Narratives Of Possibility: Adolescent Girls Constructing And Negotiating Front And Back Stage Identities Through Blogs

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NARRATIVES OF POSSIBILITY: ADOLESCENT GIRLS CONSTRUCTING AND NEGOTIATING FRONT AND BACK STAGE IDENTITIES THROUGH BLOGS

by

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DISSERTATION

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MAJOR: READING, LANGUAGE, AND LITERATURE

Approved by:

Advisor_______________________Date______________

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DEDICATION

For my family, who had an extreme amount of patience during the last few years as I struggled to make sense of this process. Kelly, I did not finish this in a weekend, but it is finished now. Tim and Devin, you grew up as I wrote and studied. I love you more.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Autobiographical Connection

Growing up, I sat on a porch and listened to my neighbor tell story after story. Each of these stories allowed me to enter and imagine new worlds. Fairy tale worlds were woven together with more realistic tales about growing up, getting a job, and creating my own family. As she talked, space opened for me to tell my own stories. Through my own stories, I learned to envision a world with unlimited possibilities. Listening to and creating stories were my first steps into literacy. I would later immersing myself in an endless series of books, which allowed me to step away from my current world and into new ways of being. While reading, I could step into the shoes of strong and adventurous characters, as well as explore topics too taboo for me to take up in my circle of friends and family. Oral storytelling and literature helped me explore my identity.

While I learned, at home, stories were an outlet for self-expression, I carefully censored my writing in classrooms. I saw academic writing as a time to leave personal experiences and insights behind and fall in line with a teacher’s expectations. My classroom writing was detached and distinctly different from the exploratory engagements that had paved my initial journey into literacy. I adapted well to the academic expectation of recalling and summarizing information while creating a divide between my personal life and my performance as a student.

Classroom environments were disconnecting, but I found the ability to connect and express myself again when I began to engage with people online. Blogging, instant messaging, and participating in online forums all gave me the opportunity to connect with like-minded people and use literacy in meaningful ways. This study comes out of my passion for
understanding more about the ways digital environments invite young women to move beyond silence and social constraints and explore new possibilities for their own lives.

**Research Background**

This research study explored the ways four girls between the ages of 16-19 used blogging to construct meaning of their experiences and negotiate their identities through a wide range of literary practices including nonfiction and fiction writing, photographs, self-created drawings, and other materials. Writing in these blogs girls moved between front stage, public performances and back stage performances, making strategic decisions regarding how they presented themselves to their audience. Contained within their artifacts are portrayals of self, continuously shaped and reshaped through on-going literacy practices.

Recent theoretical work has pointed to the significance of social literacy practices (such as online literacy practices) as tools for recognizing and embracing multimodal forms of self-expression as well as contributing to an evolving awareness of the relationship among self, social identities, and social practices (Alvermann, 2012; Kist, 2005; Mazzarella, 2005; Schillinger, 2011). For young woman, the issue of self-expression is important to consider because there are many contexts where their voices and experiences are discounted, silenced, and suppressed. Venues for self-expression can provide a way for those voices and experiences that have been ignored in classrooms and other social outlets to be recognized. Belenky et al. (1997) noted “opening our ears to the voices and perspectives of women so that we might begin to hear the unheard and unimagined” (p. 11) involves creating spaces and engaging in research practices that open up space for stories to be told from the perspective of the participants. Examining the ways girls used blogging recognizes that digital environments are shifting the ways narratives are
constructed and shared, offering new ways for girls to articulate and reflect upon their experiences.

New Literacy researchers posit that literacy practices are multimodal in nature and are influenced by the social and cultural resources available to construct meaning and recognize the self in relationship to others. Through online, self-sponsored literacy practices, such as blogging, individuals are able to perform and try-on various aspects of their identity which can contribute to the growing awareness of self-identity and connections with larger social spheres (Coiro, 2003; Kinzer & Leander, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Leu, 2000; New London Group, 1996, Perry, 2006, Sweeny, 2010). Theoretically, this research aligns with the identity work of both Goffman (1959) and Gee (1992, 2011), both of whom noted individuals enact different roles and become members of various and multiple discourse communities by the particular ways they dress, speak, and carry themselves. An individual’s sense of self continuously shifts by negotiating meaning within relationships with others including across larger social and cultural contexts.

Suggesting that identities are continuously influx and taken up through social practices, such as writing, aligns with a postmodern perspective which views knowledge as socially constructed and subject to change. Lincoln and Denzin (2000) contend that it is impossible to avoid a postmodern perspective, because the world has shifted in such a way that truths are continuously being reshaped as individuals bring their own understanding of the world into interactions with others, various texts, and different forms of technology. “It is not that we might elect to engage in work that is postmodern. Rather, it is that we have inherited a postmodern world, and there is no going back. We did not “choose” to be postmodern. The historical moment has chosen us” (p. 1060). In other words, individuals interested in literacy practices and
research can no longer look at the world in terms of absolute truths; rather they must be open to exploring the many truths that emerge as individuals interact in the world.

This study answers a call that began with the work of feminist pioneers such as Belenky, et al (1997), Pipher (1994), Thomas (2007) Wissman (2007) and others for researchers to continue to explore and to provide safe spaces for girls to describe their life experiences, negotiate amongst multiple identities, and actively shape their social worlds. This research is also a response to Palmer’s (1998) observation that, “Implicitly and explicitly young people are told they have no experience worth having, no voice worth speaking, no future of any note, no significant role to play” (p. 45). This work expands upon previous research by suggesting that the multimodal environment of a blog shifts narrative structures and allows for new ways of socially negotiating identities.

**Theoretical Overview**

If identities can be viewed as performances enacted through language and behavior, one can begin to understand how they are fluid and can shift over time and across various social contexts (Gee, 2011; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). To understand the ways literacy can play a role in shaping the self, this literature review weaves together both theoretical perspectives and empirical research in the areas of feminism, new literacies, discourse analysis, performance theory, and semiotics.

One overarching theoretical stance of feminist theory involves inquiry into the ways in which adolescent girls interact within larger cultural contexts where they are often pressured to conform to particular gender roles, which includes taking on passive roles and silencing their own voices (Hartman, 2004; Pipher, 1994; Rich, 1979). As girls enact their identity as a female, they may dress, speak, behave, and use other cues to signal to others who they are and the social
communities in which they are members. Butler (1990) describes gender as a social construct performed in different ways by many girls. This research defines gender as the “psychological, behavioral, or cultural characteristics” that are used to recognize an individual as male or female (Olson, Forbes and Belzer, 2011, p. 172). Gender as a collection of physical and behavioral traits opens up space for discussing the various ways individuals can embody both male and female characteristics. Socially constructing one’s gender does not discount that there is a biological component to it, rather it suggests that there is value in allowing for gray areas, where individuals can portray their identity in personally meaningful ways. Seth (2008) suggests that examining gender on a continuum allows for “infinite possibilities” and places value on an individual’s experiences and perspective of the world (p. 13).

Gee, a social linguist, (2011) explores up the issue of multiple identities through his work around Discourse with a capital D as the enactment of social identity through speaking, acting, dressing, believing and behaving. Discourse communities are groups of people who take up similar ways of socially interacting are recognized as being members of the same Discourse community. Negotiations of self are played out in various ways and are influenced by collaboration with others. These negotiations are shaped by the perceptions and demands of larger social communities who may support or restrict the ways individuals express themselves within a sociocultural context.

Goffman (1959), a sociologist, likens identities to performances projected from actors on a stage, and claims individuals take on particular roles based on the stage from which they perform. Using the stage as a metaphor for various social contexts, Goffman contends that individuals represent themselves in a similar way to characters on a stage: they step into and play
out multiple identities through the language they use, the clothing they wear, and the behaviors they exhibit.

Viewing identities as performances, Goffman (1959) distinguishes between front stage region, which is public and relatively stable, and the back stage region. When in the front stage region, individuals may accentuate particular aspects of their identity, while suppressing other aspects. The hidden parts of an individual’s identity are often thrust to the back stage region. In this space, individuals are more private and can let down their performative front. Back stage individuals prepare for future performances by gathering and learning new ways of being that they are seeking to integrate into their own performances.

Goffman’s work is relevant to the New Literacy practices that advocate the integration of online interactions and the way an impression is created or performed through the use of various digital tools. The online environment offers various social platforms and tools that can be utilized by a creator to enact or hide aspects of their identity (boyd, 2007; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2010; Turkle, 2005, 2011). Technology widens opportunities for identity negotiation by opening up new avenues for self-expression and social interaction (Black, 2007, 2008; Davies and Merchant, 2007). For example, in a study conducted by Thomas (2007), adolescents were able to author online identities for themselves by drawing upon digital tools including avatars and short stories to explore multiple ways of being. One girl described the ways she could vary her online identity to fit her mood and the audience and the ideas or feeling she was hoping to express to her audience. She explained, “I am Violetta today, I am feeling bright yellow and somewhat creative. I think this alias suits me well…most of my friends like this one [her identity as Violetta than my first [alias]” (p. 39). During her time online, she constructed dozens of identities and used online literacies to help her explore her own sense of
self. Violetta noted that some of these identities were consistent with her current sense of self, while other identities were very different, imagined realities. She suggested that the online world allowed her to bridge the space between her current sense of self and emerging or shifting understandings of her identity. Through engagement with new literacies, girls can continuously try and reshape their sense of self.

**Significance of Study**

Although girls in contemporary society are often encouraged to silence their own voices, ignore their experiences and conform to social norms without questioning, supportive literacy experiences can provide a means for girls to break through to new possibilities and social positions. Trzyna and Miller (1997) wrote about a young girl named Kris who had been sexually abused at the hands of her father and for a brief time talked to no one but her twin sister. Although this powerful experience initially silenced her, Kris found poetry and journal writing provided a way for her to work through her challenging past. “I wasn’t afraid to tell others about my abusive dysfunctional family. After all, it has made me into a strong young lady” (p. 8). Kris saw her experiences with literacy as transformational. She found a safe space where she could use literacy to find new possibilities for herself.

Through the very act of writing, girls construct stories that allow them to reflect on the ways their identities have been molded by social institutions and individual experiences. For example, Cleage (1987), an African American woman, shares her personal experiences to raise awareness and critique the social injustices of racism and sexism.

I am writing to expose and explore the point where racism and sexism meet. I am writing to help myself understand the full effects of being black and female in a culture that is from running toward it or away from it or anybody’s arms. I am writing to find solutions and pass them on. I am writing to find language and pass it on. I am writing, writing, writing, for my life (p. 7).
Purpose and Research Questions

As girls write individual stories, on their blogs, they weave together narratives that express their past experiences, current understandings of self, and dreams for the future; opening up spaces for exploring aspects of their identity that may have been constrained and suppressed in other contexts. This study investigated the ways girls confronted and questioned topics that are generally considered taboo including struggles with violence, gender, and sexuality. Through their blogs, girls were able express and reflect upon new possibilities for their own sense of identity as well as their social position in society. The online environment allowed girls to express themselves and socially collaborate with others.

We are concerned with possibility, with opening windows on alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before. . .We are interested in breakthroughs and new beginnings, in the kind of wide-awakeness that allows for wonder and unease and questioning and the pursuit of what is not yet (Greene, 2001, p. 44).

The purpose of this research was to explore how adolescent girls use blogs and blogging to depict identity and, in that process, socially negotiate and renegotiate both the public and private aspects of their identity. The major questions that guided this research were:

1. In what ways do adolescent girls make use of multimodalities (texts, drawing, pictures, etc.) to construct and negotiate multiple aspects of their identity in blogs?
2. In what ways do girls use their blog to take up or resist social and cultural messages they are hearing both online and offline?
3. To what extent do girls demonstrate a transformation in self-identity through their online narratives? What do the narrative analyses suggest are the catalysts for that change?
Overview of the Study

This research used a case-study approach to describe the ways girls used blogs in various ways, including posting nonfiction and fictional writing, pictures, and drawings to narrate past and present experiences as well as imagine possible futures for themselves. Throughout the study, I collected multiple data sources to ensure triangulation including: a questionnaire, blog entries, e-mails, three literacy artifacts, and three online instant message interviews. The three literacy artifacts provided space for the girls to respond to prompts related to issues central to thus dissertation including: technology, engagement with social groups, and dreams for the future.

I found participants for this research by placing advertisements on blogging community sites as well as by contacting girls individually through LiveJournal’s private messaging component. Once the girls expressed interest in participating in the research, they were sent an information sheet and a questionnaire. The information sheet informed the girls that I would be collecting archived information from their blogs (August 2011 through October 2011) as well as information that they posted during the duration of the study (November 2011 through January 2012). In addition, the girls were informed that as participants of the study, they would be asked to complete three literacy artifacts and three semi-structured interviews reflecting on technology use, social group affiliations, and personal sense of self. Interviews were semi-structured, in order to align with the research goals, while at the same time creating opportunities for dialogue between the researcher and research participants.

Narrative and discourse analysis (Gee, 2011; Riessman, 1993) were used to analyze the data. Narrative analysis provided the framework for understanding individual stories as well as the larger stories that surfaced in the reoccurring themes presented by each girl. Through
Discourse analysis, I came to understand how girls represented and negotiated their lives through specific words, phrases, and images. As I read the blog entries, I gained insights into various aspects of the girls’ identity as they constructed and shared their experiences within the blog and across other data sources.

**Implications**

Implications emerging from this study center on areas critical to this research: identity work, the importance of community, and multimodal literacy practices. To combat self-silencing, teachers should help to broaden the types of identities that are socially recognized and discussed in the classroom. This could include engaging with literature that represents diverse identities and social issues that impact adolescents. Students should be encouraged to describe and discuss aspects of the ways characters’ identities that were portrayed front stage and the ways they managed and learned from back stage performances. Discussing the ways characters negotiated their identities can support students in negotiating their own identity.

When discussing diverse identities, educators should highlight identities that are outside of the norm of the current classroom community. Discussions of alternative communities could be supported with the book discussions, described above, as well as through online literacy practices. Through online collaboration, students can connect with individuals who share their interests, but live in different geographic regions. Girls often feel more secure talking to online friends, about personal topics, than they do in face-to-face encounters.

Listening to and sharing stories in a digital environment demands re-conceptualizing what counts as a narrative. The third implication of this study involves the recognition of the ways online spaces shift narrative practices. Through blogs, and other digital practices, adolescents can create multimodal stories and weave together multiple genres, creating grander
tales than those created through a single text. This finding suggests that adolescents should be exposed to and taught how to use a wide variety of literacy genres to convey their knowledge about a particular topic. Increased awareness of the style and purpose for different writing styles can help students convey their ideas in more meaningful ways.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I described the social and literacy significance of blogs on the lives of adolescent girls. Through the stories presented on their blogs, girls shared their experiences and confronted the existing status quo of being silenced. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework shaping this study, weaving together theoretical and practical research on the sociocultural construction of knowledge, construction of identity through narratives, new literacies and technology. Chapter 3 provides a description of the research design and describes the importance of utilizing multiple methods when exploring online research environments. Chapters 4 and 5 present the case studies of the individual participants; examining the ways the girls took up issues of identity and social community within their blogging practices. Chapter 4 examines identity movement from back stage to front, while chapter 5 examines movement from front stage to back. Finally, chapter 6 presents the analysis of the findings, implications to educators and other professionals who strive to make sense of the literacy practices and social experiences of adolescent girls, and discussion for future research.
CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I described the ways stories told to me as a child as well as plot lines from texts helped me to envision new possibilities for my own life. In addition, I noted that my interactions in social and cultural communities often limited the ways I shared my life experiences and the types of identities I could perform. Engaging in online literacy practices, I found a new outlet for my voice and explored multiple ways of narrating and negotiating stories of my life. I suggested that online environments provide new ways for females, particularly adolescent girls, to construct and negotiate new ways of being. Through blogs and other digital engagements girls can express themselves and gain new insight and awareness regarding their own sense of self and the possibilities that exist for their future. This study sought to understand how the girls used literature to construct, negotiated, and transform their own sense of identity through online literacy practices. The theoretical frameworks purposefully selected to align with the research questions and highlight issues central to the study including the silencing of girls, identity and social/cultural group affiliations and the online literacy practices. I conclude the chapter by bringing together the six theories that ground the research: feminism, narrative theory, Discourse analysis, performance theory, new literacies, and semiotics. Inter-animating these theories provides a new lens for understanding how individuals use a wide range of online literacy practices online to explore the multiple aspects of self and their relationships to larger communities.

Theoretical Frameworks

Much research notes that adolescent girls are inundated with social and cultural messages that demand silence and conformity, both within and outside of school environments (Bruce,
2003; Cleage, 1987). In an effort to be socially accepted, girls might distance themselves from their own experiences, using speech only in ways that are deemed socially acceptable, and construct identities that conforms to expectations from others. Aspects of their identity that fail to align with required expectations, or as Gee (2011) describes dominant discourse are required to be thrust back stage, away from a public eye. However, hiding one’s identity and simply maintaining the status quo fails to create openings and opportunities for self-transformation. Rich (1979) explained, “If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment” (p. 43). To answer this call, the current study explored the ways adolescent girls constructed and negotiated their identities within the semi-private atmosphere of their personal blogs. Online literacy spaces are powerful tools for helping girls to communicate with others through the use of multimodal creations.

Feminist theory recognizes that women have marginalized voices in society and advocates for including more opportunities for acknowledging their diverse experiences and voices. Narratives are one way adolescent girls can share their experiences and resist social and cultural messages of silence and conformity. These stories can help girls to continuously reflect upon multiple aspects of their own identity. Following a post-modern perspective, this literature review highlights the fluidity of identity and suggests that individuals can take up different aspects of their identity depending upon the situation or context they are interacting. Theoretically, the discussion of identity will draw upon the work of Gee (2011) and Goffman (1959). Gee argues individuals use capital D, Discourse as a way of representing their identity to others. Discourse includes a wide range of sign systems including language, behavior, clothing and other components that allow them to be recognized as particular type of social beings.
Individuals with shared ways of thinking, speaking, acting, behaving and believing are described as being a part of a particular Discourse community. On the other hand, Goffman (1959) views identities as performances that are continuously reshaped as individuals move between public (front stage identities) and private (back stage identities). To be accepted by an audience individuals, like actors, conceal aspects of their identity that do not fit the character they are trying to portray back stage. Concealing aspects of one’s identity can involve the use of clothing or accessories to cover physical aspects of the self, making a conscious decision about individuals one will socially engage with, and other strategies that control the audience’s information (Goffman, 1963). Back stage can also be a place where an individual can prepare for future performances by gathering necessary resources, rehearsing new skills, and sharing emerging understandings with a trusted group of people. Linking the work of Gee (2011) and Goffman (1959) recognizes that identities are enacted and socially negotiated.

Meaning as an ongoing negotiation aligns with the work in semiotic theory. “Semiotic theory contends that humans cannot exchange meaning in any direct faction; rather, all meaning is mediated through signs. We create signs that stand for meaning” (Berhoff, Borgman, and Parr, 2003, p. 354). Semiotics suggests that meaning arises through interpreting and interacting with signs. Individuals in some communities may be encourage to keep certain signs, or expressions of their identity, hidden because they are too taboo or may disrupt the traditional flow of the community. Online, girls can widen their social communities, explore new topics, and express themselves through a wide range of modes including texts, visuals, and other communication tools. The next section highlights the constraints females face and how those boundaries shape and inform the ways young girls construct and negotiate their identities.
Feminism

Wissman (2007) argued young women are often encouraged by social, cultural, and political powers to disconnect from personal experiences and live within boundaries that encourage an, “on-going, pervasive silencing” (p. 341). These boundaries often limit the ways girls can know themselves and interact in the world. The struggle to name the self as well as act on one’s own beliefs is particularly apparent in the seminal work of Belenky et al., (1997) who found that all 135 women they interviewed had difficulty describing themselves. They often looked outward, to geographical spaces (such as the home or streets) as well as to others as means of defining and locating their position in society.

The struggle to name experiences was particularly problematic for women who were young and less educated. When these women did try to communicate they looked for external support and often found themselves feeling disconnected and angry. One woman described feeling that situations in her life were out of control when she stated, “The baby listens to him. Men have deep voices. But me, I can’t do anything with him” (p. 25). She saw herself reliant upon others because she was powerless to change the circumstance in her world. Reflecting upon their own ideas and sharing their insights with others is difficult because they feel insecure about their own ability to express themselves, or feel like they will be physically punished or shunned if they voice their ideas. Six working class girls in the work of Hartman (2006) illustrate the ways girls limit their voices because they worry about the perceptions of others. All of the girls shared that they were regarded as quiet and consciously chose to suppress their own voices in order to listen to people they felt had more authority. One of the girls explained, “I don’t like to say a lot of things because I always think I’m wrong and stuff. I always think I’m wrong! So I just listen” (p. 97). Teachers and words had the potential to get her in trouble both in school and
at home, including being taunted by classmates or getting grounded. Therefore, instead of voicing their opinions, the girls continuously consulted with the teacher, asking about assignment expectations and their own progress in the class. Asking questions and seeking validation led the teacher to believe that these girls were less capable of learning than their peers.

Moving towards a more vocal future involved taking small steps to recognize the value of one’s own knowledge and beginning to share that knowledge with others (Belenky et al., 1997). Many of the working class girls believed they would be more secure to speak their minds as they grew older and were required to be more independent and self-reliant in college and other work environments. One girl exclaimed, “I’ll probably be a little more outgoing and stuff when I get into like college and working and that kind of stuff” (Hartman, 2006, p. 102). The girls began to move towards “the other side of silence” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 3) through classroom activities including reading, reflecting in journals, and engaging in classroom discussions. One girl explored alternative ways of being as she wrote about two characters from the novel the class was reading. In the book, a mother and son talked about their thoughts and feeling surrounding the past. Unlike the open sharing of the characters, the girl explained that she hid her writing in journals and wondered what would happen if someone read them. Through the journals she connected with her own knowledge, becoming more aware of her own insights, but she could not envision sharing this knowledge in a public manner.

