Article

Negotiating With Gender Stereotypes on Social Networking Sites: From "Bicycle Face" to Facebook

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Abstract

Research indicates that stereotypical representations of girls as sexualized objects seeking male attention are commonly found in social networking sites. This article presents the results of a qualitative study that examined how young women "read" these stereotypes. Our participants understood Social networking sites (SNS) as a commoditized environment in which stereotypical kinds of self-exposure by girls are markers of social success and popularity. As such, these images are "socially facilitative" for young women. However, the gendered risks of judgment according to familiar stereotypical norms are heightened by the intense surveillance enabled by SNS. While our participants indicated that a mediatized celebrity culture inculcates girls with messages that they must be attractive, have a boyfriend, and be part of the party scene, girls are much more likely than boys to be harshly judged for emphasizing these elements in their online profiles. Girls are also open to harsh criticism for their degree of publicness. The risk of being called a "slut" for having an open profile, too many friends, or posting too much information suggests that continuing discriminatory standards around public participation may effectively police girls' capacity to fully participate online and complicate their ability to participate in defiant gender performances.

Keywords

gender, communication technology, feminist theory, digital media, girls' studies

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> Don't cultivate a bicycle face. Don't ask, 'What do you think of my bloomers?'
>
> *A List of Don'ts for Women on Bicycles* Circa 1895, cited in Popova, 2012

Introduction

In 1895, a new technology—the bicycle—offered women a chance to participate in athletics and enter public space in new ways. While many recognized this new technology as one with particularly liberatory potential for women, especially insofar as it involved a kind of public participation in sport, warnings about the dangers of this kind of public transgression of privacy norms were quick to follow. In fact, women who dared to cycle publicly were regularly labeled inappropriately forward, sexually promiscuous and just plain dangerous. As Charlotte Smith of the Women's Rescue League put in in 1896, "Many a girl has come to her ruin through a spin on a country road." She further expounded, in her fight to keep girls off of bicycles, "Bicycling by young women has helped to swell the ranks of reckless girls who finally drift into the standing army of outcast women of the United States." Words of advice were also published in 1895 columns in the Omaha Daily Bee and the New York World in articles entitled, respectively, Don'ts for women wheelers and don'ts for women riders, including gems like:

> Don't wear a man's cap.
> Don't wear tight garters.
> Don't say feel my muscle.
> Don't ask, 'What do you think of my bloomers?
> Don't cultivate bicycle face. (cited in Popova, 2012)

As Kinsey (2011, p. 1128) notes, women who dared to transgress gendered norms around public participation in sports by riding bicycles were especially harshly judged for wearing bloomers (rather than skirts), which were seen as "immodest and sexually provocative" and thus "inappropriate for women" (see also Simpson, 2001, p. 55-56). Bicycles were altered so women could mount them without having to "immodestly" lift their legs over the bicycle bar.

Fast forward over a century to another technology predicted to assist in women's emancipation: online media. In the early days of the Internet, it was predicted that broadly available digitized media would enhance opportunities for self-exploration and identity play (Turkle, 1995). It was hoped that a multiplicity of widely distributable first-person performances might, such as the bicycle, enable the destruction or destabilization of constraining accounts of gendered identity (Plant, 2000) and undermine the regime of shame used to enforce them (Koskela, 2004). Ultimately, it was hoped that social media would empower young women to counter mainstream media stereotypes and provide them with the discursive power to intentionally construct new and more vibrant definitions of what it means to be a "girl" (Scott-Dixon, 2002; Koskela, 2004; Senft, 2008).

These claims were rooted in Goffman's (1959) work on identity performance and presentation of the self. From this perspective, identities are not predetermined, but are instead performed according to time, place, and audience and in ways that are influenced by interactivity and community (Bryson, 2004). As Phillips (2009) puts it:

> [Identity is] social not merely in the sense of being relational; it is also social in the sense that it is negotiated. We do not stride into the social world as wholly formed individuals. Nor are we putty in the hands of the collective. Instead, we become who we are in relation to others, as others become themselves in relation to us (p. 304).

Within this perspective, construction of gender is a discursive, interactive process in which individuals are both objects and subjects of gender definition through their physical and textual performances (Bucholtz, 2003; Phillips, 2009; Thiel-Stern, 2005). However, it has been argued that the nature and influence of an individual's contribution within this discursive process are affected both by available cultural representations that compose the sources of meaning-making (van Dijk, 1997) and by existing power structures (Foucault, 1977, p. 27).

By decentralizing the capacity for widespread dissemination and drastically reducing its cost, the Internet seemed to offer opportunities both for expanded distribution of a multiplicity of first-person representations of gender and for creating more democratic and egalitarian power structures, in part by leveling the playing field between large media conglomerates and ordinary citizens. Online media was cast as a potential agent of social change with respect to gender oppression and discrimination on a number of levels.

