciation for the ways that the visual compels them in a way that textual descriptions of bodies or food simply cannot. Perhaps most importantly, though, both types of images represent the fantasy of disordered eating much more closely than the reality of it. Both thinspo and food porn involve idealized images, often professionally photographed in a way that hides flaws and imperfections. Comparing food photography to fashion photography, Coward writes, “For food is photographed in a very particular way; it is a regime of ideal imagery, the culinary equivalent of the removal of unsightly hairs on glamour models. The photographs, like those of models, are idealized, touched up, represent food at a perfect moment” (28). Indeed, the images featured in food porn threads (such as the sandwich thread on PMC) are often taken from restaurants’ websites, photographs which are often taken with the help of food stylists, who ensure that every component of the dish is visually appealing (even though this often means that the food is inedible, given that food’s perishable quality makes it difficult to withstand more than a few minutes of photography). These perfected images enable a fantasy of consumption that is vastly different from girls’ actual binge patterns (which tend to involve mass quantities of cheap, mass-produced junk food rather than the expensive sandwiches and
carefully crafted desserts depicted in food porn), as well as their need to purge the fattening food shortly after eating it. This also mirrors girls’ pursuit of an idealized bulimic subjectivity—they write extensively about the pleasures of the perfect purge, but the majority of their experiences involve frustration with pain, incomplete purges messiness, or discovery. They fully believe that other bulimics recognize them for “who they really are,” but the only posts that get replies are those that fall within the sites’ accepted narrative frameworks (a trend I discuss more in the final section). And certainly, the bulimic’s physical and visual encounter with the product of the purge—the vomit—stands in stark contrast to the perfectly displayed “pornographic” images of food that invoke so much desire.

The final type of image commonly seen on pro-mia forums is photographs of users’ own bodies. Self-photography was quite common on PMC but rare on the other two sites I studied, likely because PMC is private (and thus, users’ identities are more protected than on public sites). On PMC, girls periodically posted pictures of themselves to demonstrate weight loss, to visually indicate the hope for a future loss (i.e., through the use of an old photo of the user at a lower weight), or to ask other users for opinions on whether or not they were fat. For instance, Isabelle posted images of herself from before (her “fattest fatty,” with a BMI of 24.0 [within the normal range]) and after an extended purging and restricting phase (at a weight loss of 29 lbs, at a BMI of 18.9 [at the low end of the normal range]) (see Figure 20).
Figure 20: Isabelle's before and after photos

The weight loss, however, is only one difference—the first image is a shot seemingly taken by a friend at a shopping mall. The photograph is lighthearted, with Isabelle jokingly groping the hindquarters of a cow statue, looking at the camera with her tongue touching her top teeth, making a mock-sexual expression. The other two images are much more deliberately seductive. In the first of the after images, Isabelle’s hair is lightly tousled, pieces falling into her face as she bends over to expose her cleavage in a low-cut shirt, hands on her thighs. The second after picture features Isabelle’s face and arms as she stares past the camera, seemingly focusing on something else but inviting the viewer to look at her. As Barthes notes, all of these photographs required Isabelle to “transform [herself] in advance into an image” (1981, 10), but while the affect imbued in each of the images is distinct. The first image conveys Isabelle’s sense
of humor and commemorates a particular event (whether special or mundane), while the after photos were taken specifically for the purpose of posting onto PMC, transforming Isabelle into an object for other mias’ visual consumption.

While girls often post images of themselves asking for “honest opinions,” they largely seem to seek and expect validation of their thinness. In a PMC thread where users shared their most recent pictures of themselves, Cassie uploaded a series of photos (see Figure 21) with the disclaimer, “I cannot believe how FAT I look. Over 10 pounds underweight in these pics? I don’t look it. Motivation to lose more.” The images that follow the caption feature Cassie hunched over, emphasizing her thin arms and tiny waist, her head seeming out of proportion to the rest of her body. While Cassie (like Isabelle) explicitly suggests that other users will agree with her declaration of her fatness, there is no reason to expect that other users will actually respond that way. In the dozens of picture comment threads I viewed, girls consistently affirmed each other’s thinness, never once calling even an overweight girl “fat.” This proved true in Cassie’s thread as well:

Fallon: “I can’t see that you’re fat Cassie in fact I think you look great!”

Demi: “Cassie ARE YOU INSANE? You are the most fragile, delicate, thin looking girl I have seen, im so envious of you.”

Another user assures Cassie that she can “trust the guys on here because they wouldn’t lie to you”; yet, the assurance of truth-telling seems largely ceremonial. While Cassie is unquestionably thin, the site primarily operates as a support mechanism for bulimics, and a central tenet of the site is that no one criticizes anyone else’s body. Thus, the constant emergence of threads in which girls call themselves fat or ask users to “be honest” seem less like solicitations of actual opinions than of confirmation of their thinness. The images that girls post seem deliberately designed to emphasize the thinnest aspects of their bodies, except when they
post “before” pictures, which seem to purposely highlight girls’ perceived flaws. Thus, users’ photographs of themselves are primarily narcissistic, pretending to seek honest opinions but actually seeking recognition as “skinny girls.”

Freud (1914) claims that in loving another person, we forfeit some of our own self-regard, and I suggest that recognition functions similarly: in offering recognition to another subject, mias relinquish a degree of their own narcissistic presumption that they are wholly unique individuals. Mias often say that they feel like no one understands them, and while this causes anguish, it also allows them to conceive of themselves as exceptional and different. However, the cost of becoming part of a digital community is acknowledging that the initial belief in individuality was a myth, and recognizing that there are others out there who are exactly like you. However, the object libido that was extended to others must be returned to the
ego in order to maintain a healthy level of self-regard, and in pro-mia digital communities, this occurs through situations such as the discussion over Cassie’s photo. She (and other website users) has relinquished a piece of her narcissistic belief in individuality in order to offer recognition to other bulimics, and she must recollect it by receiving confirmation of her specialness (her thinness) from other websites users. Thus, she posts pictures of herself in order to solicit “honest” responses from other website users, knowing that the only response she can receive is an affirming one.

Do They Really Understand? Questioning the Realities of Recognition in Pro-Mia Cyberspace

While girls on pro-mia sites frequently state that no one understands them as well as other pro-mia users, I assert that there are limits to this understanding. Fundamentally, the desire for recognition is one that cannot be fulfilled; the subject’s opacity to others and to even herself prevents her from being fully known in a complete and satisfying way. In pro-mia digital spaces, there are several specific limitations on the bulimic subject’s ability to be fully recognized by other bulimics. First, Butler contends that ambivalence is a fundamental condition of subjectivity—we must subject ourselves to the conditions of power in order to constitute ourselves within the terms of discourse and be recognized by the Other, so the same process which grants the subject legibility is also that which constrains the terms by which the subject can articulate her identifications (1997b). On pro-mia websites, the requirement of legibility marks itself differently than in broader societal discourses surrounding femininity. While bulimic stories do not conform to hegemonic norms of feminine restraint and cleanliness, an in-group narrative style involving comfort with discussing intensely personal bodily processes with PMC users, along with that has to be adhered to in order to be understood by other users. Thus, it is
likely that ambivalent feelings exist (such as claiming to not want to be discovered but actually wanting to be caught and pushed into recovery as a means of proving that family and friends care) that are simply not expressed. Thus, the extent to which bulimic acts serve as the basis for recognition limits the types of conversation that take place, and it is rare that discussions unrelated to bulimia occur on the forums.

Finally, it is important to remember that the recognition that girls on pro-eating disorder sites seek from other bulimics is not physically or psychologically healthy for pro-mia girls. In our interview, I asked Emily if she thought that other PMC users understood her better than people offline. She responded:

Emily says:
Better is a difficult term. They are mentally ill, like myself, so there's certainly no way to say that they are a help to me. But they are understanding and they won't judge. There are places where you can feel relieved of the thoughts that plague you. Most people would not look at their friend in the same way if their friend turned around and offloaded some of the thoughts that can be shared on PMC.

The understanding offered to users on these websites is framed by the purpose of the site—to provide support for bulimics who do not want to recover. While pro-mia website users do make positive statements toward anyone who seeks recovery, taking steps to recover also necessarily excludes one from the community, because while girls on PMC are praised for recovery by other users, recovering also marginalizes them from the community (and in many cases, prompts them to withdraw from it completely). Yet, Butler (2005) indicates that the act of seeking recognition is irrevocably transformative—once we encounter another subject seeking this kind of exchange, it is impossible to return to the previous conditions of selfhood. Girls often asserted that prior to joining these kinds of communities, they felt isolated and alone, but
finding others who understood and shared their bulimic identities changed them. For mias who may consider recovery, it is difficult to contemplate giving up the kind of understanding and support that they have received from other bulimics, and it is likely difficult for them to believe that they could receive meaningful recognition from non-bulimics, even after they recover. The transformative acceptance that the pro-mia digital community offers is indeed impossible to replicate—non-bulimics certainly will not encourage their bulimic behaviors, and few will comprehend the ways that vomiting could hold such central importance in their lives. The psychic importance that this recognition holds for girls should not prevent friends and family from encouraging girls to seek treatment for bulimia (which is, unquestionably, a mental illness), it is essential to understand the ways that the desire for recognition compels girls to continue both engaging in bulimic practices and participating in pro-mia digital communities.

Recognition can provide a critical tool for interrogating the popular notion of “peer pressure.” Pro-eating disorder websites are popularly conceptualized as spaces where girls are persuaded by their peers to develop and sustain eating disorders, but this chapter contends that situating girls’ interactions on pro-mia forums in terms of the subject’s desire for recognition can open up a productive understanding of the ways that these blogs and bulletin board communities function for girls. Additionally, reframing these sites also facilitates a better understanding of how to more productively situate media and medical discourses on pro-eating disorder websites which declare them dangerous and demand that they be shut down. Girls who frequent these websites are fiercely defensive of their right to participate in these web communities, and other internet users’ attempts to persuade them to seek treatment for their disorders are often perceived as offensively paternalistic. However, it is important to recognize that the pleas for recognition embedded in girls’ forum postings can never be fulfilled because
of the community’s foundation in disordered eating, the expectation that the pro-mia subject adheres to standard group discourses, and by the subject’s inability to make herself fully known to herself or others.
CHAPTER 5:
SHE ISN’T WHORING HERSELF OUT LIKE A LOT OF OTHER GIRLS WE SEE”:
IDENTIFICATION, RECOGNITION, AND ‘AUTHENTIC’ AMERICAN GIRLHOOD
ON TAYLOR SWIFT FAN FORUMS

Allison: Her music [is] like therapy. I love that she writes all of it. I love that she cares about her fans and does things like t-partys and the 13 hr meet and greet. I love how generous she is to her fans. I love how excited she gets when she wins awards and how truly thankful she is. There's SO many different reasons.

Adriane: So, it's more than just liking her music?

Allison: Of course! I love her to death. I would do anything to meet her someday and tell her how much she means to me and how much she's helped me through.

This excerpt from an interview with Allison, a seventeen-year-old Taylor Swift fan, demonstrates the ways in which Taylor Swift’s popularity is premised upon her image as someone who, despite her international fame and popularity, is still perceived as an “all-American girl next door.” There are thousands of websites devoted to Taylor Swift, and fans on these sites write prolifically about how Taylor Swift has changed their lives, not only through her music but also through “who she is.” Fans assert that Taylor sings about subjects that are relevant not only to teenage girls, but to everyone—subjects such as falling in love, feeling like an outsider and coping with heartbreak. However, while fans position Swift as universally relatable, they also position her as a beacon of morality because of her adherence to standards of white propriety, and there is little acknowledgement of the ways that these two discourses are contradictory.
This chapter examines two websites devoted to Taylor Swift fandom, including Taylor Connect, the forum section of Taylor Swift’s official website, and Amazingly Talented, the forum section of a popular fan-produced website. Media sources and fans insist that Taylor Swift is an ordinary girl, and they continually suture her musical and extratextual personas by emphasizing the autobiographical nature of Swift’s songs. Her ordinariness makes her relatable to adolescent female fans and ultimately, accessible as an object of identification. Swift’s music and her media presence (including her Twitter, online journal, and forum posts on her official website) sell an image of “a girl just like you,” enabling fans’ identification with her as well as their belief that she recognizes them. However, the capitalist marketing strategy that underpins this image of ordinariness is also made invisible: Swift’s “authentic” image validates the fantasy that Taylor is the subject of her songs in a completely genuine way, that she experiences what “normal” teens do, and that “everyone” can relate to her, regardless of their gender, race, social class, or sexuality. Her image produces the normative expectation that there is a universal experience of adolescent girlhood love and romance.

I argue that the ability to situate and deploy Swift as an “authentic” American girl subject is wholly tied to her positioning as a white, middle class, hetero sexual, normatively feminine girl—characteristics that are repeatedly shored up through the lyrical and visual elements of her music and music videos, through media representations of her innocence and sweetness, and through fans’ insistence that she is a “good girl” whose infallibility makes her a good role model for young girls (see Figure 22).
Swift is the pop culture embodiment of Anita Harris’s can-do girl, a figure who is “flexible, individualized, resilient, self-driven, and self-made and who easily follows nonlinear trajectories to fulfillment and success” (2004, 16). In media images of girlhood, the can-do girl works hard, practices consumption as a means of displaying their girlpower-influenced femininity, and delays motherhood until she has established her career and can finally “have it all.” Harris suggests that the figure of the can-do girl establishes success as a product of individual efforts, marking all girls who do not achieve this level of success as failed subjects—as at-risk girls. Indeed, media coverage of Swift constantly depicts her as a self-made girl who achieved commercial success because of her talent, perseverance, and her drive to accomplish her dreams. Yet, in Swift’s case, the can-do image is also imbued with an air of feminine propriety, attributing much of her appeal to her status as a “good girl.” And Swift’s can-do status is repeatedly shored up through juxtapositions to at-risk girls (in media coverage, in fan discussions, and in Swift’s own music), frequently pointing to their public displays of sexuality as the reason that they have not achieved Swift’s level of success and happiness. However, Harris
points out that the can-do/at-risk typology critically neglects the ways that systemic factors related to race and class, such as lack of access to economic resources and quality education, inevitably shape girls’ ability to become can-do girls.

Studying Taylor Swift and her fandom online is vitally important. In the wake of a cultural and political climate that increasingly questions white, heterosexual hegemony, Swift’s popularity is the pop culture equivalent of the Tea Party movement. In a cultural moment in which masculine dominance, white hegemony, and heterosexual privilege are increasingly being challenged, the Tea Party movement represents intense anxiety around the deconstruction of privilege, attempting to redress these losses through a return to “traditional” morals (Sirota 2010; Stan 2010; Wise 2010; see also Coontz 2000). In contrast to artists such as Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, who explicitly foreground sexuality both visually and lyrically, Swift represents a nostalgic longing for a piece of Americana in which women’s sexual desires were kept under wraps. Swift’s music implicitly and explicitly insists that race and gender no longer matter. Yet, it privileges “traditional values” such as monogamy, propriety, and abstinence—values which are historically and inextricably tied to whiteness, heterosexuality, and normative femininity (Coontz 2000; Davy 1997; Odem 1995). Fan and media insistence that race doesn’t matter belies the very apparent racial dimensions of Swift’s popularity, seen through the visual whiteness of her music videos, the whiteness of her fan base, and Swift’s juxtaposition to racial Others. The idealization of American girlhood, which Swift’s media machine represents, constantly and implicitly privileges a vision of “authentic” girlhood that is invested in whiteness, heterosexual monogamy and romance, and middle-class propriety and consumption.

The chapter begins with a biographical discussion of Swift, considering how the narrative of Swift’s advancement to stardom and her public persona enable a depiction of her as
an “authentic, all-American” girl. I then move into a discussion of fandom, asserting that while digital spaces enable fans to intersubjectively imbue lyrics and music videos with meanings that are significant to them, the dominance of corporate music interests significantly limit fans’ agency. Next, I turn to a specific discussion of Taylor Swift fan sites, drawing on visual, textual, and interview data to suggest that adolescent fans craft a fantasy of reciprocal recognition on the forums. Fans assert that they “know” Taylor through her music and media persona and that Taylor’s relatable lyrics make them feel like she understands them deeply. The collusion of fans’ two main claims about Swift—that she is a girl just like them and that she is an infallible role model—creates a situation in which fans simultaneously confirm Swift’s highly idealized image and assert that they can live up to it. Yet, the forums are filled with posts which implicitly and explicitly assert girls’ inability to live up to these standards. Ultimately, these forums reveal that fans’ desires for recognition cannot be fulfilled, because the recognition offered by other fans is premised upon fans’ adherence to particular modes of fandom and moral codes, because the disciplinary function of the sites’ elevation of propriety limit the aspects of the self that girls can present, and because the belief in a reciprocal exchange of recognition with Swift herself is based only in fantasy.

