

Femininity Out of Control on the Internet

A Critical Analysis of Media Representations of Gender, Youth, and MySpace.com in International News Discourses

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ABSTRACT

This article raises issues related to the gendered representation in the print media, particularly English-language newspapers, of girls who use MySpace as foolish innocents who invite sexual predation. It examines the ways in which the stereotyped representation of girls and boys promotes the hegemonic discourses that construct girlhood as a time of helplessness and lack of control, and that blame the technology itself, in this case MySpace, for a multitude of cultural problems. Ultimately, these discourses portray MySpace as a dangerous place where adolescent girls flaunt sexuality, where sexual predators lurk, and where boys commit violence, thus creating and reinforcing a moral panic and extending stereotypes about girls and boys, and about technology.

KEYWORDS

girls, adolescence, social networking, predators, victims, hegemonic discourse, print media



Introduction

In its several years of existence, the online social networking site MySpace has received more hits and more media coverage than any of its social networking counterparts, including Facebook, Friendster, Bebo, Xanga, and others. In July 2006, MySpace became the most visited site on the Web, surpassing Yahoo.com and eBay for the top spot (Cashmore 2006; Tancer 2006). This is not only because it has tapped into Gen X, Gen Y, and Millennial generations' apparent need to communicate and connect in a virtual space, but also because of its ability to attract media attention. Acquired by Rupert Murdoch's News



Corporation in July 2005 after two years of existence, MySpace continues to flourish because of new users—reporting 240,000 new registrations daily (Arrington 2006)—and because of its presence in the news. MySpace users now range from rock bands to 50-year-old-mothers, as well as 12-year-olds who sign up claiming to be the required age of 14.

However, as the media covers MySpace, certain dominant narratives about MySpace have emerged. Paramount within these narratives is the role gender plays within the world of MySpace. Since MySpace users are largely young people, these gendered roles take on unique meanings as the media seek to understand how this social networking site figures into the modern life of girls and boys worldwide.

In the United States, where the site was founded, MySpace was brought into the cultural consciousness partly because of the famous (or infamous) news-oriented television program, “Dateline: To Catch a Predator,” in which a reporter masquerades as a child or teenager in order to lure would-be sexual predators to a place where they can be captured on camera, and then caught by authorities. Often, the reporter uses MySpace to find and trap the predators, and for many Americans—especially older ones—MySpace has become synonymous with danger. As this article will explore, the mainstream news media has attached itself to the idea that MySpace is dangerous for young people in various ways.

However, to its millions of users MySpace serves as a space for identity articulation and creativity. Users themselves generate much of its content through a pastiche of their biographies (“blurbs”), interests, blogs, list of friends, and posted media in many forms, and one of its primary goals is to form as many interconnections among users as is technologically possible. In essence, it is a site where media creation and communication take place at a grassroots level and where people from different worlds converge and represent themselves. Individual users’ pages often resemble artworks-in-progress as they may share videos, music, stories, blogs, and more there, and they may change the color and general look of their pages whenever they wish.

This article’s mission lies at this intersection of media creation and media representation, looking specifically at the portrayal of girls and their use of MySpace in the context of the mainstream news media representation of MySpace. In doing so, it questions the hegemonic representation of both femininity and masculinity but also takes a feminist

perspective and in doing so, pays particularly close attention to the inequities in the coverage of girls in the mainstream media. Although other scholarship (Turkle 1995; Chodos, Murphy, and Hamovitch 1997; Wallace and Mangan 1997; Speed and Ellis 2003; Bratich 2008) has explored the role news media discourses have played in constructing cultural understanding of the Internet as a virtual Wild West, this article delivers the first extensive content analysis in questioning how news discourses worldwide have used the topic of MySpace to marginalize girls as both passive and as blame-worthy for the many ways in which they are represented as users of the site.

Gender and Youth: Traditional Mass Media versus New Digital Media

From children to older teens, girls often perform their gender based on the mass media's images of what they feel a modern girl is supposed to be—from the impossibly tough, sexy Buffy the Vampire Slayer, to the cute, spunky Hannah Montana, to the thin models and celebrities staring at them from the pages of their favorite magazines. These mediated images of girls project unrealistic portrayals of gender, which can make such performances impossible for young women to fulfill (Durham 1999, 2008; Milkie 1999; Sweeney 2008). However, girlhood is more complicated than media representations suggest, and the cultural development that sees girls being some of the heaviest users of the Internet demonstrates this fact perfectly.