Haraway (1991) argued that digitized technologies and their confluence with self would trouble socially constructed dichotomies, such as man/woman, that had been used as the basis for discrimination and oppression. She thus theorized a metaphoric cyber-future as "a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end" (p. 151). From these metaphoric beginnings, others theorized more concrete possibilities for gender bending and identity play, in part facilitated by the comparatively greater anonymity thought to characterize cyberspace, as compared to physical space (Edwards, 2005; Turkle, 1995).

Perhaps even more concretely, social media have been theorized as an avenue for girls and women to expand not only the breadth of their sphere of engagement and influence, but also the strength of their influence on constraining understandings of gender. Online, not only would girls be better enabled to exchange comments, build relationships, and exchange social capital (Senft, 2008; Shade, 2007); they also would be empowered to engage in mash-ups in order to tell their own story, rather than having it purportedly told by others (Scott-Dixon, 2002). As a result, individuals who identify as girls could experience an enhanced sense of expressive autonomy. More broadly, widespread dissemination of diverse and multiple narratives about girls' lives written by girls themselves might begin to trouble dominant, stereotypical definitions of "girl" and gender-based constraints that inhibit the achievement of social equality (Senft, 2008).

Since these hopeful predictions were offered, girls have indeed come to inhabit, and in fact numerically dominate, online spaces (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, & Macgill, 2007; Media Awareness Network, 2005). Moreover, they are enthusiastic users of social media and have integrated them fully into their social lives in creative and meaningful ways (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001; Mendoza, 2007). However, a number of feminist scholars have problematized the liberatory claims associated with technology. For example, Gajjala (2000) suggests that they are rooted in an "Anglo-American hegemony which emphasizes the importance of modern science and technology for individual empowerment" and universalize the experiences of white, middle-class girls (p. 118). Certainly, messages of girl power and empowerment have been reconstructed in ways that privilege bourgeois experiences and continue to constrain the kinds of femininities available to girls and young women (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Many of the constraints experienced in online spaces reflect the ways in which patriarchal values structure the technical through a political economy of the female body (Plant, 2000). As such, there are indications that social media, like the bicycle before them, are being (re)shaped by a commercial agenda that privileges images of "a certain kind of online girl, one who is highly sexualized and commoditized" (Ringrose, 2010; Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Steeves & Bailey, 2013).

Certainly, this narrow presentation of "girl" as sexually self-objectifying and focused on looks in order to "get the guy" is common in all forms of mass media and advertising (Durham, 2008; Frederickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Ringrose, 2010); and a number of scholars argue that such media stereotypes powerfully influence the self-formative processes of teens (Brookes & Kelly, 2009; Hellman, 1998; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008). Since girls and young women tend to congregate on mainstream corporate sites that contain high levels of advertising on their pages, these same stereotypes are embedded in much of their online world (Steeves, 2004).

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that some young women appropriate these commercial images and incorporate them into their online self-presentation to varying degrees (Ringrose, 2010, p. 173). Siibak (2009) reports that girls spend a great deal of time selecting pictures of themselves to post online that make them "look good" according to mediatized standards of female beauty. Whitty (2008) found that the use of "glamor shots" is common because it facilitates the presentation of an idealized self that is sexually attractive. Scheidt's study of female avatars on teen chat sites (cited in Kapidzic & Herring, 2011) found that seductively posed, partially undressed representations of girls are common, and Manago, Graham, Greenfield, and Salimkhan (2008) report that similarly sexualized images of girls are pervasive on MySpace. Kapidizic and Herring (2011) note that the majority (71%) of girls' online profiles feature pictures of them partially clad and seductively posed with their heads tilted, bodies angled sideways, and eyes looking up or at the camera, mirroring the shots common in magazines. Ringrose (2010) concludes that the "positioning the self as always 'up for it' and the 'performance of confident sexual agency' has shifted to become a *key regulative* dimension of idealized femininity across mainstream media and advertising" (p. 176)

and that there is now "a *visual imperative* [for girls] to display a sexy self on . . . social networking sites" (p. 179, emphasis in the original).

In addition, empirical studies have found that girls in online spaces tend to reproduce other common stereotypes of femininity. For example, Manago et al. (2008) describe girls' online profiles as highly affiliative, that is they place a heavy emphasis on being attractive and having relationships with others who are also attractive. Others report that young women are much more likely than young men to mention a romantic partner on MySpace (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008), and that girls present themselves as eager to accommodate and please males (Kapidizic and Herring, 2011). Fun, popularity, and self-confidence also figure prominently in the image of the "happy, carefree, sexy-but-not-sexual [mediatized] girl" (Durham, 2008, p. 203), as does an emphasis on being emotional (Kapidizic and Herring, 2011). Links to popular television shows, movies, and music videos and shopping as a "pink technology" practice (Marsh, 2010) are also common. In the offline context, Cullen (2010) points to the importance of drinking stories in upholding the collective identity of young women as fun-loving and socially active.