Another girl, Lisa, began to voice her experiences during the classroom reading and discussion of Hamlet. Guided by her teacher’s encouragement to make personal connections to the text, Lisa saw similarities between the relationships in the book and her own. Lisa’s best friend revealed to the researcher that the struggle between Hamlet and Ophelia paralleled the struggles between Lisa and her boyfriend. Through talking with her best friend, and then reading
and engaging with the classroom novel, Lisa gained the awareness and courage to make her own private experiences public (Hartman, 2006). Discussions and writing played a powerful role in making the girls experiences and awareness of self visible and opened up space for shifting perspectives and imagining new possibilities. The next section will specifically explore the importance of narratives for adolescent girls to transcend their current perceptions of self. Through stories girls can organize and examine their own experiences and reflect on the ways they have been shaped by those encounters.

**Narrative Theory**

Narratives are powerful medium where individuals can reveal aspects of their own experiences and identity through abstractions, emotions, and even contradictory perspectives (Bruner, 1986). Stories allow girls to weave together various aspects of their identities as they make sense of the past, negotiate their present, and prepare for their future. “Stories allow us to break through barriers and share in another’s experiences; they warm us. Like a rap on the window, they call us to attention” (Shabatay, 1991, p. 137).

Journals and diaries are one place where girls can turn to write narratives of their experiences. Journals capture personal reflections including daily activities, questions about the world, and future, as well as open up avenues for reflecting on larger social and cultural issues. Cooper (1991) described one woman who wrote about her daily routine of getting up in the morning, feeding her cat, and noticing the fruit that has over ripened. These mundane observations of her morning propelled her into thinking about the struggles of being a woman and trying to manage all of the social and cultural demands placed upon her. In one journal entry the woman wrote, “My body is shot, my children feel neglected, the food in my kitchen is rotting and my partner has moved on to God and a new wife” (p. 96). Through her entry journal, the
woman implicitly reflects on her own passion, mainly writing as a way of coming to terms with the situations she finds herself in and her own identity as a woman. As she tries to hold on to her own interests, while balancing the needs of others, she demonstrates the struggle to fit the mold of traditional expectations for females, while simultaneously maintaining her own sense of self.

Although the woman used her journal to discuss and explore her social position, the work of Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) reflect on the ways some adolescent girls create Zines, which can be described as mini magazines, to demonstrate their resistance to deeply rooted social and cultural perceptions of women. These narrative pieces are characterized as, “an act of civil disobedience; a tool for inspiring other forms of activism; and a medium through which girls can effect changes within themselves, including confronting their own racism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice” (p. 411). Girls construct zines by cutting out and pasting together commercially published images alongside their own writing. For example, Barbie doll and super model images were framed besides discussions of eating disorders. A collage of animal rights commented on use of animals for fur and food. Articles about musical artists were accompanied by images of artists, reviews of bands and website links to additional information.

Corgan, one of the zine writers, aligned herself with feminism, activism and punk rock and used the zine to enact and explore those aspects of her identity. In one of the zine articles, she critiqued the materialism that can inform the ways girls engage in the world.

Yesterday I saw this girl,
Frankly she made me want to hurl,
She thought shopping at the mall,
Was the greatest thing of all.
“Screw mankind when you can shop,“
“Who needs peace? I got a new top!”
Then she whips out her new cellular phone,
Why is this world overrun with clones?
Good thing the bill goes to Daddy,
‘Cus he will pay for it gladly,
Anything for his little prin-cess
He is always there to clean up her mess,
Anytime she’s in distress,
Barf me, this really sucks,
This girl annoys me very much. (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, p. 419).

Through the zine, Corgan described her own perceptions about teenage life and commented on the materialistic society around her. As she created the zine, she reflected upon and integrated many aspects of her life into her literacy practices. This integration of self through literacy practices is a way of countering a culture of silence and disconnect that is often a part of an adolescent girls’ experience.

Social literacy practices can occur through writing as well as in dialogue with others. Carney (2000) found that many stories are told in informal settings, including discussions that pop up as individuals are walking to their cars, meeting in the hallway, or during meals. In this research, a group of young, competitive figure skaters shared stories of their lives during formal interviews, but often their most insightful moments came at unexpected moments. Stories told quickly and informally were described, by the researcher, as disjointed and lacking a sequential organization as well as, “amazing, beautiful, gentle, forgiving, funny, playful, creative, and surprising” (p. 129). These stories provided suggest that stories are complex and continuously shifting as girls make connections and reflect on their lives. As the girls shared their stories, they spoke about their identities as skaters where they felt the pressure to succeed while still experiencing the freedom through playing on the ice. Sixteen-year old Cait revealed the limitless potential she sees for her life when she masters skating skills, “I love the edge of skating…you train and train so that you can find that perfect spot. But when you find it, you can do anything…you…can do everything” (p. 131). The stories highlighted the various ways the girls shaped their skater identity as well as their identities off the ice. The girls created their identities by acting,
behaving, and performing in ways that could be recognized by others. The next section will explore identity through the theoretical lens of Gee (2011) and Goffman (1959), using these two perspectives recognizes that identities are created through behaviors, clothing, language and other props recognized by others.

**Identities**

**Identities as Discourses**

Gee (1992, 2011) believes identities are constructed through capital D discourses or speaking, thinking, acting, believing and behaving in ways that will be recognized by others who share that Discourse. Discourses can be described as kits, which contain the tools necessary to interact as particular type of person in a given context. For example, a doctor is recognized as a medical professional by wearing a white coat, using a particular type of language, working in a hospital, and using medical equipment. Discourse groups might include people from the same profession, race, gender, family background, etc.

Gee (1992) explained adhering to a particular norm in order to gain social benefits can be defined as a dominant Discourse. Dominant Discourses are always related to the benefits and social goods derived from performing in a particular manner. Conforming to a particular social standard is a way to gain social benefits including good grades in school, or gaining popularity and playing time when you are a star athlete. Conforming to the dominant Discourses of a classroom environment often requires students to leave behind aspects of their identity kits that do not fit with the social norms demanded in a particular social context. Failure to conform to expected norms may leave an adolescent feeling shunned and like a stranger in the community. “The stranger lives with a feeling of not belonging, of being different, of having lost a sense of self” (Shabatay, 1991, p. 137). Conforming to the dominant Discourse may mean concealing
An undergraduate gay student named Adrian adopted the dominant Discourse of his high school English class and limited the discussions of his relationships so he could maintain his social status in the classroom. He explains, “sexuality was something that couldn’t really be approached in a school setting, a writing setting. It’s always something that’s private, and you restrict to the bedroom. It’s not a public topic. I didn’t feel like writing classes were for personal things” (Malinowitz, 1995, p. 166). For Adrian, classroom Discourse restricted the ways he could express his own experiences.

Suggesting that identity is shaped through one’s interactions in Discourse communities follows from a postmodern perspective, which suggests, “truth consists in the group rules that facilitate the well-being of the community in which one participates” (Grenz, 1996, p. 8). If the world is socially constructed, then reality is never an absolute certainty; rather there is a perceived reality individuals verify through their interactions with others. Therefore, adolescent girls must actively participate in constructing their understanding of the world by drawing upon knowledge they gain from interacting within and across various social groups. From this perspective, knowledge is shaped through interactions with others and it is both adaptive and constrained. The adaptive nature of knowledge means social groups will construct knowledge according to ascribed norms, beliefs, and values of a particular group.

Fan fiction online sites can be seen as one Discourse community where adolescent girls build social connections. Fan fiction writing is the act of creating new stories based on plot elements or characters from published or publicly available work such as televisions shows, movies, or novels. By engaging on these sites, girls can find others who share their interest in the original text and build their own writing skills as they collaborate and critique stories. Black
(2008) conducted an ethnographic study exploring the ways English language learners used fan fiction to fine-tune and use their emerging knowledge in authentic ways. Grace, one of the girls studied, was so determined to share her stories with others that she rented Internet access time and composed in English (her third language) to reach a wider audience. She had many followers who looked forward to her latest stories. As a recognized member of the fan fiction community, she included linguistic features specific to this genre including: an author’s note that describes her background, a summary with information about the story, as well as an awareness that she has an audience who will read and review her work. At school, classmates asked for her autograph because they admired her writing.

Discourse communities can bring individuals with shared ways of being together, as well as support existing power structures and marginalize perspectives of individuals who deviate from the expected norm. Resisting socially expected norms can lead an individual to feeling like a stranger, or an outsider, in the community. In the work of Thomas (2007), one participant of a fan fiction message board struggled to understand the social dynamics of the fan fiction sites and often posted off-topic remarks. Her difficulties communicating translated into members ignoring her as well as requesting the administrator of the site to remove her work. In an effort to help the girl move from being a stranger, ostracized from the community, the administrator of the site communicated with her through private messages about the social expectations and norms important to be socially accepted and a member of the community. Over time, the girl learned proper decorum and was allowed to freely interacted on the site. The silencing that occurred in this situation highlights the importance of individual performances within larger social spaces. Although the girl wanted to have a voice in the community, her comments were often off-topic and distracting to the others members, so she was encouraged and taught the social dynamics of
the space. The Discourse community ascribed the types of social performances necessary to maintain membership. Goffman (1959) provides a way of understand the negotiation of individual social performances through front stage and back stage behaviors, which will be taken up in the next section.

**Identities as Performances**

Viewing identities as Discourses implies that there is a participatory, collaborative component to the social enactment of self. Likening identities to the ways actors step onto stage and perform a particular character; Goffman (1959) believes individuals convince their audience that they are a particular type of person by speaking, dressing and acting in ways that foster a particular impression for the audience. Goffman contends that in every social situation, individuals will seek out information about others including their social class, personality, and understanding of self. This information can be garnered from the way an individual acts, dresses or through stereotypes that have been shaped by previous experiences with similar types of people. Identity information can also be collected from the type of social context an individual has entered because similar types of people participate in similar social situations.

Although information can be collected by stepping into a social situation, Goffman (1959) warns that this information cannot paint a complete picture because information, including “the “true” or “real” attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly” (p.2). Recognizing that identity information is both observed and negotiated individuals use different signs to give and give off different clues about their identities. Verbal communication is a way to give information to others. Giving off an impression is different because the individual uses a wide range of actions and performance strategies to craft an identity. Giving off an impression creates a persona that is played out in a
way that will be convincing to the audience. Crucial to the performance metaphor is the ability to maintain a particular personae in front of the audience while keeping aspects of the self that are not in alignment with that role back stage. Feeling of discomfort that might accompany a particular role must remain hidden. Over time and through repeated performance, an individual may become more comfortable with enacting that identity.

Negotiating one’s identity through performance can be seen in the research of Tonso (2006) who studied adolescents’ interactions at a Rag Time music festival. Contrary to the traditional school setting where the teens were shunned and their musical qualities were discounted, the festival was a place where they could celebrate their musical identity. Goffman (1959) suggests that individuals continuously adjust the ways they present aspects of their identities based on what will be accepted by others. At the festival, the teens could celebrate their musical identity, while at school they often hid this part of their identity. The young people attending the festival took risks as they worked with professionals to learn new ways of playing and performing for an audience. One professional summarized the impact performance had on identity formation.

Performing is getting to know yourself. Performing is a way to come to terms with some of your anxieties and fears, and some of your strengths and weakness, and deciding what you have to give, deciding if this is the way you want to give it. It has to be with purpose and meaning, and has to do with motivation, inspiration, challenge failure, triumph, everything. Performing means life (Tonso, 2006, p. 113).

Although the teens put on public performances, the festival could also be considered a back stage space, away from critical eyes of others, where the teens could confront and explore their musical talents as well as other aspects of their own identity. The next section defines and describes back stage and front stage regions, and highlight the ways different regions influence the ways adolescents take up and perform aspects of their identity.
Front Stage and Back Stage Performances

Goffman (1959) views front stage as, “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (p. 22). This definition suggests a front as a polished, strategically constructed representation that the creator believes the audiences expects, or will respond to. For example, a girl who portrays herself, as a “good” student, will demonstrate all of the ways she lives up an educational institution’s definition of “good”.

Creating a front stage identity occurs online as individual use language and screen names in ways that will lead the audience to believe they are a particular type of person. Grisso and Weiss (2005) consider message boards on Gurl.com, as a space where girls could engage in dialogue around the issue of sexuality. On this site, girls used screen names such as adamschick4ever and LuvinJustin to show their heterosexual identity. One girl, Surfergirl1733, projected her identity as someone knowledgeable about sexual information. She wrote,

**hey gurls!!! if you ever need advice about something or if you have questions or whatever gimme a shout out {email address} or gg me. I’ve gone threw a lot of stuff with guys, emotions and pretty much everything. So yeah, feel free to add me. ChOw!!!”** (p. 34).

The front stage performances on this site demonstrates a range of identities, from the girls who project themselves as very experienced in the area of sexuality, to the girls who view themselves as virgins with strong religious convictions. One girl stated, “For one thing, it’s VERY IMMORAL!! (I’m Catholic, and i believe that sex should be saved for marriage” (p. 26). The front is established as the girls write about and claim aspects of themselves, such as being Catholic or going through a lot of stuff with guys.

On the message, board Gurl.com, girls are able to engage in dialogue about topics that might be too challenging to voice in other social, including discussions of sexual acts and their growing
awareness of the own physical development. Within this safe context the girls can step out of character and explore or hide private aspects of identity, including parts that would knowingly contradict their current character. Goffman (1959) explains the back stage is, “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (p. 112). For instance, one fifteen-year-old girl who struggled with her own sexual identity opened up more when she connected to others online. She explained, “When I got on the Internet and found other people like me…I actually said to myself that I was bisexual” (Gray, 2009, p. 121). Sexual identity and experiences can be voiced back stage among a small group of individuals, which Goffman (1959) calls a team, rather than subjected to the ridicule, questions, or comments that might come from sharing their identity with a wider audience. After connecting to others online, the girls may feel more comfortable to reach out and perform that aspect of her identity with parents, friends, and other social networks.

The Internet can be a supportive environment for like-minded individuals to share and rehearse their identities before they appear on the front stage. However, it should be noted some back stage interactions and communities might be harmful to the physical and psychological health of adolescent girls. Pro-anorexia sites (sites where individuals can share experiences with eating disorder and unhealthy weight loss strategies) are important to mention in this literature review because they speak to the complex dynamics of social communities. Public spaces are often viewed as environments where girls can collaborate with one another and receive support, but these connections can also contribute to participating in harmful ways of being. On Pro-anorexia sites participants may learn how to hide unhealthy behaviors from family and friends and share the ways their bodies are responding to the lack of nutrition (Days and Keys, 2009; Dias, 2003; Gavin and Poyer, 2008). Since these dangerous behaviors are thrust back stage,
participants enter this secret world and begin to co-construct a community where hiding and critically examining one’s body are seen as normal. Despite the unhealthiness of engaging on sites filled with discussions around one’s bodies and the images of skeletal girls, participants often get attracted to these sites because they feel like their deviate behavior is normalized and accepted in the community. The normalization of the community and the secretive behavior promoted on these sites may prevent the girls from getting the help they need (Gavin, Redham, and Poyer, 2008). Girls on Pro-anorexia sites attempt to hide their problematic eating behaviors back stage, while at the same time performing in ways that conform with cultural expectations of thinness, control, and beauty. Gordon (1990) links eating disorders and the issue of identity.

Like the anorexics, bulimics are unable to work out a solution to the problem of identity. They are caught up in the dilemma of how to integrate ambition and a need to be powerful with an identity based on pleasing, compliance, and unassertiveness. Their resolution of the problem of identity is a deep split within the self, which entails a façade of perfection, pleasing, and competence, on one hand, and a secret self that both expresses and binds “messy” feelings of neediness, rage, and helplessness (p. 60-61).

The struggle for the girl involved in an eating disorder is similar to the struggle of many adolescent girls who find themselves fragmented and trying to make sense of the many social and cultural voices thrust upon them. As Gordon (1990) points out, girls must continuously negotiate between the demands of perfection and compliance, which are front stage behaviors, and the messy feelings and secret selves are thrust back stage. To negotiate between these conflicting demands, girls may fragment, or split their identities into multiple selves. This division often means allowing only socially sanctioned, desirable aspects of the self to emerge, while silencing unique and emerging aspects of the self. As girls fragment or dramatically shift their identities, they may lose a sense of their true self and struggle to understand their own feelings and beliefs.
Rich (1979) provides an example of the ways women push their true feelings and understanding of the world back stage, as they create performances for the front stage. Critiquing Virginia Woolf’s text *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Rich (1979) suggests the text appears to be a call for women to make sense of their own world by reflecting on their own experiences. However, the tone of the text is timid and represents the caution of a woman who aware of the cultural expectations of the male authors of her time. “It is the tone of a women almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men where things have been said that are attacks on her very integrity” (p. 37). Woolf, like many other women, leaves her true identity back stage, while revealing the parts of the self that are believed to be more socially appropriate. Portraying one’s self according to social norms is deemed necessary to avoid exclusion from the community where one is a member.

Alisa, a high school student, described in the research of Bruce (2003), provides a current example of a girl who hid her own experiences of relationship struggles back stage in order to project an identity aligned with the fairy-tale experiences. She wrote,

> Be patient and understanding…talk to one another and don’t let things drop, and ask questions and listen to each other, talk problems out and most important be nice and honest and be open and let your real feelings show early in the relationship and you shall have a most great and loving and genuine relationship! (p. 177).

Alisha’s front stage performance aligns with traditional views of femininity, where women are cooperative, helpful, and submissive. In her writing, she refuses to question or even acknowledge the ways her own life deviates from the expected norms, instead leaving that part of her experiences back stage.

Back stage can be a place to hide aspects of one’s self, as well as a place where girls can sort through, organize, and reflect on their own experiences. Cleo, a teenager who struggled to
find her own voice in the classroom, used poetry to describe bedrooms as a back stage space where teenagers can explore their own identity.

A Teenager’s Room
A teenager’s room has a desk drawer open, papers falling out.
A teenager’s room has Pepsi cans hidden from view and closets with hangers poking out here and there.
A teenager’s room has an overflowing garbage container and stuffed animals tumbling over empty margarine tubs and jelly jars.
A teenager’s room has clothes strewn everywhere and unmade beds with sheets pushed off to one side.
A teenager’s room is activity, bustle and weariness.
A teenager’s room is private so don’t go in and kidnap the bit of seclusion they own.
Please don’t (Finders, 1997, p. 103-104).

The poem emphasizes that teenagers need a secluded place to sort through the messiness and multifaceted complexities of their own lives. Using this poem as an example of a back stage representation highlights the fact difficult and messy issues are continuously shaping a girl’s identity and relationship with the world. Metaphorically speaking, problems or experiences that remain unmentioned still exist in papers spilling from drawers or in Pepsi cans hidden from view. Connection between a back stage private sphere and an adolescent girl’s private negotiation of self can be seen in Turkle (2005). In this study, a sixth grader named Deborah shifted her identity as she engaged in a computer club at school. This back stage environment taught her to be more independent and allowed her to see she had the power to exert some control over her world. Prior to engaging with the club, Deborah was insecure and overly reliant upon adult influences. At home, she had few opportunities to be independent and make choices about her own life. She could not pick out her own clothes; she did not responsible for any household chores; and she constantly picked fights with others. She often exhibited anger at her
social surroundings as well as herself. She brought the anger and resentment of her home situation into the club. She constantly sought out help from the teachers and grew frustrated when she felt like her work would never live up to other members. However, as Deborah navigated the computer program, she learned that she could apply her own rules to computer program. She created rules, such as the turtle in the program could move only 90 degrees, which allowed her to feel empowered and in control. Instead of talking about the places where she lacked control, Deborah projected her feelings of lack of control onto the computer.

Using the computer, Deborah began to gain control over her own world and used that opportunity to reshape her perspective of herself and the world around her. As Turkle (2005) explained, “She needed a world apart in which to build a new set of distinctions that she could then transfer to her way of thinking about herself and others. The computer gave her this world” (p. 138). Within the context of the computer club, Deborah stepped away from the controlling voices of her family, as well as wrestled with her own insecurities. In this space, she learned to be confident and in control. The new awareness of self, which began as a literacy practice, eventually transformed her social identity.

**Semiotic Theory**

Discussion up to this point has centered on the ways adolescent girls use stories to reflect on their experiences, perform identities through front and back stage performances, and negotiate their identities within communities. The next section will delve deeper into the ways girls use a wide range of symbolic representations to represent and share experiences with others. To understand the ways different sign systems work in conjunction with one another, it is important to discuss semiotic theory. The power of semiotic study lies in the potential for individuals to construct, represent and share their own understanding through various symbolic representations.
Individual engagements have a generative potential, transforming the literacy practice as well as the perspectives of the creator (Whitin, 2005).

Siegel (2006) explained semiotic theory evolved from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure who argued individuals use sign systems to express and create meaning. Saussure centered his discussions on the use and organization of individual words, rather than on discourse created when individuals use multiple sign systems simultaneously. While there is a value in examining the structure of the language use, this limited perspective did not take into consideration the range of sign systems and how those signs were made significant in social situations.