Although scholarship looking at girls using digital media to communicate and foster relationships with one another abounds (Clark 2005; Lewis and Fabos 2000; Thiel 2005; Thiel-Stern 2007), the notion that girls use digital media to create is less prevalent. However, according to the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life, 64 percent of online U.S. teenagers aged from 12 to 17 engage in at least one type of content creation—writing a blog, creating and/or posting an online video, taking and posting photos and other visual content—and adolescent girls are far more likely to participate in content creation online than are boys (Lenhart 2007). As cultural producers through this new media (Mazzarella 2005; Kearney 2005), girls are in a more powerful position than ever before to resist mass culture's constructions of com-

mercialized femininity and sexuality. Many female users of social networking sites like MySpace do just that by posting their own creative work or opining on topics beyond the stereotypical “girl stuff” (gossip, boys, fashion), such as politics and religion.

However, this is not the image that the media most often depicts in its news coverage. Instead, dominant mediated discourses tend to focus on social networking sites—and the Internet in general—as a dangerous space where sexuality runs amok. As many girls themselves acknowledge, the Internet is an easy place to enact sexuality, which may be played out in various ways online—from interactivity to creative postings (Clark 1998; Stern 2001; Grisso and Weiss 2005; Thiel-Stern 2007). This seemingly new, progressive (and often aggressive) sexuality has been explored in recent literature about adolescent girls and offline and online identity (Lamb 2001; Simmons 2002; Grisso and Weiss 2005; Durham 2008). These practices of public gender negotiation are consistent with the literature that sees the Internet as a space where identities can be constructed, shed, and re-constructed (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995), and somewhat defies adolescents’ own assertion that they express a more truthful sense of self online than they do in other aspects of their lives (Tobin 1998; Clark 1999). However, negotiating sexuality online is often tied to the displacement of healthy conversation about sexuality in lieu of more harmful patriarchal discourses (Durham 2008). While the negotiation of sexual identity is certainly a part of MySpace and many adolescent girls’ pages, it is not the only part—though readers who learn about MySpace from newspapers might believe it to be.

Hegemonic Constructions of Femininity, Masculinity, and Youth

Gramsci’s idea of hegemony (1971) provides a useful means to theorize how the media representation of MySpace may re-create a worldview of hetero-normative femininity and masculinity. Through hegemony, dominant cultural ideologies are formed and normalized in order to support ruling classes and their interests (Gramsci 1971), and the larger population simply accepts the ideologies as natural or “common sense” (Boggs 1976: 39). Furthermore, the mainstream media uses imagery,

text, and language to create entire systems of representation that contribute to hegemonic meaning (Hall 1997). These systems give power to often harmful interpretations of gender and hierarchy. Smith (1990) argues that hegemony works to anchor how the “ways in which we think about ourselves and one another and about our society—our images of how we should look, our homes, our lives, even our inner worlds” are represented to us through the media (17). What’s more, men and women take these media representations and perform them in repetitive acts of their understanding of gender (Butler 1990), and these performances in turn carry on to solidify cultural constructions of gender. In many ways, the process is like a never-ending feedback loop in which the ways we understand “feminine” and “masculine” are represented, enacted, and embodied.

In youth, the role of media in understanding gender roles is all the more pronounced. Much of media and technology usage is tangled up with young people’s notions of what makes up the “real world”—this age group is often brought into a patriarchal system of meaning-making that is in large part an effect of the dominant mediated discourses surrounding them as much in fashion magazines (McRobbie 1982; Duke and Kreshel 1998; Currie 1999; Durham 1999; Milkie 1999; Duke 2001) as on the Internet (Sefton-Green 1998; Durham 2001; Lewis and Finders 2002; Stern 2004), despite the new media’s many opportunities to resist these dominant discourses through interactivity and digital media creation (Grisso and Weiss 2005; Mazzarella 2005; Mer-skin 2005; Kearney 2006; Thiel-Stern 2007).

