

# Young Girls on the Internet

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**Abstract:** In Norway, school authorities, education policy-makers and the media have paid a lot of attention to what they consider a serious problem: the fact that girls do not use IT as much as boys (10). When compared with boys, we attain a 'surface understanding' of girls as 'the others', they who behave differently from the 'normal' male characteristics. To inspire girls to be interested in information technology, we must understand their lives, interests and modes of behaviour, based on their situation, age and gender. We will focus on what IT means to young girls who are shaping their own interests, cultures and identities. We will show the varied interest in computer use by presenting different arenas in which the girls have integrated their computer use.

## 1. GENDER AND IDENTITY

The description of young people as 'adolescents' is a modern construction and characterised by reflexivity, makeability (a belief that a person may form oneself and one's situation) and individualisation [14]. Adolescents must create their own identity, the 'who I am', into expressions of personality, interests, values, and elements of style and that reflect themselves and the youth cultures which they are a part of. Thus our concept of identity is not of a 'permanent core' which is established during childhood and developed when we become adults. Gender is an integral aspect of identity, and we understand identity as an ongoing construction process, which at times may be chaotic and haphazard [3, 7, 8].

Recent research in Norway shows that key aspects of girls' formation as autonomous individuals are influenced by their friendship with other girls and girl culture [1]. For girls, the collective of girlfriends represents an arena for developing an understanding of sexual maturity and autonomy in their

relationship to boys [9]. Most girls belong to a girl culture and seek confirmation from female friends that they are accepted members of the group. From the outside, such youth groups may remind us of putting on a uniform, with dress codes, hairstyle, interests and language. However, at the same time the girls have to design their individual identities; establish who they are and what it means to be different [2].

Constructing their personal identity and being a part of a group occur during girls' everyday lives: family, school and 'free time.' At school and at home adults are in charge, but 'their own time' allows young people a freedom to design content and form. During this period, young people create and live their lives together with peers, where activities, conduct and relations to others are tested and related to their identity projects individually and collectively.

Youth cultures often use symbols providing us with understanding of the actions and meanings that are important to them [4, 5]. Symbols are used to mark what they reject and how they want to be perceived, or as signals that express what they find important [6]. We are interested in the way Norwegian girls use information technology as an element in their construction of identity. We focus on their use and understanding of technology in the collective girl cultures and in the girls' individual identity projects. In this context we are interested in the gendered symbols they use in connection with information technology, which explain their use or non-use of the technology.

We used participatory observation and individual interviews to study the girls' ways of using IC-technology. We selected five lower secondary schools that had taken computers in use for teaching and recreational use. Our informants were 14-16 years old and included both girls who were enthusiastic computer users and girls who were not that interested a total of 40 girls. We will show the variation of computer use and interests we met, by presenting the following arenas in which the girls have integrated their use: the Play Corner, the Typing Room, the Information Market and the Meeting-place.

## 2. THE PLAY CORNER

When young boys show an interest in computer games, it is often seen as an important base for developing computer skills and interests. In our study, nearly all the girls also played computer games when they were young. However, while many girls had played games extensively, only a few did so today. The girls emphasised what they did not like about games more than what they liked. As Caroline put it: "*I don't like it when it says with 'much*

*blood' or with 'little blood', and then you can tick off if you want heads to fall off or just remain hanging when you have shot them, or whatever's supposed to happen."* The girls describe 'Typical boys' computer games' as violent - featuring combat, conquests and war. Such games do not fit with girls' interests and values. They use the term 'typical boys' games' as an excluding symbol to indicate that they do not want to be associated with violent games.

Girls use the term 'nerd' as a symbol to describe game-fixated boys. To girls, the nerd symbol means 'persons with such one-sided interests who are dull and a-social.' By using the nerd symbol to distance themselves, the girls signal that they are social individuals with varied interests. Symbols are also used when the girls describe their own use of games. They like to play Tetris, Chess and adventure games, which they describe as 'mind games' because their objective is to search for solutions by thinking. However, the girls did not consider computer 'mind games' legitimate recreational activities. According to the girls, legitimate recreational activities include playing in a band, dancing, playing football or handball, going to cafés or movies with friends or visiting friends.