“If you listen to my albums, it’s just like reading my diary”:

Taylor Swift, Autobiography, and Musical Authenticity

Taylor Swift, the Can-Do Girl Next Door

Taylor Swift’s beginnings are well-known and frequently touted by fans: at the age of 11, Swift’s parents began helping her attempt to secure a record contract, frequently traveling back
and forth between Nashville and her Pennsylvania home until moving to Nashville at the age of 14. In 2006, 17-year-old Swift emerged on the country music scene with her eponymous debut album and quickly drew a massive audience through her characterization as the “all-American girl next door” who struggles with the same issues as “normal” teenage girls, especially falling in love, dealing with heartbreak, and struggling to fit in. While other teen pop sensations, such as Miley Cyrus, are largely regarded as commodities—overproduced pop pageant princesses whose images and careers are completely controlled by their record companies—Taylor Swift has successfully managed to paint herself as a sweet little down home country girl who somehow found herself in the middle of international fame and success when she really just wants to write songs about boys and pickup trucks.

Swift has cultivated a visual image of sweet wholesomeness by wearing soft dresses and pastel colors—often white—in real life, in images on her website, and in her music videos, bolstering her image of demure white femininity, frequently in opposition to other girls. The video for her song "Fifteen," for example, features Taylor and her real-life best friend Abigail Anderson (who also plays herself in the video), and the two travel very different routes: both have relationships, but Taylor breaks up with her boyfriend because she "realized some bigger dreams," while "Abigail gave everything she had to a boy who changed his mind." In the context of the song, it's clear that "everything she had" was her virginity—Abigail is marked as a tragedy for having sex with a boy who later broke up with her, and she seemingly has nothing left to offer after the demise of her purity. The visual elements of the video (See Figure 23) confirm this interpretation of the lyrics—Taylor’s demure makeup and cascading blonde locks are accented by a flowing white dress (as she is in almost every one of her videos) while red-headed Abigail wears a dark shirt and jeans, complemented by dark eye makeup and lipstick. Taylor walks
through a sunny meadow at the beginning of the video, but as Abigail enters the picture and engages in "risky" behavior, the surroundings grow darker and darker. Abigail is shown kissing a boy in a car, initially resisting but then giving in. The next scene depicts Abigail sitting sadly in a field of flowers surrounded by storm clouds, hugging herself and crying as Taylor comes to comfort her.

Figure 23: Stills from "Fifteen"

In this video Swift visually and lyrically occupies the position of Anita Harris’s can-do girl, utilizing her talents creatively and productively, while Abigail is the "at-risk girl," demonstrating the dangers of failing to conform to idealized notions of feminine respectability and purity. Swift is centrally depicted, in both this video and in her public image, as a “proper girl,” one who achieves popularity and happiness through avoiding “inappropriate” influences (such as parties or sexually active boys) and through maintaining an image of ultra-feminine innocence. Swift’s image of propriety unquestionably holds distinct racial and class connotations. Propriety is figured not only as refraining from sexual promiscuity, but also as refraining from talking about sex, expressing sexual desires, using swear words, or even speaking too loudly—qualities which are encouraged in white middle-class girls’ upbringings much more so than working class white
girls and girls of color (Brown 1997, Harris 2004; Tolman 2005). Swift’s appearance of sexual propriety in this video is evident not only through her avoidance of sexual behaviors, but is also shored up by the ways that she is visually marked as a white, middle class girl. Lighting emphasizes her flowing, blonde hair and her pale white skin, and her modest sundress marks her as a middle-class “girl next door.” Meanwhile, Abigail’s heavy makeup and ripped jeans distinctly mark her as a poor girl, emphasizing discursive connections between poverty and promiscuity.

Yet, while Abigail’s class status is visually alluded to, the song’s lyrics still point out her personal irresponsibility—she “gave everything she had.” This contradiction emphasizes the impossible position that poor white girls and girls of color must occupy: while they are always already marked as sexually irresponsible prior to even engaging in sex, exploring sexual behaviors that are counter to hegemonic conceptions of female sexuality further stigmatizes them as improper. Moreover, societal investments in girls’ propriety are typically limited to middle-class white girls—when we are implored to “save the girls,” there is little question about which girls are deemed worthy of protection (Harris 2004; Odem 1995). Girls of color and poor white girls are marked as sexually deviant and promiscuous, and media coverage tends to emphasize the need to protect these girls from teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. The assumption that these girls default to sexually irresponsible behavior excludes them from the category of unquestionably pure can-do girl, and they thus do not have access to the same societal acceptance of their sexual morality as white, middle-class girls (Collins 1990; Odem 1995; Roediger 1999). Consequently, while virginal Taylor is the one to recognize the limitations of her adolescent relationship, deflowered Abigail is dumped, ostensibly because the
boy was no longer interested in her after she had sex with him; thus, Taylor is empowered to control the conditions of her life while Abigail is not.

Currently, Swift’s popularity is staggering—her third album, *Speak Now*, sold over a million copies during its debut week in September 2010, and Billboard listed her as both the top-selling and most-played artist of 2010. Media coverage of Swift focuses intensely on her personal life, reporting on her relationships and speculating about the male subjects of her songs. Swift writes the majority of her songs and repeatedly asserts that all of her music is written about events she or someone she knows has experienced. She has explicitly used the pull of the autobiographical narrative to promote her new album, *Speak Now*. When asked about her songs, she stated, “They’re all made very clear. Every single song is like a roadmap to what that relationship stood for, with little markers that maybe everyone won’t know, but there are things that were little nuances of the relationship, little hints. And every single song is like that. Everyone will know.”

**Creating the “Authentic” Musical Girl Subject**

Both fans and music critics typically evaluate writing one’s own songs as a positive marker of artistic ability as well as an affirmation of musical truth-telling (Mayhew 2004; Whiteley 2000). The cultivation of the image of artist-as-solo-songwriter is essential to this image of authenticity, and frequently, the collaborative process behind the writing, production, and release of songs is erased (Williams 2004). In music from female artists, the male authorial presence is submerged in the interest of producing a supposedly authentic female musical image. The pull of the autobiographical lies in the assurance that something “really happened,” that the affective content of songs is authentic because it is based in experience. The
assumption is that fans’ affective attachments to songs are validated because the lyrics were ostensibly crafted not for purposes of mere profit but out of a genuine expression of artistic emotion. For instance, one of my interview subjects, Allison, states that if Taylor’s songs were not “real,” “Then it wouldn’t be nearly as special to me. That’s one of the main reasons I love her. She gets it what girls specifically are going through.” Thus, fans so strongly identify with Taylor Swift’s music because they emotionally connect not just to the lyrics, but ostensibly to Taylor herself.

Scholarship on music has often adhered to high-low culture distinctions, differentiating between “real” artistry and commercial music. For instance, prolific pop music scholar Sheila Whiteley (2000; 2004) valorizes women that she sees as change-makers, performers who combated sexism and paved the way for women in future generations (both those who identify openly as feminist and those who express what Whiteley identifies as feminist sympathies). She characterizes authenticity in terms of commercially less-successful figures like Tori Amos and Ani DiFranco and equates commercial success (especially in the 1990s) with the artifice of groups like the Spice Girls, whose messages are supposedly tainted with their status as corporate sellouts. Moreover, the specific content of female artists’ music has been particularly scrutinized in comparison to male artists, especially in the area of romantic love. While male artists’ musical proclamations of love have been accepted and even valorized for their artistic honesty, female artists have been criticized for shoring up traditional conceptions of femininity as based on heteronormative conceptions of the importance of love to women. Greig (1997) asserts that women are held to unfair standards in this regard, to the extent that women—especially heterosexual women—cannot sing about relationships without being subject to assertions that they should sing about “something more important.”
I insist, however, that it is essential to consider the ways that “authenticity” is itself commodified. The notion that a musician is relaying her “true self” through her lyrics is one that carries a strong affective pull for fans, and thus carries a great deal of commercial significance. Promoting the “truth” of a singer-songwriter’s music often proves to be a lucrative marketing strategy for record companies, as evidenced by the “hidden clues” in the liner notes of Taylor Swift’s albums. In the notes to *Speak Now*, select letters were capitalized in each song to construct a message that, when decoded, reveals the “real” subject of the song. (For example, the hidden message in “Back to December” was “FOR TAY,” referring to the nickname she gave to ex-boyfriend Taylor Lautner.) Even beyond Swift’s extensive statements to the media about the autobiographical content of her songs, her record company explicitly used this strategy to sell records.

Moreover, while music critics and academics often regard musical authenticity as a positive trait, I contend that “authenticity” does not always imply progressive or transgressive musical content. Garrison (2003) admits that some female-authored music is characterized largely by postfeminism, and Swift’s music wholly embodies this. Gill (2007) suggests that postfeminist discourse includes a number of themes ranging from an emphasis on self-surveillance to a preoccupation with achieving perfect feminine bodies, but I suggest that one postfeminist theme—the affirmation of sexual difference—particularly underpins Swift’s musical messages. Taylor Swift rejects the supposed hypersexuality of contemporary teenage girls and instead performs a much more conservative, demure form of femininity implicitly juxtaposed to masculinity. She presents an image of sexual innocence, wears relatively conservative clothing, and sings about romance in nonsexual ways—but Taylor Swift’s music goes beyond that, actively and frequently declaring the dangers of straying from sexual purity. While some aspects of
postfeminist discourse promote women’s sexuality as a mode of empowerment, Swift is part of a newer strand of postfeminist sensibilities that critiques this valorization of sexual pleasure.

While she writes songs based on her own life, her experiences are completely embedded in her status as a white, heterosexual, upper class, normatively feminine girl, and her songs’ content reflect her status. While Tori Amos writes about sexual assault and Ani DiFranco writes about queer desire, Taylor Swift writes about the countless tears she has cried over boys. Thus, the dichotomy between authentic singer-songwriters and commercially-produced pop groups proves to be a false one. Finally, while artists such as Swift suggest that their songs accurately reflect past experiences, Smith (1998) suggests that life writing does not simply involve the recollection and recounting of past experiences. Rather, the self is actually created through the process of writing one’s life story. Life writing can never be fully truthful because every account is always partial, because memory is not a mirror, and because audience affects the particular version of the self that will be presented. In Swift’s case, her songs do not simply recall her personal experiences but also create her as an entity, composing her adolescence and young adulthood as a perfect slice of Americana for young girls to admire and parents to revere. It is less important to determine whether Swift’s songs are “true” than to consider the ways that her music and her public persona, as well as fans’ intersubjective consumption and discussion of these commodities, reveal cultural ideals about girlhood. Swift’s extreme popularity demonstrates the cultural investment in a particular image of can-do girlhood, one which implies that success can be—and should be—achieved by upholding an image of white heteronormative propriety and eschewing sexualization. Her celebrity status suggests that she is the ultimate idealized girl subject, a neoliberal role model for all girls to emulate. However, the “girl next door” image is predicated upon a degree of economic advantage and feminine
propriety that most girls cannot achieve. Thus, examining Taylor Swift and her fans provides an important criticism of girlpower rhetoric—while Swift is the ultimate can-do girl, her intensely idealized image of fame, femininity, and sweetness reveals that the “all-American girl” is a subject position that is embedded in middle-class consumption, chaste heterosexual desire, and proper white girlhood.

The assumption of authenticity is a vital piece of the subject’s quest for recognition—we assume that we can see others (and be seen) for “who we really are,” and throughout my dissertation, girls’ assertions of “successful” or meaningful recognition were based on an ability and willingness to be honest about one’s experiences. For Taylor Swift fans, Swift’s assertion of autobiographical veracity implies that they “know” her, which is evidenced by fans’ intense focus not just on her music but on who she is “as a person.” Moreover, they believe that recognition is reciprocally conveyed—not only do they know who Swift is, but they also believe that because her music echoes their own experiences, she knows and understands them in ways that no one else (except other Taylor fans) can. This belief is shored up by girls’ frequent experiences of being criticized and even bullied due to their intense fandom (discussed later in this chapter). Of course, while fans assert that they know who Swift really is, this knowledge is mitigated through her publicity machine and in this case, particularly through her official website. While no one understands them in “real life,” fan sites demonstrate the pull of fantasies of recognition—since girls will never really know Swift, their fantasies will never be disrupted or disappointed.
Contextualizing Fandom and Celebrity

This chapter seeks to connect Swift’s public and musical image with fans’ online discussions about Swift and her music, insisting that fans provide critically important clues into the ways that Swift is constructed as an ideal girl subject. In many ways, the debates over agency in fan communities closely mirror those that have taken place in feminist literature regarding girlhood agency (which I discussed in Chapter 1). Prior to the 1990s, academic studies and media coverage of fandom was largely othering, depicting fans as uninformed, undifferentiated masses of hyper-obsessed individuals (Jenkins 1992; Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington 2007). Fandom was frequently pathologized, characterized in terms of obsession and hysteria, and fans were characterized as markedly different from “normal” people in the ways that they found deep personal fulfillment through popular culture. However, the early 1990s brought on the first wave of “insider” fan studies, which sought to explore the dynamics and differences within and among fan communities, often from the perspective of a researcher who identified as a fan in some respect. The “insider” perspective was thought to combat the othering that tended to result from outsider fan studies, since the researcher could sympathize with fans’ affective connections to their object of admiration. This wave of studies situated fans as cultural producers, asserting that fans were not simply recipients of cultural texts but that fans also critically engaged with texts, transforming them and imbuing them with new meanings.

Most saliently, Henry Jenkins’s 1992 book Textual Poachers, situated fans as pop culture outlaws. Jenkins (see also Fiske 1992; Jenkins 2006) asserted that rather than celebrating a pop culture text wholecloth, fans fixate on the elements of a text that they find most appealing and imbue the narrative with their own fantasy content, creating their own extratextual stories and subverting hierarchical modes of production. Fans are thus constituted as interpretive
communities, not simply consuming content but also providing unique interpretations of television shows, films, and music as well as producing their own original content (such as YouTube mash-up videos composed of scenes from a television show set to a favorite song). Fiske (1992) asserts that fans make meaning through processes of semiotic productivity, in which fans draw personal inspiration and importance from the object of fandom, and enunciative productivity, whereby fan communities collectively discuss and express their fandom amongst each other and through public displays of fandom such as wearing a Justin Bieber t-shirt. The digitalization of fan communities enables both kinds of productivity: fans explain on their own fansites and in forum threads the ways that a particular text has strongly influenced their life, and other fans join in, sharing similar stories. I also assert that the multimedia character of websites has enabled unique modes of expressing fandom. While expressing devotion through visual means, such as posters, collages, and artwork, is certainly not new, digital technology allows users to create their own images, seamlessly suturing together photographs of different television characters in order to make a desired relationship seem real or even to merge a photograph of the fan with the celebrity object of adoration (a practice discussed later in this chapter). User-friendly technologies such as Photoshop enable skilled practitioners to produce images that appear genuine, which stands in marked contrast to fans’ obviously doctored images previously produced by gluing photographs and magazine clippings onto paper.

However, the creative capabilities of digital technology are also hampered by producers’ use of the internet as a means of distributing information to fans, such as a television producer’s explanation of the reason a particular storyline ended or a songwriter’s explanation of a particular song’s meaning. Pearson (2010) suggests, though, that producers’ ability to
disseminate “correct” interpretations of a text and to fill in the gaps traditionally left between
the text’s content and the audience’s reception of that content, hampers fans’ own
interpretations of that content. This produces varied reactions from fans:

The speculative leaps engendered by uncertainty can be a pleasurable part of
the viewing process; digitally enabled and enhanced authorial interpretation not
only risks decreasing this pleasure but also tilting interpretive power more
strongly toward the producer, some fans assert. Of course, some hardcore fans,
eager to permanently inhabit their virtual worlds of choice, revel in producer-
supplied ancillary content, be it podcasts, webisodes, or alternate reality games.
For these fans, too much is never enough (86).

Thus, while some fans excitedly welcome all proclamations from a text’s author on the intended
meaning, others lament the ways that this greater degree of interpretive information actually
disempowers fans who enjoy providing their own interpretation of songs. Taylor Swift fans, for
example, largely express appreciation for Swift’s liner note hints about the meanings of her
songs. However, several of them expressed frustration that Swift’s song “Innocent” was about
Kanye West, saying that they wished that the song was about a different situation, because it
was difficult for them to feel sympathetic toward West. These fans felt constricted by Swift’s
explanation of the song and struggled to identify with it, since they had such negative feelings
about Swift’s 2009 confrontation with West at the MTV Video Music Awards (an incident which
will be discussed later in the chapter).

While some literature still valorizes fans’ ability to reappropriate texts to their own ends
(Costello and Moore 2007; Soukup 2006), other authors—including Jenkins himself—have
insisted that early fan studies were too celebratory of fans’ power relative to the text’s original
producers. Moreover, although many fans appropriate texts to their own ends, the cultural
productions and intragroup dynamics of fan subcultures often replicate offline hierarchies (Dell
— a topic which I will explore at length in my specific discussion of Taylor Swift fan sites.

The digital era has marked both new frontiers and old continuities in the shape that fandom takes. The interactive nature of fandom via fan communities has long been a focus of fan literature (Jenkins 2006), but digital media has enabled fans to seek each other out more easily than before, providing instant access to thousands of other similarly-devoted fans in seconds after typing “Taylor Swift” into a search engine. Whereas fans used to have to travel and attend conventions (most notably, Trekkie conventions for Star Trek fans) in order to find others who expressed a similar level of devotion, the ubiquity of online fan sites enables a sense of community and belonging with other fans, without ever having to expose one’s identity or leave one’s home. The constant presence and popularity of online fan community affirms fans’ idealization of their object of adoration, especially for those who feel that they cannot talk about their fandom with friends and family offline, either because the object of fandom is scorned by others or because their degree of devotion is considered extreme (both of which will be explored in relation to Taylor Swift later in this chapter) (Costello and Moore 2007). Soukup (2006) suggests that fansites are a way to connect with celebrities, providing fans with the belief that they can contact and interact with the object of admiration in ways that they could not do so before.