Although we are at a point in history when girls can use new media to construct and represent themselves rather than settle for being represented, some media often focus instead on how they are victimized through it. This process is not entirely uncalculated, some argue. For example, Edwards explains that the news media has effectively overused quotes from official sources and childhood safety experts to further the agenda of those official sources—specifically with regard to the surveillance function of news in our lives (2005). Furthermore—keeping in mind Hall’s idea that media representations affect real-world actions and policies—this representation of girls fosters a moral panic about girls’ use of the Internet and furthers a social construction that places girls in the role of victim (Edwards 2005; Hall 1997; Mazzarella and Pecora 2007). Femininity is again equated with a lack of power and control.

Boys who also act as cultural producers and active participants in (specifically digital) media are represented in the news perhaps even more narrowly than girls. Although past literature has examined how boys are seen to be the “natural” users of technology (Tobin 1998; Sefton-Green 1998; Durham 1999), they also are represented as aggressors. This media representation of the masculine as aggressive is widespread, with one in five male television characters using violence to solve a problem (Children’s Media 1999). In the same study, three quarters of the 1,200 children researchers surveyed described male television characters as “violent,” and more than two thirds said both men and boys on television were “angry” (Children’s Media 1999). These stereotypical media portrayals create myths connecting masculinity to violence and not only reproduce moral panic about boys’ behaviors, but also reinforce the notion that manliness is tied to physical power and violence, often over girls and women (Pollack 1999; Katz 2005). This article seeks to illuminate how femininity is constructed through media representations of girls. But femininity cannot be questioned without also examining how it differs from the mediated discourses about masculinity.

Through this theoretical lens, I ask the following research questions: “How does the media represent girls who use MySpace, and is there a difference in how gender is portrayed in young people’s use of MySpace?” and “How might these representations reinforce hegemonic understandings of identity and girlhood?”

Methodology

This article uses a two-part methodology to answer questions related to representation and power in the portrayal of girls as users of MySpace. The first part is a critical content analysis of news stories about the topic to establish something of the breadth and depth of coverage of stories about girls and boys using MySpace with a particular focus on whether media representation differs according to the sex of the young person using the site. The second part is an ideological critique of those stories—a more interpretive process. Critical content analysis suggests that the reader must negotiate any ideological frames that are inherent within a text, as is suggested by Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model. Hall

suggests that readers must work to detect and ultimately resist the ideological tenets inherent in the text (Hall 1980: 138–139), which means careful, critical reading and a constant negotiation of the content.

First, a Lexis-Nexus search over English-language worldwide was conducted between 1 June 2004, and 1 June 2007, using the search terms “girls and MySpace” and “boys and MySpace”. This time period was chosen to add artificial limit to the very large number of stories. In addition, MySpace hit a record high frequency of news stories between these two dates and the site itself hit a peak in user numbers in the summer of 2006 (Cashmere 2006), so it marks a time during which the site was particularly relevant to mass popular culture.¹ This time span also falls into the period just before the rival social networking site Facebook was opened to users other than only college students—a move that in the fall of 2006 allowed young and old to sign up for pages on their site. Facebook seemed to take over as the most written about social networking site in terms of mainstream media after this occurrence. The primary search—using the words “girls and MySpace”—on major newspapers worldwide yielded 1,853 stories, while the primary search using “boys and MySpace” yielded 995 returns.

Next, an initial reading of the headlines and leads of all of the stories was done to ensure that there were as few stories as possible duplicated. In cases where chains of newspapers ran the same story in more than one newspaper, only the first-run story was included in the total and this reading also ascertained that the girls and boys were under the age of 18. This sweep narrowed the results to 390 in which the primary topic had to do with a girl using MySpace, and to 128 in which the primary topic had to do with a boy using MySpace. 45 of the stories overlapped in that they discussed both boys and girls’ use of MySpace. A random sample of 100 stories was chosen for this analysis. Newspapers used were primarily from the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, though stories from New Zealand, Canada, Singapore, and Tokyo are also represented. (Not all these stories are quoted in the discussion.)

Using Hall’s (1980) method of critical reading as a guide, stories were read in their entirety. In this reading, many of the stories were determined as falling into different categories. These stories then were used for the final, more interpretive part of the analysis in which overarching ideological narratives were sought for within the body of sto-

ries. Using Hall's model again, texts were analyzed keeping in mind both producers' assumed intentions and readers' interpretations. Various ideological patterns emerged from this close reading, and specific dominant narratives became apparent. The narratives indicate findings that have been interpreted with Gramsci's understanding of hegemony in mind as it relates to the media construction of gender and youth.