When we conducted an informal scan[1] of publicly available Facebook profiles[2] of young women living in the Ottawa, Canada area who indicated that they were between 18 and 22 years of age in order to see what kinds of girls are performed online, we found an overwhelming reproduction of these narrow stereotypes. Indeed, out of the 1500 profiles we examined, only one departed from this portrayal of girl.[3] The rest incorporated most or all of the elements identified in the literature: representations of girls as sexualized objects seeking male attention through the use of glamor shots and partially clad, sexualized pictures and fun, carefree textual and photographic references to relationships with friends and a romantic partner were plentiful, as were references to partying, emotional venting and advice, mainstream popular culture objects, and shopping. It appears, therefore, that traditional "girl" is well established in online social spaces. What is unclear, however, is what meaning these stereotypes have for the girls who either reproduce them or see them in others' profiles. Are they ironic and playful reinterpretations of mainstream tropes or are they taken at face value? Are they something to be ignored, celebrated, or resisted?

Here, we present the results of a pilot study that examined how young women between the ages of 18 and 22 "read" stereotypical representations of femininity on social networking sites. In doing so, this article interrogates the relationship between gender performances on social networking sites and the stereotypes that are found on these sites. The research we report is part of a larger project exploring the performance of gender on social networking sites and girls' and young women's lived experiences of privacy and equality online. Our goal was to better understand how young women construct the meaning of these stereotypical images and experience them in their own online lives. In this, we adopt Buckingham's approach and view these images as "resources on which young people draw in an ongoing, active construction of gendered identities . . . [and which] provide (some) young people with categories of self-definition around which to mobilize and negotiate, to claim as their own or disrupt" (Buckingham & Bragg, 2003).

Method

As we felt that asking our research participants to comment on the Facebook profiles of real people would be unduly invasive, we created a fictitious Facebook site for an 18-year-old girl referred to in this article as TS, using original text and stock photographs that exemplified these stereotypical representations of femininity that earlier researchers had found populate the online world. In doing this, we used real examples from our informal scan as models. Although the resulting profile contains a highly stereotypical version of girl, that version is consistent with the kinds of mediatized representations that abound in all forms of media and reflects the themes and images that overwhelmingly dominated the public profiles we viewed in our informal scan. The mundane nature of TS's profile is perhaps best established by the unanimous claim made by all of our participants (discussed below) that TS is both a "regular" girl and that profiles like hers are extremely common. TS's profile accordingly enabled us to explore the ways in which young women construct the meaning of common online stereotypes without asking them to judge the representations posted by real girls.

TS' pages, reproduced in Figures 1 and 2, include beach photos of TS in her bikini, and a head shot of TS looking over her shoulder with her head tilted, her cheeks drawn in, and her body angled looking into the camera (an image our participants referred to as "the duckface" or "the MySpace face"). Her profile picture shows her and her boyfriend, EH, gazing into each other's eyes, and the page is littered with photographs, status lines, and wall posts confirming their love for each other (e.g., TS ♥♥ LoVeS heR Man ♥♥) and thanking him for his "awesome gifts" or for just being "so awesome," indicative of her willingness to please her male partner. There are also photographs of and textual references to TS drinking, partying, and laughing with friends. TS demonstrates an emotional nature through her wall posts about her relationships with her best friend and her boyfriend and her conflicts with others, as well as sage advice. The personal interests she lists reflect a mainstream interest in shopping and popular movies, books, and music.[4]

In the fall of 2010, we held six 60 minute semistructured interviews with six young women and one 60 minute focus group discussion with eight young women between the ages of 18 and 22 to examine how they "read" the ficitious profile of TS, and how it compared to their own online presentations. All participants were recruited by posting advertisements on the University of Ottawa's campus. The advertisements sought women between the ages of 18 and 22 who used social networking (blogs, online videos) as a regular part of their social activities and were interested in participating in an interview about their online experiences as women, especially regarding privacy and equality, and the benefits and risks of online social interaction. Participants were selected on a first-come, first-served basis.

In the interviews and the focus group, we explored the types of visual and textual representations the participants used online to express their identity as young women, and the interplay between these representations and the mainstream media representations they see around them. We then presented our participants with a hard copy of TS's profile. All participants were told that the profile was fictitious. We asked participants what they thought of TS, and why they thought she chose the photos, images,

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Info
Photos (1)
Notes
Friends
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In a relationship with
Evan Hill

Find Friends
Best Friends
Coworkers
Classmates
Jessie Jones
Sarah Parkes

Add a Badge to Your Site
Activity Log

Tiffany Summers
Edit Profile | View As...
Lives in Ottawa, Ontario · In a relationship with Evan Hill · Born on May 15, 1992
Add where you work · Add your school · Add your hometown · Edit Profile

Update Status | Add Photo / Video
What's on your mind?

Tiffany Summers
— Party in the U.S. JESSIE!! (4 photos)
Like · Comment · Share · August 16, 2010 at 11:39am
Tiffany Summers probbbb the only facebook friendly photos hahaha
August 16, 2010 at 11:39am · Like
Write a comment...