Murray (2004) suggests that digital media presents the image of a shift in power dynamics regarding marketing, and indeed, musical artists and producers have had to consider how, for example, the internet allows insiders to leak songs before albums release. Thus, savvy producers have begun to release singles to iTunes before an official album drops so that they can make money off of fans’ desire to be the first to hear a new song. For Taylor Swift’s most
recent album, four different singles were released in the months preceding the full album release, so fans were able to start listening to the music and speculating about album content long before they could hear the entirety of Speaker Now. Indeed, the Taylor Swift fansites that I examined contained a number of threads discussing the released songs, always with “spoiler alert” warnings in the title. The threads were filled with users exclaiming their love of the new songs and asserting that the songs dramatically increased their excitement for the album. Yet, Murray suggests that we cannot too easily elevate the possibilities of fan agency in forcing producers to share previously-withheld content, because significant power differentials remain intact. He writes, “Emerging models of fan/producer relationships around premium media content might be best characterized as an uneasy dance in which conglomerates’ desire for maximum circulation of content chafes uncomfortably against fans’ resourcefulness in eluding the prescribed legal and economic frameworks for the circulation of that content” (9). Thus, corporate self-interest dictates the release of protected content and also limits the ways in which fans can experience a text. While consumptive enjoyment is encouraged, creative distribution and reinterpretation of a text potentially hinders corporate profiteering. Thus, fans’ uses of a text are typically only encouraged to the extent that they allow production companies to directly or indirectly reap financial benefits. Fundamentally, Jenkins (2006) suggests that fan-producer relationships are ambivalent:

Media consumers [are not] either totally autonomous from or totally vulnerable to the culture industries. It would be naïve to assume that powerful conglomerates will not protect their own interests as they enter this new media marketplace, but at the same time, audiences are gaining greater power and

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8 A “spoiler alert” indicates that the thread contains information about a piece of media that has not been fully released to the public yet (i.e., an important plot point in an upcoming television episode). The term “spoiler” implies that fans’ enjoyment of a media text might be “spoiled” if they want to be surprised. In the case of Speak Now, a number of fans did not want to know about the early songs because they wanted to experience the album as a total entity without any preconceived ideas of what it might sound like.
autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture. The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than semiotic democracy (136).

Thus, it is critical to consider how fandom is shaped by, though not entirely controlled by, corporate interests, as well as to examine the ways in which levels of corporate influence have varying levels of influence that are context-dependent. Fan literature has not significantly explored the relationship between official and unofficial websites in terms of site content, rules, and forum interactions; however, this chapter discusses the ways in which these issues of commodification and capital emerge differently on different types of websites dedicated to Taylor Swift.

While fan literature provides a number of useful interpretive frameworks, there are several gaps that I aim to fill. First, fan literature typically does not consider the subjectivities of fans themselves—their fandom is treated separately from their own identifications. I assert that it is essential to consider how race, gender, sexuality, and social class impact fans’ presence on fan sites and the quality of their participation. Additionally, fan studies typically focus on the ways that digital technologies have altered television fandom, but they rarely consider the ways that music fandom has shifted in the digital era. Finally, fan literature does not consider the ways that the internet refigures the nature of celebrity itself. Celebrities’ uses of digital technology such as Twitter provides fans with a false sense of intimacy, suggesting that celebrities are easily accessible and “just like us,” and also erases the production team behind the cultivation of the public image.
“Imma let you finish, but…”: Kanye-Gate and the Specter of Race

The incident that perhaps most clearly illustrates the collusion between “girl next door” and celebrity paragon of perfection is the infamous Kanye West debacle. In 2009, Taylor Swift won the MTV Video Music Award for Best Video for her song “You Belong With Me.” As Swift reached the podium to receive her award, rapper Kanye West famously charged the stage, took the microphone from her hands, and proclaimed, “Yo Taylor, I’m really happy for you, Imma let you finish, but Beyonce has one of the best videos of all time!” When Beyonce won an award later in the show, she invited Swift onto the stage to give the speech that Kanye interrupted, and Kanye apologized to Swift both personally and publicly the following day. The response from VMA attendees, the media, and Swift fans was unanimous—West was a bully who had victimized America’s sweetheart.

Fans’ reactions were particularly strong. On the Taylor Connect forums, Belle 2527 writes:

the first time I saw it I cried. [...] I can’t imagine being Taylor when her big moment when she was truly accepted by the MTV audience and that was when some guy like Kanye comes up to ruin it all.

This fan points to the dual images of Swift—she identifies with the emotions that she believes Taylor experienced when “some guy like Kanye [came] up to ruin it all,” yet she also points out that this incident that she found so relatable was being “truly accepted by the MTV audience.” Of course, the actual experience of having a nationally televised award acceptance speech is one that girl fans will never have, but Swift’s image of ordinariness compels girls to see her as one of them—and in this setting, she is seen as a victimized girl who needs protecting. On Amazingly Talented, the 2009 VMA thread exploded immediately after the incident, with over 5,000 posts.
on this thread alone in just a few weeks. Girls responded by applauding Swift’s bravery and
Beyonce’s kindness, but Melissa was frustrated by the positive spin other users tried to put on it:

For the rest of her life when Taylor looks at her first VMA award she won’t get to just remember the rush and thrill of that moment, when she first held it in her hands and then was able to look out at the huge crowd of her musical peers and some of her idols. She won’t be able to remember that moment because it will always be superceded by the memory of someone coming on stage who’s music she had always admired and to whom she had never given any insult, she’ll remember seeing and hearing that person take the mic from her and announce to all of her peers and heroes that she was unworthy of the award she’d been given, and that it should have been given to someone else. This is what Kanye did and this is why what he did was such a terrible thing. [...] He had absolutely no business being there, he stole something that did not belong to him in taking a moment from Taylor that can never be returned fully. Like Katy Perry said, He stepped on a kitten in full view of the world, and the world for the most part is not blind.

Melissa’s description of Swift as a “kitten” who was “stepped on” echoes the character of much of the rhetoric around the incident. It was not only that Kanye’s actions were inappropriate—unquestionably, they were—but also that Swift was depicted as a sweet, childlike victim. There is virtually no acknowledgement from fans that, as an international superstar, Taylor Swift wields a great degree of personal and social power which calls into question her “kitten” status. The rhetoric around Swift’s supposed victimization has differed substantially from that around the 2009 Rihanna-Chris Brown domestic violence incident. Despite incontrovertible evidence that Chris Brown brutally attacked her, Rihanna’s victim status has been frequently questioned by the media because of her refusal to publicly “act like a victim”—she has rarely discussed the incident, she asked a judge to lift the restraining order against Brown, and she eroticizes dominance in songs like “Rude Boy” and “S&M” (Lee 2011; Ramirez 2011; Rolling Stone 2011; Singh 2009). While Taylor Swift is seen as completely blameless and utterly justified in her subsequent musical retaliation, Rihanna has been marked as a bad girl whose blame in the
incident is undetermined at best (particularly in public dialogue, as evidenced by the overwhelming number of victim-blaming user comments on news stories about her). And indeed, both media and fans constantly brought up Taylor’s sweetness as the most troubling part of the incident, wondering “Who could ever hurt someone so nice?” (Burchell 2009; McKay 2009; Serpe 2009). Unquestionably, the different discourses surrounding the two women are informed by their individually distinct relationships to propriety (which Swift embraces and Rihanna rejects), but also by the ways that their racial subjectivities always already position them differently in relation to notions of victimization and protection.

The ability of Swift, her publicity machine, and the media at large to so fully paint her as a victim is enabled by her constant depiction as an eternally innocent, vulnerable child. Race was an absent presence throughout media coverage of the incident, which emphasized Taylor’s victimization and submerged Kanye’s subsequent apologies underneath continued emphasis on his supposed thuggery. The media’s construction of her victim status is shored up by Taylor’s constant visual affirmation of her whiteness in her music videos (donning white dresses, surrounding herself with pastel colors, and filling her videos with other white people) and Kanye's blackness, reiterated in his own music and public persona. The widely circulated images of the incident (See Figure 24) further emphasize the disjuncture between the two—Kanye, donning sunglasses and a black leather shirt, places his hands on Taylor, who is wearing a sparkling white gown and her trademark surprised face.
The incident remained in the media spotlight for many months and then reemerged at the 2010 VMAs, when Swift performed the song “Innocent,” which she wrote for West. The song includes lyrics such as “I guess you really did it this time” and “32 and still growing up,” simultaneously disciplining Kanye for his actions at the previous year’s show and forgiving him. Media outlets and Twitter users were critical of Swift’s performance, with the media suggesting that Swift was arrogant to discipline him in this way and many Twitter users suggesting that Swift was rehashing a year-old issue. Fans on the boards, however, found Taylor’s performance inspiring:

Isabella: And to all the folks that thought Taylor was being melodramatic about it, I'd like to remind them that Taylor has been very mature and classy about this whole thing, and that everybody in the Twitterverse and media blew this out of proportion last year. Taylor didn't have a hand in that. I just hate how she's perceived by many as the bad one here for writing and performing this beautiful song when she didn't start this thing.

FearlessJenny: Taylor expresses herself through song. Innocent isn't her 'no moving on'. Innocent is her means to move on, it's her way of dealing with what was a horrible moment in her life. People on twitter etc thinks she need to get over it, but what that don't realise is that this is her way of getting over it.
Isabella and Jenny defend Taylor’s right to perform the song, asserting that she had a right to defend herself. Isabella asserts that, contrary to media and Twitter claims that Swift’s performance was a childish means of revenge, Swift has been “very mature and classy,” both in her overall response to the incident and in her performance of “Innocent.”

As a feminist scholar, I must point to the masculinist privilege embedded in Kanye’s confidence in his right to interrupt a young woman’s speech and forcibly grab the microphone from her. However, while few would defend Kanye’s interruption, the national uproar over the incident—which even prompted President Obama to publicly call Kanye a “jackass”—was embedded in historical and contemporary fears about the dangers of black men to young virginal white girls. Swift’s propriety and vulnerability, which are central to her popularity, are inextricably tied to her whiteness. Kate Davy points out that “White women signify hegemonic, institutionalized whiteness through their association with a pure, chaste, before-the-fall-womanhood […], attained and maintained via middle-class respectability with its implicit heterosexuality” (1997, 212). Societal investments in protecting girls have largely been constrained to middle-class white girls, and black men have often been cast as the threat to girls’ safety and purity (Odem 1995). Swift’s favorable status is further figured through her propriety’s relation to commodification—she comes from a country music background, a genre which prides itself on selling authentic images of American, apple pie wholesomeness. Hip hop, however, openly flaunts its embeddedness in both consumerism and sex, and Kanye’s musical and digital presences are negatively marked as excess and artifice. Thus, while race never explicitly entered girls’ fan discussions or mainstream media representations of the event, the specter of white American fears about dangerous black men is evident.
“I’m just a girl, trying to find my place in this world”:

The Affective Pull of Ordinariness in Swift’s Music and Extratextual Persona

The remainder of this chapter focuses specifically on identification and recognition on Taylor Swift fan forums. Fans simultaneously claim Swift as a girl “just like them” who struggles with the same issues of relationships, popularity, and self discovery as them, and as the total embodiment of physical, musical, and moral perfection. When taken together, these two discourses imply that fans themselves can access the same kind of success and acceptance as Swift, and indeed, the forums on both Taylor Connect and Amazingly Talented are filled with threads where girl fans discuss how to be more like Taylor. However, while fans insist that Swift’s music and public persona are relatable to anyone, a number of them also implicitly and explicitly reveal that living up to these standards is a struggle. Thus, while fans seek recognition from other fans and assume recognition from Swift herself on the basis of their adherence to the “Swiftie Code,” the inadequacy of these moral discourses to encompass girls’ diverse lives and experiences ultimately renders recognition impossible. I begin by discussing the ways that fans articulate their identifications with Swift as an ordinary girl, considering how Swift’s musical themes of romance, heartbreak, and fitting in enable fans’ fantasies of recognition. Then, I analyze the ways that girls characterize Swift as a role model, suggesting that Swift’s image of propriety compels fans to attempt to adhere to strict standards of femininity and purity and to stigmatize behavior that falls outside of these strict moral codes. Finally, I explore one specific site where evidence of non-propriety quietly emerges: through the simultaneous suppression and surfacing of queer desire in fans’ affection and admiration for Swift.
In both interviews and website analysis, I was overwhelmed with the degree to which fans identified with Taylor Swift. I conceptualize identification as the process of identifying or aligning oneself with a person, a concept, or a social category. Identification involves recognizing the ways that one’s own characteristics, beliefs, or experiences correspond with an external source, which incorporates several cognitive and psychic processes, including examination, comprehension, admiration, and imitation. It is thus an assertion of a relationship between the self and the Other, as well as a process of internalizing the characteristics of an Other into the self (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973). Freud (1917) and Fuss (1995) assert that identification is foundational to the subject, since the self can only be defined in relation to others. Taylor Swift’s image as the “girl next door” makes her fully relatable to fans. Girls look to Taylor and her music as a guide for how to approach romantic relationships, cope with unpopularity, and live according to particular moral codes. Fans frequently say that they love Swift because she sings about topics of central importance in their own lives. Moreover, identification with a celebrity serves an important function for fans, because seeing a celebrity as someone “just like them” enables them to see the celebrity’s fame and fortune as validation of their own identity and experiences (Redmond and Holmes 2007). Diana Fuss suggests that “identification is the detour through the other that defines a self” (2), and in that vein, role models serve as important points of identification. Adolescents—especially girls—are often characterized as flighty and unserious, and the issues that are important to them are often marginalized (Kearney 2006; McRobbie 2000; Raby 2007). For Taylor Swift fans, Swift’s popularity removes the stigma attached to adolescent emotionality and recasts it as a positive attribute.
Adolescent female fans frequently express strong connections to both Swift and her music. On a Taylor Connect discussion board titled “Please stop complaining about songs about boys and love,” messofadreamer writes:

She writes what she feels. Boys are a teenager's life pretty much. There are days where you feel like a princess and there are days where you're heartbroken.

And Untouchable writes:

The great thing about Taylor is that pretty much all of her songs resonate with something that I have gone through, am going through, or wish for.

Messofadreamer marks heterosexual romance as an experience of central importance to the experience of adolescent girlhood, defending Swift’s frequent use of romantic themes in her music by universalizing the significance of heterosexual relationships. Yet, messofadreamer is not simply defending Swift as an artist, but also as a representative of girlhood experiences—the thread’s topic is a plea not only to stop criticizing Taylor, but implicitly also to stop criticizing teenage girls in general for “obsessing” over heterosexual romance. This user situates having a boyfriend, experiencing heartbreak, and feeling like a princess as “a teenager’s life pretty much,” which marks her identification with Swift and situates the centrality of their shared experiences. Adolescent relationships are discursively trivialized as silly adolescent incidents with no lasting significance, and so users’ defenses of Swift also represent a desire that they themselves be recognized as autonomous, mature subjects. In the same way, Swift’s popularity and commercial success validate a fan’s sense of self, since public approval of the messages in Swift's music indicates that her perspectives (which mirror fans’ own perspectives) are important. Untouchable forges past, present, and future connections to Swift’s music, indicating not only that her current experiences align with Swift’s but that future ones will, too.
Fans frequently indicate that they believe that Swift’s music is relatable for adults as well as adolescents, and Untouchable’s assertion of Swift’s lasting impact on her life is another instance of revaluing girls’ perspectives.

For both of these users and many others, Swift’s music is important to them because she is a teenager who sings about topics that they find relatable. Fans craft a fantasy of recognition through these relatable topics, asserting that “no one understands me like Taylor.” Freud (1897) suggests that fantasy is not metonymic with falsehood; instead, fantasy denotes the ways that unconscious desires emerge through the imagination. He suggests that “there are no ‘indications of reality’ in the unconscious, so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect” (112). Thus, girls identify with the themes in Taylor Swift’s music and with her public persona, and through this, they construct a larger fantasy of a reciprocal exchange of recognition with Swift—they believe that she understands them in a way that no one else does and that they “know who she really is.” This fantasy of recognition fulfills girls’ unconscious desires for acceptance and validation, and as such, it is in their psychic interests to believe in the reality of this relationship rather than to cast it aside as unimportant.

I asked each of my interview subjects, “Do you think that Taylor Swift’s music speaks to what it’s like to be a girl today?” Each girl responded unequivocally and affirmatively:

Kelly: Yes, I do because they are all about real life and real situations.

Caitlin: I suppose so, a lot more for some than others. I definitely don't think Taylor does it intentionally. Since she writes from experience though, it just happens to relate to a LOT of people.