Findings

Narrative One: Girls are Victims, Too Naïve, Stupid, and Out-of-Control to Protect Themselves

Overwhelmingly, the stories written about MySpace—even stories that had nothing to do with actual criminal acts and which simply described the MySpace and the social networking Web site phenomenon—mentioned or focused on older male sexual predators attempting to prey on younger teenage female MySpace users. This is not an unexpected finding; recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice showed that one out of three of those who have been targeted by sexual predators are in fact, girls, and, in the offline world, 9 out of 10 sexual assault victims are female. In a recent 10-country study by the World Health Organization, between 15 and 71 percent of women reported physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner (WHO 2008, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/index.html>). Indeed, violence against women is normalized and embedded in the cultural history of the world, and the sad truth is that girls *are* often its victims.

However, current research has demonstrated that the fears regarding online predators have been largely overblown; very few children are actually approached by predators and fewer still are actually attacked by predators (Jenkins and Boyd 2006; Cassell and Cramer 2007). As the media over-represents these numbers in its coverage (Edwards 2005), it also perpetuates other troubling ideologies about girls as victims, often portraying them as passive and almost inhuman. For example, the following represent excerpts from fairly typical crime stories about sexual assault through MySpace that say very little about the girls themselves:

A 22-year-old youth soccer coach who allegedly raped a 14-year-old girl he met through the MySpace.com Web site was arrested earlier this week, San Rafael police said (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 August 2006).

A convicted sex offender who admitted having sex with a 15-year-old St. Paul girl he met at Myspace.com has pleaded guilty to third-degree criminal sexual conduct (*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, 15 February 2006).

More than 40 British girls are thought to be among the victims of a suspected internet paedophile arrested in Canada. Mark Bedford, 21, is accused of befriending girls aged nine to 15 online and encouraging them to take off their clothes (*London Sunday Telegraph*, 30 July 2006).

Stories also portray girls as naïve victims who meet predatory strangers through MySpace. A story in the 13 July 2006 issue of *The Toronto Sun* suggests that a Canadian teen who was photographed and videotaped in sexually explicit positions by an older man posed after becoming acquainted with him on MySpace. The story implies that she was excited to have her photo taken. Similarly, in a much publicized story about an American 16-year-old who “tricked her parents into getting her a passport” flew to the Middle East to meet a 20-year-old she met on MySpace (*Seattle Times*, 24 June 2006), the girl is shown helpless and stranded in a foreign land needing the help of parents and law enforcement to bring her back. Furthermore, several stories recounted how investigators posed as “bait” in the guise of young girls while no stories discussed police officers posing as young boys, although boys are also victims of sexual predators. In each of the stories, the police running the operations were male, further reinforcing one of the notions of hegemonic masculinity—that an authoritative masculine figure is literally needed in order to nab predators and save would-be female victims.

Moreover, MySpace itself is portrayed as a technology that almost literally enables (male) sexual predators to victimize young girls who use the site. London’s *Sunday Telegraph* ran an editorial marveling at what a “cakewalk” it was for one predator:

No wonder he conned more than 40 adolescent girls. Once a pedophile has access to Facebook, or any of the hundreds of other chatrooms for teens—MySpace, Friendster, Xanga—he can snoop to his heart’s content. He can read message walls, learn the lingo and discover which pop bands are cool. He can gather material to create a convincing teenage character for himself, or tailor-make a soul-mate for a particular victim, knowing that few children will have the worldliness to see through his disguise (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 6 August 2006).

Each of the pieces represents the female victims in various states of agency in their own fate, demonstrating through language (predators “conning” girls, for example) that femininity can be alternately weak and, in the case of the girl who flew to the Middle East to meet her stalker, completely out of control. Although the articles stop short of blaming the victims in these contexts, they do infantilize them by making it seem as though they don’t know better than to run off with strangers whom they meet on MySpace. This includes law enforcement officials posing as girls to nab the predators, and in this case parents are told that their daughters are essentially too stupid to know better. These representations reinforce hegemonic portrayals of masculinity in that readers begin to see men as both natural aggressors and saviors. They reinforce stereotypical notions of femininity in that girls are represented merely as victims and silly ingénues.