Tiffany Summers
how much friggin fun was Jessies party? wish i cud remember...such a drunk nite
Like · Comment · Share · August 16, 2010 at 11:06am
Jessie Jones HAHAHA yaaaaa about thaaaaat... how did that shit even happen??????? post the pics u took with ur cam!
August 16, 2010 at 11:07am · Like
Tiffany Summers theyre pretty bad ill post some in a bit tho
August 16, 2010 at 11:23am · Like
Write a comment...

Tiffany Summers
our anniversary was sooo amazin i couldnt ask for a better bf!! flowers, hotel, campagne AMAZIN! xoxox love u ev!
Like · Comment · Share · August 16, 2010 at 10:59am

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Chat (Offline)

(continued)

Figure 1. (contiued)

Figure 1. TS's Facebook Profile.

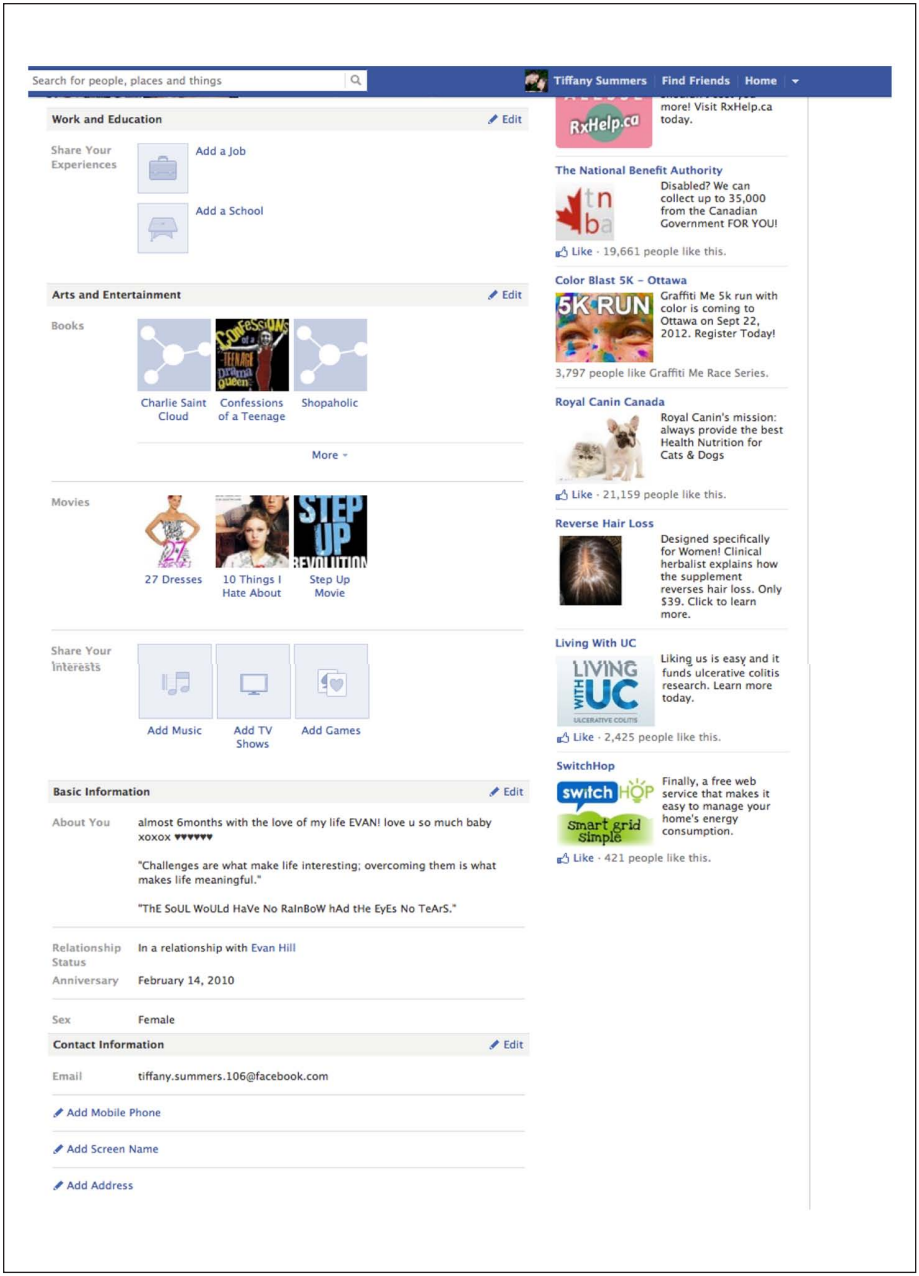

Figure 2. TS's Facebook Interests.

and texts she did. We also asked them what kind of responses they expected TS would receive from others visiting her page, and why. We then discussed their understanding of "gender" and "equality" in the context of their online activities.

With participant permission, the interviews and focus group were audio-taped and transcribed by the research assistant for our analysis. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms are used below to identify participants.