Both of these girls situate “real” experience as a significant factor—indeed, the determining factor—in Taylor’s relatability. Kelly suggests that Swift’s music speaks to the experience of
being a girl simply because it is “about real life and real situations,” drawing a supposedly uncomplicated line between one girl’s experiences—Swift’s—and all girls’ experiences. Caitlin’s quote, meanwhile, emphasizes the ways that the autobiographical is popularly misunderstood to be without artifice or intent (Scott 1991). She suggests that Swift’s songs don’t “intentionally” fall in line with normative understandings of girlhood; instead, Swift’s songs “just happen to relate to a lot of people” because she writes from her own experiences as a girl. Experience is explicitly juxtaposed to intent—Swift is presumed to simply be writing about her own life, without ever considering whether her songs would be relatable for other people.

Yet, these assertions are premised on the assumption that something like a “real life” could be accessed or expressed through music—an assumption that proves impossible for several reasons. First, Swift’s public catalog of music is inevitably influenced by the demands of capital, which requires her to put forth a consumable image. In order to be commercially successful, she must articulate her experiences within socially legible frameworks of girlhood. Within the pop country music genre, white heterosexual fans primarily expect and identify with an image of wholesomeness, especially where young stars are concerned and Swift has little choice but to engage with the types of narratives that her intended audience desires. Moreover, the assumption of “reality” in Swift’s songs ignores the very real role of managers, producers, and record companies in the production of music. There is an extensive process of selection and editing that occurs when choosing which songs to record for an album. Finally, there is no one “real” account of events, as clearly evidenced by the degree to which Swift’s version of her breakups vary from the accounts presented by her ex-boyfriends (especially the notable disjuncture between Swift’s and Joe Jonas’s vastly different songs about their breakup). Thus,
the notion that Swift’s songs are relatable to girls because they are “real” proves to be an untenable one.

Yet, it is not only Swift’s music that her fans relate to, but also Swift herself. In a Taylor Connect thread titled “If you Could do ANYTHING in the World with Taylor Swift for a Whole Day, What Would You Do?” FearlessWhiteHorse13 wrote:

We’d fight dragons! 😄lol j/k 😊

I would spend the day doing the kind of things you’d do with your best friend. Since I don’t have one, I have daydreamed about this sooo much. We would just hang out, I’d show her around my town, Go out to eat, shop, If it was warm enough, go down to the beach. (I live near the beach.) hang out at my house & talk, & just have fun. Like regular girls. All the things I never get to do anymore. It would be a dream come true. 😍

Fans often fantasize about having a personal relationship with Swift, drawing upon her image of ordinariness to craft fantasies about engaging in everyday teenage activities with Swift. Indeed, this fan’s dream of having Swift as a best friend is a common fantasy on the fan sites, demonstrating that Swift is not just idealized as a talented musician but also as a paragon of wholesome American girlhood. Notably, “We’d fight dragons” is a reference to “Long Live,” a song that Swift wrote about the experiences she has had touring with her band. However, this fan’s reference to the song pulls her into Taylor’s inner circle, demonstrating her desire to be friends with her.

As demonstrated through the icons in the above quote, fans mark out Swift’s “girl next door” image through visual as well as textual means. The availability of many kinds of media enables many ways of articulating girlhood fandom, and the labor involved in creating graphics is seen as expressing a particularly deep level of devotion. Fourteen-year-old Kelly, who creates Taylor graphics, contends that visual elements of the site are especially important because “they
show how much we love Taylor.” In the graphics featured in their signatures and in their avatars, fans creatively use images of Swift available online as well as photographs they have taken with her to create unique images. These images serve many functions (which will be discussed in each of the following sections), but one prominent use of images revolves around fans’ understanding of Swift as an ordinary girl. Graphics feature Swift engaging in everyday, normal activities such as hanging out with friends or having a picnic. A graphic from Taylor Connect (see Figure 25) features Swift in a flannel shirt and knit cap, throwing her arms out as she explores a city. This image suggests that even a celebrity like Swift still wears “regular” clothes and gets excited when visiting a new place, just like other teenage girls do.

Another photograph from Taylor Connect (see Figure 26) features Taylor standing with a crowd, taking a picture of herself and those around her, surrounded by dozens of other people doing the same thing. This image visually demonstrates the ways in which fans understand her to be “one of them,” someone who is just as excited to get a picture with them as they are to get one with her. Swift does not stand out distinctly in this image, but rather, blends in with the rest of
the crowd, visually affirming fans’ belief that she values them as much as they value her, and marking her as a regular girl.

Fans’ assertions of Swift’s relatability have also been partially based on her origins story, which emphasized the ways that she felt unpopular and out of place during her adolescent years. In a thread titled “Why do you love Taylor?”, Taylor Connect user SamanthaFearless13 wrote:

I love her because she was just a normal girl who dreamed big and made her dreams come true and because she worked hard to get there!!! And because in school she didn't have many friends and was bullied all the time!!! She takes ordinary life situations and turns them into songs in such a positive way!!!!!! I really admire her for that!!!!!!!

SamanthaFearless13’s quote demonstrates one significant feature of digital fandom—visual markers of affective investment. Each of her sentences is punctuated by multiple exclamation marks, conveying the importance that Swift’s story holds for her. The number of exclamation points increases (from 3, to 5, to 7) throughout the post, visually conveying that
SamanthaFearless13’s excitement about Swift continued to build as she wrote about the reasons she loves her. For this fan, Swift’s girl-style American dream is significant: she identifies Swift’s normalcy, work ethic, and positive attitude as the most admirable things about her, demonstrating that Swift’s relatability is a critically important factor in fans’ identifications with her.

On each of the sites I examined, fans claimed that Taylor was bullied in school and cited that as a particularly resonant experience for them. Many of the girls self-identified as unpopular, and so the belief that Swift was also unpopular bolstered their own self-image. However, the characterization of Swift as a victim of bullying is a generous usage of the term. Swift told Teen Vogue that "Junior high was actually sort of hard because I got dumped by this group of popular girls. They didn't think I was cool or pretty enough, so they stopped talking to me. The kids at school thought it was weird that I liked country [music]. They'd make fun of me" (2009). Swift also recounts a time when her friends ostensibly became jealous after she was invited to sing the national anthem at a local sporting event. Later that day, her friends went to the mall without inviting her, and Taylor recalled being “heartbroken” when she and her mother unexpectedly saw them at the mall. Fans see these incidents as thoroughly traumatic bullying experiences, which reveals the extent to which narratives of girlhood are normatively constructed through the subject positions of white, middle class, heterosexual girls.

The rhetoric of bullying has extended through fans’ discussions of Swift’s critics, whom they often call “bullies” and decry for “picking on” Swift. Swift herself has also employed the language of bullying in “Mean,” a song from Speak Now which includes lyrics such as “You, with your words like knives” and “Someday I’ll be big enough so you can’t hit me and all you’re ever gonna be is mean.” The song is directed toward a music journalist who has harshly criticized
Swift’s music on several occasions, but girls strongly identify with the affective content of the song:

Taylor1321, Taylor Connect: OJFDIOHFXQDSH!!!!!!! I LOVE IT!!! AHH!! I LOVE IT!! ITS SO COUNTRY AND ITS AMAZING, AMAZING, AMAZING!!!! Omg, and I can relate to it so much. There’s always gonna be that one person who puts who down, but you’re always going to be better than them in the end!

Taylor 1321 mirrors SamanthaFearless13’s use of emphatics, proclaiming her love for the song through a nonsensical string of letters, exclamation points, capital letters, and repetition.

“OJFDIOHFXQDSH” visually represents excitement beyond words or expression, a reaction so strong that she is temporarily unable to construct a coherent thought. The song is not simply great but “AMAZING, AMAZING, AMAZING !!!!” which emphasizes this fan’s intense admiration for Taylor and identification with the song. In online contexts, typing in all capital letters represents yelling, so Taylor 1321’s endorsement of the song can be seen not just as a personal affirmation of its work but as loud insistence to everyone who can hear (see) her words that they should agree with her. The use of multiple emphatics demonstrates this fan’s intense love and devotion, gesturing to the ways that girlhood is often metonymic with extreme displays of emotion. Moreover, the fan claims a personal identification with the song’s message of self-aggrandizement, overcoming her own insecurity (“There’s always gonna be that one person who puts you down” with an assertion of superiority (“you’re always going to be better than them in the end!”)). “Mean” is itself an allegory for the hope that Taylor Swift offers girls—just as she became more popular and successful than her detractors, so they too hope that their own bullies will be forced to recognize their worth.

Fans see songs like “Mean” as evidence that Swift has experienced hardship in life, and they use this as a means of answering critics (real and imagined) who assert that Swift’s music
depicts a perfect, privileged life. In the Taylor Connect official “Mean” thread, Sarah4Taylor writes,

It’s made her the person that she is today. If she was popular at school, she’d take friendship and friends for granted and write boring songs about a perfect life! I think it's made her more determined, if she can survive High School, she can survive any rumor written about her easily!

Fans constantly assert Swift’s ordinariness and relatability, casting her as one of them (not popular) and emphasizing that this celebrity figure has experienced the same issues that they have, despite the fact that her first album was released when she was only 16. Fans assert that Swift’s music is universally relatable and that if her critics would only listen closely, they would also benefit from her music. Responding to a rash of suicides among gay teens in 2010, Riley even asserted that Swift’s music could “save lives”:

Back on topic, if more people listened to Mean, I think it would actually prevent suicides. Taylor not only writes and performs amazing songs, but she also saves lives!

Fans’ extremely strong identifications with Taylor often lead them to believe that her music is life-changing for everyone who encounters it, and there is little acknowledgement of the ways that Swift’s music may not feel inclusive to those who do not share her privileged statuses. Yet, fans themselves—some of whom are lesbians or girls of color—find Swift’s narrative of overcoming bullying fully relatable and highly inspirational. Taylor Swift’s autobiographical narrative constitutes her as an all-American girl who has experienced the same struggles as any other girl, erasing the class privilege that enabled her to transition from small town girl to international superstar. Indeed, the extent to which fans repeatedly position Taylor as “just like us” reveals her media machine’s success in constituting her as a “girl next door,” but it also
illuminates fans’ desires to see themselves reflected in a popular celebrity figure. Many of the girls on the fan forums identify as unpopular, so claiming Swift as “one of them” enables them to seek recognition on the basis of sameness with a beautiful, talented young musician.

It is critical to consider the ways that digital media facilitates fans’ identification with celebrities, particularly in the ways that official websites serve as critically important marketing outlets for production companies. Swift’s official website submerges its actual purpose—selling albums and concert tickets—beneath an assertion of Swift’s authenticity as a digital girl subject, marked by her use of everyday digital technologies such as blogging, forum posts, and Tweeting. The website carefully sutures her musical and public personas with her “real self” by prominently featuring a journal, supposedly written by Swift herself, which contains photographs and reflections on her experiences on tour and in life. The official site also prominently displays Swift’s Tweets on the front page and features a forum section purportedly containing posts from Taylor. This facilitates an even greater deal of identification and admiration than what would be possible through relatable lyrics alone.

“She’s like...perfect. All-American”:

Idealizing Taylor Swift’s Image of Proper Young Womanhood

On both Amazingly Talented and Taylor Connect, girls unanimously situated Taylor Swift as a paragon of girlhood perfection, worthy of their devotion and admiration. Girls see Swift’s fame and fortune are marked as evidence not only of her superior musical talent but also of her moral rectitude. Redmond and Holmes (2007) suggest that the celebrity validates a fan’s experiences, but celebrity figures like Swift also offer fans the hope for a more livable life. Fans
hope that by following her example, they can achieve, if not international acclaim, at least the kind of social acceptance that Swift enjoys. Frequently, Taylor Connect and Amazingly Talented users express extreme admiration not only for Taylor Swift as a musician, but as a person and especially as a role model. I asked all of my interview subjects about whether they saw Taylor as a role model. Caitlin replied:

Caitlin: Okay, yeah, I think Taylor is a perfect role model!
adrianejbrown: What makes her a good role model?
Caitlin: She's like...perfect. All-American. She isn't involved in drugs or partying, she hasn't taken the wrong road such as Miley Cyrus has, which lost her a lot of fans...she's just not involved in anything that would suggest otherwise.

Miley Cyrus frequently emerges on discussion boards as a foil for Taylor Swift. While Taylor is often cited as being “good” or “sweet,” Miley Cyrus is used as a cautionary tale of a good girl gone bad, particularly in the wake of the less-wholesome-than-before video for “Can’t Be Tamed.” Caitlin confirmed this:

adrianejbrown: What do you mean by “the wrong road”?
Caitlin: [...] So "the wrong road" for Miley was basically leaving her younger fans...going all sex-appeal and trying to come off as more mature. I don't think it's working too well for her, so I hope Taylor doesn't do that!

Indeed, Swift's propriety is often established through the use of foils, such as in the song “Better Than Revenge.” Taylor has confirmed that the song was directed at actress Camilla Belle, who was reported to be the cause of Swift’s breakup with Joe Jonas. The chorus asserts that Belle is “better known for the things that she does on the mattress.” The line caused some debate on the boards as to whether it was appropriate, especially for younger fans, but users overwhelmingly expressed their appreciation for and identification with the song:
DoubleK: In a way, it's kind of Camilla's fault that she has a reputation for those things. Plus, what she did was just plain cruel, and Taylor let her know that. I know what it's like to have your love stolen from you, and if I wrote a song about the girl who ruined my life, on a scale from 1-10 for badness, it would be 20.

Taylor Swift’s image as a sexual innocent is thus bolstered by her juxtaposition to a girl who supposedly used her sexuality to hurt Swift—a girl who, it is worth noting, identifies as biracial because of her Brazilian father. Thus, Swift’s image of propriety and goodness are marked through her whiteness as well as her chastity. Taylor’s desexualized image was frequently cited as a reason for her role model status.

I asked Katie, another interview subject, about Taylor’s role model status, and she replied:

Yes. She is. Not to sound like a sound byte here... but she isn’t whoring herself out like a lot of other girls we see. She's got an image based around being a good girl and still being fun. I think that's good for girls to look up to.

However, Katie made a distinction between Taylor’s public persona and private life in a comment on one of my blog entries:

I think it's kind of naive to suggest that a beautiful very successful superstar like Taylor Swift would be a virgin at 20 years old. With that being said, the fact that she's not capitalizing on her sexuality and I'm pretty positive she won't ever is what makes her a good role model. It's not about her being "perfect" and "pure," it's about her not flaunting it like other young girls.”

Katie’s comment points to two important components of Swift’s image of propriety—“not capitalizing on her sexuality,” and “not flaunting it.” While Katie does not chastise Swift for potentially having a sex life, she asserts that both talking about her sexual practices and making money from it would make Swift a bad role model. This carves out a limited place for female
musicians, allowing them to sing about chaste heterosexual romance but to never acknowledge desire. It also affirms what Deborah Tolman calls “the missing discourse of desire,” a cultural silence on girls’ sexual desires which implicitly asserts that girls do not have sex for their own pleasure or enjoyment.

In one thread, titled “Would Taylor still like me if...”, LongLive131 ponders whether Taylor Swift would approve of her asexuality:

I feel like this is odd for a Taylor Swift fan, but I keep noticing others saying "To be a Taylor fan, you have to believe in love." Well, it's not that I don't believe in it, I'm completely uninterested. In dating, relationships, all of it. [...]So, is this wrong? I just want to [...] be accepted the way I am, & know that Taylor would still like me, Even though I'm so different.

This quotation points to the thin line between promiscuity and prudishness that girls must walk—while openly expressing sexual desire violates standards of white propriety, refusing the affective dimensions of heterosexual romance is seen as potentially marking this girl as an inferior feminine subject. Posts like this are distinctly digital. The existence and proliferation of fan sites allows girls to fantasize about approval from those whose opinions matter most to them—other Taylor fans, who understand their devotion when people in their offline lives don’t, as well as Taylor herself, since many fans believe that she reads the forums.