They also, in a sense, blame MySpace. While this blame is just the next in a long line of panic reactions to “new” media and its effects on young people (such as film in the 1920s, television in the 1950s, rock music in the 1960s, and so on), the new blame is somewhat more insidious because of the interactivity it affords. Through this passive construction of language and these references to the social networking site, it almost seems as though the sexual predators are somewhat blameless because the technology, and girls posting to it, have “made it so easy” to stalk them by using MySpace in the first place. This storytelling practice removes power and responsibility from the sexual predator who is represented as nearly powerless over his desires in the grip of a miracle technology.

Narrative Two: Sexy Girlishness Draws Predators

Stern (2001) and Mazzearella (2005) have examined how girls use the Internet in many ways to construct adult identities and, in the process, act as cultural producers—a term Kearney defines as “not only texts produced for girls by adult-run mainstream culture industries, but also those cultural artifacts created by girls” (1998: 286). Grisso and Weiss (2005) and Thiel-Stern (2005) note that adolescent girls use the Internet to negotiate gender identity and sexuality, whether by using language that they view as “sexy” or by posting photos and information that they view as sexually provocative. Too often such production is in

fact, done by appropriating male language for sexuality that is akin to pornography (Grisso and Weiss 2005) and too often these photographs are placed in positions that are directly in the male gaze.

One of the dominant narratives within the stories analyzed focuses on how the girls who use it construct themselves as “sexy” on their MySpace pages. One example, from *The Columbus Dispatch* (10 August 2005), discusses the U.S. House of Representatives’ proposed legislation to “do something about” MySpace: “... [a] recent flurry of news stories about sexual predators lurking on social-networking sites such as MySpace.com and scantily dressed teens depicted in videos on other sites have resulted in congressional hearings about the dangers of the Internet.” The “scantily-dressed teens” in this story (it is easy to assume that these are not *male* teens) codes the girls who are linked with MySpace not only as inappropriately sexy but as sexually promiscuous. Even in stories that are not about underage girls using MySpace, reporters sometimes make the link themselves. For example, in Tokyo’s *Daily Yomiuri* (27 December 2005), the reporter talks about 34-year-old “Renee” using MySpace to meet friends and romantic interests, and adds this sentence: “Renee may in fact be closer to 14 years old than the 34 she claims,” thus suggesting underage manipulation of age when this may not be the case at all.

While it can be disconcerting to see girls and young women negotiating gender identity in such public ways that play into the dominant patriarchal discourses of culture, it also must be noted that women of this generation also tend to find the act of using technology to play and experiment with identity as an empowering one (Thiel-Stern 2007). For example, in this *Philadelphia Inquirer* story, “Cyberspace is a dangerous world for children,” (12 October 2005), the reporter leads with a sentence that invokes both scantily clad women and cyber stalkers:

Marty Howe sat a little unnerved after being exposed to Web sites with scantily clad women and the prospect that one of these photos could serve as a disguise for a cyber stalker. The Havertown father has a son, 6, and a daughter, 3. “I’m so conscious of predators now,” Howe said immediately after a 90-minute presentation, “A Cyber World of Trouble,” at Haverford High School Monday night. “It’s certainly an eye-opener. I’ll try not to throw the computer out when I get home.”

The following story, which ran in *The Boston Globe Sunday* magazine (9 July 2006), tells the story of a driver’s education instructor who was

accused and acquitted of raping one of his teenage students. The language used codes the girl as a slutty, narcissistic scatter-brain and was mostly about how the accusation of rape ruined the life of the man she accused:

THE GIRL WAS BEAUTIFUL. Still is. And she's hardly shy about it. That much is obvious from her Web page on MySpace.com, which appeared less than three weeks after the trial ended. On her page, the girl, who is now 19, says 'shopping is one of my favorite things to do' and 'i ALSO LOVE TO LOOK HOT AND SEXY for myself and anyone who cares.' Beneath one of the pinup shots she has posted of herself is the caption: 'do I look like a slut?' But according to the page, she also likes literature and wishes she could have met Mother Teresa. It's a hodgepodge of random thoughts and photos—some of them a bit graphic—like many of the personal Web pages on MySpace, which has become the place to swap and post both mundane and racy tidbits that were once reserved for a diary hidden in a bottom drawer.