Peirce, unlike Saussure, did not restrict his exploration of meaning to linguistic sign systems. Peirce argued researchers should take into consideration, "meanings and messages in all their forms and all their contexts" (Innis, 1985, p. vii). Signs help individuals mediate their understanding of the world. The broadness of this definition is more fitting for this research because the narratives girls are constructing online involve the use of a wide range of sign systems. Similar to Saussure, Peirce suggests objects do not have an inherent meaning; rather the meaning is generated through a process of semiosis. Using the concept of a semiotic-triad, Peirce explained how individuals interpret meanings from various sign systems. The triad involves using a sign (a representamen) to stand for a particular concept or the object. The representamen is the symbolic representation of the object and the interpretant serves as the reference for the ideas or the meaning surrounding the object. Therefore, the meaning of an object is constructed from an individual’s knowledge of both the object as well as the context where the object is being used.
The semiotic triad suggests individuals can never really know an object, rather they creating meaning from the interpretants, or the signs of that object. Meaning, therefore, is continuously adjusted based on personal, social, and cultural influences. In the work of Cunningham & Smith-Shank (1992), Thomas A. Sebeok, a scholar of semiotics, reasoned meanings are continuously generated through a negotiation and renegotiation of interpretants. “Essentially, you're spinning interpretants forever and ever. You take a concept, sign, object, and endlessly interpret it and every time you interpret it you add new knowledge (which may be false) but at all times you expand”(p. 66). Semiotic pedagogy suggests meaning making is an active process, where social engagements and new experiences increase one’s learning and awareness. Referencing the work of C.S. Peirce, Rosenblatt (1995) contends through engagement with various sign systems individuals continuously negotiate various aspects of their world. Similar to the earlier performance discussion, sign systems allow individuals to try out an idea and generate new understandings.

In imagination we rehearse various possibilities of action in a given situation. We go through a process of imaginative trial and error, trying out different modes of behavior and working out their probable effects (p. 199).

As individuals continuously negotiate meaning, they use previous experiences to make sense of their current situation. If they are experiencing something novel, they must hypothesize or generate new meaning. The interrelationship between meaning making and experiences suggests all aspects of an individual’s life, whether they are voiced front stage or hidden back stage will influence one’s understanding of themselves and the world. Experiences propel learning, as individuals use their prior knowledge to encounter and interact in novel situations.

Continuously assessing and shifting one’s awareness of the world through engagement with sign systems is highlighted in the work of Berghoff, Borgman, and Parr (2003). In this
research, teachers explored the ways an art-infused curriculum could allow students to be actively engaged and extend teachers’ awareness of student learning. Teachers encouraged students to engage with the topic of slavery by engaging them in lessons that used a wide range of sign systems including reading texts, listening to music, creating visuals, and reflecting on the topic through personal connections. A wide variety of responses helped heighten students’ awareness and emotionally connect with the material. One student explained his personal engagement in the material by stating,

I spent an incredible amount of time on my piece of artwork last night. I was so immersed in different mediums for understanding and making knowledge that I really forgot the fact that I needed my rest. This morning I see one more thing…. My poem=my piece of artwork. (p. 359).

As individuals generate ideas for their work, they draw upon cultural references and begin to explore the various meanings of those symbols. In regards to literacy, recognizing that meaning is continuously constructed and negotiated within a social context is important because it places value on the personal and unique experiences of each individual.

**New Literacies**

Lankshear and Knobel (2007) describe new literacies as practices that merge technological components and social components and change the ways individuals communicate with one another. This theoretical framework recognizes meaning is an active, personal process influenced by social, cultural, and political factors. Active engagement with text is particularly noticeable with the emergence of Web 2.0, where technology opened up avenues for individuals to create and share their work with others. User generated shifted the focus away from commercially published materials, where an authority figure established both the content and the meaning, and towards individual negotiations of meaning. This shift aligns with the work of the New London Group (1996) argue in today’s global society individuals are designing, rather than
passively consuming information. Individuals are expressing their ideas through multiple modes of communication including text, audio, and visual components.

Ninth grade students in the work of Bailey (2009) engaged in an English classroom where the teacher integrated new literacy components into the mandated curriculum. Students got involved in a wide variety of multimodal tasks that encouraged them to link traditional literacy skills, including story elements and literary techniques to contemporary topics including song lyrics and television shows. Before and after reading a book, the students were asked to creatively write and discuss their lives and their dreams for their future. Through the integration of a wide variety of symbols, students portrayed their future identities as, “successful athletes, musicians, scholars, or other professional people” (p. 220). Connections between contemporary media allowed students to build on knowledge from their own lives in ways that were relevant in the classroom, recognizing the social nature of new literacies.

Through the use of color, font size and other graphic images, students integrated multiple layers of text to demonstrate their evolving understanding of the poem and themselves as learners. One student explained the difference between reading the poem and having the opportunity to create her own interpretation. She stated

> It makes it more real. Like, you could read {the poem} and it’s be “Okay, this person’s feeling this, and like that.” But in PowerPoint, when you see the pictures and the movement {i}t actually shows you what’s going on and it makes you feel, even if you don’t realize it…It’s kind of like school…so many things collide together to learn one thing. And I guess that’s what the music and the colors and the stuff do” (Bailey, 2009, p. 224).

Multimodal, digital projects gave students a wide range of tools to learn about the literary elements presented in their classroom and interpret literature as well as reflect upon their own lives and experiences. The symbols they chose to integrate into their projects revealed ways they were connecting to larger social and cultural messages.
One form of New Literacies that has garnered a lot of attention with researchers includes the act of blogging. Blogs can be described as online journals where individuals can use text, video, and audio components to craft their narratives (Carrington, 2009; Davies and Merchant, 2007). Blogs are seen as an important form of new literacies because 35% of the girls participating in online practices use this narrative space (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). Blogging sites offer users the opportunity to share experiences with friends, as well as connect to people from around the world through interest-based blogging communities.

A middle school student, described in the work of Vasudevan, DeJaynes, and Schmier (2010), often found herself disconnected from the academic writing, occurring in her own classroom, but engages extensively with her blog. Within this space, A’idah constructed herself as a physical being within a virtual space through the texts she posted as well as through images of herself. In the midst of posting adjective about her sense of self, she explained to the researcher that she was engaging in the writing to describe herself “from the outside in” (p. 15). Using narrative practices to construct the self is particularly important for this research, and including a new literacies perspective within the framework suggests that the traditional perception of narrative is shifting. New Literacies recognize that the narrative environment now includes interactive, multimodal mediums, shaped within a specific social context. These spaces blur the boundaries between front and back stage environments, offering a semi-private environment where girls can post information publicly or use privacy preferences to control who sees the content. The writing that is shared can be commented on and influenced by other readers. For A’idah, loved the attention she received when people read and commented on her blog entries. On a personal level, blogs provide the type of feedback that might be limited in face-to-face encounters, as girls can connect with people from around the world or those who
share similar interests and struggles. For literacy educators, blogging provide a way of understanding topics of personal concern, understanding the diverse ways adolescents are using literacy, and supporting their on-going development (Stern, 2007; Vasudeyan, DeJaynes, and Schmier, 2010)

As girls interact on their blogs, they construct an identity for themselves as well as situate themselves as part of a larger social and cultural Discourse community. Variations in identity performances are described in the work of Guzzetti and Gamboa (2005) who described the distinct ways two girls, Janine and Corgan, used blogging. Janine constructed her identity as someone emotional and reliant upon others. She used her blog to gather social support as well as develop her identity as a writer. She posted as many as ten entries a day including one entry that stated, ‘I don’t want to just unleash these tremendous emotional things on you from the start…..if you’re a friend of mine, I love you. Thanks for being there for me through shit that’s happened in the past. Perhaps you’ll be there for me now’ (p. 185-186). In addition to gathering emotional support from her readers, Janine also participated in fan fiction communities. This literacy act allowed her to construct herself as a writer who was opening to learning from others who commented on her writing, as well as a support to others-giving and receiving support from them.

While Janine relied heavily on the blog site to express her personal feelings, Corgan constructed her identity in ways that reflected a more independent, an in alignment with her personal and political feminist believes. Rather than the feeling focused blogging, represented on Janine’s blog, Corgan characterized her writing as, “idea-based rather than feeling based” (p. 191). She wrote less frequently, and when she did post an entry it often focused on issues of social and cultural concern. For example, in a personal blog entry, Corgan reacts to a CNN report
about the war in Iraq. She summarized the entry by stating, “Clearly, we’re doing an excellent job; they thank us by torching our bodies and hanging them from a bridge. Like, obviously, we’re doing them a great service” (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005, p. 195). In these entries, Corgan constructs her identity as someone who understands and uses sarcasm as well as someone who is involved in political activism. Unlike traditional journal writing, writing becomes a meaningful act taken up to explore personal angst, gain support, and find avenues for empowerment. As one teen wrote, “I felt like as long as I had the blog, I had an audience-and having an audience made me feel like what I was saying was important. Without it, I don’t feel anyone is listening to what I say anymore” (Stern, 2007, p. 104). Having the ability to articulate and share personal experiences helps girls to become more aware of their personal interests and share the ways they are creating meaning, thus moving them beyond the isolated, disempowered perspectives often described in traditional work with young women.

Conclusion

Many adolescent girls struggle to find their voice and share their life experiences within social communities. To move beyond positions of silence and begin to reflect on the ways they have been shaped by life experiences and messages from external voices girls may turn to online spaces, including blogs, to perform and negotiate multiple aspects of their own identity. Online communities offer supportive, collaborative networks where girls draw upon their knowledge of literacy practices to continuously express and interpret new meaning about themselves and the world around them. This literature review critically examined the problem of the silencing and suggested that performance theory and discourse analysis are two approaches to understanding the ways girls construct and negotiate their identities. As adolescent girls engage in social situations, they may encounter individuals who are not supportive of aspects of their identity and
thus they move that component of their identity. As girls find others individuals with similar ways of acting, speaking, and engaging, they are able to join Discourse communities and feel more comfortable with revealing more about their life experiences and identities front stage.

Recognizing that digital environments are multimodal and social in nature suggests that girls have a wide range of expressive mediums to draw upon and the meaning is multiplied as texts, visual, and auditory components are woven together. These new practices connect more with the way young people are currently expressing themselves. As one student stated, “Blogging is more exciting than a journal because people can appreciate writing more than if it’s on the Internet” (Vasudevan, DeJaynes, and Schimer, 2010, p. 15). The next chapter will outline the methodology used to examine the ways four adolescent girls constructed and negotiated their identities through blogs and blogging.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In Chapter 1, I included a narrative describing life experiences that led me to understand the importance of using literacy to construct and negotiate personal identities. I described the challenges I faced when it came to expressing aspects of my identity within particular Discourse communities and the value of online communities in working through issues of my own. A framework of the current study was presented, including a theoretical rationale for conducting the study. In chapter 2, I braided together disparate theoretical frameworks in order to make central the importance of online blogging practices for adolescent girls identity construction and negotiation. I highlighted the importance of story for moving beyond current perceptions of self and exploring new ways of being.

In this chapter, I describe the research process including the process of recruiting participants, data collection and analysis and the ethical and privacy issues taken into account throughout the study. The methodology section is crucial for this research because it highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing traditional research practices and weaving those best practices into online interactions. Hine (2005) who, has written extensively about online research methods, suggests that there is an importance in exploring, “where the existing heritage of methodological thinking applies and where they {online researchers} felt the need to question or move forward from established thinking” (p. 2). In particular, I paid careful attention to building rapport with participants and allowing their voice to be central to the research process.

Recognizing that adolescent girls are pressured to silence themselves and disconnect from their own experiences, this research explored the ways girls between the ages of 16-19 used
blogs and blogging to reflect on personal experiences and construct and negotiate aspects of their identity through multimodal literacy practices. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. In what ways do adolescent girls make use of multimodalities (texts, drawing, pictures, etc.) to construct and negotiate multiple aspects of their identity in blogs?

2. In what ways do girls use their blog to take up or resist social and cultural messages they are hearing both online and offline?

3. To what extent do girls demonstrate a transformation in self-identity through their online narratives? What do the narrative analyses suggest are the catalysts for that change?

**Research Design**

A qualitative research design was selected provided a way of exploring social interactions within a natural setting: in this case blogging on the site *LiveJournal*. A qualitative approach recognizes that meaning making is a continuous process; shaped by on-going social interactions, and represented through language as well as other sign systems (Gee, 2011). Manning (1992) explained qualitative research recognizes the importance of data that is “richly descriptive and faithful to {participants’} perspective” (p. 133). I selected this design because I valued the voices of the girls and was intrigued by the process of making sense of the data as it emerged.

To describe the interactions I had with the research participants, I chose to create four individual case studies, Chapter 4 examines the cases of Ryann and Casey, Chapter 5 highlights the cases of Bella and Scarlet, and Chapter 6 highlights critical issues that emerged during this dissertation through a cross-case analysis. Merriam (2009) defines a case study as, “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). Reinharz (1992) suggested that case studies are important in feminist research because they provide a way to understand a particular phenomenon from the diverse perspectives. Gathering information from individual girls, I came
to understand more about the phenomenon of blogging and the ways it is taken up by adolescent girls, while the cross-case analysis helped me to understand the similarities and differences between the girls’ online interactions (Khan and VanWynsberghe, 2008). I used my understanding of theoretical perspectives and empirical research in the fields of literacy and technology to discuss and describe the ways my research contributes to these areas and offers new possibilities for educators.

**Researcher Background**

Prior to describing the actual research design, I establish my relationship to the research through a description of my own experiences and beliefs about online practices and research. The importance of describing my own interactions follows from the perspective that “the knowing subject is always located in a particular spatial and temporal site, a particular configuration of the everyday/everynight world” (Smith, 1999, pp. 4-5). In other words, I recognize that my personal insights cannot be separated from the ways that I collected, analyzed and presented the research findings.

Working in several different school districts and across multiple grade levels—from elementary through college, my research is, in part, shaped by my observations of curriculum and educational settings that marginalize the voices and experiences of students. One of my most memorable experiences was watching the tears roll down the eyes of a fourth grade little girl who was listening to me read the story about a child whose parents had left and the character’s struggle to make sense of the situation. The child, who was being raised by her grandmother, had experienced a similar situation. Her tears and the discussion that ensued after reading the story created space for the students to make connections to the story and reveal their personal experiences with family, loss, grief, and resilience. Although I delighted in the
conversations and was amazed at the openness these students shared, I was disappointed and frustrated when the principal walked in and asked me to return to the curriculum workbooks and stay on the scheduled paced out by the textbook company. Students’ personal experiences were put aside as we returned to the comprehension questions focusing on plot and grammar elements.

This experience occurred several years after I began teaching, but at the start of my experience teaching elementary school in an inner-city charter school. As I walked into the new position, I felt like a brand new teacher- a teacher drowning under the daily grind of teacher manuals and time-sequenced lessons. At the end of that year, with a high level of frustration and exhaustion with a curriculum that asked children to leave their real lives outside of the classroom environment, I sought out a new teaching position. Heavily influenced by my graduate work, I wanted a space where I could explore learning alongside my students, using the inquiry-based lessons that evolved from students’ interests and experiences.

My new position was a sharp contrast to the previous experience. Rather than scripted programs, I was able to create, experiment, and explore a range of subjects, using teaching techniques I felt were appropriate for my middle and high school special education students. In this new role, I found my voice as a teacher. I recognized the importance of honoring personal experiences and interests to drive learning. Empowered to make their own choices, students read *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2005), tried out their dreams of being a chef by cooking for the class, and grappled with personal issues include including self-injury, parent conflicts, and learning how to drive. I supported the students’ learning by bringing in relevant texts, asking questions, and encouraging them to collaborate and share with one another.

In addition to classroom discussions and traditional assignments, I introduced students to blogging. I was drawn to blogging as a literacy practice because it was an activity I used often to
document and reflect on my own experiences. I began blogging when I was in college and continue to post entries several times a month. This practice helps me connect, with people share similar interests, and engage in conversations that I struggle to articulate in face-to-face settings. When I introduced blogging to my students, I shared entries from my own blog, showed students how to sign up and create their own accounts, and encouraged them to connect with one another by leaving comments on each other’s blogs. Although many of the students struggled with writing, they clamored to have time to check their blogs and post entries. Within their entries, they revealed details about their lives both inside and outside of the classroom. I found that topics students struggled to share with me face-to-face often appeared in entries and their peers provided encouraging words and suggestions in the comment section.

Opening the classroom and inviting personally meaningful topics to guide curriculum, I shifted the way I taught and began to listen more. This transition helped me to let go of the feeling that I needed to shape my students’ beliefs through pre-designed curricula and carefully structured and scripted units. As I opened to listening to my students, I relinquished some control and learned to trust the process of teaching and learning alongside my students. Palmer (1998) suggested, “Dialogical methods of teaching help keep me alive. Forced to listen, respond, and improvise, I am more likely to hear something unexpected and insightful from myself as well as others” (p. 24). As I listened to my students’ stories and shared my own, I came to value narrative practices, which are central to this study.

**Research Perspective and Role**

There are many research paradigms, or views about the way knowledge is constructed and shared. Research paradigms are, “a way of looking at the world; interpreting what is seen; and deciding which of the things seen by researchers are real, valued, and important to
document” (LeCompete and Schensul, 1999, p. 41). Viewing knowledge as socially constructed and continuously renegotiated within and across various social contexts, this study followed an interpretivist approach. An interpretive paradigm blurs the line between researchers and the researched because it places a significant value on the experiences and stories of participants. Merriam (2009) stated, “The key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspective, not the researcher’s” (p. 14). From an interpretive perspective, individuals can present multiple realities as they negotiate meaning in various social and cultural contexts. Recognizing that meaning is continuously negotiated and influenced by the context, I engaged with my participants throughout the research-by observing their literacy practices, asking questions, and listening carefully to their responses in an effort to continuously test emerging hypotheses against various data sources. Belenky et al., (1997) explained that as they listened carefully to the stories of women, they could hear themes and perspectives of the world that were previously, “underground, unarticulated, intuited, or ignored” (p. 20). Following a feminist theoretical lens, I recognized the need to give girls space to tell their own stories, and understand that their stories would be influenced by my own interpretation and understanding. To avoid bias, I had to continuously question, rather than assume, what the girls meant when they described aspects of their own lives. I also read each data source repeatedly, which allowed me to hear stories in new ways make links between their various literacy practices. I used the links across data sources to describe and justify emerging conclusions.

In an effort to maintain the girls’ natural voices, I have chosen to include large sections of the girls’ own work in the findings. Throughout the research, I followed the feminist principles introduced by Kirsch (1999) including:
• Acknowledging and valuing the lived experiences and perspectives of young women
• Creating space for mutual collaboration and rapport gained through interactive and cooperative engagements.
• Recognizing the influence of social and cultural factors on individual meaning making, including the belief that each participant is entering the work with their own backgrounds, goals, beliefs, and ways of negotiating and sharing meaning
• Analyzing the data carefully to explore multiple interpretations and perspectives that can be arrived at through the data.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

I used purposive sampling to select participants for this study, selecting girls who would provide a diverse range of literacy practices and life experiences. Merriam (2009) explains, “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). I selected girls from the United States between the ages of 16-19. All participants were active bloggers on LiveJournal and had been engaged in blogging activities for at least three months prior to the research beginning.

I recruited participants using two different procedures. First, I placed advertisements on various blogging communities; including those highlighted in my literature review as topics that resonated with adolescent girls including: fan fiction, pro-anorexia, art communities, and craft spaces (see Appendix A). I found communities by conducting a search on the LiveJournal website. Although many LiveJournal communities are public spaces, I chose to contact the moderator through LiveJournal and ask permission prior to posting my advertisement. A
moderator creates and maintains order on a community site. I believed gaining their permission to post on the site was a way to respect the community and ensure that my presence would not interfere with established norms. If the moderator approved my advertisement, I posted onto the community page expressing my desire to recruit girls to participate in the future study. The advertisement explained that interested participants should if send me a private message using messaging system available on LiveJournal. This one-to-one system is similar to e-mail because it sends a message privately from one LiveJournal account to another. Within 24 hours of receiving message, I responded and gave the girl my personal e-mail account and explained that I would e-mail her with a questionnaire and information sheet once I received a her personal e-mail. I chose to use the LiveJournal messaging system to begin initial conversations because I believe it is a more intimate setting and there is a level of comfort with LiveJournal members communicating with one another using that system. Personal e-mail as an initial point of contact could be intimidating. Within 24 hours of receiving the initial e-mail, I sent out an information sheet regarding the study and initial questionnaire (see Appendix B and C). The information sheet contained the goals of the research as well as the expectations for participation. In this e-mail, I also thanked participants for their interest in the study and explained that if they had any questions or concerns they should contact use e-mail to me at any time.

I also recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is an effective way of reaching out and forming relationships with people who might not see or respond to initial advertisements. Patton (1990) explained snowball sampling recognizes and values the relationships that potential research participants have with others. Using this process, I interacted with potential research participants and asked them if they knew of additional LiveJournal bloggers who might be interested in participating in the research. After receiving the
suggestion, I contacted potential participants through the closed communication system on LiveJournal to explain the research goals and invited the blogger to participate, giving them my personal e-mail to further communication.

After the girls returned their questionnaire, I read through it to make sure that the girls were from the United States and were also active on other websites. Although I received several requests to participate from adolescents from abroad, I respectfully clarified information from the advertisement that stated I could only accept girls from the United States. Although I received completed questionnaires from thirteen girls, two of the girls were from other countries and one girl used only blogging to communicate. Of the eight girls who qualified for the study, only six of the girls completed all components of the work. I reduced the case-study number to four to ensure that an in-depth analysis of their work could be completed.

Informed Consent

Johns, Hall, and Crowell (2004) explain researching online environments means adapting traditional approaches to meet the unique issues that arise in an electronic environment. Through a discussion of their own research, these authors point out that different Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) translates into different standards about what is deemed acceptable. For example, some boards allowed for an electronic signature, while other IRBs are less accommodating to online consents. The variation in acceptable practices is attributed to, “various levels of understanding among IRB members of the formal features of the online environment, and varied levels of trust concerning the integrity of human interactions taking place online” (p. 111). In other words, the researcher must be aware of the expectations and guidelines of the particular IRB to ensure that standards are being followed. For this research,
I received a waiver for written informed consent and parental consent because the use of signatures and parental involvement would involve collecting information not pertinent to the study and beyond the norms of online communication potentially increasing the risk for participant in terms of privacy and confidentiality (see Appendix B).