Images also provide visual context to the ways in which girls idealize Swift as a role model. Countless graphics feature a photograph of the user meeting Taylor, with many of them marking this moment as a critically important point in their lives. One graphic from Amazingly Talented features a doubled image of Betty hugging Taylor and smiling, emblazoned with the date and “It was the night things changed.” It is also notable that this graphic and many others utilize a special font modeled after Taylor Swift’s handwriting, allowing them to create the
digitized illusion that Swift herself wrote these words, and in this case, that she also felt the
event was life-changing. This fan and many others mark meeting Swift as a life-altering event for
them, one that stretches beyond just meeting a celebrity and actually has the power to
“change” someone’s life. Another Amazingly Talented fan, Rachel, employs the Swift
handwriting font to write a message, “I love Rachel! Love, Taylor” on an image of Swift, making
her own digitally “autographed” photo since she has not yet been able to meet Taylor. Many
graphics visually assert that while Taylor is an idealized celebrity, she is still relatable, and
meeting her is a joyful experience. One graphic, however, stood out for the ways that it marked
a distance between the user and Taylor. Farah, a user on Taylor Connect, used a graphic for her
avatar (See Figure 27) that featured Swift singing on stage, facing away, and Farah down in the
crowd, with all of the other faces around her blurred out. The graphic featured the words “I’m
invisible and everyone knows who you are.” The visual cues of the image—Swift on stage,
turned away, surrounded by an ethereal glow, and Farah down in the crowd looking up at Swift
with passionate adoration—mark the distance between celebrity and fan, but it is also
important to consider how the image signifies the gulf between Swift, as a normatively feminine
white girl, and Farah, an Arab-American girl. Farah feels “invisible” compared to Swift, marking
herself not simply as less popular than the singer but as completely unknown and unseen by
anyone. However, this image also may be read as an attempt to forge a connection between
Farah and Taylor, since everyone else is blurred out and those two are the only clear figures.
Girls identify with Taylor Swift as a fantasy projection of themselves, someone whom they admire and hope to emulate. As a role model, Swift represents the aspiratory aspects of identification—while fans relate to her, they do not see her as a direct reflection of who they are, but rather as someone like them who embodies what they want to be. For instance, many fans lament their own lack of relationships, exclaiming that they cannot wait until they get to experience relationships like Taylor has. Interestingly, many girls on the website identify as unpopular, but they see Taylor as a girl who has experienced the same struggles that they have. Yet, Swift’s articulation of girlhood is heavily idealized—though she sings about unrequited love and feeling like an outsider, her songs often end with her either getting the guy or getting revenge, and her claims of being subjected to real-life adolescent bullying amount to being excluded from shopping trips by her popular friends. Unpopular fans do not see Taylor as one of the mean girls who would pick on them in real life, though. Instead, they see Taylor as conveying recognition through songs that they relate to. As Butler indicates, subjects find recognition more meaningful from some people than from others. Taylor’s recognition is meaningful to fans because she is a celebrity and she embodies the characteristics that they want to possess. And
other fans’ recognition is meaningful because they also identify with Taylor and express the same deep affective connections to both Taylor and her music.

Many girls use Taylor as a guide for how to approach their own lives, seeking to emulate her in both appearance and behavior. Amazingly Talented has an entire section of the forum dedicated to fans who want to emulate Taylor’s fashion sense. Fans post pictures of Taylor, discuss her clothing, hair, and makeup, and share links for places to buy either the exact item she is wearing in the picture or to lower-cost replicas of the same item. Many fans also yearn for Taylor’s approval regarding their own romantic and personal lives. On Taylor Connect, threads such as “The Swiftie Code” (also called “The Swiftian Way) establish behavioral norms for Taylor Swift fans, based on fans’ readings of her songs and her personal life. For instance, TaylorChangedMyLife writes:

A Swiftie strives to...
- Stays true to themselves, and doesn't change for anyone.
- Believes in love, prince charming, and fairytales.

And SamSam adds:

A swifte strives to:
not be afraid to cry on the bathroom floor
still believe in love and in love stories
fight for what you believe in

These fans identify two themes that run through discussions about “The Swiftian Way”: staying true to yourself, and believing in love. Yet, while this notion of “being true to oneself” is prevalent, it is clear from the ways that propriety is elevated on these sites that only certain people should remain steadfast in their behaviors and beliefs, while others should strive to be more like Taylor and her fans. Moreover, a belief in true and lasting monogamous love is
frequently cited as a critical aspect of one’s Swiftie status, and the salience of community norms around this belief are evidenced by LongLive131’s anxiety over admitting her asexuality. Yet, while fans often cite love as a theme that everyone can relate to, believing in love is often coded in heteronormative terms of femininity, and sentimentality: “prince charming,” “fairy tales,” and “cry[ing] on the bathroom floor.” Thus, while fans elevate Swift as a role model and strive to emulate her, this elevation is embedded in the cultural valuation of white femininity. Butler (2005) suggests that expecting others to adhere to consistent and constricting identities “enacts a certain ethical violence” (42), and indeed, fans’ explicit and implicit adherence to “the Swiftian Way” requires girls to constantly maintain an image of proper girlhood. The only way that girls can be recognized for “who they are” is if they really are constantly invested in nonsexual romantic love, intent on sustaining positive thoughts, and obsessed with presenting a sweetly feminine physical appearance (criteria which almost certainly even Taylor Swift herself does not meet).

The belief among fans that all adolescent girls find Taylor Swift relatable is facilitated by digital spaces. On Taylor Connect, harshly criticizing Taylor Swift or talking about her personal life in any form is explicitly banned, so the only voices present on the site are those who admire all of her decisions. Even when comments are not harsh enough to warrant deletion by the site’s moderators, detractors are immediately pounced upon by avid Taylor supporters. The restrictions on anti-Taylor content are reflective of a much larger trend of policing on the sites. Both Taylor Connect and Amazingly Talented have strict swear filters which translates curse words into cutesy girlish words like “rainbows,” “unicorns,” “cupcakes,” and “kittens,” the latter of which is actually the replacement for the word “sex” on Taylor Connect. Thus, propriety is not only figured through a ban on explicit discussions of sexuality, but also through a ban on even
the mildest of swear words and through the complete discursive denial of the existence of sexual practice. While users commonly assert that “everyone is welcome” and that “every girl can relate to Taylor’s music,” recognition only occurs through unacknowledged social frameworks that emerge on the site, such as whiteness and heterosexual romance. Idealized American girlhood is purportedly available to everyone, yet the reliance on “good” behavior—engaging in chaste heterosexual romance, and maintaining an image of niceness while denigrating others—limits this subject position to those who embody normative characteristics of femininity and white propriety.

“Everyone calls me a lesbian because I love Taylor so much but I’m NOT one”:

Queer Identification, Heterosexual Melancholia, and Homophobic Practices

While Swift’s fans assert that both Swift’s music and their community are inclusive, recognition is only accessible if we can be seen for “who we really are,” which is impossible. Taylor Swift fan sites evidence the subject’s opacity, demonstrating the ways in which the desire for recognition requires subjects to present themselves in particular ways in order to be recognizable and legible to other website users. The disciplinary function of Taylor Swift’s idealized image of chaste propriety compels a particular kind of digital self-presentation which is upheld by fans’ desire to emulate her, or at least to publicly appear that they do. This has two possible outcomes: either the only girls on the site are the ones who actually meet the moral codes that Swift advances, or girls suppress pieces of themselves to fit into the forum community. My research revealed both outcomes at different points. I did targeted searches of the forums to obtain demographic information, and out of many hundreds of users, I only
encountered a few girls of color from the US and only one out lesbian—the interview subject I call Katie.

During her interview, the conservative political climate that shapes the site became incredibly evident. Katie told me about some of the difficulties she faced because of her openness about her sexuality:

I've gotten some people from TC who spammed my formspring a while back with stuff like "you only like Taylor because of your sick perversion!" [...] on TC there was a thread about which we preferred, Taylor with her red lipstick or a more natural look and I said I like the red because her lips looked more kissable. That post was flagged as abusive and Jordan hid it. [...] I've had issues with the moderators and administrators about it pretty much the whole time I've been a member.

Katie’s expression of desire violated the site’s adherence to standards of heteronormative propriety. In one discussion board thread, male members of the site asked other users for advice about girls, and Katie jumped into the conversation to lament her own difficulty in determining how to best approach girls. Most people on the thread ignored her comment, but one user responded to tell Katie that she would “personally feel uncomfortable” if she discovered someone she knew was a lesbian, but that Katie would find someone eventually. While Katie’s sexuality is made evident on the site through both her posts and the “LGBT Swiftie” icon that she made for her forum signature (see Figure 28), she is only welcome on the site as long as she keeps her desire under wraps. When Katie explicitly brings up her homosexuality, she is met with silence, uncomfortable remarks, and sometimes by homophobic taunts. However, while Katie has been negatively affected by Taylor Connect’s stringent views

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9 Formspring.me is a website where users set up a profile page for other users to ask them questions. Katie’s reference to “spamming” means that other users followed her from Taylor Connect and posted harassing, homophobic messages on her page.
on sexuality, she does not connect this to the purity that is valorized by Taylor Swift’s music, by fans on the site, and by Katie’s own interview responses. As I discussed in the previous section, Katie is deeply invested in the kind of heteronormative propriety that other fans see in Taylor Swift’s music, and she fully believes that Swift’s music is relatable for lesbian girls:

Yes. I mean, I have had feelings about girls that correlate to her feelings about guys. And although I’ve not been in her relationships, I can still relate to feelings of love and appreciate those feelings.

Katie suggests that she can incorporate Swift’s image of sweet wholesomeness into her own experience and articulation of lesbian relationships, in much the same way that lesbian and queer girls on MySpace employ heteronormative imagery to depict their identifications. Yet, as on MySpace, Katie desires to appropriate a piece of heteronormative culture—“Swiftian” propriety and sentimentality—without considering the ways that this strict view on the expression of sexual desire is connected to the ways that she is marginalized within the community because of her sexual identity.

On both sites, the specter of lesbian desire emerges as a negative consequence of expressing extreme fandom to non-fans. Historically, “extreme” female fandom has been coded in terms of desire for young male musicians, such as Elvis, The Beatles, or David Cassidy. The
media depicted girl fans of these male artists as hysterical, swooning, and far more interested in obtaining a date with the star than forging a connection with his music. Positioning Taylor Swift fans within this historical legacy, then, flips female fandom on its head: while Taylor Swift is not the first teenage girl pop star, she inspires publicly obsessive homosensual fandom. Because girl fandom has often been coded in terms of desire (as opposed to identification), Swift’s fans are situated as desiring her within this cultural understanding of fandom.

I suggest that the desirous components of girls’ statements of affection and admiration can be understood as a kind of heterosexual melancholy by which girls deny the possibility of lesbian desire, even as the unconscious remnants of it surface in their expressions of fandom. Butler writes,

Heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibility of homosexuality, a foreclosure that produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time that it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love... [H]eterosexual melancholy [is] the melancholy by which a...feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but ‘preserved’ through the heightening of feminine identification itself (1993a, 235).

Butler insists that the dichotomization of identification and desire is a falsehood that serves to preserve the heterosexual gender matrix, but queer desire demonstrates the ways in which desire and identification become muddled. Heterosexual femininity is always formed through the denial of the possibility of lesbian desire, yet at the same time, this denial remains as an ungrievable loss because there are no conventions for expressing this loss. Freud (1933) suggests that although psychoanalysis has typically conceived of identification and desire as distinct, it is possible for an object choice to become a point of identification. However, as Fuss (1993) asserts, the possibility for desire and identification to merge calls into question this entire
foundational dichotomy, “demonstrat[ing] their necessary collusion and collapsibility, the ever-present potential for one to metamorphose into, or turn back onto, the other” (54). In the case of Taylor Swift fandom, girls’ intense identifications with Swift emerge as the remnants of desire that have been suppressed. It is not that girls consider Swift as a possible object of desire and then reject her; rather, as Butler suggests, this foreclosure exists from the beginning. Because heterosexual identification is a prerequisite for social acceptance and legibility, girls have always understood that they must identify themselves within this matrix. Thus, in order to maintain the hope of recognition, girls must articulate their fandom in terms of heteronormative identification.

On Taylor Connect, a number of girls expressed frustration because family, friends, and classmates called them lesbians because of their obsession with Taylor:

JillianforTaylor: I get teased about being a swifty every day of my life. At first, it was by the odd person at school, but even my so-called "best friends" call me names for liking her, so much so that one of my friends slapped me the other day because I said that I'd rather see her in concert than go see Eclipse. It's gotten out of hand what people call me, but I know that I'm not going to stop liking Taylor because they don't like her. Every one says I'm a lesbian too because I like and idolize Taylor so much, I just don't think they understand what it is like to find someone that can sum up every single thing that has happened into a song just yet. But the day they start to worship a female singer, I won't be the one calling them a lesbian.

Throughout this post, JillianforTaylor expresses a degree of devotion typically reserved for romantic relationships. Going beyond calling herself a fan, she remarks that she gets “teased about being a swifty,” a moniker that reveals her intense admiration for Swift. She writes that she talks about Taylor Swift so frequently that her friends call her names and even slap her. Though she says that being called a lesbian has “gotten out of hand,” she asserts that her feelings about Taylor are so strong that they will not change. JillianforTaylor’s admiration for
Swift is intensely revelatory of heterosexual melancholia—she does not consider that she might “like and idolize” Swift in a desirous manner, because expressing or even possessing lesbian desire is completely unthinkable, even as a possibility. “Lesbian” is not so much a falsely-applied identity here as it is an insult—JillianforTaylor insists that she “won’t be the one calling them a lesbian” when other girls “worship” female stars, implying that to do so would be hurtful and wrong. She does not deny an attraction to Taylor because it is untrue, but rather because this attraction is socially impossible, and there is no discursive mechanism for her to express and experience the loss of the possibility of same-sex desire. Yet, desire surreptitiously emerges through hints at the intensity of her devotion for Swift, her need to defend Swift to her friends, her admission of worshipful feelings, and her assertion that she has “found someone” who understands her completely.

While this topic emerged less frequently on Amazingly Talented, several girls recounted similar stories. Girls who were called lesbians were always quick to assert their heterosexuality to other members of the message boards:

Laura13: Ok so i lovelovelove Taylor Swift. You could say im obsessed, idc. But i think some of my friends think im weird and i honestly think my mom thinks i need help or something because im constantly updating people and talking about the latest Taylor news. And this one guy at my school gets sick of it and says i have a crush on her. Which i sooooo do NOT! Maybe i should talk less about her? Does anybosy else have that problem? I dont wanna be the only one. lol.

Laura13’s post vacillates between denial and insecurity about the desirous nature of her attachment to Taylor Swift. She begins by admitting that she “lovelovelove[s] Taylor Swift,” the repetition confirming the intensity of her feelings, and she even explicitly acknowledges her obsession, but says “idc” (I don’t care). But this initial bravado about the acceptability of her feelings about Swift quickly fades into insecurity (“my friends think im weird” and “my mom
thinks i need help or something”) as she recognizes that others see her attraction to Taylor Swift as something more than musical appreciation. She then brings up the real point of anxiety: a boy at school asserts that she has a crush on Taylor, to which Laura13 simply responds “Which I soooooo do NOT!” The emphatic response exemplifies a typical adolescent strategy of denying desire that actually exists. The tone of this one sentence shifts from the rest of the quote—it is the only place where she uses capital letters or exclamation points or repeats letters for emphasis. Yet, in the context of the rest of this quote (which emphasizes her affection and obsession), it reads less as a denial of desire than a refusal to acknowledge desire. Her solution is not to redirect her desire to more acceptable sources, but rather to talk less frequently about Taylor—a solution that reveals a psychic conflict between the desire to be liked and the desire for autonomy. This suggests a conflict at the heart of the subject’s desire for recognition—while we want to be recognized for “who we really are,” we also must describe ourselves in terms that are legible and acceptable to others, and intense emotional attachment to a female musician removes Laura13 from these modes of legibility. She closes her post by soliciting responses from others, hoping that even if her friends and family do not understand her, other fans on the site will relate to her.

The girls in my study saw fan forums as an important place where their fandom is not interpreted through a lens of lesbian desire. Here, other fans sympathize with the so-called “lesbians” and assure them that being “obsessed” with a female artist does not make them queer. However, the quest for recognition again compels girls to adhere to normative frameworks, repeatedly asserting their own heterosexuality while upholding the condemnatory function of the “lesbian” label. Girls expressed feeling sad, hurt, and betrayed when people
referred to them as lesbians, and no one questioned how actual lesbian girls might feel about the aggressiveness of their denials. I asked Katie how she felt about this trend:

I’ve noticed that too. I used to comment and tell them, I get being upset about being called something you’re not but I wanted to make sure they were upset for the right reasons... but then the moderators threatened to ban me for trying to do their job.

Katie acknowledges that “being called something you’re not” would be upsetting, but she also indicates a concern that girls were not “upset for the right reasons”—that their hurt feelings were ultimately connected to homophobia. Yet, Katie’s attempts to raise important questions about the social power of lesbian-baiting tactics were unwelcomed by the moderators, and website users always meet stories about lesbian-baiting with unqualified sympathy (“Oh, I’m so sorry”).

However, while girl fans unequivocally deny the possibility of a desirous component to their fandom, undercurrents of desire constantly emerge on the message boards. On Taylor Connect, there is a forum section where fans can leave letters that they have written for Taylor so that they can share them with other fans. Many of these letters express a significant degree of love and devotion. However, one letter, written by BrittanyHeartsTaylor, was especially notable for the ways that the author blended identification, desire, and admiration:

You have no idea how many times I have practiced writing this letter. Any chance I get, I’m practicing. I’m not sure why, I suppose in the odd hope that I bump into you I want to be prepared. That is a lame excuse, but seriously, I’m know the day I meet you I’ll want to tell you so much, but the words will be unable to come out - I’ll be speechless. [...]

I get called a freak, a lot. Mainly because of my obsession with you, mainly because of the fact I idolize a girl makes people call me a lesbian on a daily basis. They haven’t looked up to someone how I look up to you, so they have no idea how much those puns hurt. Every living moment I am talking about you, so
much so my teachers refer to me as Brittany Swift. It drives some people mad but to be honest, I don't care and I really honestly mean that. [...] I love you Taylor. Thank you, thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I will always be so thankful for every lesson that you have taught me.