Tying the girl's use of a MySpace page to the attraction of sexual predators is unfair and troubling, and framing the story this way gives a sense that "she asked for it"—a blame-the-victim strategy that has stigmatized rape survivors throughout history and further reproduces hegemonic discourses linking feminine sexuality to promiscuity. A story from *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* refers to how "students" (although the language is gender-neutral, the article later discloses that the students are from an all-girls high school) use MySpace to project sexuality, ultimately leading to the world's "sickos", as the article calls them, being better able to track them:

"Your sexy little bear."

"I'll be ur dirty lil secret."

"The string that holds my thong together," posted with a photo of a young woman swigging from a bottle of Miller beer.

They read like come-ons from a soft-core porn site. They aren't. These are the titles of self-created and often detailed profiles of Northeast Ohio high school students, which are posted on the Internet with such characteristics as age, sexual orientation and whether they're interested in friendship, dating or a serious relationship.

... with a little mining, you'll also trip on questions like, "What kinda sex do you like?" or "Do you think I'm hot?" or "Would you have sex with me?" Some admit they smoke or have been drunk. Many of the teens'

Web profiles include photos of them drinking or smoking or posed provocatively in revealing clothes. Many also provide their full name, high school, hometown and other identifying information.

As if the world's sickos needed help finding prey (18 December 2005).

This example further reinforces the understanding that posing “provocatively in revealing clothes” will understandably bring “the world’s sickos” to girls’ front doorsteps with the sole purpose of hurting them. Again, the media representation of girls equates sexuality with sexual violence and allows girls to be blamed for their role as victim.

Narrative Three: MySpace Girls Are Mean, MySpace Boys Are Murderers

Although the topic of cyberbullying—one of the most prevalent topics found in the stories about youth and MySpace—would appear to apply to both girls and boys, news reporters told stories about cyberbullies through considerably gendered discourses. Specifically, the stories about girls acting as cyberbullies used imagery to paint them as “mean girls.” The “mean girl” is a popular archetype in the media as shown through characters like Regina in the 2004 film “Mean Girls” or Blair from the “Gossip Girl” book series and television show, and she appears repeatedly in both popular culture (Sweeney 2008) and in news stories about girls. This story from *The London Daily Mail* (26 July 2006) uses a psychologist’s observation to explain that girls are the most common victims of cyberbullying.

“...[G]irls are far more likely to be victims of cyberbullying than boys,” Peter Smith, professor of psychology at Goldsmiths, said. “Ten years ago psychologists thought of aggression in verbal or physical terms, which traditionally was a male domain. But cyberbullying is more akin to relational or indirect bullying, such as spreading rumors, where girls are more likely to get involved.”

The language also suggests that the bullies themselves are also girls—adhering to the “mean girl” archetype—even though that was not a finding of the study being discussed in this article. By using archetypes and stereotypes to describe girls bullying others, the news stories often diminish the seriousness of the issue and the violence involved. However, stories about girls being physically violent with one another are

seen to be so far out of the ordinary that they often garner international media attention as an exception to the rule. As the media perpetuates these stereotypes that girls are “mean” (not violent) toward other girls, culture buys into them—again recreating or reinforcing the stereotype of girls as utterly harmless in their role as aggressors.

While the majority of the stories about cyberbullies used gender-neutral language (“teens”, “adolescents”) to portray both bullies and their victims, the examples used in the stories overwhelmingly described girls being harassed by boys. Moreover, many of these stories actually were about boys sexually harassing girls online, which has a quite different meaning from cyberbullying. This was the case in an article in *The (Melbourne) Age* called “The Bully You Can’t See.” Although the article attempted a gender-neutral look at bullying, it included the example of “a 16-year-old girl [who] received an anonymous, sexually explicit text message containing a threatening image—it took authorities just a few days to track down the sender, a private school student. The message had been sent while the student was on camp. He got the girl’s mobile number from a friend.” Another example of sexual harassment-as-cyberbullying appeared in the *New York Times* in the piece “Internet Gives Teenage Bullies Weapons to Wound From Afar,” (26 August 2004), in which half the examples in the article related incidents that were closer to sexual harassment than bullying. One of these examples from the article tells of a teacher trying to help after an incident with a sixth grade girl:

Recently, Ms. Yuratovac intervened when a 12-year-old girl showed her an instant message exchange in which a boy in her class wrote, “My brother says you have really good boobs.” Boys make many more explicit sexual comments online than off, counselors say. “I don’t think the girl is fearful the boy is going to accost her, but I do think she is embarrassed,” Ms. Yuratovac said. “They know it’s mean, it’s risky, it’s nasty. I worry what it does to them inside....” (19 May 2007).