**Research Setting - LiveJournal**

I selected the site *Livejournal* because I had personal experience with blogging on the site and I felt very familiar with the various tools and how to navigate the site. *LiveJournal also* offers an extensive network of interest-specific communities where individual bloggers can publicly share their ideas with others as well as maintain a private, personal blogging space. Marwick (2008) explains, “users tend to think of *LiveJournal* more as a neighborhood than as a social network, an emotional affiliation built on trust that exist in both face-to-face and virtual relationships” (p.1). The connection LiveJournal users have with one another are formed through shared passions and interests.

To create an account, a blogger begins by setting up a profile page. This page is publicly available and includes biographical information such as: hometown, school, and interests as well as information about the blogger’s participation including friends, communities, and stats (including the number of posts and comments on the blog). Girls can upload user pics to customize their blog. The user picture visually represents an icon the girls would have linked to their personal space. Figure 1 shows some examples of users’ pictures. These small images are posted on the profile page as well as on the blog entries.
Figure 2 shows the standard format for every blog entry. The large box in the center is a place where users can also embed hyperlinks, media from other sites, and photographs in their entry. The subject box can be thought of as the title for an entry. Users can chose to put something into that box or leave it blank.
Data Collection

“Data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment” (Merriam, 2009, p. 85). The bits and pieces of data can be examined to explore the ways individuals construct meaning about themselves and the world around them (Orgad, 2007). This research study used multiple data sources including: a questionnaire, participant observations, blog entries, three literacy artifacts, three semi-structured interviews and a reflective research journal to create thick descriptions of the ways research participants constructed and negotiated their identities on blogs. A data table (Table 1) outlines the collection process, explaining the purpose and process of collecting each artifact. Following the graphic representations are specific descriptions of each data source.
## Data Collection Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source And Description</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Collection Process</th>
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</table>
| Questionnaire - Multiple choice and open ended questions | - Demographics  
  - Technology Usage  
  - Perceptions of their own identity and social interactions | - Sent out questionnaire and information sheet October 2011.  
  - I asked participants to return the questionnaire as soon as possible. |
| Blog entries | - Describe the blog as a research setting, as well as the actors and activities occurring in that space.  
  - Capture use of symbolic representations including language, visual representations, etc.  
  - Capture the native language use, the ways participants customize their own personal accounts, and note the exchanges between the creator and audience. | - Archived entries from August through October 2011. Entries were also collected during the study-November through January 2011-2012.  
  - During the study, I read through blog entries once a week.  
  - I copied all blog entries into a word processing file, removed personally identifying information and then printed out a copy for the participant’s binder. |
| Researcher Reflective Journal | - Capture researcher’s thoughts, questions, concerns related to the research process.  
  - Document emerging themes | - Every other week I reflected on my data collection and wrote entries in my own personal blog reflecting on the process, questions that I wanted to ask participants and concerns I would address with my advisor or a fellow doctorate student. I set all of these entries to private, to prevent my participants from reading and being influenced by my thoughts. |
| **Literacy Artifacts** | #1-Explore participant’s perceptions, development, and technology. I encouraged participants to respond through any medium they felt comfortable including video clips, writing, or visuals.  
#2- Explore participants’ perceptions of the social and cultural groups they associated with. I encouraged participants to present their ideas through three visuals.  
#3-To explore how participants’ future aspirations and identity. | During the first week of November, I e-mailed participants directions for this literacy artifact. I included a due date for the artifacts, but I was flexible when I did not receive the completed project by the deadline. After the deadline passed, I e-mailed participants asking if they had any questions about the artifact and asked if I should see their lack of response as a sign that they did not want to continue with the project. Some of the participants wrote back saying they had been busy or were still thinking about their responses. I asked the participants to stay in contact and complete the project as quickly as possible.  
Artifacts #2 and #3 e-mailed immediately after the first and second interview tool. I gave the participants a deadline to e-mail the project, but I continued to be flexible and sent out e-mail reminders and if a girl missed the deadline. |
| **Interview** | #1-Participant’s perceptions on technology and questions about blog entries  
#2--Participant’s perceptions of their social and cultural groups and questions about blog entries. Member checking.  
#3—Questions around letter to their future selves, questions about blog entries, blog entries. Thank you for participation asked if I could remain in contact as I wrote drafts or needed further clarification. | I arranged interviews within one week of receiving each literacy artifact, based on my availability as well as the participants’ |

**Table 1-Data Collection**

**Questionnaires:**

Participants in this study responded to a questionnaire of approximately 40 survey questions and 15 open-ended questions (Appendix C). I used the questionnaire to become acquainted with the research participants and begin to understand how they perceived their own
world. The closed-ended portion of the questionnaire asked participants to check off whether they believed a word or phrase described them. They place an X in box that aligned with the statement- Yes, I would say that word describes me; No, that word/idea does not fit me; or Unsure/Comments. The open-ended questions gave the participant an opportunity to discuss perceptions of their own identity, technology usage, and their social interactions with others.

Prior to administering the questionnaire to participants, two high school students, one age 16 and the other 17, reviewed the questionnaire to ensure that the language was at an appropriate level as well as offer suggestions regarding identities that adolescent girls might be representing online. These high school students selected offered two different social groups and literacy ability. The 16-year-old was a strong student who studied hard and received accolades from her teachers. She came from a financially stable family and had access to her own computer. The other student was 17-years-old and struggled with school assignments, particularly reading and writing tasks. I followed the advice of these students to rewrite some of the questions and make them clearer to an adolescent audience. Fraenkel & Wallen (2008) explain administering a questionnaire in advance ensures that the vocabulary and questions are non-leading, unambiguous, and at a reading level appropriate for the research audience.

**Blog Entries and Profile Information:**

Blogs are personal sites where individuals can post individual entries as well as create a profile page, which contains biographical information. These pieces of data are physical artifacts that convey information about the blogger’s experiences and perceptions of self. Yin (2003) explains that the collection of physical artifacts is a way of entering into the lived experiences of researcher participants. During the study, I collected profile information, archived blog entries (August 2011-October 2011) as well as entries posted during the study (November 2011-January
The only dates that deviated from the six months listed were two entries, one on Bella’s page and one on Scarlet’s page, these entries were pre or posted dated and served as the opening entry to the girls’ blogs. Inserting past or future dates allows the girls to post entries and block people who are not friends from reading the entry. Both of these were included in the study because they were the opening entries in the girls’ blogs and contained vital personal information.

I did not require a set number of entries to be posted during the week or during the course of the study because I did not want to interfere with the natural engagement of each of girls’ online expression. Allowing the girls to naturally create as little or as many entries during the three months period, I received a great deal of variation in the number of blog entries collected. The table below shows each of the girls and the blog entries collected during the three-month research process (November-January) as well as the three months of archived data (August-October). Attempting to describe the variations in data collected each month extends beyond the scope of this research and was not taken up. Prior to presenting the table, I provide some information about each girl and the way she used her blog.

**Ryann:** 16 years old and lives in South Carolina. Ryann viewed the Internet as a social space where she could connect with people interested in K-pop music (Korean pop) and fan fiction writing. Ryann reflected upon her gender and sexual identity through fictional writing.

**Casey:** 18 years old from Orange County, California. She identified herself as a lesbian, and struggled with feelings that she is both male and female. Casey works through issues of gender identity and sexuality through stories about her own experiences as well as in fictional texts.

**Bella:** 17 years old from Missouri. She described herself as someone who was introverted and finds it challenging to connect with people. She uses her blog to express her evolving sense of
self, including a desire to be more social.

**Scarlet**-16 years old and lives in a suburb of New York. Online engagements online provide an avenue for her to receive the attention she craves. Scarlet captured a wide range of memories, emotions, and her physical responses, including problematic eating and self-injury in her blog entries. Scarlet’s description of her behaviors provided a way of understanding the multi-faceted nature of her identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Blog Entries Collected Each Month of the Study</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scarlet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-Blog Entries Collected Each Month

When collecting blog entries, I began by copying all of the profile information into a word processing document. I removed personal information such as the name of specific schools or individuals. I saved the profile information on my computer as well as printed a copy. All blog entries were also copied onto my computer and saved in both print and electronic form.
Literacy Artifacts

At three points during the study, approximately once a month, the girls received an assignment sheet that gave the direction for the literacy artifacts. Literacy artifacts invited girl to describe the ways they saw technology, their social and cultural interactions and their own sense of identity. The first reflection encouraged girls to express themselves through art, videos, or other means. The second artifact asked girls to use pictures or images to make connections between their personal experiences and memberships in various social groups. The last project asked girls to write a letter to their future selves (see Appendix D). Through the literacy artifacts girls had the opportunity to create artifacts that address the research goals and use literacy in personally meaningful ways.

The literacy artifacts were originally designed to allow the girls to express themselves through a wide range of prompts, using drawing, writing, videos, or other means of communication. However, after sending out the first prompt and receiving many questions from the research participants asking for clarification about the exact expectation and voicing hesitation that they would complete the project in a suitable manner, I revamped the prompts and clearly articulated my expectations.

Semi-structured Interviews:

Interviewing allows a researcher to gain insight into the participant’s experiences and perspectives of the world. This research used semi-structured interviews to hear from the girls and allowed them to express their ideas freely, while still moving towards the research goals (Schensul, Schensul, LeCompte, 1999). Each participant engaged in three semi-structured interviews centered around three key aspects of the research-the use of technology, social performances or negotiations with others, and their own identity.
All of the interviews occurred online using the instant message program that the girls selected. Instant messaging is a synchronous communication method, allowing the research and participants to communicate one-on-one in “real” time. Instant messaging removes the ability to see body movements, facial expressions, and hear the intonations expressed in an individual’s voice, but this medium was a cost-effective means for communicating and sharing with research participants. During the interview process, I encouraged girls to write in complete sentences and expand their thinking. Some of the questions I asked participants included: What topics do you generally blog about? How do you decide what topics to blog about? Who do you see as your audience? If you had to use a metaphor to describe your blogging practices, what would it be? In what ways have experiences you’ve had online shaped the ways you think about yourself? If you could give someone advice about joining an online community, what would it be? (See Appendix E for additional questions)

The open-ended nature of the semi-structured interview process supported a conversational tone, while maintaining a level of formality. Some instant messaging programs support video conferencing; however, this medium I did not use this medium because it was too intrusive for the purposes of this study. Students were able to self-select the instant message program they felt most comfortable with using, and I created an account for research purposes only.

**Reflective Researcher Journal**

I recognized that my own beliefs and experiences with online environments might influence the interpretations of data therefore I continuously used my researcher journal to reflect upon and ask questions about the data collection process. Spradley (1980) points out, “like a diary, {the researcher’s} journal will contain a record of experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes,
confusions, breakthroughs, and problems that arise during fieldwork” (p. 71). As I wrote entries in this journal, I described the emerging themes, questions I had, and challenges I was facing. The research journal was significant for me because I needed to understand how each participant presented her identity in unique ways and through various literacy practices. I used this reflective journal to reflect on the emerging data and generate new questions, which I took up in interviews and other member checks. The use of the research journal ensured triangulation of collected and analyzed data. Prior to describing the analysis of the data collection, I briefly explain the way I kept the data collected organized and confidential.

**Organization of materials**

To ensure that data was not lost if the computer malfunctioned, I collected information in both electronically and in print form. When I received the questionnaire and literacy artifacts through e-mail, I downloaded the file and read through the writing. As I read, I removed any personally identifying information, replacing real names with self-selected pseudonyms, and then stored the data on my password-protected computer. I printed a copy of all word documents and placed that data source under the appropriate section in a binder. Binder sections included: questionnaire, blog entries, literacy artifacts, and interview questions. I stored binders in a locked filing cabinet. All data will be stored for a period of seven years and then destroyed.

**Organization of Data and Findings: Narrative Case Studies**

Linking identity and narratives is informed by the work of Bruner (1986) who explains individuals use stories to organize their experiences and position themselves in relationship to others. Buitelaar (2006) also believes stories are shaped by the ways individuals perceive themselves and their connections with social communities. He states, “Depending on the actual or imagined positions from which self-narratives are told, people tell different stories of their
past, present and future” (p. 262). To this end, I used both discourse and narrative analysis to construct individual case studies of each participant, which explored the ways individuals use literacy to construct and negotiate multiple aspects of their own identity. I found this approach in alignment with my own beliefs that individuals, particularly females, need opportunities to talk openly about their experiences and have the support of an active listener.

Narrative and discourse analysis shape and inform one another. Gee (2011) describes discourse analysis as a means of looking at the ways identities are shaped in relationship to social contexts. Discourse Analysis was used to highlight the ways language was used by individuals to position themselves as part of or distant from larger social or cultural communities. I identified, coded, and categorized the identities across multiple sources of data to ensure triangulation of results.

In addition to Discourse analysis, I drew heavily upon narrative analysis because I believe stories are one way that understandings of self-identity can be revealed and they are means from which individual make meaning. My approach to narrative analysis was informed by the work of the Bell (1988), which was thoroughly delved into in Reissman (1993). This approach recognizes that the plotlines of stories are often nonlinear and emerge as individuals reveal and reflect on their experiences through various literacy practices. Linked stories demonstrate connections between ideas that initially seem to be unrelated or lacking organization. Bell’s attention to the shifts in linguistic representations between various stories provides “evidence for transformation in consciousness” (p. 37). This concept supports the research goals of understanding identity negotiations and transformations of self-identity.

One of the stories examined the detailed account of Sarah, a woman in her mid-30’s who faced medical challenges. In college, she was disconnected and chose not to recognize that
aspect of her identity. She stated, “it never really, became a part of my life” (p.35). However, during her first pregnancy Sarah became more aware of the impact her illness might have on her and her children. These issues were solidified when she lost her first child and came face-to-face with the reality and consequences of her illness. Sarah’s identity transformed when she took an active role and became involved with an organization that worked with other women and addressed this medical concern.

Similar to the way Bell (1988) looked at the stories Sarah told, I also delved in the different stories told by the research participants. Combining Discourse and narrative analysis, I looked at the identities I had listed and the ways the girls shaped those identities through the stories they created and posted on their blogs and through other data sources. I wove together individual plot elements from the stories that emerged from various sources, including the texts as well as the visual components the girls shared with me. I linked key ideas together in ways were not a part of the original text and often pulled together plotlines from diverse data sources. Pulling together various aspects of the girls’ work allowed me to look at the individual texts as part of larger story, where transformations of self could be captured over time and through on-going engagement in storytelling. Throughout the analysis, I made links between the different data sources and worked to construct coherent narratives for each participant. To ensure that I captured the composition style of individual participants I chose to leave the language intact, except when errors would interfere with the overall meaning.

I chose to organize my research results into three chapters. In order to understand how the chapters are framed, it is important to return to the theoretical work of Goffman (1959). In chapter 2, I described back stage as a region away where an adolescent girl could make sense of her identity with a small group of trusted individuals. The back stage also provides a way of
concealing potentially problematic aspects of one’s identity. On the other hand, front stage is a public space where girls perform a fixed and fairly stable identity. Both performance regions are constructed using props, behavior, language, and other social cues. Chapter 4 examines the work of Ryann and Casey, who used their blog to negotiate their identity and move new understandings of self from back stage to front stage. While chapter 5 explore the ways Bella and Casey became aware of the ways their behavior interfered socially engagements with others and chose to shift aspects of their identity from front stage to back stage. Merging the data from all four girls, the cross-case analysis highlights the ways online literacy practices provide a forum for girls to engage in identity work in ways not available in other social contexts. Implications are offered in each of the three findings chapters, making central the importance of weaving together theory, research, and practice.

**Trustworthiness or Credibility of the Case Study**

To ensure the research was reliable and valid, I used the conventions of trustworthiness including: prolonged engagement, persistent observations, use of reflective journal, member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The use of multiple resources provides a way of “cross-checking participants’ self-representation in multiple online contexts” (Black, 2008, p. 404) which can overcome the difficulties of an online space where face-to-face conventions are unavailable. For instance, the researcher’s interpretation of a blog entry representing a particular aspect of a participant’s identity can and should be checked against interview data.

**Prolonged Engagement and Persistent Observation**

Building trust and rapport with the participants occurs over time and includes engaging with and observing participants for an extended period of time. Lincoln and Guba (1985)
suggest that the researcher should spend a significant amount of time engaged with the research participants. For three months, I stayed in contact research participants through electronic means including e-mail and instant message programs. I checked for updated blog entries twice a week and three months of used archived blog to support my analysis. An on-going process of observing, asking questions and clarifying my thinking helped ensure that data support the conclusions.

**Member Checks:**

Merriam (2009) explains checking in with participants is critical “for insuring internal validity” (p. 217). This process involves taking initial interpretations to the participants and asking them to reflect upon the accuracy of the reporting and make any adjustments or clarify particular aspects. I used member checking at several points during the study. Member checks occurred during interviews, as I asked the girls to reflect upon my initial interpretations. During these checks, girls elaborated on the ways they agreed with or deviated from my perceptions. If a research participant rejected my emerging ideas, I asked her to clarify her ideas and give me additional details to support her position. In addition to using the monthly interviews to check interpretations, I also sent girls initial drafts of my writing for comments. On-going interactions helped to ensure that the girls’ voices and experiences were accurately interpreted.

**Peer Debriefing:**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain qualitative research can be influenced by the biases and unconscious limitations an individual researcher brings into the project. To boost the credibility of the findings a researcher should reflect upon their findings with an outside source. Throughout the study, I remained in contact with my dissertation chair as well as continuously communicated with a fellow doctorate candidate. Merriam (2009) highlights the importance of this professional
contact, explaining that a doctorate candidate’s committee can serve as a reflective source of support, pushing the researcher to see and reflect on the data in new ways. For me, the conversations encouraged dialogue about the data and helped me clarify my own thinking and encouraged me to continue writing and rewriting, looking deeper each time.

Audit Trail:

“An audit trail in a qualitative study describes how data was collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made through the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). Transparency of research process is important for demonstrating the systematic research approach used reach the presented conclusions. The techniques I used to select participants, as well as collect and analyze data are described in this chapter.

As I engaged in the research, I systematically collected and analyzed the data; I used the principles of trustworthiness to ensure that my findings were reliable and valid. In addition, I used ethical behavior throughout the process to ensure privacy and make sure participants felt comfortable during the process. Spradley (1980) states ethical behavior places the needs, interests and safety above all else. Researchers who engage in online research should maintain the same level of professionalism and ethical behavior as traditional researchers. Ethical behavior online includes notifying participants of a research presence, following the norms of the site, and clearly communicating intentions to potential or current participants (Ess and the Association of Internet Research, 2002). I followed these suggestions by seeking permission from the moderators of the online community to post an advertisement on their space, articulating my intentions to participants, and engaging in a respectful manner with participants throughout the study. Comments left by readers of the participants’ blog were noted, but not directly quoted. I felt the need to protect the privacy and creative expression of the readers who
were not directly informed about the research. I respected the participants’ time by making sure interviews lasted no more than the requested hour of time and following the research protocol outlined in the information sheet participants received at the beginning of the study. Trustworthiness and ethical research behaviors work hand-in-hand to ensure that research findings are solid and participants are comfortable and safe as they engage in the research.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the ways adolescent girls between the ages of 16-19 construct and negotiate aspects of their personal identities through multimodal literacy practices. Through a discussion of the girls’ personal experiences I also explored the ways they took up or resisted social and cultural messages. This chapter provided a detailed description of the methodology including: the research design, description of the setting, recruitment of participants, data collection, and analysis process. I collected data from multiple sources including a questionnaire, blog entries, literacy artifacts, and online interviews to ensure triangulation and meeting the protocols of trustworthiness. The process of recruiting participants, collecting and analyzing data all relate to the research questions and the intersection of multiple theoretical frameworks that shape the foundation of this research. In particular, the research contends that through participation in online communities adolescent girls have the ability to reflect upon and renegotiate identity issues through narratives.
Chapter 4-FINDINGS: BACK STAGE TO FRONT STAGE

This chapter begins the discussion of findings. I have chosen to break the findings down into three chapters in an attempt to organize the diverse stories and literacy practices that emerged during the study. Chapters are framed around the idea of staging or performing an identity. Chapter 4 highlights the ways of Ryann and Casey used the back stage environment of their blog to question, explore and transform their perceptions of their own gender and sexual identity. As they grew comfortable with their new identities, they moved those new understandings to front stage performances. Chapter 5 explores the ways girls made strategic decisions to minimize or conceal aspects of their identity, thus moving from front stage performances to back stage. This movement was strategic and taken up in an effort to align more with the social expectations and norms of the Discourse communities they desired membership. Chapter 6 provides a cross-case analysis of the all four girls-specifically focusing on each of the research questions and providing discussion and implications for educators.

Review of the Literature

Feminist research often advocates for the importance of having a public voice. However, this chapter suggests that back stage, private spaces are critical for understanding the self and gaining the necessary tools, knowledge, and social connections to embrace and socially perform new identities. Back stage, girls can connect with like-minded individuals who help prepare for future engagements. This chapter begins by describing and defining the difference between front and back stage regions and then moves into the two case studies, where back stage spaces were central for helping girls gain a public, front stage voice.

Goffman (1959) suggested that individuals represent themselves in relationship to various
audiences, negotiating their identities by moving between two performance regions: front stage and back stage. Back stage social performances take place away from the prying and often critical eye of others. Within this space, girls can take off the masks, let down their guard and explore complex, challenging, and contradictory aspects of their own identity with a group of trusted individuals. Within the back stage environment, girls are able to connect to and share their understandings of self with a team of like-minded people. A team can be understood as, “any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine” (p. 79). The individual’s team provides support and helps prepare her for future front stage performances.