I love, love, love you,

Brittany

The first paragraph of this excerpt bears notable similarities to common narratives of romantic confessions—practicing the words over and over again, dreaming about the fantasy encounter, and feeling like she will not be able to speak when the moment finally arrives. She claims that she does not know why she repeatedly practices this speech, displaying some insecurity over the unusualness of her actions, then stating that she “wants to be prepared” if she meets Taylor. However, she cites preparedness for a chance encounter as a “lame excuse,” chastising herself for her spending so much time crafting her words because of her presumed inability to speak eloquently in front of Taylor. However, the “lame excuse” phrase also implicitly acknowledges the intensity of Taylor’s effect on her—she notes that the desire to be prepared to speak to Taylor is ultimately an insufficient explanation for the amount of time and energy she has spent fantasizing about and preparing for this encounter, alluding to the elements of desire in her affection for Taylor. Brittany then confesses to Taylor that her love for the musician has resulted in name calling and criticism because she “idolizes a girl” and talks about her “every living moment.” Brittany’s confession that her teachers call her “Brittany Swift” and that classmates call her a lesbian point to the ways in which Brittany’s public display of affection for Taylor is marked with queer desire. However, Brittany does not identify herself as a lesbian, and that label, along with “freak,” is one that she describes as incredibly hurtful. Yet, she also asserts that ultimately, being called a lesbian will not alter her behavior—she “doesn’t care” that her
gregarious about Swift “drives some people mad,” and she closes her letter telling Taylor “I love, love, love you.” Brittany’s public declaration of unconditional love for Taylor in the format of a love letter transcends platonic affection for the musician and reveals the ways that heterosexual melancholia redirects queer desire through socially legible circuits of admiration and affection.

Desire also emerged through intensely descriptive discussions of fans’ sensory experiences and fantasies of Taylor. A Taylor Connect discussion board thread titled “What does Taylor smell like?” featured fans guessing at what she might smell like as well as fans who had met her describing how she smelled:

Hannah: OMGZZZZZ she smells AWESOME

Lexie: She seriously smells SO good! It’s Givenchy Hot Couture perfume... I’m putting it on my Christmas list

HelenofTroy: I read somewhere that she uses strawberry scented buttermilk skin lotion from Body Shop (or something like that)! And it makes her smell like that.

Becky: That sounds so good!! Like something I would eat! Hrm. Now I’m hungry 😋

Melina: Taylor always smells so good... it’s an admirable quality

Girls’ interest in determining how Taylor smells was both about wanting to smell like her and wanting to be close enough to smell her—in fact, several users joked about how they would go about asking to smell Taylor “NOT IN A WEIRD WAY.” Here, heterosexual melancholia emerges through the heightening of girls’ own feminine identifications, as they explicitly insist that they want to look and smell like Taylor (themes that also emerge in the numerous threads about Swift’s hair and clothing) but at the same time, hints of desire emerge through affective markers and through unstated aspects of this admiration. For instance, users’ descriptions of smelling or
wanting to smell Taylor imply the intimacy of stepping into her personal space to smell the perfume on her neck. The types of adjectives used to describe Swift’s scent in the above excerpts—"AWESOME," "so good," "something I would eat"—demonstrate an implicit connection between scent and desire, again blurring the line between desire and identification. Fuss (1993) suggests that homosexual desire is not simply a surplus of identification (as Freud suggested); however, desire does always incorporate a degree of aspiration. She critiques Freud’s assertion that lesbians “lack a certain mature relation to lack” (since lack is, in Freud’s conception, what motivates the heterosexual desire for the other) and instead contends that queer desire is also motivated by a lack (except that the lack is not predicated upon gender). The currents of queer desire that circulate on Taylor Swift fan pages are not simply instances of excess identification, but also of desire toward someone who possesses a degree of physical attractiveness, popularity, financial success, and wholesomeness that they themselves do not possess.

Desire also emerges through fans’ uses of images. Katie, for instance, repeatedly expressed physical attraction to Swift in her interview, indicating that her interest in Taylor incorporated not only identification but also desire. Indeed, Katie’s avatar (see Figure 29) combines a photograph of her with one of Taylor, their hands jointly forming a heart. Katie made the graphic by superimposing a picture of herself over half of the original image, which featured Disney star Selena Gomez. For Katie, though, the image represents the possibility of desire between her and Taylor, or even just someone like Taylor, and she forges a visual and romantic connection to Swift through her avatar.
This image demonstrates the ways that the visual holds the ability to wordlessly house many meanings—attraction, affection, admiration—in just one image. While Katie’s graphic displays the most prominent and explicit mode of desire when contextualized with her lesbian identity, the visual character of the image itself is not markedly different from many other girls’ graphics. For instance, Amazingly Talented user Felicity has several graphics which feature images of Taylor sitting on a picnic blanket, wearing a dress, holding a flower, and gazing seductively at the camera while she twirls her hair. The image is emblazoned with the words “I was enchanted to meet you,” a lyric from the song “Enchanted,” which Swift wrote about a boy she had a crush on. Felicity’s use of these images conveys an intense admiration for and attachment to Swift in a way that is not entirely heterosexual, and indeed, the depth of many girls’ expressed attachments to Swift extends beyond what can be understood as completely platonic.

**Conclusion**

My examination of Taylor Swift fan forums illuminates the ways in which digital subjects seek out recognition from those they believe are most capable of granting it—those they admire,
and those who share their admirations. However, recognition is not an equal playing field—girls
must frame themselves in normative terms in order to be understood, and these terms are
inaccessible and constricting to many subjects, especially racial and sexual Others. I also suggest
that for digital subjects in particular, recognition has a distinct connection to capitalism. Sites
like Taylor Connect facilitate subjects’ identification with celebrities by creating the illusion of a
constant and personalized digital presence, but these sites submerge their purpose—selling
albums and concert tickets—in order to bolster the authentic American girlhood image that
consumers are so attracted to. Recognition is offered not out of a genuine desire to know and
understand someone, but as a marketing strategy. Thus, the digital subject’s hope that the web
can be a space of understanding and belonging unavailable in her offline life is ultimately
untenable—because the desire for recognition compels partial or even false self-presentations,
because recognition is unevenly accessible, and because normative frameworks of gender, race,
sexuality, class, and age shape any potential exchange of recognition.
CHAPTER 6:
CONCLUSION

Last fall, I gave a paper on Taylor Swift at an international conference on girlhood along with several colleagues from Ohio State. Throughout the conference, I listened as scholars across all levels of academia (from undergraduate students to full professors) from several countries presented research on the state of contemporary girlhood. While the sessions covered diverse topics ranging from activism to Sabrina the Teenage Witch to nerdy girls, I was struck by the perpetual refrain of agency that emerged in nearly every presentation: girls are the future, girls are radical, girls will be changemakers if we only give them the tools. The media scholars were perhaps the most optimistic—in several different sessions (including a plenary), both new and established scholars cited the digital divide as the most salient factor preventing girls from expressing their “true selves” and claiming the digital world for feminism. Almost unequivocally, girls were valorized as somehow better than adults, uncorrupted by conservative politics or compromise and already exploding the boundaries of normative girlhood wherever they could. Feminist scholars’ role was touted as primarily one of amplifying girls’ voices rather than critiquing or questioning them. As I spoke with my colleagues (who shared my concerns) about these trends, I became increasingly agitated and convinced that although the intention of validating girls’ perspectives is admirable and important, it ultimately does girls a great disservice to overwrite the influence that feminist sentiments have on their identifications, actions, and self-presentations.

This dissertation firmly challenges the ways that agency is figured by girlhood scholars.
While I agree that girls’ perspectives have too often been cast aside as silly, uninformed, and irrelevant (Raby 2007), I assert that taking girls seriously does not mean putting them on a pedestal. In my Introduction, I discussed the debates around girls’ agency, suggesting that feminist scholarship tends to represent girls in one of two ways: either as constrained by structural forces of racism and sexism which prevent them from reaching their potential (Chambers et al 2004; Currie 1999; Currie 2001; Duncan 2004; McRobbie 2000; Nielsen 2004), or as empowered, agential figures who utilize girl power to redefine girlhood and engage in feminist activism (Danesi 1994; Garrison 2000; Harris 2004; Inness 1998; Kelly et al 2006; Lesko 1996; Pomerantz et al 2004). Girlhood media scholars fall largely into the last category, situating the internet as a place of promise for girls in which teenage feminist bloggers can write about the continued need for pro-choice activism and sex-positive girls can have forum discussions about how to engage in physically and emotionally fulfilling sexual relationships (Currie et al 2006; Grisso and Weiss 2005; Harris 2004; Kearney 2006; Kelly et al 2006; Lesko 1996; Pomerantz et al 2004; Thiel 2005). Often, these scholars situate access as the defining factor: girls are supposedly ready and waiting to explode the boundaries of normative femininity, if only we give them laptops and classes in HTML coding.

However, as several girlhood scholars have pointed out, both major strands of thought rest on reductive conceptions of girls’ ability to exercise power, express themselves, and articulate their identities (Driscoll 2002; Gonick 2006; Thomas 2008). Girlhood media scholars posit that girls are all similarly positioned relative to feminist sentiments, and scholars in both camps rely on the assumption that we can rely solely on girls’ explicit thoughts, influences, and motivations. Feminist conceptions of girls’ agency valorize voice over all else, but there is little attention given to analyzing what girls actually say when they are given the opportunity to say it.
Instead, feminist scholars tend to focus primarily on “exceptional” girls who defy normative conventions, and analyses of these girls’ thoughts and behaviors largely mark girls as subversively heroic (Currie et al 2006; Driver 2007; Kearney 2006; Kelly et al 2006; Vickery 2010).

However, my dissertation demonstrates that even girls who do not fall into normative categories of whiteness, heterosexuality, middle class status, and thinness often reaffirm the centrality of these categories. My multifaceted methodology, which combines visual and textual analysis of websites with instant messenger interviews, illustrates that while girls often explicitly claim to be transgressive, unique individuals, their interactions with other website users and their uses of visual media tend to place them within normative frameworks. In Chapter 3, I showed that lesbian and queer girls on MySpace often utilize heteronormative (and sometimes explicitly heterosexual) imagery in their digital self-presentations. Though girls assert in textual components of their profiles that they are proud to be gay, the visual elements of their pages present a conflicting story which confirms the importance of monogamy, legal marriage, and sexual desirability to their online presences. While feminists assume that lesbian and queer girls are inherently activist by nature of their outsider status in relation to heterosexual privilege, my work demonstrates that girls do not simply reject heteronormative discourses. Rather, girls seek to place themselves inside of these discourses by utilizing iconographic and photographic conventions regarding abstinence, sexual objectification, and sentimentality within their profiles. In Chapter 4, I argued that even though bulimic girls often do not adhere to feminine expectations of thinness and cleanliness, they still affirm the importance of these standards by contrasting themselves unfavorably to anorexics. And in Chapter 5, I suggested that while Taylor Swift fans characterize themselves as unpopular, they still admire and seek to emulate Swift’s supposed physical and moral perfection.
My reliance on recognition theory illuminates the ways that the subject’s desire to be known and understood by others compels these particular kinds of girlhood self-presentation. Butler (1997b) asserts that subjects passionately desire recognition, but in order to be legible to others, subjects must articulate themselves within legible terms. Digital girl subjects must constitute themselves within established conventions in order to make themselves readable to online audiences, and they thus must frame themselves in relation to normative discourses. Thus, lesbian and queer girls on MySpace employ heteronormative images and terminology (such as the frequent instance of labeling themselves “married”) in order to be recognized as sexually desirable or serious about their relationships. Girls implicitly contend with cultural narratives that constitute adolescent lesbianism as simply a “phase” that girls go through and utilize their MySpace pages as a place to establish the seriousness of their sexual identifications.

My dissertation also bears out Butler’s assertion (2005) that the desire for recognition is more specifically directed toward some individuals than to others. For bulimic girls on pro-mia websites, other bulimic users offer the promise of acceptance and recognition that non-eating-disordered individuals cannot grant. Girls seek and offer recognition through frank and specific discussions of vomiting practices, exchanging stories about both rewarding and embarrassing experiences. Their shared intimacy with the abject and mutual pursuit of bulimic jouissance allows them to feel like “no one else understands” them in the way that other pro-mia website users do, and thus the recognition that they offer is more meaningful than the level of understanding that friends and family give. Similarly, Chapter 5 showed that Taylor Swift fans feel persecuted for their intense devotion to Swift, and they believe that only other fans can understand the reasons that Swift and her music are so critically important to them. While girls’ family and friends express confusion and even make fun of them for their fandom, fan sites offer
a place where they can create graphics that merge their picture with Taylor’s, write love letters to Swift, and discuss the ways that the musician has changed their lives without fear of being criticized.

However, I argue that the subject’s belief in the possibility of recognition is ultimately untenable. The belief that we can be fully known and understood is premised upon the idea that there is a stable, core self that can be extracted, presented, and read; however, this is a myth. My dissertation demonstrates that rather than expressing a coherent identity, girls’ digital identities tend to shift frequently. Over the course of my study, my subjects’ MySpace pages changed frequently, erasing all traces of former relationships, musical tastes, and autobiographical statements. While girls often claimed in interviews and on their pages that their MySpace pages reflected “who they really were,” the “who” shifted multiple times over the months that I analyzed their pages. Moreover, my dissertation demonstrates that subjects present themselves in particular ways for specific audiences. While pro-mia girls flaunt conventions of normative femininity by openly discussing their purging practices on pro-mia digital forums, these discussions are entirely contained to website conversations with other bulimics. Girls express significant anxiety about being discovered by non-bulimic friends and family members, and they assert that they attempt to conceal their behaviors from nearly everyone outside of the pro-eating disorder community. And among Taylor Swift fans, my work revealed that while girls profess that everyone can express who they are, not all girls feel welcome. Although Katie’s continued presence on the site was tolerated, her behavior was strictly policed, and she felt that she had to conceal her sexuality in order to avoid harassment from users and unfair treatment from moderators.
The constantly shifting nature of the self illustrates that girls’ desire for recognition is not simply about a desire to be seen in the small, everyday aspects of self-presentation, but as full subjects—even though this belief in stable subjectivity is a fantasy. Thus, the investment in a coherent self enacts, in Butler’s (2005) words, an “ethical violence” of stable expectations among website users. In the bulletin board communities in particular, users are expected to keep conversations to the topic at hand, so they really are only able to discuss one small aspect of their lives (bulimia or Taylor Swift). Conversations that fall outside of these boundaries may be ignored or even deleted, so it is within girls’ interests to overemphasize the importance of this one topic and to leave other subjects out entirely, or to reference them peripherally with the inability of online forums to delve more deeply into other topics. Moreover, even within the context of websites’ general topics, there are particular narrative structures that girls must adhere to. On pro-mia websites, the topics that garner the most positive attention from other users are those that discuss the private pleasures and public embarrassments of bulimic practices, and posts that do not confirm these perspectives are often ignored. Girls who have not been binging and purging for an extended period of time or who openly share their disorder with friends and family are labeled “not really bulimic,” and this practice of exclusion compels girls to present their eating disorders in line with the site’s narrative conventions. On Taylor Swift fan sites, the constant elevation of Swift’s own physical and moral perfection compels girls to present themselves in a way that confirms their own aspirations to be more like Swift. Girls valorize Swift’s feminine propriety, holding themselves and others up to her assumed standards and criticizing anyone who appears to be too “sluty.” Girls who do not meet these standards, then, are either completely excluded from the site or must suppress pieces of themselves in order to fit in. On both of these types of sites, criticism is both implicitly and
explicitly forbidden: pro-mia girls cannot recommend recovery or criticize one another’s bodies, and Taylor Swift fans are strictly forbidden from criticizing Swift or her music. Thus, the only voices allowed are those that agree with the sites’ conventions, and so site members are rarely able to articulate a contrary viewpoint.

Thus, while girls assert that they can reveal “the real me” in digital spaces, this investment in self-coherency and recognition ultimately compels girls to force themselves into particular normative frameworks in order to be recognized. This, I suggest, has implications for the ways that girlhood is broadly understood as well as for girls’ own psychic and physical interests. On MySpace, girls’ articulations of lesbian and queer identifications are largely ensconced in heteronormative frameworks, and moving outside of these categories (for instance, through expressions of non-monogamous desires) would render them illegible. However, girls’ employment of several tropes of adolescent web activity, such as sexualized photographs of themselves, may also uphold the broader digital audience’s investment in lesbian desire as a publicly consumable spectacle. In the case of pro-mia sites, offering and receiving recognition only on the basis of a mental illness implicitly compels girls to avoid recovery, since they fear the loss of support that they receive from other bulimics. And finally, Taylor Swift fans’ valorization of heteronormative feminine propriety both falsely implies that girls can achieve the same kind of success and popularity that Swift has if they simply follow her example and excludes girls who cannot meet these high standards—especially girls of color, lesbian girls, and working class girls.

Yet, girls cannot simply choose to give up the quest for recognition—subjects are only formed through a process of interaction and negotiation with the Other. When Butler asks, “Who am ‘I’ without you?” (2005, 22) the implied answer is “No one.” While there is
unquestionably an internal component to the formation of identifications, the subject has no
definition or meaning outside of the social contexts that frame her life. Thus, I do not suggest
that girls should simply give up on their desires for recognition (in a manner that would be
parallel to popular criticisms of the influence of “peer pressure”) because they cannot ultimately
be fulfilled. Rather, my dissertation illuminates the centrality that recognition holds for the
subject’s passionate desire to belong and to be known. While the subject’s quest for recognition
remains unfulfilled, it is precisely that lack, that impossibility of satisfying the desire, that
compels the subject to continue to seek recognition by the Other. My aim has not been to seek
to destabilize the centrality of recognition in processes of subjectivity; instead, my dissertation
raises important questions about the bases upon which recognition is typically granted and
offered. The investment in the notion of a coherent or stable self forces subjects to attempt to
consistently articulate themselves within normative frameworks even though these terms are
always inadequate, and so the fantasy of “true” recognition is ultimately a constricting one.