Findings

Typicality of TS' Profile

When we showed our participants[5] TS' profile, many told us that she was a "regular" or "typical" teenaged girl (Dawn; Corrine). TS was viewed as "typical" in that, like everyone on Facebook, she was trying to "highlight the parts of [her] life that seem more interesting," a process Dawn characterized as building "a very public persona". Others perceived her to be a typical high school girl engaged in immature, validation/attention-seeking behaviour (Brenda, Andrea) that Andrea described as being "obsessed" with "letting people know what [they were] doing."

However, Francesca also told us that the social networking environment was structured to reward this kind of attention-seeking behavior:

> When I was in grade 12 when I first started using it, I think I was that girl. I was like, "I want to get these comments, that'd be nice." I don't think I initially started that way, but once you start getting the comments, you sort of start feeding into that a bit. So . . . I'd say in the beginning I didn't, then I started receiving comments, then it became something I'd be conscious about.

Other participants lamented what they saw as the typicality of TS' profile (Brenda, Kim). When asked if TS' profile was a typical of an 18-year-old, Brenda replied:

> Yeah, sadly, sadly. I know even approximately intelligent people who reference *Twilight*, so . . . so sad for my age group.

Further, TS' overuse of capitalization and spelling and grammatical errors were derided by a number of participants as part of a scheme to "dumb down" in order to appear "cool" (Brenda, Tina). Dawn suggested that TS needed to understand that "you've got to be serious sometimes" and Francesca expressed concern that *she* would not be taken seriously if she were to present herself in the same way as TS:

> I think day in and day out I definitely try my best to not be perceived as that person, because . . . I eventually want to hopefully become a surgeon. And, you

> know, I would argue that it's still somewhat male-dominated, that particular specialty, so I think I've just been constantly trying to avoid any real association with that kind of girl, because I think if I were to be perceived like that by most people, you know, what I want to do would kind of maybe become a joke to these people. And they wouldn't necessarily take it seriously.
>
> Whereas fast forward to today, I will post, kind of, posters for an event I'm trying to advertise. Or, um, photos with my friends. Photos from an event that I helped to run. Things like that, that's more of my concern now.

Later, Francesca described her sense of the conflict between being pretty and being a doctor, noting, "You know what's funny? I've been asking myself why I never realized that [I could be a pretty doctor] until now." Tina also identified her active negotiation with the TS persona, articulating her goal never to "project that my priorities are the same as [TS']," and characterizing TS' album as being filled with pictures of "herself being attractive".

> Dawn contextualized TS' self-presentation in relation to the commoditized environment of online social networking:
> Dawn:So Facebook's a benefit for [TS] in that people can see that she's up for a good time, and you want to have fun, you should hang out with her, sort of thing.
> Valerie Steeves:Like an ad?
> Dawn:It kind of is. It's like a personal ad, yourself. Like, "I am a good time; if you're with me, you're going to have fun. Let's go have fun." That's what she'd like to get into.

Although many participants criticized TS, most of our interviewees recognized her as socially successful and only a few of our participants indicated that they would not be "friends" with her (Vecepia, Amber). Other participants articulated more complex relationships that seemed to reflect their understanding of TS' social status. For the latter group, TS might be listed as a "friend" but not one that they would really talk to or "hang out with" (Tina, Parvati); instead, she might simply be part of a broader circle of people with whom to socialize (Tina). Those who wanted to distance themselves from TS offered various reasons, such as annoyance with TS' "superficial" presentation intended to make "everything seem perfect" (Jenna), and her "fake," "cliché" attempts to get attention and to position herself as part of an in-crowd (Amber; Tina, Francesca, Andrea, Brenda, Parvati). Focus group participants' commentary on the TS profile was particularly harsh by comparison with that of our interviewees. As focus group participant Tina noted:

> Me and my roommate get the other person up to laugh at profiles like this. Like, "Oh, wow, what a bonehead, get away," you know?

References to Romantic Partner

TS' persistent references to her relationship with her boyfriend EH drew mixed commentary, with Kim and Dawn concluding TS wanted to show she is "happy and in love". In contrast, others saw EH as part of a broader strategy by TS to gain social status by "flaunting" her boyfriend (Kim, Andrea) and bragging about having an active social life (Andrea). For Andrea, TS' gushing commentary about EH indicated immaturity and insecurity:

> It's, "I want you to know that I have a boyfriend". That's what I get from it. And that's something that I usually see in high school, like, maybe it's her first boyfriend or first good one, I don't know. But I think it just shows that you're insecure.

Some told us that the genuineness of the relationship was less important than the fact TS had a boyfriend, with Brenda suggesting that TS was EH's "trophy" and EH was TS' "purse . . . Just kind of on your arm, looks good . . . " Corrine speculated that when they broke up, TS would simply "photoshop a new face onto the guy".