Back stage spaces can be likened to a teenager’s bedroom, where girls can invite friends in, but close the door and block others out. In the bedroom, away from the prying eye of adults, girls can flip through magazines and dream about their future, share gossip and advice, or try out new clothing, make-up, or other performance props. Gray (2009), in her study of rural queer adolescents, highlights the significance of back stage spaces for identity exploration through her discussion of Amy, a 15-year-old who identifies as bisexual and found online environments a safe space where she could come to terms with her own identity, by connecting to other LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender) youth. Unlike the limited media representations she saw on television, online engagements allowed her to connect to and make sense of her identity with others who were also striving to understand their own sexuality. People online shared coming out stories, political news around GLBT culture, and outlets for buying gay pride accessories. Her statement, “I’ve always been attracted to both sexes, but I found my true identity on the Internet,” highlights the significance back stage participation plays in her awareness of self-identity (Gray, 2009, p. 121). Similar to Amy’s back stage engagements, Casey and Ryann also explore the significance of their own sexuality through back stage online
Front stage individuals take up fixed and stable behavior that lead audience members to perceive the girls as a particular type of person. Within this region, girls make strategic decisions about which aspect of themselves they reveal and which aspects of themselves they conceal back stage. Chapter 5 takes up the issue of front stage spaces more extensively, but they must be acknowledged in this chapter because new understandings of self often move from back stage to front. It is through the willingness to step into public environments that girls are able to transform their personal identities as well as the larger social and cultural communities in which they are members. Rich (1979) noted that as women make public their life experiences, they find, “newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration” (p. 49). Transformation of social and cultural dynamics requires the collective voices of previously silenced girls and girls’ willingness to name and perform in ways. Simply being willing to consider and name new understanding of self is a movement towards more public, front stage engagements.

**Introduction to Casey**

Through writing across various data sources, Casey described her experiences with technology and offered insights into the ways she understands various aspects of her own identity. Her first literacy artifact provided an overview of the types of identities and online engagements I would see emerge throughout the study.

My technology use from when I was a child hasn’t changed much. I have always been a blogger, blogging for pleasure rather than an audience. Chiefly, however, I used the internet for generating responses to my art, which I post on site{s} like LiveJournal, tumblr, and deviantART. Additionally, I use the internet for research on subjects such as recent world history, and LGBTQ history and culture. I am interested in these subjects both academically and for my own pleasure. I use the internet for my own enjoyment. I use the internet for fashion blogging and shopping online; being a fashion design major, both of these things are important in my life. Finally, a great deal of my internet use is
devoted to keeping up with my friends, since most of them are online (Literacy Artifact #1-11/20/2011).

After reading through this piece I noted the following in my researcher journal. “Casey takes up similar identities in her literacy artifact as I noted from her questionnaire—queer, writer, fashion design” (12/1/2012). The types of social interactions she engaged in online mediated her understandings of self. For example, she explained that she blogs largely for pleasure, but she enjoys receiving responses to the artwork she posts online. On a personal level, the Internet gave her access to information that would inform her sense of identity, including the history and culture of LGBTQ issues and ideas for fashion. As she negotiated the multiple aspects of her identity, she moved between back stage and front stage identity performances. In particular, she used the back stage space of her blog to work out aspects of her identity that deviated from traditional social and cultural norms.

Casey’s identity work largely centers on her negotiations of gender and sexual identity, therefore it is imperative to have working definitions of these identity constructs. For the purposes of this research, gender is defined as the “psychological, behavioral, or cultural characteristics” an individual exhibits that can be recognized as male or female (Olson, Forbes and Belzer, 2011, p. 172). Aligning with the work of Butler (1990), gender is a social performance, individuals strategically take up ways of acting, dressing and behaving that can be recognized as characteristically male or female. Although gender is typically described in terms of male and female, the theoretical stance that identities are performances creates space to transcend traditional boundaries. Individuals can perform as male, as female, or blur the boundaries that separate the two gender identities. Olson, Forbes, and Belzer (2011) used the terms transgender and transexual as the ability to transcend biological sex by taking on the
“behavior, appearance or identity” (p.172) of the opposite sex, this research uses the term genderqueer because that was the label Casey continuously used to describe the fluid nature of her own gender identification. Genderqueer, according to Casey, involves having the ability to move fluidly between male and female gender roles, rather than embodying only one (member check, 3/7/2012). Casey uses the back stage environment of her blog to explore the possibilities of being more than female.

Sexuality is different than gender. Sexuality involves feelings of attraction to another person on a physical and emotional level. Although sexuality is different than gender, girls often understand their sexuality in their understanding of gender roles. Casey, in particular, discusses her sexual identity in relationship to female attributes that include being soft and open and more masculine characteristics that include being distant, aggressive, and controlling. This case study begins with Casey’s negotiation of gender and moves on to negotiations of sexual identity.

Beginning with the initial questionnaire (11/2/2011), I observed that Casey was constructing her gender identity in ways that stretch beyond the traditional dichotomies of male and female. According to Butler (1990) social and cultural messages help to shape gender roles, with individuals taking up characteristics that are recognized as feminine or male. For Casey, the distinction between the two genders blurs. The first open-ended question asked, “In addition to the labels above, what are some other ways that you identify yourself?” Casey responded with the word “genderqueer” and she went on to state, “Other people might identify me as a femme lesbian (I am very into makeup, very fashion conscious and strive to be a fashion designer). I don’t feel that people always understand my gender, but I don’t mind.” Casey begins to reveal that her social performance can appear very feminine, as she wears makeup and she is aware of
different fashion elements. However, she also states that people don’t completely understand her gender because she is genderqueer-embodying both male and female attributes.

Addressing the readers of her blog, Casey announces her emerging understanding of her gender identity “did i tell you i’m gender-fluid LJ {LiveJournal}? because i’m gender fluid and it’s makin’ me real happy to understand this about myself. i’m still {using} female pronouns but i do enjoy neutral and male sometimes (Blog entry-8/28/2011). Although research on transgender individual focuses on moving between one and the next, Casey’s presentation of identity reflects the embodiment and appreciation for both genders. She appreciates her female body, “I love my breasts and my vagina and love being called a girly boy” (E-mail conversation, March 4, 2012), but she also expresses a desire to enact traditionally masculine attributes. As Casey negotiates her gender identity she blurs traditional gender boundaries.

Theoretically, I recognized that in a postmodern era, identities are continuously in flux and shift depending on the social context and the beliefs, values, and knowledge constructed by individuals. Loutzenheiser (2002) charged, “Binary constructions...leave little room for the complicated lives of young people” (p. 441). Recognizing that identities are constructed and negotiated as individuals interact in various social contexts, I explored the ways Casey used her blog as a back stage online environment to explore issues surrounding gender. Although her negotiations of gender are openly discussed in her blog, she does not give that identity a public, front stage voice. She maintains a front stage performance of female because she is worried about how she others perceive her.

**Silly Little Bunny Girl**

In terms of gender identity, Casey presents a very feminine image front stage. I must describe her front stage feminine nature in order to highlight the distinction between the ways
she outwardly portrays her femininity and the ways she hides her feeling of being male back stage. Front stage, Casey is very conscious and describes herself as femme (Questionnaire11/2/2011). She uses a hand-drawn bunny image to represent herself and describes herself as on her profile page as a “silly little bunny girl”, this image blends together both sexual and gender identity (Figure 3). The bunny is voluptuous and dressed in a pink dress with a white collar, reminiscent of the traditional clothing from the 1950’s. During her first interview, Casey explained that she used this image because it represents her sexual side. “i am really digging my Online Bunny Persona as of late…the bunny is…sort of sexual for me…I just see it as kind of a “playboy bunny” type of thing”. The Playboy Bunny demonstrates Casey’s awareness of a cultural model of femininity.

Figure 3-CASEY’S BUNNY DRAWING

The bunny is wearing clothes that are retro in style, designs that Casey believes are essential for the modern day female. Portraying one’s self through appropriate fashion is critical for Casey. On December 29, 2011, Casey’s blog describes a shopping trip where she purchases female accessories including: a faux fur wrap, a mask with feathers, four pairs of earrings, a black purse, and two eye shadow palettes. She wrote, “I love spending money on makeup”. She posts links to stores and items she recommends for girls who want to be in style (Blog entry-8/20/2011). This advice follows closely with her dream of becoming a female fashion designer (Blog entry-8/29/2011). The next section explores Casey’s back stage struggles with feelings of being partly male. I consider her male performance a back stage identity because she only shares
these thoughts and feelings with readers of her blog.

I want to be called a he

Casey wrote on her LiveJournal profile page that her name was Prince Casey Cottontail. Using the term “prince” signifies a male identity. Casey’s longing to be male was also captured in a blog entry dated October 13, 2011, “I really, really, really want a dick at least temporarily. I want to be called a he.” As well as in her second literacy artifact she constructs and negotiates her understanding of masculinity around the character, Don Draper, from the television show Mad Men. Casey sent a picture and noted that this picture represents her “ideal self…” (Literacy Artifact #2-12/4/2011).

![Figure 4-Casey's Ideal Self-Don Draper](image)

When I asked Casey to describe why she found Don Draper so appealing she stated, “he basically is a handsome, debonair, sharp-dressing guy who loves women…pretty much every lady that sees him wants to be with him. i wish i could be like that, honestly.” (Interview #2-12/4/2011).

Casey wants to be like Don, she also recognizes that she does not fully fit into the mold that shapes him. Don “woos” women, but he has difficulty getting close to them on an emotional level. “don has gone through a lot in his life…he had a rough childhood and a rough adulthood and he refuses to attach himself to anyone he meets.” Unlike Don, who keeps his distance, Casey takes a more caring and traditionally feminine approach to love. “i do attach myself to people. i
feel love for many people, romantically and platonically, and i believe love is a beautiful thing, even if it's not for everyone” (Interview #3-1/2/2012). As Casey writes about her sense of identity, she begins to recognize that she does not fit social or cultural models in which an individual is either male or female.

With conflicting feelings, she must negotiate new understanding of herself in relationship to larger social and cultural ideals. She takes up this negotiation in a blog entry dated September 20, 2011, re: gender: i think i'm a girl who pretends to be a boy who pretends to be a girl. this generally makes me weird and genderfucked, and maybe gender-fluid, but i don't care. i'm going by "girl" for now because it makes me feel the least horrible for various reasons in my life i don't care to go into. it leaves a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth, but...whatever... i'm sorry to confuse...really, i'd prefer my friends think of me as something more than a girl, but with family and officially i'm trying not to mind so much. it's really, really hard. but i gotta.

She recognizes that her gender is fluid, but also notes that performing outside of traditional social boundaries could be perceived as weird and confusing, so she hides her feeling back stage. When I asked Casey if she wanted to be more open with her gender in public spaces she replied, “It’s one of my greatest wishes” (Interview #2-12/4/2011). However, she contends that struggles to publicly display her feelings of being both male and female because she is still confused about her own gender identity and she is uncertain about how others will respond. To avoid the difficulties that could potentially arise when she resists Dominate female discourse, Casey chose to limit her exploration of a masculine gender identity to the writing she posted in her blog. Personal narratives captured her conflicting feelings around gender, while fictional writing helped her imagine various social roles she could take up if she allowed herself to present unconventional gender roles front stage.
Identities Through Fictional Characters

Casey was not comfortable with revealing her masculine side to others, however she uses literacy to explore different social identities through fictional stories and role-plays. Online role-play writing is a collaborative process that requires an individual to take on the persona of a character to create a story (Black, 2007, 2008). Stepping into a character, Casey could imagine new roles for herself and work through her conflicting messages surrounding aspects of her identity. “Play is the medium of mastery and creation of ourselves as human actors. Without opportunities to fantasize and reflect on scenarios in our heads through the safety of figured worlds, there would be little force to a sense of self or agency” (Woodcock, 2010, p. 358).

Casey’s often took on the character of Frankie, a transgender individual who was biologically male, but portrayed herself as a female. When I asked Casey why she played Frankie and how she was similar to that character she noted,

i do like to pretend that i live in the 1950's! and dating a greaser, which she does, would be fun too, although not that particular person (he's a guy, first of all, and second of all their relationship is somewhat abusive which i obviously wouldn't want in real life). personally, i don't roleplay because i want to be my character; i roleplay because i think it's fun to build on plots with other people (Interview #3-1/2/2012)

Frankie not only appeared in Casey’s role-plays, but also appeared as a character in a secondary fiction blog. The entries in this blog were very short and contained very little background information, character development, or in-depth plot lines; rather, they appeared to be snapshots of sexual activity between characters. On December 13, 2011, Casey posted the following story:

In the 40's, a housing company cleared the dense woods in Oakland, Maine just enough to make way for a small suburban settlement. However, there were still many trees surrounding the town. In the wintertime, they became heavy with snow, and it spotted the forest floor.

It was December 23, 1953, and getting dark. Frankie laid flat on her back; melting snow
and blood spattered her face. The moonlight made Frankie look more pale than she already was. Jack straddled her. He had a strange look on his face when he punched her in the face again.

"Say it, you queer," he breathed.

Frankie coughed. "I'm your bitch," she dry-sobbed. "I'm your bitch and I love it when you fuck me." Her cock was getting harder every time Jack touched her, whether it was a slap or a caress. This time Jack slid his hand up her thigh and snorted.

"Gettin' hard." Jack squeezed Frankie's balls. Nevermind the fact that he already had an erection himself.

Writing sexually explicit stories can provide a way for adolescent girls to talk about sexuality. Casey’s work is based on the genre, Yaoi, sexual stories written by adolescent Japanese girls who call themselves “Rotten Girls” (Galbraith, 2011). In these stories boy love, sexual relationships between male characters are written in a detailed manner. These fantasy stories push against cultural boundaries and help the creators become more aware of their own desires and boundaries. As Casey explained, Frankie was in an abusive relationship, but she would not want that for herself. As Casey stepped into the role of Frankie or fantasized about being the debonair Don Draper she empowers herself and begins to construct and enact a multi-faceted identity and explore new possibilities for her own public identity.

The intense sexual nature of her fiction stories were very different from the softer, loving and romantic partnerships fantasies that appeared in her personal blog, which reveals two distinct perspectives surrounding the ways Casey understood that sexual identities are performed through physical and social negotiations with others.

i just want someone to kiss me even if its on the head. just a little smooch. just a platonic smooch. i just want to be somebody’s bunny. i just want to sit on someone’s lap and be their little pet for wall. that’s literally all i want. not even sexual. i just want it (December 19. 2011)

Through literacy, writing both personal narratives and fantasy stories and Casey had the
opportunity to safely explore various social roles, including behaviors that could occur during a romantic relationship.

This identity exploration parallels the ways girls in Thomas (2007) constructed and shared fictional stories as a way of stepping out of their own lives and opening to ways of being. Lily, one adolescent girl, explained that through role-playing she was able to explore multiple sides of her character and herself. Through her characters Lily could strong emotions including happiness, anger, and uncertainty. “When I’m playing Lalaith I just set all feelings on her, display everything. It’s almost like a new me” (p. 64). Using a character to mediate social performances, both Casey and Lily can explore various social roles and open up the possibility for enacting new social identities. Back stage, girls prepare their future front stage performances. The next section highlights the way online interactions helped Casey move her awareness of being a lesbian from back stage to front and the significance that played in her personal and social life.

Discussion of Sexual Identity

Casey attempts to publicly hide the masculine aspects of her gender identity back stage because she is uncertain about her own thoughts and how the public may react to her new portrayal of self. Within the back stage environment of her blog, as well as role-play and fantasy writing, she is able to explore new possibilities for the ways she portrays her gender identity. She remains safe online, away from the potentially judgmental voices of others, but the trade off is the limitations that are placed upon her ability to transform and negotiate new roles across other she social and cultural communities. Casey strategically keeps her thoughts around blurring gender boundaries back stage, limited to the confines of her blog. Casey is more open to revealing and discussing her sexual identity. As a lesbian, Casey’s sexual identity deviates from
traditional expectations. However, unlike her gender identity Casey is more open with sharing that she is a lesbian with others. She explained that on a scale of 1-10, she was a one when it came to sharing her gender identity with others, but an 8.5 with sharing her sexuality in face-to-face situations. She attributes her openness to the positive experiences she had with sharing her identity with others online (Interview #1-11/21/2011).

Casey began exploring her sexuality online when she was between the ages of eleven and twelve. Similar to her negotiation of gender identity, Casey also relied on fictional writing and other online websites to explore her sexual identity. The significance of online social networks appears in a statement from her first interview, “The internet’s been great in helping me figure out who i am, validated me when i felt “wrong” or immoral and helped me find friends who are going through similar issues” (Interview #1-11/21/2011). Online she could talk openly about being a lesbian when she was too conflicted to have the conversations face-to-face. The back stage space helped Casey talk through moral, social, and personal implications around sexuality before she was ready to voice her identity publicly.

Confidence and knowledge gained through online interactions helped Casey move this aspect of her identity from back stage to front stage. She transitions her lesbian identity from back stage to front stage. She recalled, “My friends were generally cool about it. my mother has grown to be alright with the idea, my father ignores it” (Interview #2-12/4/2011). Although Casey initially felt nervous about revealing her sexuality, she also felt a sense of relieve that she could share her awareness about herself with others. “i was very scared, but even at that age i was excited that i had an identity for myself” (Interview #2-12/4). Ramussen (2004) notes that the conflicting feeling regarding coming out are normal and indicative of the complex individual and social dynamics surrounding sexuality. Feeling of celebration must be negotiated alongside
social and moral implications.

With a willingness to portray her sexual identity front stage, Casey is able to engage more openly with offline communities and envision new possibilities for her own future. Casey joined a Gay Straight Alliance at school. This social outlet provided more support and acceptance for Casey. She explained, “i feel like i can just be myself in every way there” (Interview #1-11/21/2011). Her engagement with this group gave her a sense of belonging and positively impacted her mood. She described relief at being able to find a positive and supportive network of friends in. In this entry she states, “being friends with a big group of people is really making me happy! especially a queer-friendly group of people whom i can have cool discussions with” (blog entry-8/19/2012). In addition to finding offline social groups, willingness to speak openly about her sexual identity created space for Casey to expand her vision of what was possible for her own life. Casey’s articulates a vision for her future in a blog entry dated September 9, 2011.

i want a girlfriend she will have strong arms…she will also exclusively wear tight t-shirts and jeans, or tuxedos or suits. she will be very fashionable and touch my butt when we are talking to people…i will giggle and touch her flat chest and she will smirk down at me in a very suave manner. she will then ask for my hand in marriage” (Blog Entry-9/18/2011).

A similar openness does not happen with Casey’s masculine side because she limits sharing that aspect of her identity to people who are online. Although Goffman (1959) does not specifically address struggles with gender or sexuality, his work highlights identity work as a performance that is continuously in flux and varies based on the social context where identities are being performed. Within the safe online environment, where the audience did not judge her for being a lesbian or exploring gender roles, Casey is more open. As she becomes more knowledgeable and confident in herself she is able to step forward in new ways.

Ryann, the second case that will be presented, also negotiates her gender and sexual
identity in a back stage manner. Much like Casey, Ryann sees the blog as a space where she can reveal aspects of her identity that she struggles to address in other social contexts. Ryann claims, “I don’t hide myself on my blog, because my blog is where I come to be me” (Questionnaire-11/3/2011). Her online acts helped transform her view of her own identity from someone who was quiet and withdrawn from people, to someone who could create and participate alongside others. This movement back stage to front demonstrates the increased confidence Ryann found through her online literacy practices.

**Introduction to Ryann.**

I never came face-to-face with the research participants, never heard their voices, or saw any of their literacy acts outside of the information they sent through e-mails, instant messages, or information posted on their blogs, however through those very acts I came to understand each of the girls as unique individuals. I always received Ryann’s literacy artifacts weeks after initial deadline. I asked for the first artifact to be returned by October 15th, Casey’s returned hers on November 14th. She sent the artifact with an e-mail stating, “Sorry for getting back to you so late. School’s a drag!” Similar comments were made as I received all of the other literacy artifacts as well. She was very involved in school and that limited her participation in blogging. She also explained at the start of the research that her blog, “wasn’t really developed right now” because she deleted the blog she started when she was in fifth or sixth grade because if its “untidiness and lack of quality” (Questionnaire-11/3/2011). While Ryann had fewer blog entries than the other girls, her work was intriguing because it paralleled some of the same struggles Casey worked through, including exploring gender and sexuality identity through back stage blogging practices.
Although I waited for Ryann to send me the completed artifacts, she was prompt and expressive during the online interviews. She shared with me her interests in Korean pop music, her passion for fan fiction writing and her struggles with sharing her interest with family and friends because she felt that they would judge her. For Ryann, blogging provided a space where she found others who shared her interest and she felt safe to write about topics without feeling ashamed or judged by others.

To me, it’s {Interacting online} kind of like an escape. I like having something that’s just my own. That and people would think different about me, you know? For the most part I don’t care what other think but there are always lots of judgmental people at school and just displaying the fact that I write stories about fantasy things and blog about korean things just isn’t something they would think was normal.

Using the statement, “it’s kind of like an escape”, highlights the ways Ryann has positioned her identity as a Korean-pop music fan and her engagement in fiction writing back stage. Although Korean pop and fan fiction writing are central to her identity, Ryann contends she does not share her writing with people offline because they might not understand her interest and they may perceive her as weird. “At school…just displaying the fact that I write stories about fantasy things and blog about Korean things just isn’t something they would think is normal…my dad, if he ever thought thinks about it, would think I outgrew it…my mom knows, but…we don’t talk about it because it gets awkward” (Interview #1-11/20/2011). Struggling to share her interests, front stage, the back stage environment of her blog gave Ryann a place to work through issues of personal concern including her own gender and sexual identities away from the judgmental voices of family and friends.

Ryann’s filled her blog with fan fiction stories that integrated her knowledge of Korean pop music (K-pop) with her conflicting feelings around gender and sexual identity. Fan fiction writing involves using knowledge of existing television shows, movies, books, or other media
outlets to formulate new stories, which often take into account the individual writer’s life experiences, background knowledge, and personal identities (Black, 2007; 2008). Through fan fiction writing girls can begin imagining new possibilities for their characters, and as a result see new possibilities for transforming their own identity. Ryann’s plot lines focused heavily on themes of gender and sexuality and the conflicting issues that arise as girls try to make sense of their conflicting knowledge and feelings regarding these issues.