Implications

My analysis of girls’ digital media productions reveals the importance of grounding
subjectivity theory in social context. While psychoanalytic theory is often critiqued for
universalizing psychic processes (McNay 2008), my study demonstrates the importance of
considering the ways that psychic desires are affected by the particularities of individuals’
gendered, racial, and sexual subjectivities. While I assert that all subjects are motivated by the
desire for recognition, I also suggest that this desire is specific, mutable, and contingent. The
girls in my study all expressed the desire to be known and understood for “who they really are,”
their conceptions of who they were, as well as the focus points of their desires for recognition,
shifted substantially based on the particular media context I studied. While bulimic girls sought recognition on the basis of a denigrated, unfeminine subject position, Taylor Swift fans wanted to be understood as sweet, sexually proper, and heterosexual. Different digital contexts enable and encourage different modes of self-presentation, so it is critical to ground analyses of identification, recognition, and subjectivity in particular contexts. Moreover, my study reveals that the visual is a critical component of digital self-presentation, pointing to the importance of considering the ways that subjectivities are not simply expressed, but actually made, through processes of creating, borrowing, and combining various elements of subjechood that emerge from a variety of sources.

This dissertation has significant implications for girlhood media scholars. While feminist scholars have largely focused on the project of giving voice to girls, my work demonstrates that uncomplicatedly focusing on girls’ actions and intentions is insufficient. Subjects are motivated by psychic as well as social processes, and it is critical to explore the ways that both of these factors influence the ways that girls interact and present themselves in digital spaces. My work firmly contests the notion that simply giving technology to girls of color, poor white girls, or queer girls will result in the explosion of feminist sentiments on the internet. Thus, digital media scholars must think beyond the ways that the digital divide impacts girls and also consider the ways that racist, sexist, and heterosexist discourses continue to circulate online (see also Nakamura 2002, 2007). However, my work also expands upon current literature that challenges the possibilities of the internet as an emancipatory space. While Nakamura, Hansen (2004), and Currier (2010) importantly note that the body does not cease to exist in digital spaces, their analyses primarily focus on internet users’ explicit actions. My framework reveals some of the psychic motivations underpinning digital subjects’ articulations of gender, race, and sexuality,
illustrating the ways that engaging with particular discourses and identifications allow subjects to more legibly seek recognition.

Finally, my findings thoroughly dispute many feminist scholars’ investments in the possibilities of girls’ agency. While girls are often uncomplicatedly painted as proto-feminist subjects (Driscoll 2002), I suggest that girls’ online interactions are characterized by ambivalence—even when girls articulate identifications that are at odds with normative conceptions of femininity, this is often counterbalanced by other statements and images that tie them back to whiteness, heterosexuality, middle class status, and thinness. While it is important to acknowledge that girls’ online interactions generate culturally significant meanings about femininity and adolescence, I argue that affirming girls’ status as cultural producers does not necessarily mean that we must (or can) characterize this production as unequivocally progressive or positive.

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman (2004) contends that our cultural investment in youth as “the future of our country” betrays a false sense of optimism that ultimately detracts from efforts to make the present more livable. The belief that the next generation holds the promise for a better society is constantly repeated yet infinitely deferred (since inevitably, there never is a generation that fulfills this hope) and Edelman asserts that we must “withdraw our allegiance, however compulsory, in the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism” (4). Edelman’s criticism of investments in futurity is instructive for girlhood media scholars—while we as feminist scholars are trained to validate the voices of marginalized individuals, we cannot place too much confidence in girls’ ability or desires to “change the world”: first, because not all girls subscribe to feminist goals of equality and empowerment; second, because girls’ explicit statements and actions are always informed by hidden psychic desires for identification and recognition; and
finally, because in order to be socially legible, girls must articulate their identifications within normative, constricting, and inadequate frameworks.
References


APPENDIX A: BLOG ENTRIES

Introducing the Blog 3/8/10

So, this blog is going to be about my reflections on the process of writing my dissertation. I’m a pretty avid blog reader (especially food blogs :D), but this is my first experience keeping a blog of my own. So I think it’ll be interesting to see how this turns out. For someone in Women’s Studies, I’ve always been a pretty traditional academic. I’ve always been pretty skeptical of what we think of as experimental teaching methods like having students create artwork or poetry, and I never would have seen myself as someone who’d decide to use a nontraditional research method in writing my dissertation...but here I am, blogging. I’m not just using this blog as a space of venting and processing, though those things will be important.

I’m actually using it as a source of data for my project. I’m doing this in a couple of ways. First, I’m thinking about it as autoethnography, as a way of being reflexive about my own experiences in doing fieldwork and in concretely situating myself in my work. So I’m thinking a lot about what’s motivating me to do particular work, how I’m processing each chapter, and particularly how I’m approaching my work with my research subjects. Second, the blog is a place where the girls I invite to participate in my study can come to read about the research process and comment on the study. I’ll be sending a link to my blog to each girl, and I’m hoping that at least some of them will come and comment on the project. So given the different aspirations of this blog, I feel like I’m writing for different audiences. I know some other academics will be reading it, because I know a few faculty members and grad students who have expressed interest in following it. Hopefully there will be teenage girls who wander over to read and make
comments. And random family members and friends who are vaguely familiar with my work might also poke in from time to time.

Generally, I’ll write blog entries about what kinds of things I’m seeing on websites, how interviews are going, how the dissertation as a whole is taking shape, what kinds of theories I’m working with, and how I’m dealing (or sometimes not dealing) with the intense process of dissertation writing. So, to the handful of readers out there, hi. :) If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact me. And I hope that you find this dissertation blog interesting and informative. I’m really looking forward to sharing my research and to talking about the process with all of you!

Describing My Project 3/9/10

So I guess my second blog entry will talk a bit about what my dissertation is actually doing...wait a second, back up. Since I’m blogging for people who don’t necessarily know what a dissertation is, I should explain that first. So broadly speaking, a dissertation is a book-length project that someone writes as part of the requirements (generally the main part of the requirements, at least in the humanities) for earning a PhD. It has an introduction, a few body chapters, and a conclusion, and it generally seems to be a couple hundred pages or so. In my department, we spend somewhere around 2 years writing it. You eventually publish some chapters in academic journals and generally hope to get the dissertation published as a book somewhere down the road.

So the dissertation is different from say, a research paper that you’d write in English class because in a research paper, you’re collecting a bunch of other people’s research and synthesizing it. That comprises one part of a dissertation called the literature review, but most
of a dissertation is original work. So we draw upon what other people have done, but we have to make a unique contribution—we have to say something that no one else has said before. The exact requirements, structure, and so on vary from discipline to discipline. Women’s Studies is interdisciplinary (meaning that we draw from a lot of fields in our work, like English, sociology, philosophy, psychology, education, political science, geography, and so on), so there’s a lot of flexibility in what we do in general. It’s mostly dependent on what your advisor and your dissertation committee want.

My dissertation looks at the ways that teenage girls present themselves online. I’m specifically interested in how girls construct particular images of themselves because of a very basic, underlying, unconscious desire to be understood and recognized by their peers, family members, and anonymous internet users. This desire for recognition isn’t limited to teenage girls—it’s something we all have. I’m specifically drawing on Judith Butler’s ideas about how the desire for recognition leads us to define ourselves in ways that are complex and sometimes inaccurate and even contradictory, and so we can never really represent ourselves in any sort of “true” or fully encompassing way, which means that no one can ever really fully understand us. But we want people to recognize and understand us, and so we have to use these inaccurate and inadequate terms anyway.

Specifically, I look at four different kinds of websites: MySpace, fan sites and MySpace pages of a couple of musicians (currently Lily Allen and Adele, though I’m really hoping to figure out a way to write about Taylor Swift as well), pro-eating disorder bulletin boards and blogs, and fat-positive bulletin boards and blogs. I’ll explain all of the different websites in other blog entries, but mostly I wanted to select websites that presented a broad spectrum of the experience of contemporary adolescent girlhood—so MySpace is sort of my starting point for
thinking about general issues, the musicians’ sites let me think about issues surrounding celebrity girlhood, and pro-eating disorder and fat-positive websites help me explore issues around girls’ ideas about their bodies.

I’m really interested in how girls are explicitly and implicitly addressing issues surrounding gender, race, sexuality, and class. So I look at things like blogs and bulletin board posts, but I also analyze the photographs, graphics, music, and videos that girls use on all of these websites. And in addition to analyzing websites, I’m doing instant messenger interviews with teenage girls. This is a pretty new way of conducting research, and I don’t personally know anyone who has done interviews online (and actually, I don’t personally know anyone else who’s using their research blog as a source of data).

So I’m going to be really interested to see how doing online research turns out. I think it will present a lot of challenges but I’m also really excited to see what kinds of things I learn from it. I love my topic, and I’m having a lot of fun with my dissertation so far. I’ll continue to explain bits and pieces of it as I go along, but this is probably a good place to stop for now.

**Interviews! 3/10/10**

So, I sent out a bunch of interview requests yesterday and got a handful of responses, which is great! We’re always told to send out many more requests than the number of interviews we want, because response rates are quite low...and even lower for anything internet-based. I actually got to conduct one interview last night and another one this afternoon, and it was pretty great! I coached and judged high school debate for years and I’ve really missed working with teenagers since moving to Columbus, so it's great to be talking to girls about their lives.
Both girls confirmed some of my expectations--namely, that MySpace is important in terms of communicating with friends and that they really like that you can customize your page with graphics and backgrounds and such in ways that you can't for Facebook. Also, they both talked about how it's important that their close friends like their pictures and pages but less important whether random MySpace friends do. They talked a lot about how MySpace was an important place to show other people who they are and expressed the feeling that their pages are reflective of who they are.

One thing that's really surprising to me is that both of these interviewees said that MySpace was really important to them in terms of finding relationships--both of them met their current girlfriends on MySpace and one of them--Leslie*--has met all of her girlfriends that way. Leslie said that it's just easier because she has a hard time figuring out who's gay and who's not in real life, but MySpace makes it a lot simpler because sexual orientation is one of the basic pieces of information on most people's pages.

This last piece is really great for my chapter. There's been some good work, most notably by danah boyd, about how Facebook has attracted mostly white and middle class teens while working class teens and teens of color are more likely to be on MySpace (http://www.danah.org/papers/2009/WhiteFlightDraft3.pdf). However, there's not really any work on the ways that sexuality impacts teenage girls' uses of social networking sites, so I'm even more excited than before about incorporating my interview data into this chapter.

So far, so good! Interviews are going great!
Adventures in internet research 3/14/10

So, I haven't done any new interviews since my last post, though not for lack of trying. I had a dozen or so girls respond to my initial email but most of them haven't responded to follow up emails, and I've been messaging back and forth with a couple of other girls but haven't been able to connect with them via IM yet. So right now, out of 60 requests, I've gotten 2 interviews. I just spent an hour or so sending out around 100 more requests. I'm hoping to get three more interviews for this chapter, so cross your fingers!

From what I know about standard response rates, this is pretty much par for the course. My advisor, Mary, said that there's usually about a 10% return rate on surveys (something I've also heard elsewhere), and internet-based research has even lower response rates. Anyone who has an email address knows that we all get so many emails that many things get lost in the shuffle, and even if someone is initially interested, there's no guarantee that they'll respond to subsequent emails. There's something about the indirect nature of email that makes it easier to ignore than in-person communication. The kind of response rates I'm getting for MySpace are not such a big deal because there are so, so many people on MySpace that it's easy enough to just send out more requests. However, I'm a bit concerned about response rates this low for subsequent chapters. As soon as I get through these interview requests, I'll move on to interviews for the next chapter (which I'm already doing reading, textual analysis, and writing for). It'll be really interesting to see how all of this continues to play out.

One other thing that I have to consider in doing internet research with teenage girls is that they're constantly bombarded with messages from people they don't know, whether it's random spam, another user looking for friends, or someone looking to hook up. This seems to be a particular problem for queer girls on MySpace. There are a LOT of girls who prominently
indicate (in their user name, headline, or basic profile information) that they’re not interested in IMing/messaging, becoming MySpace friends, or having sex with guys. Since you can search for people on MySpace by age and sexual orientation (the method I actually use to find potential research subjects), I think queer girls get a lot of guys who are into the whole straight guy fantasy of lesbians (specifically, pretty young girls who make out with/sleep with other girls but are also totally willing to do a guy or just need to meet the right guy). MySpace does allow users to block messages from people who aren't their MySpace friends, but in the vast amount of messages I've sent, only 10 or so times did I have a message rejected for this reason, so I don't think it's used often.

One girl I requested an interview with actually messaged me back saying "I don't think you're legit." I completely understand her response and anticipated it in my research design. One nice thing about internet research is that it's very easy for me to send a link to this blog (which I do in the initial request and at a few other points in the process) and a link to my profile on OSU's website, which provides a lot of legitimacy. I also give out university email addresses for myself and Mary. Mostly, I want to do everything I can to assure girls that this is a legitimate project and that I'm not some internet creeper trying to harass teenagers. Incidentally, the girl was satisfied with the university website link, and she's one of the girls I've been communicating with about setting up an interview time. Fingers crossed!

Okay, so everyone think happy thoughts of girls willing to do interviews with me!

Interviews redux/intro to pro-ana/mia websites 4/5/10

So, I haven't updated the blog in a couple of weeks. Interviewing continues to be a big challenge. If you don't follow my Facebook, you haven't heard that I had one interview that was...
interrupted when the research subject abruptly said "I have to go to jail now." I'm not sure if she was visiting someone or going there herself, but she messaged me the next day apologizing for leaving mid-interview. I'm trying to reschedule, so hopefully that'll pan out. I have one interview scheduled for Friday night and am working on a few more, and I just sent a bunch more requests out. Let's hope I can get a few!

I'm simultaneously working on my second chapter, which looks at pro-eating disorder websites. I'm a little torn on how much to write about this chapter in my blog because it's something that people are intensely private about. Right now, I'm doing a lot of background reading and analyzing the websites. I want to get a bit more of a feel for what I want to ask before I dive into interviews, and the only way to do that is to spend a lot of time reading the websites.

However...that's a pretty tricky undertaking. Pro-ana/mia websites, if you're unfamiliar, are websites where people, mostly women and girls, talk about eating disorders--specifically, these are usually people who actually have eating disorders and who don't want to recover. A lot of the website content is geared toward talking about everyday eating issues/habits, trading tips on how to continue and hide their eating disorders, posting pictures of extremely thin women (called "thinspiration"), and offering support to each other on bulletin boards. They see eating disorders simultaneously as lifestyles and diseases--they want family, friends, doctors, etc. to leave them alone and respect their decisions about how to eat because they believe that living with an eating disorder is possible if you don't go overboard, but at the same time, they often talk about anorexia and bulimia as diseases, saying that they would quit if they could choose to. So it's a very complicated way of talking about eating disorders.
A lot of people who don't have eating disorders react very strongly and negatively when hearing about or viewing these websites. People talk a lot about how these girls and women are trying to recruit other people into starting disordered eating (not true--they actively shun people they deem "annabes," or women/girls who want to develop EDs) or that they're poor, deluded victims. My project is working against the idea that these women and girls are victims, but I also don't think that anorexia and bulimia are valid lifestyle choices. So mostly I'm thinking about the role that these websites serve in girls' lives, why they're important, why they present themselves in particular ways on the websites, what role the internet community plays, etc. I'll continue to update everyone as I start developing conclusions and formulating arguments.

A general note: I won't ever post the names of the pro-eating disorder websites I'm looking at. There are a lot more privacy issues at stake than just mentioning that I'm looking MySpace pages. Also, while I'm someone who is extremely curious and always Googles everything I read about, if you have any sort of body issues, I would recommend actively avoiding these websites. They can be particularly difficult to look at if you've ever struggled with an eating disorder, and even researchers who have always had healthy body images tend to find themselves struggling with the issue after spending a lot of time viewing the websites.

Here's hoping that I have some updates about interviews soon!

The last of the interviews for now... 4/18/10

So, the recruitment messages I sent out on the day of my last blog post were successful! I had a few more interviews that I wanted to complete just to round out my MySpace chapter, and several girls responded. I ended up getting 6 in-depth interviews (about an hour of IM
conversation each), and my MySpace chapter is in great shape! I'm really excited about all of the interesting data that my interviews provided.

Annie talked about hiding her MySpace page from her mom after getting into trouble for posting some provocative pictures. She also talked a lot about how she feels more comfortable expressing herself on MySpace than she does in face-to-face conversations and that she feels like people can know who she "really" is by reading her MySpace page. My work is really influenced by autobiography theory and by subjectivity theory, which contest the idea that there's a real or authentic self--instead, we show different parts of ourselves to different people at different times, and we're often not consciously doing it. But generally, one of the big questions my project addresses is whether the web really opens up a space where gender, race, sexuality, body image, etc. can be expressed and understood in ways that are different from real life--something I'm quite skeptical about. Mostly, it seems that girls continue to be constrained by the ways that femininity, whiteness, thinness, heterosexuality, and middle-class status are valued in society, and even when they try to contest these categories, they're not really able to stretch them.