Interestingly, Dawn, Andrea, and Brenda each placed TS' boyfriend shots within the broader context of perceived gender differences. Dawn suggested that girls were more likely to show photos of themselves together with their boyfriends, whereas boys were more likely to post a photo of their girlfriend only. She surmised that for girls, "it's an 'I'm wanted' thing." Similarly, Andrea noted that boys often seemed disconnected from their relationships online, whereas for girls it was as if "finding a boyfriend, defines you, or something"; so much so that "whenever they get one . . . I'm sure the first thing they think of is, 'Now I can change my . . . status on Facebook!'" Brenda speculated further that boys were judged much less harshly than girls for demonstrating indifference to their relationships online:

> Just because guys can get away with bloody murder compared to girls in social networking. Because, like, no one expects a guy to care, you know what I mean? But they expect a girl to care.

Francesca went even further, suggesting that boys who do emphasize their girlfriends in their profiles are judged positively, while girls risk being judged negatively for the same kind of content:

> I think guys are rewarded. I think if this were [EH's] profile, and we had the exact same picture, it would be spun in a completely different way. He's so sweet; he's actually, like posting a picture with his girlfriend, he must be so committed; you know, so in love, and this and that.

Brenda felt that, girls who, like TS, heavily emphasized their boyfriends in their profiles were influenced by media representations:

> I think that, like, because Hollywood culture's so deeply embedded in female's psyche that I think a lot of them truly believe that they need a boyfriend.

Glamour Shots and Sexualized Imagery in Photos

Many of our participants felt that TS' photos were overly sexualized, particularly those with her boyfriend (Andrea, Corrine, Francesca, Tina), suggesting to Andrea and Corrine that TS "cares that people think she is sexy". Francesca interpreted TS' photos to indicate that she has very liberal attitudes toward sex and wants others to think "Oh wow, this girl has the perfect . . . love life." When asked for a single word that best described TS based on her profile, Tina answered:

> I was going to say slutty. Because the content of all of her photos is either her half naked or draped over some guy.

While some of our participants considered TS' bikini shots to be part of the portrayal of a sexy, party girl image, Corrine, Francesca, and Kim specifically connected them with a desire to be seen or to "show off" (Kim). For Corrine the bikini shots signaled both that TS was confident, but also that she was looking for reassurance. However, it "weird[ed Corrine] out" that "a complete stranger can look at a picture of . . . a girl like this."

Socializing and Party Photos

For Andrea and Jenna, TS' party photos indicated that TS wants to be seen as "a partier", although Dawn commented that TS seemed to be having "way too much fun." Online participants who, like TS, emphasized partying in their photos were variously described as "try[ing] to sort of build a picture of themselves as they want to be perceived" (Jenna) and as people who won't go out without a camera because

> there's absolutely no reason to go out, because no one will know you were out. It's so stupid, like, I don't know, it's like Facebook kind of makes it real. Like, if I didn't post pictures up on Facebook, I never really went to the beach last weekend.

Brenda, Andrea, and Kim connected the "party girl" persona TS portrays through her party photos with mediatized celebrity lifestyles "that a lot of people want to have" (Andrea), with Brenda noting:

> This could be a recreation of Lindsay Lohan's "pre-crazy" days . . .
>
> Like, the Hollywood, celebrity lifestyle, like, they go get drunk, and they go to parties; they go to hot spots and get all dolled up.

A number of our participants saw future career or employment related downsides to the "party girl" image created in TS' profile, primarily because she might not be taken seriously (Danni, Vecepia, Parvati, Dawn). As Francesca noted:

> I think if you had her profile next to someone who was really studious in their picture somehow, who are you going to hire? . . . I think in terms of going into the job force, [TS' profile] would have more of a negative impact as opposed to the person who looks studious.

Andrea described TS' profile as "uninteresting, because it's something I see a lot . . . people who have albums like this have a whole bunch of albums that all look the same."

Venting and Sage Advice

For Brenda, the venting on TS' profile was typical, more so for girls than for boys because, in her view, "girls like to talk more in general."

While Jenna and Amber felt that TS was trying through her quotes "to be really deep," they felt the quotes were "a classic case of trying too hard." However, Brenda situated this kind of sage advice within celebritized popular culture:

> Sage advice maybe emanates from the fact that "there's all these self-help books now, like, 'love yourself', 'love', blah, blah, blah, love, love, love. Like, I don't know if you've noticed this but I think celebrities are kind of endorsing it too, you know, "Love yourself before you can love someone else". Well, I love blah, blah, blah. It's just a love culture."

Francesa also noted that the sage advice posted by girls often relates to relationships, which she connected with a general social pressure on girls to be in an intimate heterosexual relationship:

> And I think because we live in an age where, especially for people my age, like, just, I think people are always consumed with, like, "Okay, if I don't have a boyfriend now, when will I get one? Will this last? If not, what's my next step?" And I think that's just so ingrained in our minds that I think people just kind of like to dispense their own thoughts, and I think Facebook gives them the perfect opportunity and venue in which to do that.

Mainstream Interests

Some of our participants understood TS' selection of favorite movies and books as signals of gender performance, with TS signaling herself as "girly" by listing movies such as *Twilight* and books such as *Teenage Drama Queen* as her favorites (Dawn, Corrine, Kim).