For those girls who like to play computer games, the cultural constraints constructed by the girl culture can be problematic. For example, during the interview with Ann and Alice, controversies arose about computer games. Ann likes playing some of the "boys' games". In the discussion with her friend she found it difficult to express her own preferences. Alice dislikes computer games, and is the dominant person in the relationship. The following discourse took place:

Alice: *I don't like computer games, really. I never had any interest in Nintendo or that stuff. I'd rather be with friends and have fun in other ways than with the computer.*

Ann: *I'm not so very ... (vague and careful)*

Alice: *A-social sport, really. It doesn't have to be, but I don't think it's any fun to play games.*

Ann: *I never want to play alone (thus signalling that she is not a-social)*

Alice: *A boy in our class, he spent all yesterday playing on his computer, for twelve hours, or maybe not that much. But he's doing this every day. It doesn't have to be a-social, but it feels like it really is.*

Ann: *But people can sit together and play too?*

Alice: *Yes, that is also possible.*

Ann: *I think they often do. They go home to somebody who has lots of games, right?*

Alice: *Some sit by themselves and play, too. I think that's a-social. I couldn't have done that, no way. We've got a computer at home, but I haven't used it.*

Ann: *I use it perhaps once a month.*

Ann's playing is not seen as legitimate in the common culture of her friends. Nevertheless, she tried to indicate that she did not entirely agree with Alice's negative attitudes to games. Thus, she challenged the collective meaning by rendering her personal interests more visible. Making the 'I' more visible than the collective 'we' of the girl culture, may be seen as an element towards testing one's own individual interests and behaviour. However, most girls indicated that games did not mean much to them, and the message seemed to be that you cannot be one of the girls if you play computer games a lot.

### 3. THE TYPING ROOM

The girls learned at an early age to master word processing. They use computers to type their lessons, essays and assignments. The '*typing room*' they designed was not only used for homework, but also for poems, short stories, diaries, jokes and private thoughts. The girls saw the *typing room* as an intimate sphere where they were alone or together with close friends. Ada gave us an example of writing as a collective activity: *A friend and I, she's the daughter of my stepfather's buddy, and he's at the same workplace, and has the same kind of computer. We use to start a stopwatch, and then in five minutes we start to write. We have the same heading, and then we write and exchange computers and then we write again, continue doing each other's story.*

The girls' *typing room* contains what we think of as traditional girls' interests and activities, communication in the form of letters, diaries and albums. Using computer technology, writing can be combined with drawing software, the Internet and CD-ROMS. The girls define computers as fascinating tools for creative writing processes. The *typing room* is an arena where technology is used for reflecting on oneself and on relations to classmates, and for sharing one's most secret thoughts. Writing also serves as a significant stepping-board to the Internet, the new and undoubtedly most popular computer activity for girls.

### 4. THE INFORMATION MARKET

The Internet represents an entirely new medium for the girls, which is not distorted by gendered symbols. The girls define the Internet as an exciting place to be during their free time, and their fascination has developed after only a brief period of use. Many of the girls indicated they are 'hooked' on

using the WWW. Texts and images are quickly integrated in their work with assignments and essays. While browsing the net, they also find exciting information about their hobbies and recreational interests. Using the WWW, girls experience greater freedom to find out about things without having to follow instructions from adults. The WWW represents a major source of information that the girls use to supplement other conventional sources. They discovered that using this resource presents the challenge of developing more independent learning processes, expressed by Caroline: *"We're studying Nazism and socialism, and we've used the Internet to find out more than what the textbooks express. I have done this also because I don't understand everything in the textbooks, and then I have to make it out some other way."*

Many of the girls also developed an interest in elements other than the "useful information" linked to serious school activities. They search for pictures of male pop and film stars, which they print out and decorate their bedroom walls with. The net thus functions in the same way as pop magazines and the weekly tabloids do. The information market is an arena both for individual projects and collective girl culture as an expression of what it is to be a teenage girl. Their personal interests and orientations determine the kind of information the girls look for on the net. The net provides them with opportunities to act more flexibly and more independently. Even if 'gorgeous boys' are exciting, the experienced net surfers nevertheless told us they tired of this quickly. Instead, they concentrate on "communicating on the net". We shall thus move on to the arena that we have called the *"Meeting-place"*.

## 5. THE MEETING-PLACE

The Internet as a *"meeting-place"* provides the opportunity to exchange opinions and establish friendships with people we otherwise would not meet, and reflect on aspects of our own personality through conversations [12, 13]. A number of the girls expressed a fascination with the communication opportunities on the net, as Ellen shows when she said: *"All the things they have managed to link together – it's like one thing... You are able to make contact with people - it isn't just you and your computer. You know there are others out there somewhere also sitting at their computers."*

The girls use a variety of ways to reach others, using homepages, e-mail addresses and chat lines. Several of the girls caught the IRC fever. Playing computer games for hours on end is regarded as 'nerdy'. In contrast, the girls can sit with IRC or chat for hours. They consider this as a social activity that is compatible with their interests and identities. Using chat lines is a typical

joint activity when they have free use of the net at school. They watch together, commenting on what happens on the screen.