**The Girl I Want to Be**

Throughout Ryann’s writing she constructs and negotiates her gender identity based upon the images of the pop stars from the teen musical group, Girls’ Generation. Ryann explained her passion towards the Korean pop band, Girls’ Generation, in her second artifact. In this pieces, she included a picture of the musical group (Figure 5) and explained,

They really mean a lot to me because they're my inspiration. All nine of them are kind, considerate, talented, beautiful and amazingly strong. For example, one of the members lost her mother at the age of 14 to cancer and then had to move away from her family for about seven years to train to follow her dream. She's stayed strong and optimistic. These girls are important to me because I want to be like them and I they make me **strive** towards me goals. They are constant role models for me! (Literacy Artifact #2-12/18/2012)
Ryann’s admiration of the girls’ involved honoring their musical ability, as well as examining their personality and life experiences both onstage and off. Following the pop stars closely, she begins to understand that the glitz and glamour presented in the media does not offer the complete picture of these girls. Cancer, death, challenges of moving away from home and other personal struggles, which are hidden back stage, impact the girls lives as much as their more public engagements.

The pop stars, much like Ryann, must negotiate and manage their personal identity by making decisions about what identities they will present publicly and which they will conceal back stage. During Interview #2, she explained, “Usually I write them [the characters] so they have two sides to themselves…They’re really confident and sarcastic and upbeat on the outside but inside they’re sad and there’s some conflict” (Interview #2-12/18/2011). For example, in the a story entitled, “wake up” two sides of the character Hyoyeon are revealed through the opening line of the story which states, “As independent and rebellious as she is, Hyoyeon is still a girl” (11/12/2011). As a girl, Hyoyeon also craves intimacy and tenderness, which can be gained
through a relationship with a male. Conflicting feelings in the characters lives parallel Ryann’s own struggles managing aspects of herself. Ryann wrote in the questionnaire, “My friends think I am outgoing and funny” (Questionnaire-11/3/2011). However, in interview #2, she revealed, “Sometimes I get really sad because I bottle things up” (12/18/2011). Ryann explained she often hides her true feelings, including being frustrated, angry, or sad because her friends might find that annoying. Struggling to share her feelings, and being less than independent are seen as problematic for someone who wants to be considered a girl. To be socially accepted, she stays keeps challenging feeling back stage, including her desire to romantically connect to others.

Sexual identity is a natural part of adolescent development, but many girls may be encouraged teachers, parents or other authority figures to not act out or speak about their emerging feelings (Cherland, 1994). Ryann pushes romantic feelings back stage because she is fearful of others’ reactions. “Well honestly I don’t really tell people my feelings because I’m rather shy sometimes. So I don’t flirt often or anything because I get uncomfortable and I tell myself not to do it” (Interview #2-12/18). When Ryann told herself not to flirt, she limited the possibility for transforming her identity from a single girl to a girl comfortable with romantic relationships.

Writing fictional stories and posting them in her blog provides a space for confronting the contradictory beliefs regarding gender and sexuality. “I usually take an event that happened and make it romantic, like make the characters have thoughts about another character” (Interview #2-12/18). Through these stories, she is able to explore different roles and negotiate issues of gender and sexual identity. One of the plotlines in K-pop fan fiction communities centers on the love triangle between Hyoyeon and Donghae, and Eunhyuk. Hyoyeon is a female who is dating Donghae (male), but she is in love with Eunhyuk, a boy she had previous dated. In this story
entitled, *Let Me*, Hyoyeon recognizes her feelings, but withdraws as the romantic tension becomes too overwhelming.

Hyoyeon tilted her head up as Eunhyuk slowly brushed his lips across her neck. A shiver went down her spine and she closed her eyes shut quickly to try and control herself; she was too easily broken by his touch. Eunhyuk’s hand caressed her hip and he kissed her pulse before moving to her lips.

When they kissed, it was always slow, sensuous. It was never some lust-filled make-out session, there was meaning and passion behind their actions. Hyoyeon liked that.

Eunhyuk’s hand trails to her stomach and slips under her shirt, rubbing her flat stomach comfortably. Hyoyeon is all sparks and electricity now, and that creeping feeling of nervousness and restraint that she always feels when they get this far appears again.

She’s gone rigid. He notices.

Eunhyuk sighs and pulls away, pinching the bridge of his nose as Hyoyeon flushes red and wishes to wither away. Her confidence is always gone when she’s with him.…

She does not know what to say. It’s herself that’s holding her back. Past relationship problems and trust issues don’t help.

Eunhyuk suggests that Hyoyeon is not a typical female and this pattern of behavior is unusual. When she withdraws, claiming she is nervous, he counters, “Bull….The Hyoyeon I know isn’t nervous because of a kiss…You’re not one to follow the typical girl trends” (Blog entry-11/6/2011). Hyoyeon’s disconnect is because of her own uncertainty about what she truly wants in a relationship. She recognizes that she is in a relationship, but she longs to be with someone else. Hyoyeon, like Ryann, struggle to articulate what she truly desires in a relationship. This struggle makes it difficult for both individuals to publicly engage in a relationship.

**Now I’m a Creator**

Within the safety of an online community, Ryann is able to explore her conflicting understandings of gender and sexual identity as she connects to a small group of trusted
individuals who share her love of Korean pop music. In particular, the love triangle between Hyoyeon, Donahue, and Eunhyuk is a recognized element of this genre of writing, but many readers left comments praising Ryann for taking up the storyline in such meaningful and heartfelt ways. Another reader commented that if she had the ability to write fan fiction she would craft the story in exactly the same way; but since she was not a writer she loved and thanked Ryann for doing it. In response to one reader’s comments about how enjoyed the ways the characters were portrayed Bella replied, “Thank you! :D I’m so glad you liked it! And even though I’m not some guru on their relationship (aha I only started writing hyohyuk like three days ago) I would imagine that’s a good portrayal of how’s they’d be :D Thanks again” (Blog comment, 11/6/2011). Words of affirmation encourage girls to continually to actively engage with one another. Through the characters, Ryann is able to reflect upon her own personal beliefs and experiences. Rather than stepping into romantic relationships and playing out new ideas in front of people, she uses the back stage environment of her blog and the characters in her stories to try out new role “It [Fan fiction writing] helped me realize what I want in life…like my relationship, my beliefs, etc….I’ll write something about a character’s future or their beliefs on a certain topic. And while writing I think how nice that belief is” (Interview #3-1/15/2012). Opportunities to try out social situations through characters helps girls to understand more about themselves and different possibilities for their own life.

In addition, to personal identity exploration, Ryann believed her literacy interactions with the supportive fan fiction community also contributed to her transformations in her social relationships. Online, she can be herself and share her interest in fictional writing and Korean pop music and she uses the knowledge she has gained online to engage in new academic and personal engagements.
As a child, I didn’t interact with people. I was one of those people who lurked and appreciated other people’s work without telling them. Now I’m open and I’m a creator myself. If I like your writing, I’ll tell you. I’ll start conversations with people. It’s so much better this way” (Questionnaire, 11/3/2011).

Ryann’s fan fiction writing gave her the ability to negotiate new meaning across a wide range of social contexts. As she created characters, she explored many different paths for her own gender and sexual identities. The opportunity to perform or enact one’s identity, through characters, gave Ryann a voice and confidence to explore new possibilities for her own life. In addition to social growth, Ryann gained important literacy skills she could use to enact a front stage identity as a successful student. “When I write papers I use word choice and writing styles that I’ve picked up from writing fan fiction, and technology wise I use the computer so I can get around quickly and use the computer really well” (Interview #1-11/20/2011). Interacting online had a positive impact on Ryann, she explained that she learned to be a creator and gained necessary skills to interact in the classroom. These new understandings of self opened up space for her to imagine new possibilities for her own identity.

**Conclusion**

Greene (2001) suggested that in a postmodern world, it is important to recognize the continuous shifts in self-identity, particularly the previously inconceivable possibilities that arise when one is allowed to share their uncertainties and new awareness with others.

We are concerned with possibility, with opening windows on alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before. We are interested in breakthroughs and new beginnings, in the kind of wide-awareness that allows for wonder and unease and questioning and the pursuit of what is not yet (p. 44).

As noted in Chapter 1, this research contributes to our understanding the many ways girls are using online spaces to construct and negotiate new identities. Ryann and Casey both used the
back stage, online environment to explore and continuously negotiate multiple aspects of their identity including gender and sexual selves. Topics the girls struggled to voice in other contexts, including Ryann’s engagement with fan fiction and fantasy writing and Casey’s performance of non-normative gender and sexual roles, were addressed openly in their writing. Increased awareness of self and the confidence they gained through interacting with others allowed the girls to interact front stage. Ryann transformed and began to see herself as a creator, while Casey became open with expressing her sexuality through relationships. When girls are empowered to speak out and explore personal experiences they can shape and reshape understandings of themselves and step on stage as new characters.

**Implications:**

As discussed in Chapter 2, adolescent girls are often encouraged to be silent and passive in classroom environments. They detach from their own knowledge and experiences as they enter a classroom or social situation where their ideas, values, or life experiences are distinctly different from those around them. In an effort to conform, girls may withdraw and silence their own voices. Taking on passive roles, girls may simply conform to the expectations of their teacher-completing assignments as instructed, limiting their sharing to socially sanctioned topics, and avoid the challenging and pressing issues that often impact adolescent girls. Passive positions lead to girls losing aspects of their own identity as they conform to social and cultural expectations.

This chapter suggested that back stage environments help girls to hold on to aspects of themselves as well as extend their current perceptions of self-identity. Ryann, for example, worried that she would be shunned if she shared her interest in Korean music and fan fiction writing with others. Online she found community and openly shared her interests. Casey
confronted and resisted social and cultural messages that limited her identity to male or female and explored the social and more implications of coming out as a lesbian. Blogs and other online literacy practices are like sanctuaries, spaces away from potentially judgmental peers and other family members, where girls can reveal a range of social identities. Ryann noted the importance of the social space when she stated, “These people don’t judge you because they’re just like you-like the same things you do and they’re proud. You want a fangirl about a new music video by your favorite Korean group? There are hundreds of people on Tumblr to talk to about” (Literacy Artifact #1-11/14/2011). As girls find acceptance they have the ability to continuously imagine and reimagine possibilities for their own identity.

The back stage environment of a blog can be compared to the supportive GLBT (Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) community outreach programs described in the work of Blackburn (2003), where young adolescents were able to negotiate aspects of their sexual identity. Justine, a research participant in Blackburn’s work, found a safe space to voice her struggles and began to see her individual identity, as well as her participation in society in new ways. One of her literacy practices involved writing and sharing a poem she wrote at the community center with her class at school. This movement demonstrates the ways she shifted her identity as a lesbian from back stage to a more front stage performance. Classroom teachers can help facilitate similar types of moments by asking students to bring in writing they have completed in other contexts, including those published online spaces, into the classroom.

Teachers can help facilitate the moment between back stage explorations and front stage performances through the use of quality literature. Classroom libraries filled with a wide range of texts create space for students to discuss their emerging understandings of self with other people. Rosenblatt (1995) suggested, “books are a vital means of getting outside the limited
cultural group in which the individual is born. They are, in a sense, elements of societies distant in time and space made personally available to the reader” (p. 184). Just as the girls expand their awareness of self by creating and sharing stories with other bloggers, books and other media, including music, movies, and webpages can also help facilitate these discussions.

This chapter highlighted the case studies of Ryann and Casey who negotiated their identities by moving back stage identities front stage. The next chapter explores the narrative practices of Scarlet and Bella and discusses the ways they transition aspects of their identity from front stage performances to back stage. Recognizing the ways identities are projected front stage and then moved into back stage environments links to the theoretical notions of Gee (2011) who charged that social identities are more than simply individual performances, rather they are shaped, explored, and performed as members of a wide range of social and cultural communities. In order to be socially accepted, girls must make strategic decisions regarding how they will perform their own identities. The girls’ online narratives reveal the ways they attempt to manage others’ perceptions through the topics that get voiced and those that are shoved back stage.
Chapter 5-FINDINGS: FRONT STAGE TO BACK STAGE

This study examined the ways girls constructed and negotiated their identities within blogs and other online digital spaces. Findings were presented in two chapters, based on Goffman’s (1959) performance theory, which suggests that individuals manage their social identity performances by moving between front stage and backstage region. Chapter 4 explored the ways Casey and Ryann used their blogs as backstage spaces, connecting with small teams of supportive Discourse communities, which lead to transformations in the ways girls saw themselves and enacted their identity front stage. In particular, personal narratives along with fictional writing helped the girls explore the various ways in which they could understand and perform gender and sexual identities.

This chapter highlights the ways two girls, Bella and Scarlet, transformed their social identities by shifting aspects of their identity from front stage to back stage. Shifts in identity occurred when girls realized that their current social performances were negatively impacting their social interactions with others and took steps to actively shift their performance. Recognizing that girls can become aware of and consciously choose to shift their identity counters traditional feminist work that positions girls as victims, disempowered and silenced by social and cultural forces. The girls in this study demonstrated that literacy provides a way for girls to become more aware of themselves and their relationships with other and take conscious steps to recreate their own sense of identity.

This chapter highlights the ways Bella constructed her identity as an introvert and outsider, but shifted and became more open with expressing herself when she realized that acceptance in community could only occur if she expressed her thoughts and connected to others. In the final literacy artifact, she wrote a letter to herself that demonstrates the types of
transformation she hopes to make in the future.

But maybe, just maybe, you are still like that {shy and lonely}, but you’ve learned to handle it and have learned to actually like yourself so much you don’t have to feel like the odd one out…. (1/21/2012).

Her vision for the future suggests that she believes that shy and lonely are inherent characteristics of her personality, but that through her own efforts she can perform, or handle, these characteristics in ways that are more socially accepted. Her negotiation of self will be highlighted further in this is chapter.

Unlike Bella, who struggles with being shy and withdrawn from people, Scarlet constructs her identity as someone who craves attention. She strives to control how people perceive her by managing her physical appearance, including her weight. She describes struggles with mental health issues, but strives to move beyond those labels by engaging in more empowering social literacy practices. As the case studies of Bella and Scarlet will reveal, individual understandings of self and the performance to those identities are often adjusted through interactions within and across various social communities. Blogging creates a narrative space where girls can construct their identities, posting current understandings of self, as well as document transformation of their identities.

**Introduction to Bella**

During the research, I was amazed at the ways girls openly revealed aspects of their life with me, including their thoughts on topics that they were hesitant to share with offline peers of family members. In Bella’s initial questionnaire she described herself as, “Introverted” and explained that she did not believe other people could tell what kind of person she was because she is secretive and hide most things about her life. This secretive or shy nature seemed to spill over into her interview interactions, where she was quiet and slow to respond. During the first
interview, I asked less than half of the questions to Bella that I asked other girls because her responses were slow and I found myself asking if she was still connected to the chat or understood the questions, rather than questions about her identity, use of literacy, or peer group. She would reply that she did understand the question and was simply putting together a response.

Although I was frustrated with her interactions, I was also intrigued because her silence and disconnect reminded me of the quiet, withdrawn girls in the work of Pipher (1994) who struggled to articulate themselves because they felt tension between expressing their authentic views of the world, and the pressure to conform to societal expectations. I saw the tension between the two selves during the last question I asked during her during the first interview. “How is the person you want to be different from the person you feel other's expect of you?” She replied, “I'm really introverted, quiet, and shy. And I'd always feel like I should be as outgoing and easily make friends like everyone else” (1/14/2011). Throughout the data there is a continuous tension between maintaining a front stage identity as someone introverted and pushing that identity back stage and being more open with others.

**Bella as an Outsider**

In bold font and all capital letters the words “FRIENDS ONLY” appear in the introductory post of Bella’s blog. Beneath the statement, Bella includes a list that describes the ways she identifies herself, her interests and the life experiences that have shaped her identity. She included information such as the dream she had about the grunge singer, Kurt Cobain, trying to kill her, wanting to be a mermaid when she was little, and her current interests in Anne Frank, Marie Antoinette, and Catherine the Great. Her posts begins with the statement, “I'm a way too shy and quiet girl from Missouri” aligns with the introverted identifying characteristic that ran through all of Bella’s writing. Struggling to find her voice and using that voice to connect to others Bella explained, “Reading and writing make me (veryveryvery) happy” and noted that
writing provided a way for her to articulate ideas when she did not have the ability to voice them publicly, “I can't say anything right with my mouth but I can listen and write it down pretty well” (Introductory blog entry-11/13/2020-Date is outside of the time frame of the study. However, as described in chapter 3, girls use this technique to block readers who are not friends from reading posted blog entries or keep entries in a particular order). She constructs a front stage identity where she is a stranger, someone separate and different from others. Shabatay (1991) notes, “The stranger lives with a feeling of not belonging, of being different, of having lost a sense of self, of being alienated from God” (p. 137). Taking on the identity of a stranger, Bella views herself as someone too different to be accepted by others.

A narrative from Bella’s blog provides an example of the way she feels like a stranger in the midst of her religious community because she is not practicing the behavior expected of a member of the Baha’i religion.

It’s been approximately 2-3 months since I’ve said my obligatory prayers, and even before that I wasn’t faithfully saying it. A week might go by before I might {say} them again. To fill you in, I’m Baha’i we have obligatory prayers…we are to say {them} once everyday before sunset. I haven’t been doing them. After a while it’s not even “I forgot.” It’s not on my mind at all and it doesn’t occur to me I didn’t say my prayer until I randomly wake up at 2 in the morning. Regardless of what, I’ve been lacking spiritually. I don’t feel like a Baha’i. I don’t know how to fix that and I feel weird even thinking about asking the people who are Baha’i what I should do. I think in the end it’s only a matter of me having to work at it and solving the problem on my own (January 1, 2012).

Without saying night prayers, Bella no longer feels a part of the Baha’i community. Without actively participating in the community, Bella feels like a stranger. She believes she cannot ask for help because people would perceive her as too weird. Trying to maintain a front stage identity that is respected by others, she believes she must confront the challenging feeling of being disconnected on her own. Asking other people for help challenges the front stage identity of being comfortable with being withdrawn and shy. It also runs counter to the
statement; “I couldn’t care less if I live in my head” (Introductory blog entry-11/13/2020). When she is disconnected from her religious community a part of her identity is missing. Religion is an important attribute of her identity because it helps her to feel calm and connected (Blog entry-1/1/2012).

Feeling of being a stranger, whose life experiences are insignificant compared to others echoes the research of many researchers who explore the literacy engagements of adolescents, including the work of Hartman (2006), Palmer (1998), and Yagelski (2000) who all found that young people consciously chose to silence themselves in academic environments because they believed their words and ideas did not count, and had no value. Although virtual environments are often celebrated as spaces where girls can openly construct and explore multiple aspects of their lives, Bella makes it clear that her feelings of insignificance and worries about how others will perceive her limit the types of front stage activities she engages in online. In response to the question, “Do you feel like your blog is an accurate view of your life or do you leave stuff out or make things more exciting?” Bella noted, “I don’t necessarily think my blog is an accurate view of my life. I leave things out. Even though my journal is private and I only friend certain people, there are still some things I just don’t share” (Questionnaire-11/4/2011). She struggles to find language to express herself and worries that others will perceive her as someone too weird to be included in their social community.

Me. I’m weird and I’m not that cool. I don’t have rad piercings or plugs or undercut hairstyles with hot pink dyed tips or tattoos that would make people think “Hey, she looks interesting enough to talk to! She must be rad!” …I don’t always have the greatest stories to tell, I don’t always know what to say, or I don’t have anything to say when I probably should (Literacy artifact #3-1/21/2012).

Although blogs can be seen as a back stage space, as I highlighted in Chapter 4, Bella recognizes that others are still able to read her ideas and make judgments about the type of person she is.
Viewing the blog as a front stage medium, Bella makes conscious decisions about which aspects of her identity she will reveal and which she will conceal.

**Lessons from The Outsiders**

Feeling different from others Bella connects with the novel *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) and uses that text to envision new possibilities for her own life. Bella’s interest in *The Outsiders* first appeared in a blog entry dated October 7, 2011. In this entry, she included an image of an Outsiders’ shirt (Figure 1) and explained that she was excited because she was going to go see the play version of the novel. On October 8, she remarked, “So *The Outsiders* play was amazing and I never wanted it to end…They captured the humor and sadness so well”.

![Figure 6-Outsider T-shirt Image](image)

Her interest in the play is also apparent in her second literacy artifact, where she included an image of the text (Figure 2) and stated “*The Outsiders* is one of my most favorite books. There are characters in this book…I wish I could imitate. In a way they’re the kind of people I try to strive to be in terms of good qualities” (12/21/2011).
Figure 7-Outsider Book from Bella's Second Literacy Artifact

The character Bella connects with the most is Ponyboy, a fifteen-year-old Greaser who is shy and full of dreams. Although Ponyboy could also be described as a stranger because he excels in school and runs track, while his friends run the street and struggle with keeping up with academic demands, Bella views his character as confident and socially connected, someone extremely different from herself.

Pony's able to speak his mind about things to others easily, and I can't really do that without feeling overly self-conscious. I don't always feel as comfortable with myself like Pony seems to, and I don't think I can easily understand people as much as he does, for the most part (Interview #2-12/5/2011).

As Bella describes herself, in relationship to the character Ponyboy, she reveals that she is aware that she is shy, but suggests that she enacts this behavior because she is self-conscious and struggles with understanding others. Through Ponyboy, Bella recognizes the importance of trusting herself and having a voice, even if speaking impacts the ways others perceive her.

