

Star dolls, cyber chicks, or bitch bytes?
Investigating the social interactions of Queensland Year 8 girls in online communities

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Contemporary youth are immersed in a rapidly changing globalised community. They are exposed to an array of conflicting social changes and high speed technological advancements. Concerns for the health and wellbeing of youth are linked to these societal shifts and governing agencies are mandating protective action (Australian Government, 2005; Rigby, 2010). One of the leading concerns is the escalation of aggressive and violent behaviour in youth, specifically, amongst girls (Benbenishty & Astor, 2008; Cross et al., 2009; Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2008). Populace discourse supports the notion that contemporary girls are becoming meaner and nastier (Gonick, 2004; Ringrose, 2006). Further, existing research indicates that female aggression has severe consequences for adolescent girls including debilitating depression and teen suicide (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin-MacGill, & Smith, 2007; World Health Organization, 2004).

Importantly, cyberbullying is a growing problem amongst adolescent girls and is linked to female patterns of covert relational aggression (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992a; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Osterman, 1992b; Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2008). Although international cyberbullying research has produced mixed findings in relation to gender prevalence, emerging Australian research shows that cyberbullying is more predominant in girls than their male counterparts. In particular, Cross and colleagues (2009) found that Queensland Year 8 girls were almost twice as likely to be cyberbullied as the boys in their same year level. The reasons for this phenomenon have not been empirically studied. Moreover, the aggressive nature of girls' social interactions in online communities has not been investigated. Of particular concern to this study are the troubling moments in girls' online social interactions and the ways in which they navigate and negotiate such encounters.

Project outline. This project seeks to investigate the social interactions of Queensland Year 8 girls in online communities. International research findings suggest that adolescent girls may experience difficulties negotiating social interactions in digital spaces because they are more likely than their male counterparts to use the Internet, e-mail, and other telephonic devices to build, maintain, and sustain friendships (Boneva & Kraut, 2002; Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001; Ling & Yttri, 2006). Furthermore, Australian research indicates that Queensland Year 8 girls experience higher rates of cyberbullying than any other Year 8 cohort in the country (Cross, et al., 2009). The link between girls' social interactions in digital spaces and the higher rate of cyberbullying amongst Year 8 Queensland girls has not been investigated.

Theoretical framework. Social interaction theory (Bochner, Cissna, & Garko, 1991; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991; Goffman, 1967, 1970; Schutz, 1967) suggests that particular social cues and interactional practices are important components of relationship building. Consequently, identifying social practices that increase adolescent girls' online vulnerability may reveal social mechanisms that lead to problems such as cyberbullying. In addition, unearthing the social interactions that may produce troubling encounters for Year 8 girls' in online communities should help educational researchers plan prevention strategies.

Research objectives. The objectives of this project are to expand the cyberbullying research base in a local context, to clarify the social interaction difficulties that may be experienced by some Queensland Year 8 girls in digital spaces, and to identify troubling moments and patterns in online contexts that may lead to problems such as cyberbullying. The outcomes of this work may suggest educational strategies that will improve the interaction skills of Year 8 girls in online communities.

Research methodology. To address the objectives of this project, the researcher seeks to collect data from a cohort of Year 8 girls at a Southeast Queensland secondary school. The project design will include a three-phase data collection process. The first phase will involve the dissemination of an anonymous online survey developed and managed using Griffith LimeSurvey. The second phase of data collection will involve synchronous online focus groups supported through the Elluminate Live (E!) digital platform. In the third phase of data collection, the researcher plans to develop and disseminate an online reflective journal and self-rating activity using the Griffith University's LimeSurvey platform. This three-phase data collection process is expected to maximise opportunity for Year 8 girls to honestly discuss their online social interactions while minimising student concerns regarding peer judgement.

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