Although the news discourses suggest that girls are the primary bullies online, they also suggest that boys are not entirely blameless as online aggressors. In fact, the search on “boys and MySpace” turned up many stories—more than a third of the final number of stories found about boys and MySpace, in fact—representing them as troubled murderers and would-be murderers who use the social networking site to carry out their plans of violence. Whereas girls are “mean” because they can be

more so online, the hegemonic discourses created in these stories would have us believe that boys are murderously violent because they can be more so online. In many of these stories, boys were seen as seizing upon the new technology of MySpace in order to seek out victims or act out their own violent plans. For example, *The Hartford Courant* (26 October 2006) reported that a male high school student was charged with “threatening” after police were alerted to bulletins he posted to his MySpace page making a “general threat to the student body.” A *Washington Post* story about a security officer at a Maryland high school noted that they scan students’ “MySpace.com sites, which, in some cases, offer a window into their thoughts and activities.” The reporter notes that the officer “will be able to point, within the next couple of weeks, to an incident in Kansas, where sheriff’s deputies, alerted by a MySpace.com posting, arrested five teenage boys allegedly plotting to shoot high school classmates on April 20, the seventh anniversary of the Columbine murders” (6 June 2006).

Through media representations, boys using MySpace seem at direct odds with the victimized, sexualized girls since they are constructed with a harsh, violent masculinity that is prevalent in popular media imagery today (Katz 2005). Again, hegemonic forces mandate that the masculine ideal is impossibly large, strong, and powerful, and powerful often translates as violent. In the media representation of boys using MySpace suggests, this cultural stereotype not only reinforces an impossible ideal but juxtaposes it against a corresponding image of powerless girlhood. Borrowing from Hall’s understanding of the power of media representation (1997), these prevalent (and often exaggerated or false) depictions of femininity and masculinity simply give further power to unfair understandings of gender and they seek to reproduce unfair hierarchies within culture.

Conclusions and Implications

Hall (1974: 98) writes that the “mass media play a crucial role in defining the problems and issues of public concern” and serve as the main channels for public discourse within a society that is marked by inequities that are reproduced through those media channels. In this analysis of gender portrayals of girls and boys using MySpace, it is clear that the

news media perpetuates the notion that girls are helpless victims who are too naïve, stupid, or sexually out-of-control to know better than to post information on MySpace that could lead to their own harm. In contrast, boys are active agents who seize upon the technology in order to become more violent. If hegemony serves to solidify our own understandings of our society (Smith 1990), the news media is complicit in representing girlhood as a time when girls are both out of control of authority and also out of control of their own destinies—thus tying girlhood directly to victimhood and helplessness, and by extension, femininity directly to powerlessness. While these patriarchal discourses unfortunately are not new, the news media must be criticized for reifying them through journalistic coverage in a time when girls actually are using digital tools like MySpace to actively create and articulate their lives in ways that are new and interesting.

Furthermore, these representations further foster a moral panic related to the Internet and gender. Media practitioners are frequently not the “primary definers” of news events, but their professional relationship to sources allows them to play a crucial role in reproducing the definitions of those who have access to the media to serve as “accredited sources” (Hall et al. 1978: 59). Journalists rely on “official” sources—like the law enforcement officers consulted for many of the stories here—and a hegemonic process is enacted. The social condition of consent is necessary for this broad cultural construction of negative meanings—threats—that stimulate the moral panic (Hall et al. 1978).

Ultimately, as the media represents girls as out of control, their discourses also essentially blame them for their burgeoning sexuality and in some ways ties their use of the Internet, and MySpace in particular, to the attraction of sexual predators and to a certain extent, bullies and harassers. The linking of boys’ use of MySpace to violent masculinity does nothing to remedy the dominant hegemonic discourses about gender norms being reproduced here. In fact, it only further reinforces the idea that gender and power are inextricably linked as early as boyhood and girlhood and that the disproportionate amount of social capital allowed to women and girls continues through adulthood and across cultures.



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Note

1. This time period falls before two high-profile cases linked to girls' use of MySpace: A July 2007 videotaped beating of a female classmate and the Megan Meier suicide case in 2007.

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