One of the lessons I've learned [from reading *The Outsiders*] is that you are the way you are or want to be, and sometimes people aren't going to like you/understand you but you still have to stay true to yourself. And that there's always a little good in something or will be in the end no matter how a bad a situation may be, and that it's okay to feel like you don't fit in anywhere, you might not find that exact place where you belong, but eventually you'll feel comfortable with yourself and find people you feel connected to (Interview #2-12/5/2011)
Imagining new ways of being through the use of literature is highlighted in the work of Rosenblatt (1995) who noted that discussion of characters’ actions and life experiences provide a lens for individuals to consider their own lives, “Talking about these matters in terms of the situation in the book merely makes it easier for the reader to bring his inner problems into the open…revealing what he cannot or will not say about himself” (p. 196). Similar to the ways she uses the character of Ponyboy to consider her own interactions in the world and the ways she wants to take up her own identity; blog archives also allows her to look back on where she has been in terms of identities she is projecting to others. “I’ve been able to look back on past entries and in a way analyze how I was feeling and understand where I was coming from. It’s made it easier to put things into perspective” (Interview #1-11/14/2011). When Bella considers the perspective of Ponyboy as well as her own social situation, she realizes that she can shift the ways people perceive her by engaging with the world in new ways.

**Bella Shifts her Identity**

Although I struggled to connect with Bella during the first two interviews, there was something strikingly different about her when I began to talk with her during the third interview, which occurred on January 23, 2011. The slow responses were replaced with rapid and articulate responses. I noticed this shift almost immediately, when I asked her how things were going. Unlike the previous two entries, where she replied, “it’s fine” (Interview #1-11/14/2011) and “okay” (12/28/2011) to that question, she replied, “Everything’s been pretty good for the most part. I’ve been getting a lot of schoolwork that’s been piling up done, so now I feel relaxed. How have you been? (1/23/2011). The expressiveness of her response paralleled the identity shift I had also noticed in her writing and seemed to suggest that she was pushing the quiet, shy front stage behaviors back stage and taking up a new and more social identity. One of the first
questions I asked about the blog entries she had posted since the second interview involved the new identity I saw emerging in her blog. I noted that on December 4, 2011, she wrote extensively about changing her style of dress.

Apparantly there does come a time when you outgrow your "only wear band t-shirts, jeans, and Converse" phrase.

For the past 3 months I’ve been slowly donating/clearing out my closets of all unwanted things. Shirts that are too large and unflattering, band shirts that were actually quite ugly, childish things, shirts too tight, wonky jeans, worthless skater shoes even though I’ve never skated in my life. Now my closet is looking more hipster/punk/girly-ish. Ish ish ish.

I don’t impulsively buy shirts from Hot Topic or concerts anymore. Unless they *really* look nice I know I won’t tire of it in a year or two. I’ve been following these kinds of blogs {links to fashion blogs} and those are the kind of stuff I actually like and want to wear.

Basically I’ve been revamping my wardrobe.

What about you? Has your style changed recently?

As she outgrows one phase, she discards old fashions and relies on the advice from other bloggers to find new styles that she would like to wear. I wondered if the new way of dressing changed the way she understood her own identity. When I asked that question, she replied, “I think I do, but in a way I think it's an ongoing small change. I feel like since my clothing is changing I'm becoming more comfortable with how I appear and how others see me too” (Interview #3-1/23/2011). Although her blog highlights a shift in clothing, the catalyst for that shift is not apparent. When I asked why decided to change the ways she was presenting her identity she stated,

Overall it's me kind of being fed up with myself for feeling stiff around others and not wanting people to notice (I've had some tell me they had) and I don't want to seem so standoff-ish. Majority of the time I can't always do this because it's just natural for me to act withdrawn, but I'm trying to work on it (Interview #3-1/23/2011).

In her desire to be more socially connected, she began to transform the ways she performed her front stage identity. Rather than being “stand-offish” and withdrawing she began to find ways to
connect to others. Through blog entries, she captures the unraveling story of her crush on a boy. December 16th, 2011, wrote, “If my entries start to vaguely sound like a teen romantic/comedy movie you may have seen, it’s because I have a crush and I’m attempting to do something about it.” Although she does not elaborate on her attempt(s) to connect with him, she writes in a letter and places it in a blog entry on December 28, 2011, demonstrating her belief that aspects of her current identity would make it difficult for the two of them be a relationship with each other.

Lance (pseudonym),
I really need to stop thinking about you, writing about you, trying with you. I know you could never like me the way I like you…Why would you want to be with me when you can be [with] so many other cool girls who most likely look like the person you want to be with?” (December 28, 2011)

Bella saw her identity as distinct from the “cool girls” and questioned why Lance would even consider her. Believing she is too different from what Lance would want in a girlfriend, Bella shies away from revealing her feelings towards him, instead placing the thoughts in the back stage environment of her blog. On January 9, 2012, Bella expresses relief that she did not share her feelings publicly because Lance has started dating another girl. Bella’s once again used her blogging space to write him a letter and express her thoughts surrounding his new girlfriend.

Lance,

The only thing I can say is I'm glad I finally know. You do dig someone else. And she's the total opposite of what I can never be.

Now I’m sitting here and I can’t believe I was so emotional about you and freaking out and wondering if I could ever get close enough to tell you I like you. But now I know, and I didn’t even have to embarrass myself in front of you to find this out.

Now I’m just ticked off and kind of pissed at you and excuse my manners if I begin to call you names when I see you, you f-ing bum. I’m more irritated than sad. But whatever, I’m moving on.

Have fun with your soon-to-be-girlfriend.
This is some nutty stuff.

No xoxox,
Me

The blog was a safe space for her to highlight emerging feelings. Through her entries, she captures a transformation of self away from a quiet and shy girl who is cautious about talking about particular topics online, to being open and expressive. Her identity shifts because she recognizes that her current social performances limit the ways she can interact and engage with people. hooks (1989) highlights the importance of the transformational process reflected in Bella’s blogs, “Awareness of the need to speak, to give voice to the varied dimensions of our lives, is one way women…begin the process of educational for critical consciousness” (p. 13). Learning to speak, women become more aware of the ways they are positioned by their own beliefs and their feelings regarding what is possible in their own lives.

**Introduction to Scarlet**

The final case study focuses on Scarlet, who used literacy to publicly confront painful experiences, reflect upon social and cultural pressures, and learn more about topics that were personally meaningful. Unlike some of the other girls, who needed prompting to complete the literacy artifacts, Scarlet quickly returned the requests for information and explained that she was always open to more interactions. She added me to her Facebook page, instant messaged me outside of scheduled interview times, and commented on my blog posts. She noted that she loved the attention of being involved in the research (Interview #3-12/8/2011). Scarlet posted about a multitude of issues in her blog and explained, “I bare absolutely everything on LJ {LiveJournal} (Questionnaire-11/3/2011). As Scarlet “bares” all, she revealed the ways she conformed to societal expectations for females to be thin and pretty, but also highlighted the struggles of
behavior that can be perceived as crazy. Her identity negotiations involve moving difficult or challenging aspects of her identity backstage and presenting in a manner that is viewed as more socially appropriate and self-empowering.

Scarlet’s openness was in part eye opening, but also challenging to encounter. There were many times when I wished I had not stepped into her work, that I could ignore the difficulties of her life, or give some clear “teacher” advice and help improve the situation. However, I recognized that my role as a researcher was not to fix, but to listen and acknowledge the experiences as she described them. Jones (2004) suggests that my feelings of hesitation towards Scarlet’s journal work are similar to other teachers who downplay, or ask students to leave personal issues outside of the classroom doors. “We are often afraid of what we might hear, afraid of the guilt we may feel, the sadness we may experience, or the hopelessness that may overcome us. However, we must stop protecting ourselves in this way…the silencing of children’s stories makes their lives seem worthless” (p. 468). Simply by listening, we allow the experiences of young people to be front stage, addressed in a public manner, rather than ignored, discounted, or shunned. This work recognizes the importance of telling difficult stories, but also highlights the ways backstage environments can be used to help girls shift away from disempowering experiences and construct new front stage identities.

**Pretty and Thin**

Scarlet’s profile page included an image of a girl, with short hair and down cast eyes on Scarlet’s profile page (Figure 8). Short hair curls just above her shoulder and the part covers most of her right eye. Her left eye is shut and long, dark eyelashes stand out against her pale white skin. Freckles appear across her cheeks.
When I asked Scarlet to explain why she chose to place an image of a girl, Scarlet replied, “I thought she was pretty, and looking at other people's profiles for inspiration, I thought it would look nice. It doesn't have any deeper meaning than aesthetics” (Interview, 1/2/2012). This response aligns with messages presented by many media outlets, girls do not need to go much deeper and they do not need to have strong voices because their main role is to look “pretty”. They learn what “pretty” is by examining the images around them—such as “other people’s profiles”. Researchers including Carney (2000) and Woodcock (2010) suggest that the messages girls continuously receive from the media—television, print, internet, other blog shape the ways they define their own identity and perceptions of beauty. A girl’s appearance plays a critical role in how they are perceived and accepted by their social and cultural communities.

Throughout a variety of blog entries Scarlet represented her understanding of prettiness and feminine beauty, which she constructed through descriptions of the body and clothing. Scarlet strived to fit into a pair of size 0 jeans, which would symbolize beauty. “I still continually
drool at the size zero jeans. They're so perfect, and I want to be size zero so badly, though I know I'll probably only be able to get to a 1” (Blog entry-8/18/2011). During the second interview, Scarlet explained the image of the perfect size jeans is appealing to her because it would document her own perfection. “I just think I'll feel perfect when I'm a size zero.” Symbolically, the perfect size of jeans translates for Scarlet as a perfect sense of self.

When striving for perfection and beauty, Scarlet used language that scrutinized aspects of her own body as well as the bodies of others. “I hate being a disgusting fucking pig…My stomach sticks out, my legs are huge and meaty, and I have chipmunk cheeks. I'm a pig. I want to cut off all of my fat; I wish it were possible (Blog entry, 10/23/2011). Not only did she break down her body into fragments that need improving, she also broke down other girls into their body parts. “I don’t even view girls as girls anymore. They’re the sizes of their legs and stomach. I’m constantly comparing and trying to figure out what who’s the thinnest, what size they are, what their bmi is, how much they weigh, what their body fat percentage is. It’s sick” (Blog entry-11/7/2011). By breaking girls up into individual components they become less than human, they become the sum of individual parts. The girls are on display, judged only by the way they construct an outward appearance.

Although her language makes it difficult for her to be whole and complete as an individual, she is used language that is commonly recognized by other adolescent girls who participate in Pro-Ana online communities. On these sites, Ana-short for Anorexia, is seen as a friend, or a God that should be worshipped and girls talk about the ways to achieve their ideal bodies through problematic eating behaviors (Dias, 2003; Gavin, Rodham and Poyer, 2008). Scarlet explained, “I’m involved in a lot of eating disorder or “pro-ana” {pro-anorexia} blogs…I only go there to meet people similar to me” (questionnaire). On October 1, she posted pictures
generated from another website of what she might look like at different weights. In this image, the body of Scarlet who stands 5’1 tall and weighs 107/108 pounds was stretched to create a projection of what she might look like if she weighed only 77 pounds. Although she seemed to recognize that this image might not be a realistic portrayal of what her body, it did not stop her from noticing the flaws in her current body and dreaming about her new shape.

It's so ridiculous when you think about it logically, but basically, you put in a full-body photo of yourself, and you put in your current height/weight in the picture and how many lbs you want to add/reduce. It doesn't do anything except stretch out the picture or make it narrower, it doesn't take into account bones, width/dimensions (you could still see the shadowy bulge on my stomach when I put myself down to 80 lbs), etc. This would be me at 77 lbs,

Scarlet’s ideal is a narrow body, where she does not have bulges in her stomach. She explains, “I'll be my own "thinspo" as pathetic as that sounds. I was drooling over how thin I could look at 77, and it just made the thought of all food SO repulsive. It's fucking awesome.” When Scarlet used the term “thinspo” she is taking up and sharing terminology that would be recognized by other Anorexic community members would recognize. Thinspo is short for thinspiration, images celebrities with extremely thin bodies worshipped as objects of beauty (Dias, 2003). On November 21, 2011, she noted, “I spent hours on anorexic’s blogs….staring and envying their bones and low BMI” (Blog entry). She strived to fit the cultural expectations of thinness and readers of her blog often applaud and encourage her to continue to lose weight and limit her calorie intake.

Entries filled with descriptions of calorie taken in as well as burned demonstrate another way she represents her membership in the eating disorder community. For example, on October 9th she wrote, “Around 1000 calories today. 400+ burned off. 585 net.” On November 9th she explained, “I had 800 calories, burned off 200 or more from hot yoga…which leaves me with a net of 600. Acceptable, though I’d like my intake to be under 600.” In the comment section of
this entry she is commended by one of her readers, a girl who has struggled with Anorexia, for staying within an acceptable calorie intake. Not only is Scarlet praised by her readers for staying within perceived norms of eating, she is also celebrated for changing her body and losing weight. Scarlet applauded herself several times for the progress she was making towards gaining a more defined body. For example, on August 18th she noted,

Today I feel gorgeous…I know I am seeing progress and I know I can keep going. I was 112 tonight, which means I'll probably be 111?, maybe even 110.5 tomorrow morning, or the day after that, and certainly 110 by Tuesday…I look at the body pics I took a few weeks ago, and my stomach is definitely shrinking, and my collar bones are definitely peeking out a bit.

Her identity is continuously represented through her descriptions of eating, weight, and exercising. “I need to be thin, otherwise I’m worthless. I can’t dress nice. I can’t socialize. I can’t look at myself in the mirror. I can’t do anything. I need to get to 110 lbs to start. Realistic goal in the next few months” (Blog entry-12/12/2011). Scarlet believed her front stage appearance, particularly the weight, impacted the ways she could play out her sense of identity. If she is thin enough, she will be accepted and able to be more engaged with others. When I asked her to comment on the ways online communities influenced her participation in these behaviors she stated, “I think in a way, it normalizes the issue and maybe even rationalizes….if they see the reasons why other girls are doing it, they can say those are their reasons too and it gives them more ways to make it okay” (Interview #3-1/3/2012). As girls communicated with one another they began to take up similar ways of perceiving their behaviors, often rationalizing and justifying their participation in the practice.

To avoid the scrutiny and criticism from others she framed what she is doing as a “diet”. “To the people who don't know about my ED, I deny it. I said I'm eating 1200 calories a day, cutting out bad foods, etc.”. Dieting, from Scarlet’s perspective, is a socially accepted practice and she
attempted to keep the extreme behaviors back stage, with a community of others who would understand and support her behaviors.

Although Scarlet attempted to construct a public identity as someone pretty and in control of her weight, her family and friends express concern and disgust at the extreme measures she is taking to live up to a thin ideal. “My mom gave me a whole lecture today on how I go from one extreme to the other, that by not eating all day I’m fucking up my metabolism and that’s why I come home and binge, etc. I’m actually going to listen to her and try to have breakfast-lunch-dinner” (Blog entry-9/27/2011). Her friend, Matt, suggested that she cut out the “bullshit” attention seeking behaviors and learn to be her own person (11/24/2011). Although her mom and friend, Matt, publicly address her behaviors, she continued to engage in them because she believed being thin was necessary and she tried to hide her problematic behaviors, only revealing what she is doing on her blog. “I plan to lose 8 lbs., at least…I’m not going to tell anyone I am doing it. I’ll only write about it on here. I’ll try to hide it in real life as much as possible” (Blog entry-1/3/2012). The back stage environment of her blog is a place where hides her challenges with food, but allows to maintain a front stage appearance of pretty and feminine.

Scarlet managed other’s impressions of her behavior and appearance by negotiating between front and back stage performances. She attempted to manage a front stage identity as pretty and feminine, while keeping the difficulties with of controlling her food intake back stage. In addition to crafting a social identity based on thinness, Scarlet also explored her social identity as someone who has struggled with exhibiting socially appropriate behaviors. In the next section, I explore the ways Scarlet uses words and images to create an image of someone who is struggling with “crazy” thoughts and behaviors, but pushed those behaviors back stage when she receives negative feedback from others.
Crazy, Cutter Girl

In the questionnaire, the first opportunity the girls had to discuss and describe themselves, Scarlet highlighted her identity as someone who has mental health problems. Scarlet wrote, in the very first open-ended question, “Most people in my school know that I spent 4 months of last year in a psych hospital, so I feel like I’m known as the “crazy girl” the cutter, the psycho, etc.” (11/3/2011). The image of a “crazy” girl is further highlighted in the very first post on her blog. A scene from the movie Girl Interrupted (1999), which follows the lives of young women as they interact in a psychiatric hospital is the first thing that appeared on Scarlet’s blog. In this particular image, Angelina Jolie’s character, Lisa (a sociopath), is in the foreground lying with her head hanging over the edge of the couch with her tongue sticking out. In the background, a black and white television is on and another, and another patient is sitting wrapped up in her blanket and coat. The words “Friends Only” appear on the left hand corner of the photograph. The “Friends Only” label reflects the fact that all of the journal entries are viewable only by individuals that Scarlet has indicated are “friends” (Figure 10). This very public image sets the tone for Scarlet’s future discussions of her own struggles, including hospitalization in a psychiatric ward.
Under the image, Scarlet provided an introduction of herself including details of her personal struggles with mental health labels.

I have Major Depression, PTSD, Borderline Personality Disorder (technically traits since I'm not 18), and ED-NOS. I let my mental illnesses define me, and I wish I didn't. I was violently molested repeatedly from ages 4-8, and that fucked me up….I've been hospitalized four times on account of depression, attempted suicides, cutting, etc. If I get hospitalized again, I'll probably be sent away for long-term. (11/13/1999-Date is outside of the time frame of the study. However, as described in chapter 3, girls use this technique to block readers who are not friends from reading posted blog entries or keep entries in a particular order)

She revealed that mental health labels have shaped how she identifies herself and she gained those labels by acting out in ways that were problematic, including being depressed, attempting suicide, and cutting. Although Scarlet expressed the desire to move away for the identity of someone defined by mental illness, attention is a powerful social reward for her acting out.

Scarlet explained, the reasons she ended up in the hospital, “I was very sick. I was constantly manipulating, constantly wanted attention, did anything for attention. I was cutting everyday…I couldn’t take it {dealing with her life}. I was just so suicidal. I felt so worthless” (Literacy Artifact #1-11/8/2011). Her time in the hospital played a significant role shaping her understanding her own identity. She came to understand that her behavior led her to a placement where she could get the attention she craved, the nurses said good morning to her, gave her time to write, and cared for her (Blog entry-11/30/2011). In addition, when she returned home she was also showered with additional attention. “When I was in the hospital, I was extremely popular…I had hundreds of {Facebook} wall posts supporting me, no exaggeration. When I first came back, everyone wanted to hang out with me” (Interview #2-11/28/2011). Publicly performing an identity as someone who is sick and needs care and support led to social rewards, including comments and concerns for family and friends. For example, on Thanksgiving, she
expressed gratitude to the people who stood by her during her struggles. She received over 40 likes for that comment. She reflected on the attention in a blog entry dated November 24, 2011, “Whenever I write about my mental health I always get 40 or more likes” (Blog entry-11/24/2011). Attention is a powerful payoff, one that is challenging for her to relinquish.

Scarlet’s artifacts captured the way she cycles between urges to act out and receive the negative attention and her desire to be healthy. “I want to act out so badly. Make a mess. Cause a scene. Get negative attention, my favorite kind. I’m disgusting. I’m a disgusting human being” (Blog entry-12/1/2011). However, she realized that acting out can be socially stigmatizing and she desires a more healthy balance for life. “I need to start making some serious change in my life….I need to start seriously working on myself. I need to start recovering” (Blog entry-11/1/2011). Her desire to become healthy is influenced by her own internal desire to no longer feel extreme emotions and find a healthy identity that will carry her into the future. “I want to have motivation and drive for life…I want to have energy and vitality. I really want to do this” (Blog entry-11/14/2011). Publicly performing in ways that are unhealthy can be challenging for other people, and have negative social consequences. “No one wants to be friends with the crazy girl…. My own family (aunts, uncles, cousins) treats me like I'm mentally handicapped now” (Interview #2-11/28/2011). There are times when her peers call her annoying and tell her to stop with the drama. In one encounter, her ex-boyfriend, Thomas, said it was challenging to be around her because he feels like she is emotionally draining to be around and she, “sucks the life out of {him} like a sponge” (Blog entry-11/1/2011). With peers and friends voicing concerns about her identity, Scarlet begins to take slow, tentative steps towards constructing a new public identity.
In a blog entry from November 11, 2011, Scarlet wrote extensively about a multitude of issues concerning her life, including the way she feels her behavior is having a negative impact on others. “I am an emotional parasite…I feed off others lives and creations and identities because I have none of my own…I help others but refuse to help myself”. She highlighted the ways she relies on others to feed her need for recognition and uses their voices to understand more about herself. However, this reliance on others interfered with her ability to understand her own identity and craft a performance in line with her own more healthy thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. She wrote about the need of letting go of the past, pushing it back stage, and creating a new public identity.

I need to truly rid myself of everything in the past. I’m not defined by my past and because I feel that I walk around with the label of “CRAZY” slapped on my head, that’s what I come across as. If I start seeing myself as a young girl with interesting stories to tell and a big heart who like reading, writing, and possibly yoga, meditating, Wicca, then maybe I’ll come across as that and maybe I’ll relearn to socialize.

She recognized that the label of “crazy” that she has clung to and allowed her to gain attention from others must be relinquished if she wants a different type of attention from others and new identity for herself.

**Secret Identity: Just Average**

Taking steps to craft a identity as a “young girl with interesting stories to tell” Scarlet’s blog entries began to take on a different tone, as she wrote less about her struggles and more about the new ways she is engaging with others. For example, on November 19, 2011, Scarlet posted a blog entry in which she described a class field trip she went on. Rather than the feelings of emptiness and social isolation she typically described in regards to peer interactions, she wrote “I felt surprisingly happy and social…I sat with my friend Donna and she pretty much told me about everything going on in her life, and we had a steady flow of conversation. I felt normal for
the first time in a long time.” She allowed herself to engage in conversations that are playful and silly, rather than always on the brink of a crisis.