The chat lines constitute a new opportunity for getting to know other young people. When they get to know somebody better, they may switch to more personal contact. Then the exchanges occur via personal e-mail addresses. As friendships over the net develop and take on a more intimate nature, the conversations are not shared with their friends in the same way as the more shifting exchanges over the public chat lines. Among the more experienced net users we found a number of girls who found friends from other countries with whom they gradually established regular communication. Anniken told us: *"I have found pen pals in Russia, and I talk with them... This is the best thing I know, knowing that you are talking with people on the other side of the world. You get to know what they're doing, their cultures and everything."*

They feel that having 'chat friends' via the net is completely different from having old style pen pals. They are able to speak directly with people on the other side of the globe. In fact, they consider it easier to 'talk' on the net than in front of a stranger. Eva explains: *"I feel more embarrassed to talk to people (in the real world) when I have absolutely no idea who they are...just walk over and start talking...That's pretty hard for me to do, because I am rather shy. It's easier if you aren't talking face to face."*

By using the net, the girls avoid concerns about how their bodies, clothes and uncertainty might prevent them from getting to know somebody. The net's 'invisibility' offers them the chance of reaching out as interesting people before other distorting elements intrude. Thus the net is seen as a kind of 'freedom channel' to reach out and be accepted as the persons they are. Some of the girls said they know of girls who have found boyfriends over the net. They see this as a possibility, but feel it is much too risky to find a boyfriend only through net contact. Consequently, Norwegian boys are more interesting 'to e-mail' than boys from abroad. If they did find a boyfriend, they would need the opportunity to meet regularly.

The majority of the girls are not interested in creating identities when chatting on the net. When the girls use chat lines or e-mail they want to get acquainted with 'real' people. Eva's comments illustrate what a number of the girls pointed out: *"I give my own opinions and attitudes when I speak to people. The point of going there is that you can get to know somebody and talk about your opinions with them and hear what they think, not just invent somebody who doesn't exist."*

Some of the girls said that the anonymity provided by nicknames offers good protection against embarrassing episodes. Dora once she lied about her age and said that she was 18. Then things happened which she was not so thrilled about: *"And then suddenly I find out that the guy I'm writing with is*

*forty years old!"* Her friend Daisy provided her with a way of solving such problems: *"Then I just leave. It's kind of yucky, really. I'd been talking to a guy for a long time, and then he tells me how old he is. Fifty years old he was this guy. That was disgusting!"*

If things get out of hand, the girls break off the conversation and start with a new nickname. They feel they have adequate control, and that it is up to them to break off unwanted contact.

The styles of communication the girls developed on the net, including making themselves visible as young girls, offer them the opportunity to test aspects of their personality, intimacy and sexuality in direct communication with others. They are able to test relationships that are much more difficult to establish in other ways. For the slightly older girls, the net represents an avenue for experimenting with close and intimate relationships with boys and young men. This could be done on the net without the interference of their girlfriends. Thus, the net enables them to test their autonomy, finding out who they are and wish to be as individuals. In contrast, the younger girls generally use the net as an arena for collective experiences with their girl friends. The technology and the people they encounter through the net constitute important elements that shape the girls' cultures. Through the "meeting-place" the girls focus on reaching out to other young people, interested in communicating about what it means to be a young person today.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In order for teachers and schools to motivate girls to use information technology and explore its possibilities, they must understand girls' use of technology as a defining element of their common culture and individual persona. It is in their free time that the girls develop their interests in the use of information technology, especially the use of the Internet to contact other youth around the world. Girl culture rejected computer game playing as a-social, symbolised by the 'computer nerd'. Writing, word-processing and compiling information from the net are extensions of traditional girl activities. They are fascinated by the use of the Internet as a social arena. It offers new opportunities for contact and communication and for testing their own identities. Internet use is considered social, and was not tied to the gendered symbol of the a-social nerd. To be a skilled user of Internet increased a girl's status, in contrast to game playing and programming which are connected to the a-social nerd. Both boys and girls participate in communication on the net. The net offers opportunities for exploring relations with the other sex in a form where girls have control and new

opportunities. The new interactive possibilities of information and communication technology broke the gender patterns traditionally associated with computer use among young people.

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