Oh! Kat, the interview subject who left in the middle of her interview, was able to finish it. We had a really interesting conversation about how she and her girlfriend argue about what's appropriate for each of them to post on their pages. One thing that was really interesting about her page was that one of her blog entries was actually written by her girlfriend, who wanted to apologize to Kat's MySpace friends about how she'd acted during hers and Kat's most recent breakup. Since my dissertation is so concerned with the ways that the interactive character of the web changes the ways that girls describe themselves, I'm particularly interested in how queer girls interact with their girlfriends, how they influence what each other posts, and what
kind of access they give each other in terms of passwords and such. For example, Kat said that she and her girlfriend actually read each other’s private messages and catch each other flirting.

So, that’s the last of the interviews for the MySpace chapter. I’m starting my next round of interviews soon for the pro-eating disorders chapter, but I’m holding off for the time being (for reasons explained in the next blog entry).

Interviews, anxiety, and pro-mia cyberspace 8/27/10

So, I started this blog to talk about the process of conducting online interviews. Based on the 4-month lapse between the last entry and this one, you can guess that I haven’t been conducting interviews for a while.

I’ve been working on the textual analysis pieces of my dissertation, both for the pro-bulimia chapter and for the chapter on musicians. Basically, I’ve been spending a lot of time reading websites, taking notes, taking screen captures, and writing the parts of my chapters that don’t relate to interviews. I’ve also been working on a couple of articles, one that I submitted to a journal a couple of weeks ago and one that I’m currently co-authoring with Mary, my ever-patient advisor.

However, I’ve been avoiding interviews like I avoid reruns of Jersey Shore. Why, you ask? Don’t get me wrong—I loved doing interviews for my MySpace chapter, and I’m really excited to see what kinds of things I learn from doing them again for subsequent chapters.

The problem is the pro-mia chapter. I’m really nervous about soliciting interview subjects from these sites. Mostly, users on pro-ana sites have been notoriously skeptical of people wanting to conduct interviews, and I’m not sure about how this will go. My research is on bulimia, though, and I’m not sure whether girls on pro-mia forums will react in the same way

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as people on pro-ana sites. I've perhaps gone a bit overboard in the amount of notes and screen captures I've taken, but I'm actually a bit worried about being kicked off of the site and so I want to make absolutely sure that I have all of the data I might need before I send out interview requests.

Clarification: I haven't lied about who I am on the site. I signed up for an account with a simple user name/password registration form. They didn't ask why I wanted to be part of the site (though some do), and I've never posted, only lurked. And of course, my research methods are fully approved by my university's IRB. So there's no deception involved—I just worry that they're going to be angry that some researcher is hanging out on their website and reading their conversations.

In general, I have a really complicated relationship with this chapter. It was very difficult for me to spend any significant amount of time on the forums at the beginning, and I had to limit the amount of time I spent. Just as I'd read accounts from other researchers who started having body image issues at the beginning of their studies, I was feeling more self-conscious about my own body than I had in years. The incredibly descriptive accounts of binges and purges were difficult for me to read, and I became careful for a while about the circumstances in which I read the forums.

After a while, though, I was able to read the forums in a more detached way. I started thinking more analytically and less emotionally, and my time on the forums became much more productive. There's this huge tension for me between the more personal reasons that I'm pursuing this work (after all, don't we all initially pursue topics because we're passionate about them in a more personal sense?) and the ways that it's intellectually fascinating to me. I'll post more specifically about some of the theories I'm working with soon, but in general, I feel pulled
to make my work useful in a broad sense (particularly for the pro-mia chapter) and also to make it intellectually unique and insightful (which seems to often preclude broad accessibility).

Anyway, I'm sending out interview requests tonight. I'm so nervous! If I can at least get a few, I'll be happy. I'll update the blog as I hear from people. Fingers crossed that I don't get kicked off...

**Brief interview update 8/29/10**

So, I had four people respond saying that they were interested in doing interviews, which is great! Also, I was able to actually conduct one of the interviews this morning. It went really well and was incredibly useful, and the girl I interviewed offered to post on the forums to let people know that I wasn't trying to secretly shut the site down.

However, when I came home this evening to check my private messages, my account had been deactivated. Obviously, I knew this was a risk, but I thought that the possibility of getting interviews was worth it. One of the girls who said she wanted to do an interview told me that someone else might report me, but I was still hopeful that people would read my message and recognize that my project isn't about demonizing pro-mia websites or accusing users of convincing other people to develop eating disorders (which they definitely don't). I just hoped that the girls could give me some insight into the ways that the website is important to them, and the interview I conducted this morning was really, really helpful in that way. It definitely prompted me to think about some things I hadn't considered before and also really confirmed a few things I'd been pondering.

I'll write more specifically about my results later, but for right now, I want to hold off. I asked my thus-far only pro-mia interview subject to pass my email address along to the other
people who agreed to be interviewed, and I'm hoping that they contact me. I'm not counting on it, but it would be fantastic if I had more than one interview for this chapter.

**Pro-mia sites—update 9/6/10**

So, I never heard back from Emily, the only girl I was able to interview before I was kicked off of the pro-mia site. She and I are still friends on MSN messenger, but I'm not going to initiate further contact. It's a bummer to not have gotten more interviews, but I still have a lot to write about based on the website.

I'll write a little bit about some of the things I've been thinking about regarding the chapter, but I won't post direct quotes or write anything that could link back to the people or the website I'm writing about.

So, I'm specifically focusing on teenage girls who identify as pro-mia, or pro-bulimia. Every article I've read that examines pro-eating disorder communities in cyberspace focuses either completely or almost completely on pro-anorexia websites and internet users. Certainly, pro-anas are much more common than pro-mias, so it's much easier to find pro-ana websites, and even on sites that incorporate both anas and mias, anas tend to dominate. So it's understandable that most academic work on pro-ED cyberspace would either focus on anas or lump mias in with them. This also mirrors a larger trend in feminist academic literature and in the media, both of which tend to focus on anorexia much more than bulimia.

I'm really interested in bulimia specifically, and one of the things I'm most interested in is why it's always situated as a "lesser" eating disorder compared to anorexia. It gets less media and academic attention, it's made fun of a lot more (jokes in pop culture about girls throwing up after eating or about college girls going through bulimic phases), and even girls with eating
disorders describe anorexia as more admirable than bulimia (for instance, bulimic girls saying that they wish they had the willpower to be anorexic, or anorexic girls describing binges as failures).

I think that there are several reasons for this. One reason (which Sarah Squire and Raya Morag have pointed out) is that anorexic girls seem more "extreme"--they experience much more dramatic weight loss than bulimic girls (who are typically within a healthy weight range), and so they make more sympathetic "victims" of a weight-obsessed culture. Anorexia is also often described in terms of control (restricting food intake), whereas bulimia is understood as a loss of control, particularly over the amount of food that's consumed. Women are supposed to be in control of their bodies and appetites, so bulimia is in conflict with idealized views of femininity in ways that anorexia is not.

Also, though, I think that a lot of people are uncomfortable talking about bulimia because they're disgusted by it. Anorexia is neat and clean, whereas bulimia is messy--especially purging. Most people see throwing up as something that should be avoided at all costs, but bulimics vomit on a daily basis. It's also different than, say, the vomiting that accompanies chemotherapy, because bulims actually induce vomiting themselves--they stick a finger or a toothbrush down their throat, gagging until they throw up. This thing that is supposed to be so gross is something that bulimics willingly engage in (though bulimia is a disorder, so it's not entirely a freely-made-decision). I think that the "choice" to throw up, to get vomit on your hand, face, and clothing, to have the taste in your mouth, is something that a lot of people have difficulty understanding and tend to just think it's gross.

On pro-mia websites, women and girls talk about which foods are easiest to throw up and what tastes best coming back up--purging is discussed at great length and in explicit detail.
While this is something that would typically make them outcasts, in this particular space, it's a basis for bonding, for finding other people who struggle with the same issues. Mia girls talk about being embarrassed when people who don't have eating disorders "catch them in the act," but amongst themselves, they casually share stories and sympathize with each other ("I know what you mean," "I've been there," etc.).

It's really too bad that I can't get back on the website anymore and that I can't do any more interviews, but the data I have is really interesting and rich, and I'm really pleased with the shape that the chapter is taking.

Up soon: dispatches from my observations on official websites and fan sites of popular musicians, including Taylor Swift (and a few other surprises). I'll also talk a bit about the interviews I'm doing with fans on those sites.

I didn't know it at fifteen... 10/5/10

So, I've been spending a lot of time on Taylor Swift fan sites lately. I'm still finalizing the list of musicians that I'm going to look at, but I've known for a long time that Taylor Swift was going to be a big focus of my chapter on musicians. She's incredibly influential right now--sold out concerts, massive record sales, #1 songs, etc. Teenage girls especially love her, want to be her, and often identify deeply with her lyrics. I think that her music, her public persona, and her fan base are really important places to look at the way that girlhood is taking shape in contemporary American culture.

Taylor Swift is an excellent example of an idealized celebrity girl figure. She completely embodies the kind of post-feminist ethic I want to question in my dissertation--she presents herself as, in Anita Harris's terms, a "can-do" girl--she's seen as someone who works hard and
utilizes her talent to achieve success. And it's true that she's done a lot for someone her age--
she has a new album coming out in a few weeks, and unlike many young artists who receive a
writing credit on songs (along with 5 other people), Swift actually does write most of her songs
and asserts that many of them are autobiographical. The popular media seems to see her as a
feminist figure (in fact, an MTV.com article recently suggested that she and Katy Perry are both
empowered young women who simply profess different ideals of empowerment).

However, she's really not so much of a feminist figure as a post-feminist figure. She's
not at all critical of sexism (for instance, the limited range of roles available for female artists in
the music industry) or aware of the ways that her class privilege has enabled her career
(particularly in her family's ability to travel to Nashville to meet with record labels). Her public
persona is, in many ways, steeped in stereotypical femininity. When Kanye West famously
interrupted her 2009 VMA acceptance speech, Taylor responded by continually depicting herself
as a sweet young girl who was victimized by a bully--and the media’s affirmation of her victim
status is shored up by Taylor’s constant visual affirmation of her whiteness in her music videos
(donning white dresses and surrounding herself with pastel colors and filling her videos with
other white people) and Kanye’s blackness. Intentionally or not, Swift’s reaction to the Kanye
West debacle (and her misguided attempt to passive aggressively discipline him with a song at
this year’s VMAs) shored up long-held prejudices about the dangers of black men to young
virginal white girls.

Her music is also deeply invested in heteronormativity (in casting heterosexual
relationships as the most normal and important part of a girl’s life). The song "Fifteen," for
example, situates the high school experience completely in the context of relationships: "senior
boys who wink at you," "you're on your very first date and he's got a car," etc. The two main
figures in the song are Taylor and her real-life best friend Abigail, and the two travel very
different routes: both have relationships, but Taylor breaks up with her boyfriend because she
"realized some bigger dreams," while "Abigail gave everything she had to a boy who changed his
mind."

In the context of the song, it's clear that "everything she had" was her virginity—Abigail
is marked as a tragedy and a failure for having sex with a boy who later broke up with her, and
she seemingly has nothing left to offer after the demise of her purity. This line caused some
debate on one of the websites I'm looking at, with one person asking what Swift might have
meant and some people suggesting that she simply meant that Abigail gave her all (meaning her
best efforts), but most people seemed to agree that it implied sex. The visual elements of the
video confirm this—Taylor is dressed in a flowing white dress (as she is in almost every video)
while Abigail wears a dark shirt and jeans. Taylor walks through a sunny meadow at the
beginning of the video, but as Abigail enters the picture and gradually engages in "risky"
behavior, the surroundings grow darker and darker. Abigail is shown kissing a boy in a car,
initially resisting but then seemingly giving in. The next scene shows Abigail sitting sadly in a field
of flowers surrounded by storm clouds, hugging herself and crying as Taylor comes to comfort
her. Harris might suggest that Abigail is the "at-risk girl" to Taylor's can-do girl, demonstrating
the dangers of failing to conform to idealized notions of feminine respectability and purity.
While virginal Taylor is the one to recognize the limitations of her adolescent relationship,
deflowered Abigail is dumped, ostensibly because the boy was no longer interested in her after
she had sex with him; thus, Taylor is empowered to control the conditions of her life while
Abigail is not.

Many of the girls on the websites I'm looking at strongly identify with Taylor. There are
multiple threads about which songs girls most identify with, and "Fifteen" is one of those songs (along with "You Belong With Me," a song which details Taylor's frustration that a male friend of hers doesn't see that she would be a better girlfriend than his current one. The video for that song features Taylor as the protagonist but she also appears [in a brunette wig and revealing clothing] as the male friend's two-timing girlfriend). Interestingly, there are also a lot of adults on these sites, many of whom appreciate Taylor for being a "positive role model" for young girls. Indeed, parents seem to love Taylor Swift, and while artists such as Miley Cyrus become "too sexy" for parents, Swift has retained her parental approval because of her squeaky clean virginal image. Taylor Swift's popularity demonstrates a deep cultural investment in preserving girls' purity and innocence, though this investment is largely contained to girls who otherwise conform to the conditions of ideal girlhood--white, heterosexual, and middle class.

I'll blog more about my adventures on fan sites later. I'm working on a few things that are potentially exciting, but I want to wait until I get a little further along to share them. I'll also post tidbits from interviews soon.

Reference:

Taylor Swift and "ideal" role models  11/7/10

So, I've been working busily since my last post. I presented my Taylor Swift research at a conference on girlhood a few weeks ago, and I got some really good ideas about things I want to discuss in my work. Also, I'm toward the end of interviews for the Taylor Swift chapter, and I'm so excited about what I've found.
One of the things that came up in the question & answer time after I gave my research talk was the issue of role models--specifically, whether or not Taylor Swift is a good role model for girls. This topic comes up over and over again in the online fan communities I'm looking at, in media discussions about Taylor, and in the pop culture class I teach (in which we watch a couple of different Taylor videos). Among fans, her role model status is virtually uncontested. One of the girls I interviewed said that Taylor is a good role model because she doesn't drink or do drugs. People on fan forums talk about how Taylor shows girls that they can follow their dreams, and many people find her non-sexualized image admirable.

Feminists, I've found, tend to be quite critical of Taylor's status as a potential role model. At the conference, people asserted that she's an inappropriate role model for girls because her songs are steeped in traditional values for girls, such as sexual purity, feminine sweetness, and vulnerability, and she doesn't offer girls any routes to empowerment. This is something I've seen reiterated in feminist media outlets and among students in my pop culture class.

As a feminist researcher, I find myself somewhere in the middle of these debates. I have a problem with this idea that an appropriate role model for girls has to be infallible, and both sides seem to engage in this kind of dialogue. Taylor fans (adolescent and adult) love that she's a "good girl," and media folks seem obsessed with the possibility that she could be less than perfect (for instance, think about all of the media dialogue about whether her song "Dear John" implies that she had sex with John Mayer). She's being held up to this impossible standard, and despite all of the feminist criticisms that Taylor represents herself as this eternally vulnerable child, it seems that if she did try to change her image and mature into adulthood, she would lose her audience.

I also think that a lot of researchers on girlhood assert that girls who deviate from the
"norm"--white, straight, middle class--are inherently empowered in ways that girls who are part of the norm are not. For instance, in a study about girls' online activities, Dawn Currie, Deirdre Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz, wrote about girls who practiced "alternative femininities" that went against the grain of what was typical in their school. However, in my research, I argue that there's nothing inherently good or bad about defying norms, and these defiances are often really complicated. For instance, many lesbian girls are invested in the same traditional ideals of monogamous romance as many straight girls.

Being very traditionally feminine in appearance and attitude isn't necessarily a bad thing. I think sometimes Taylor Swift gets unfairly called out for singing only about boys--most musical artists are straight, and most songs are about love, so don't most female artists sing about boys most of the time?

At the same time, though, I think that girls get boxed in by traditional standards of what it means to be a girl--pretty, sweet, non-confrontational, heterosexual--and it's hard to move outside of those confines if you want to be accepted. And while some of Taylor Swift's music is just generally about love and romance, some of it (like the song "Fifteen," which I discussed in my last entry) promotes really harmful ideas about what girls are supposed to be like. There's a song on her new album, "Better Than Revenge," that engages pretty blatantly in slut-shaming by referring to a girl who's "better known for the things that she does on the mattress." Taylor Swift seems invested in promoting herself as an innocent virginal white girl and virtually everyone else as promiscuous or mean to her, which is a really limited place for a girl to be. Where does she go from here? What happens if she does (or already has) become sexually active before marriage? And what about her fans who aren't as sexually pure?

In general, I'm very skeptical of the whole "role model" issue. There is no perfect person
whom little girls are supposed to look up to, and holding public figures up to those impossible standards is really restrictive—not just toward someone like Taylor Swift, but toward ourselves and the standards we hold ourselves to.