Kim and Francesca understood these mainstream selections as attempts to fit in and appear cool and in-the-know, while still blending in. As Kim noted:

> Yeah, I think it's better to blend in. But you want to blend in in a way that . . . I don't know, it depends on the person. Like, for me, I want to blend in in a way that I don't get too noticed, but, like, for [TS] I guess she'd want to kind of stand out, but still kind of blend in in the way that she has the same interests as her friends, she does the same things, she went to the parties. She blends in like that, but she stands out because she's more popular.

Is TS a "Slut"?

While some interviewees expressed concern about whether TS had overly sexualized her profile, active debate over whether TS was a "slut" arose only in the focus group. The discussion broadly related to two issues: (a) whether the content of TS' profile suggested that she was a "slut"; and (b) whether publicness per se exposed girls online to be labeled a slut.

While Tina's labeling of TS as a slut focused mainly on postings about staying with EH at a hotel and TS' selection of sexualized photos, others who agreed that TS was an attention-seeker, did not equate these various components of TS' Facebook page with being a slut. Corrine suggested TS' photos with EH were less problematic because they had been taken in the context of a relationship, while Francesca and Jenna contextualized TS' bikini shots as acceptable because taken at the beach. These concessions within the focus group notwithstanding, both interviewees and some focus group participants felt it important to distinguish their choices to maintain the privacy of their bikini shots from TS' choice to publicize hers (Sandra, Amber; Corrine). In that regard, Corrine and Amber noted, respectively:

> You're not going to see these private parts of my life right on my Facebook. Just like I don't want people seeing me a in a bikini; I'll save that for later. Once you get to know me, maybe you can see me in a bikini.

> I didn't take [my beach pictures] down, because I'm only sharing with certain people. I'm in a group with, like, 12 girls, and we all share our pictures. And my profile's all private.

Although a number of participants expressed concern about being too judgmental of TS, there appeared to be a common perspective that girls risk being judged to be sluts if they post sexualized content (Dawn, Corrine, Andrea). Further, Corrine speculated that girls with profiles like TS' open themselves up to the risk of sexual predation.

In addition, focus group participants actively debated whether publicness, per se, exposed a girl or young woman to the risk of negative judgment; particularly to being

labeled a slut. Tina and Amber agreed that girls with profiles like TS' could avoid, or at least minimize, exposing themselves to the risk of negative judgment by keeping their profiles private. Parvati noted:

> I think if you keep your profile open, you're automatically judged as somebody who wants attention. Like, that's the first thing you notice about someone, is that they have an open profile or not. And if they do, you're like, "You just want attention; you're a [TS]."

Moreover, Natalie, Tina, Amber, and Sandra indicated that a girl who has an open profile, has "a ridiculous amount of friends," gives out too much information, and is too attention-seeking faces a greater risk of being consciously or subconsciously adjudged to be a slut. For this reason, a number of our focus group participants agreed that girls had to be more careful than boys in constructing their Facebook profiles (Danni, Sandra, Parvati). However, Sandra later pointed out that, in her view, being adjudged a slut should depend at least in part on what a young woman was public about. She also distinguished between posting materials *portraying* yourself as a slut and actually *being* a slut:

> I just kind of wanted to comment . . . I don't find that having an open profile or having a lot of friends means that you're a slut; I find it's the statuses and the pictures, but even then, it's not necessarily that you're a slut, it's just what you're trying to project. It doesn't mean that you're a slut just because you have slutty pictures on there. I find all it means is that you're insecure; it doesn't mean that you're a slut. I don't think it should be considered, because you can't really judge someone by their pictures. You could be super conservative but just trying to show that you're a slut, and you're not. So I don't judge by the pictures. The pictures tell me that they're insecure and trying to prove something.

Discussion

Our participants' responses to TS' profile highlighted that online social networking can involve a significant degree of identity play, as users elect to post certain kinds of material in an effort to evoke certain kinds of personas (Turkle, 1995). However, rather than destabilizing gender (Plant, 2000), our participants' responses suggest online social networking can just as easily be used to reiterate stereotypical conceptions of gender that can be conveyed through choices as simple as one's favorite movie and book selections (Ringrose, 2011). While online social networking may well provide girls with a platform upon which to counter mainstream stereotypes and to redefine what it means to be a "girl" (Senft, 2008; Scott-Dixon, 2002), the widespread recognition of the typicality of the TS profile itself supports findings by Manago et al. (2008), Kapidizi and Herring (2011), and Ringrose (2010) that social stereotypes continue to structure girls' online gender performances.

Further, our study suggests that girls' ability to engage in defiant gender performances online may be complicated by the combined effects of the structure of online social networking environments (Shade, 2008) and familiar offline social norms that both reiterate gender discriminatory power structures (Foucault, 1977) and constrain the range of cultural capital (vanDijk, 1997) from which girls can draw (Brookes & Kelly, 2009; Hellman, 1998; Manago et al., 2008). Our participants understood online social networking as a commoditized environment in which a particular kind of self-exposure might be seen as the currency exchanged for markers of social success and popularity such as compliments and a higher tally of friends, which, according to our participants, were particularly important at younger ages. As such, these images are "socially facilitative" (Kapidzik & Herring, 2011) for young women because they provide entry into social success. Even our participants who did not wish to reproduce a stereotypical identity negotiated carefully with girls who did, taking care not to alienate themselves too far from them. However, our study suggests that the gendered risks of judgment according to familiar stereotypical norms may be heightened by the intense surveillance enabled by online social networks, thus complicating the liberatory potential of self-exposure suggested by Koskela (2004).

Our participants' responses suggest the operation of stereotypical norms and discriminatory double standards in online social networks both in the ways that they judged TS and in the ways they understood themselves, as young women, to be judged online. While our participants indicated that a mediatized celebrity culture inculcates girls with messages that they must be attractive (Durham, 2008; Ringrose, 2010; Whitty, 2008), have a boyfriend (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008), and be a player in the party scene (Cullen, 2010) in order to be socially successful, girls are much more likely than boys to be harshly judged for emphasizing these elements in their online profiles. Further, while a popular culture focused on relationships and "love" may encourage posting sage advice as a marker of social success, doing so also exposes girls to the risk of being ridiculed for "trying too hard." Our focus group discussion demonstrated that reactions to girls who fail to live up to the norms of the group can be "brutal," and a girl who uncritically reproduces stereotypical feminine identities can be "othered" by peers precisely "at the very moment she tries to express her exuberant sense of individual agency" (Cullen, 2010, p. 189).

Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, our study suggests a perception among our participants that girls will not only be more harshly judged than boys for the content of their online profiles, but also for their degree of publicness. The imperative to avoid appearing "too slutty" in the context of sexual regulation among teen peer groups is well documented (Ringrose, 2010, p. 175); however, as Ringrose notes, "the intense virtual imperative to represent the self as 'sexy' and sexually confident online creates new contradictions for girls, who appear to still need to navigate not appearing 'too slutty'" in offline contexts (p. 175). The risk of harsh judgment as a "slut" merely for

having an open profile, too many friends or posting too much information suggests that continuing discriminatory standards around public participation may effectively police girls' capacity to fully participate online and complicate their ability to shirk off the socially-imposed shroud of modesty through defiant gender performances (Koskela, 2004).

Conclusion

Online social networking, like the bicycle before it, offers unique potential for new forms of public participation by girls and women. Moreover, participation in online social media through mass distribution of first-person narratives could allow girls and young women to take back the pen from the consumeristic forces of mainstream media and rewrite social scripts about what it means to be a girl. And yet, girls' and young women's impressive rates of participation in online social media do not appear to have translated into widespread defiant gender performances. In fact, our study suggests that mainstream gender representations and stereotypes continue to have currency in girls' and young women's self-representations in online social spaces, and that the meaning of these stereotypes may be shaped both by discriminatory social norms and an environment structured by commoditization and intense surveillance.

Even as our study participants recognized (and in some cases scorned) the typicality of the TS prototype, with its frequent representations of TS' boyfriend, her party habits, and TS "looking attractive," many were engaged in complex negotiation with the stereotype. On one hand, repetition of these representations carried with it the potential for social success and popularity, while on the other it risked harsh social judgment heavily embedded with discriminatory norms about the propriety of women's participation in the public sphere. Like the 1895 warnings to girls about the risks of cultivating "bicycle face" and becoming members of an "outcast" class of women by participating in the public act of bicycling, the risk of harsh judgment for Facebooking women in 2012 disturbingly intertwines threatened allegations of sexual promiscuity with the very act of being public, or worse yet, publicly displaying their sexuality. In this way, gender discriminatory norms of modesty and shame may continue to effectively police women's place in public space, while at the same time rewarding certain kinds of stereotyped displays as markers of social success.

Our study suggests that girls' online presentations of self involve complex negotiations between the social status rewards of online self-exposure and the gendered risk of harsh judgment that seems to go along with having been "too" public. While the lowering of the bicycle bar may have architected enforced modesty for women, the architectures of social networking seem more oriented toward an enforced publicness. However, the gendered costs exacted for that publicness in 2012 appear discouragingly similar to those exacted in 1895.

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Notes

1. Conducted in summer 2010, examining profiles posted by women living in the Ottawa, Canada area, who indicated that they were between 18 and 22 years of age.
2. For our purposes, "publicly available" profiles included Facebook content to which any member of the public has access, regardless of whether she or he has a Facebook account or is listed as a "friend" of the individual who owns the profile.
3. The outlier was a profile of a young lesbian woman who was politically active in the gay rights movement.
4. Names of books and movies were taken from the profiles in the informal scan.
5. Our interviewees are referred to in this article as Dawn, Brenda, Andrea, Corrine, Francesca, and Kim. Our focus group participants are referred to in this article as: Tina, Vecepia, Parvati, Natalie, Sandra, Jenna, Amber, and Danni.

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