In a second blog entry from November 19, 2011, Scarlet continued to explain her transition between having a mentally ill identity and the emergence of a new identity. In this entry, she described the symbols from a dream, where she saw herself wearing a tattoo, earrings, a bra, and shirt. All of the objects had a rainbow butterfly on them. The butterfly represented a transitional period, in which she would have the opportunity to reveal new ways of thinking. The tattoo revealed her uniqueness and individuality. Ears suggested her need to be more and responsive to others. A nurturing maternal side was represented with the bra. And the shirt revealed her emotional connection to various situations. She suggested that the rainbow represented her hopes and success, a link between her spiritual and Earthly self. Through her dream, she believes she is being told to let go of her mentally ill ways and take on new ways of being.

Tarot also provided symbolic ways for Scarlet to envision new ways of enacting her identity and engaging with others. When she was freaking out about the stability of her relationship with her new girlfriend, she turned to the cards and they told her to “take immediate and direct action”, thus reinforcing the notion that her identity and how others engage with her is directly related her to the ways she represents herself and engages with others (12/29/2011). The importance of taking personal responsibility and empowering herself was also seen in two tarot card readings from January 1, 2012. Scarlet asked the cards about her girlfriend as well as what the New Year held for her and in both cases, she received as two of wands as the last card (the card believed to reveal the outcome of a situation) and she interpreted that to mean, “personal power, creativity, and boldness”. Taking up those attributes, Scarlet allowed herself to move
away from the victim identity, in which she relied on other people to take care of her and recognize that has personal power to change situations.

Scarlet also took up the practices of yoga, as a way to empower herself. This practices pushed her to learn a new skill and reflect on the ways she can handle challenging situation. “I got a good work-out. I pushed myself to the limits. I can’t wait to become better at it, and fully do the poses and then pushing myself even further. I want to be great at yoga” (Blog entry-12/7/2011). She orders books and tapes to learn more about the practice. She also envisioned taking a yoga training class, so she could get a job doing something she is passionate about (1/11/2012).

Personal difficulties that opened her blog including stories of molestation, depression, hospitalizations and endless challenges are pushed back stage and she enacts an identity that is more hopeful. Socializing with others and engaging in new activities help Scarlet construct a new front stage identity.

Everything is currently normal, and that's okay. A year ago I would have been doing anything to make a crisis; normal was the enemy last year. I would be cutting myself during school, spraying perfume in my eye so people would think I was crying, threatening suicide, trying to get hospitalized, hooking up with guys I just met, secretly basking in my glory of cutting deeper than 99% of people I know. I've come a long way and I talk about it a lot, but I'm so thankful that I'm past that. I think I live in the past too much. There's a part of me that will always cling to that part of my life, and it might be something I always accidentally bring up because I miss the drama, but I'm able to not act on it. I'm okay (1/19/2012).

She further noted the transition to her new identity when she stated, “I've basically just been working, reading my Hinduism catechism and meditating…I feel like I should be more chaotic…Meh, guess my identity recently is "average" (1/29/2012).

Although Scarlet reshaped her identity, it should be noted that there were blog entries between the end of November and the completion of research that revealed she still struggled, on
occasion, with performing in ways that were socially acceptable and productive. On December 12, 2011, she reflected in her blog that she felt “fat and obese” and began to act out-hitting herself in the stomach and face. Her mother called her out on that behavior and told her to, “start acting like a normal person.” After things calmed down, she shared with her mom that she wanted to receive the same hugs and attention that her sister received. Her mom replied that Scarlet puts up too many walls and it’s hard to have that type of relationship with her. Once again, Scarlet is left realizing that her behavior gets in the way of engaging with people in the ways she desires. She must put the past behind her in order move forward and write new stories about her relationships with others as well as herself.

In this chapter, I have highlighted the ways Bella and Scarlet both renegotiated their identities by moving their front stage performances back stage, and constructing a new public identity. The girls shifted their identities because of social messages that made feel like strangers, isolated from others, and desired to belong. As Shabatay (1991) notes to find acceptance the stranger must, “learn how to blend, to belong, to be beyond mistrust” (p. 140). Bella and Scarlet shifted their ways of performing their identities, by finding new ways to empower themselves and find their own voice as young women. The implications for this chapter highlight the importance for teachers to recognize front stage performances, constructed in multimodal way, as well as the influence of community on types of identities that are socially enacted.

**Implications**

As noted in Chapter 2, women can use stories to understand more about their own beliefs, values, and experiences as well as the social and cultural communities around them (Cooper, 1991). The Internet creates new ways for girls to tell stories, as they must consciously create a
personal identity using images and texts on their profile, blog entries, and other forms of online correspondence. Teachers should be aware that online environments help girls construct and share their understandings of self through multiple representations. Although there were only a few images in the girls’ blog entries, they used those pieces to highlight aspects of their own identity. For example, Bella’s revealed her love of *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) through an image of a t-shirt she wanted and the book she was reading. Scarlet posted pictures of a “pretty” girl and her own attempts at constructing the ideal body. Students should be encouraged to integrate words and images in their own projects to highlight key ideas about themselves or the material they are trying to learn.

The second implication that arose from this chapter highlights the importance of creating spaces where identities can shift and change, but encouraging students to use literacy to explain why their identities are shifting. For bloggers, revealing catalyst behind the shift is particularly important because the reader is not an observer in their daily interactions. For Bella, the catalyst that shifted her identity was a crush on a boy. In her blog, she noted, “If my entries start to vaguely sound like a teen romantic/comedy movie you may have seen it’s because I have a crust and I am attempting to do something about it” (Blog entry-12/16/2012). Scarlet expresses a desire to recover from her eating disorder and have more appropriate social interactions (Blog entry-11/14/2012). As students learn new material, they should be encouraged to reveal the ways their new understanding influences the ways they understand themselves and their relationships with larger social and cultural groups in which they are members or seek membership.

The last chapter of this study offers a discussion of the study, specifically weaving together the work of the five girls with the individual research questions. Further implications for educators will be discussed and limitations of this study will be highlighted.
Chapter 6-ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways adolescent girls between the ages of 16-19 use blogs and blogging to construct and negotiate their identities using a wide range of multimodal texts (text, drawings, photographs, etc.). This qualitative case study focused on five adolescent girls who kept blogs on the site LiveJournal. The data were collected from a pre-questionnaire, blog entries, three literacy artifacts, and three online interviews. Narrative analysis (Reissman, 1992), and Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011) were used to sort, organize, code, and analyze the data. Data highlight the notion that girls use their blogs to construct and negotiate multiple identities through the various symbolic representations that align with and resist larger social and cultural messages. The findings sustain the postmodern notion that identities are continuously in flux and girls’ online writings often blur the boundaries between front and back stage regions. Chapter 4 included narratives of two girls, Ryann and Casey, who moved their identities from back stage to front, as they found comfort and support in their online communities. While Chapter 5 highlighted the ways Bella and Scarlet made decisions to move their front stage identities back stage when they realized their behavior isolated them from the very people they wanted to be close to. This chapter will analyze the findings of all four girls in relationship to the research questions:

1. In what ways do adolescent girls make use of multimodalities (texts, drawing, pictures, etc.) to construct and negotiate multiple aspects of their identity in blogs?

2. In what ways do girls use their blog to take up or resist social and cultural messages they are hearing both online and offline?
3. To what extent do girls demonstrate a transformation in self-identity through their online narratives? What do the narratives analyses suggest are the catalyst for that change?

As I address each of the research questions, I will draw upon the finding from Chapters 4 and 5 revealing the similarities and differences between the girls’ work. After that, I will describe the ways this study upon existing literature in the fields of literacy and technology, highlighting both the implications and limitations of the study. The chapter ends with recommendations for educators and other professionals who work with adolescent girls, including suggestions for future research.

Analysis

Question #1

In what ways do adolescent girls make use of multimodalities (texts, drawing, pictures, etc.) to construct and negotiate multiple aspects of their identity in blogs?

Blogs contained both visual and textual components. However, the girls relied primarily upon written text to construct and negotiate their understandings of self and the world. Multiple genres of writing appeared in the data including personal narratives, fan fiction stories, letter writing, and self-descriptions. For example, Ryann constructed her identity as a fan of Korean pop music and a fan fiction writer through written descriptions of self-including the statement, “I’m a teenage girl who loves K-pop music video games, {and} fan fiction” (Questionnaire-11/3/2011). She revealed this identity through the fan fiction stories she posted on her blog. The stories wove together her knowledge of Korean pop (K-pop) stars’ personality characteristics and personality with aspects of her own understandings of self. For example, she used the love triangle between Hyoyeon, Donghae, and Eunhyuk to explore different romantic scenarios, even though she was too shy to physically negotiate a relationship with someone offline.
Scarlet also constructed her identity through descriptions of self, “I have difficulty identifying myself and I feel like I’m in a “transitional phase, but eating disordered, borderline (as in BPD), a realist, a dreamer, inquisitive….I’m known as the “crazy girl”, the cutter, etc….I’m striving to not identify myself by my illness” (Questionnaire-11/3/2011). Scarlet’s blog entries focused on the multi-faceted nature of her identity, including the ways she understands and performs various aspects of her identity. On-going negotiations often focus on whether or not she will adapt a healthy lifestyle, or continue to engage in problematic behavior to seek control and gain attention from others. Scarlet sees people as central to helping her understand more about herself and negotiating new identities for herself. “However afraid I am of happiness and solid relationships, it’s what I want most, and it’s in my future, but I just need a strong support system…to help me in getting there” (Blog entry-10/2/2011). Through stories, Scarlet reflects on the types of interactions she has with various people and how their words and actions continuously shape the ways she understands herself.

Casey included a hand-drawn image of a bunny to represent the feminine side of her own identity, while a photograph of the television character, Don Draper, represented her masculine side (Figures 4 and 5 in Chapter 4). Symbolic images conveyed details about the ways girls’ identities, specifically their appearance, were informed by larger social and cultural messages. Navigating into Scarlet’s blog entries requires clicking on an image from the movie Girl Interrupted (Figure 6 in Chapter 4). This media image could be seen as a way Scarlet aligns herself with other cultural images and messages centering on mental illness. She aligns herself with the characters in the movie by defining herself by mental health labels, seeing herself as crazy, and descriptions of her own stay in a mental health hospital.
Cultural connections, posted on blogs and descriptions of self, also conveyed the girls’ identities as fans of a particular type of media. For example, Bella included an image of her favorite book, *The Outsiders*, while Ryann shared a group photo of the Korean pop group Girls’ Generation (Figures 1, 2, 3 in Chapter 4). As Black (2007, 2008) noted, fan fiction writing is a way girls can negotiate aspects of their identities they struggle to embody in other social contexts. Ryann, who was shy about engaging in intimate relationships in her own life, used the complex dating relationships of Hyoyeon to explore different social situations. Casey used role-play alongside fictional story writing to try out new identities. Writing scenarios for the transgender character Frankie provided a way for her to explore gender and sexual identity.

**Question #2**

**In what ways do girls use their blog to take up or resist social and cultural messages they are hearing both online and offline?**

Recall in Chapter 2, I noted that Goffman (1959) stressed the importance of recognizing both front stage and back stage performances. These regions are helpful in considering the ways online spaces shift as they construct and negotiate their social identity performance. Often the girls made strategic decisions about which identities they would take up and which they would conceal depending on the ways they took up or resisted larger social and cultural message heard online and offline.

Scarlet’s writing provided a clear example of the impact outside messages have played in shaping her understanding of self. Her profile picture included an image of a girl she has described as “pretty,” and she recognized this characteristic because she has read and observed the ways other people put their blogs together. Her understandings of beauty are also fashioned off of traditional notions of feminine beauty, in which women should be thin and good-looking.
On November 21, 2011, she noted, “I spent hours on anorexic’s blogs…staring and envying their bones and low BMI” (Blog entry). She strove to fit the cultural expectations of thinness and readers of her blog often applauded and encouraged her to continue to lose weight and limit her caloric intake. When I asked her to comment on the ways online communities influenced her participation in these behaviors she stated, “I think in a way, it normalizes the issue and maybe even rationalizes….if they see the reasons why other girls are doing it, they can say those are their reasons too and it gives them more ways to make it okay” (Interview #3-1/3/2012). Communicating with other girls with eating disorders, Scarlet was drawn to engage in problematic behaviors.

On the other hand, Scarlet was also influenced by the messages of family and friends who express concern and disgust at the extreme measures she took up to live up to a thin ideal. “My mom gave me a whole lecture today on how I go from one extreme to the other, that by not eating all day I’m fucking up my metabolism and that’s why I come home and binge, etc. I’m actually going to listen to her and try to have breakfast-lunch-dinner” (Blog entry-9/27/2011). Her friend, Matt, suggested that she cut out the “bullshit” attention seeking behaviors and learn to be her own person (11/24/2011). To deal with the conflicting messages about how she should represent herself Scarlet blurred the boundaries separating front stage and back stage performances. In particular, she attempted to hide extreme behaviors by using language that would be more socially acceptable to those outside of the eating disorder community. “I post a lot about “weight loss”…but I never mention the word eating disorder. I like people to think I’m just a typical dieter; it’s far more acceptable” (Questionnaire-11/3/2011). For Scarlet, as well as other girls in the study, language played a significant role for taking up or resisting larger social and cultural messages.
Casey also included descriptions in her blog about the ways she was both conforming to as well as resisting messages from larger social and cultural communities. Although she felt partly male, she represented her feminine identity in a way that would be socially recognized and accepted by others. “Other people see me as a femme lesbian (I am very into makeup, very fashion-conscious and strive to be a fashion designer” (Questionnaire-11/2/2011). She hid her masculine feelings because she was still confused about her own feelings around appearing in that way, as well as how others would perceive her. Casey’s struggles to make sense of her gender and sexual identity could be attributed to the messages she hears surrounding queer issues offline. She explained that she heard messages from others that made her question whether being genderqueer or gay was “wrong or immoral”, but commented that the Internet was a supportive environment where she could learn about herself as well as the larger political and historical background surrounding queer issues (Interview #1-11/21/2011). The research participants all described moments when they chose to self-silence in an attempt to conform to social and cultural expectations. However, the girls also described opportunities when they resisted the status quo, found their voice, and began to transform their perceptions of themselves or see the world in new ways. This self-silencing relates to the work of Wissman (2007) as well as other feminist researchers (Bruce, 2003; Pipher, 1994; Rich, 1979) who noted that girls need opportunities to reflect upon their own experiences and use their voices to open up new possibilities of self.

**Question #3**

To what extent do girls demonstrate a transformation in self-identity through their online narratives? What do the narratives analyses suggest are the catalyst for that change?
Bella initially described herself as “introverted” and claimed that she chose not to share aspects of herself with others because believed that they would not care (Questionnaire-11/4/2011). However, she also described the importance of being recognized by others when she is willing to share her ideas through her blog and other digital outlets. “I like hearing people’s opinions about what I created, and its makes me feel good when someone would say they really liked it” (Questionnaire-11/4/2011). Bella’s shift in her identity as someone who creates and shares materials online and someone who is more shy and secretive parallels the work of Pipher (1994) who charged that girls often lose their voices as they move into adolescence. At this time, girls become more concerned about how they will be perceived by others. Bella expresses her own feelings of insignificance and the caution she has towards sharing her work, “I’m very cautious when it comes to posting stuff on certain places. If I don’t think something’s very good or people will view it negatively, then I won’t post it. I know people won’t always like what I put out there, but I still get anxious about it” (questionnaire-11/4/2011). Bella moves from creating and sharing work, to anxiety around the work because she is concerned about how she will be perceived by others. However, when she begins to like a boy she reflects on her own identity and recognizes that her shy demeanor is the complete opposite of what her crush desires (Blog entry-1/9/2012). Recognizing that she must be active in creating a desirable situation Bella notes, “I feel like some of the kids at my school are just “waiting for something to appear” and be handed to them…You have to actually look for stuff….being a bit more open-minded” (Blog entry-1/4/2012).

Ryan also described herself as shy, but as she began to interact in fan fiction communities she learned to negotiate meaning with other people and redefine her own sense of identity. “As a child, I didn’t interact with people. Now I’m open…I’m a creator myself. If I
like your writing, I’ll tell you. I’ll start conversations with people…I feel like I can be myself” (Literacy Artifact #1-11/14/2011). Engaging in online Discourse communities allowed her to form relationships and a supportive network with others.

**Summary of the Discussion**

To construct and negotiate identities within online spaces adolescent girls used text and visual components. Texts included multiple genres of writing including personal narratives, letters, and fan fiction writing. Fan fiction writing allowed the girls to engage with others around a shared knowledge of a particular topic as well as explore new social identities. Through characters adolescent girls confronted topics, including sexuality and gender roles, that were difficult to discuss in other settings. Girls used visual components to support the messages presented in text as well as offered an opportunity to view the ways girls constructed meaning and expressed their identity using symbolic representations.

Goffman (1959) describes the importance of recognizing front and back stage regions for identity formation. These regions are important to recognize within the context of online literacy spaces because they suggest that individuals make strategic decisions about how they will “perform” or represent themselves to others. They made strategic decisions about what aspects of their identity they would reveal and which they would conceal. Transformations in identity occurred when girls moved aspects of their identity from back stage, sharing their emerging knowledge, confusion, and successes with others. Combining visual and textual components girls were able to move beyond positions or distance they have felt in other social environments. As they grew more comfortable with expressing and sharing their identities online, they could move to communicating and sharing offline.
Discourse communities played a vital role in the type of literacy acts the girls constructed and shared online. Gee (2011) stresses the importance of Discourse communities, suggesting that individuals learn to express their personal identities as part of larger social and cultural communities. The online space allowed girls to connect with others who had shared knowledge around a particular topic or engaged in similar types of behavior. Recognizing online environments as social communities is critical for shifting discussions around literacy practices.

**Contributions and Expansion on Existing Literature**

**Contribution 1**

**Expanding the notion of Discourse communities by recognizing that girls can perform their identities using front stage and back stage regions**

Traditionally, girls have been encouraged to silence their own voices and disconnect from their own experiences in order to conform to social and cultural expectations. Taking on a passive role, the girls may choose not to speak out in class, to peers, or in other offline social contexts. However, the findings of this research suggest that online literacy practices create a way to break through the veil of silence that has often made girls’ voices invisible in society. As girls integrate their voices into discussions, they are able to engage with others, reflect upon their own ways of thinking, and continuously transform their understandings of self. As noted above, discussions of identity were framed through the theoretical lens of Goffman (1959) and Gee (2011). Merging these two frameworks together suggests that personal identities emerge from engagements with larger social and cultural communities and can be controlled, at least partially, through front and back stage performances.

The main purpose of the study was to explore the ways girls constructed and negotiated their identities through blogging. As I examined the data and constructed narratives centering on
each girls’ experiences with online practices I recognized that Discourse communities played a vital role in the type of conversations the girls felt comfortable revealing and those they thrust back stage. The support or condemnation girls believed they would receive from others played a key role in the girls’ portrayal of self. When I offered the girls an opportunity to describe their online experiences they often cited the support and encouragement they felt when sharing their material online, and maintained that they could not be as open offline. Blogging allowed girls to reflect upon their own experiences and begin to conceive of new possibilities for their own identity. They could work out issues in a semi-public space before presenting their new sense of self to a larger audience.

Although it is importance to recognize that blogging gave girls a voice, it is also critical to point out that online Discourse communities are not always beneficial. Online interactions can lead children to connecting to and sharing their problematic behaviors with others who are also engaged in similar issues. Girls learn to use language in a strategic manner that normalizes the problematic behaviors and they can struggle to see other possibilities for their own lives.

Recognizing that identities are created and performed in both front and back stage regions aligns with postmodern notions that identities are continuously shaped. Literacy engagements are critical for helping girls see alternative ways of being. Online spaces are important because they facilitate the type of exploration described by Greene (2001) who claim awareness was important for pursuing new ways of being.

We are concerned with possibility, with opening windows on alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before. . .We are interested in breakthroughs and new beginnings, in the kind of wide-awakeness that allows for wonder and unease and questioning and the pursuit of what is not yet (p. 44).

As girls move between front and back stage regions they make decisions about which identities they will perform publicly and which they move back stage. Concealing aspects of
one’s identity back stage maintains status quo, but also helps the girls to maintain social connections with others. Back stage girls can ask questions, deal with their own uneasiness and explore a wide range of possibilities before publicly identifying and performing that identity.

**Contribution #2**

**Recognizing the value of exploratory literacy practices including those that address challenging and extremely personal issues.**

Girls must negotiate who they are in the face of a society, which tells them to remain silent and detached from topics when they cannot be easily resolved and presented in a polished, clear-cut manner. Blogging created opportunities for girls to reflect upon the ways they have been molded personal experiences as well as the messages they have heard from social and cultural institutions. Although the value of personal experiences is highlighted across literacy research, previous studies have focused on issues traditionally recognized as common to adolescent girls. Rarely has literacy research confronted the types of issues addressed in the work of Casey and Scarlet. The issues and concerns of Casey and Scarlet extended far beyond the norms of typical adolescent developmental, and their blogs became an outlet for finding others who could relate and help them make sense of their own identity. Issues like molestation and confusion around gender identity have both political and personal ramifications. By writing about their experiences and presenting them in a public manner girls are able to engage in community with others to reflect upon and explore the ways they have been shaped by their experiences and begin to conceptualize new ways of being.

**Implications**

The findings from this study yielded three implications, which will be described in this section, specifically focusing on the ways girls construct online narratives that lend themselves to
understanding more about multiple aspects of the girls’ identities. Discussions of the findings spiral from the feminist perspective that suggests that all voices, including those that have been traditionally been marginalized, are valuable and should be recognized (Bruce, 2003; Pipher, 1994; Rich, 1979). As well as the theoretical work surrounding new literacies, in which girls construct and share meaning through the use of technology including the integration of multiple modes of communication. As previously noted, the discussion of identities centers around the work of Goffman (1959) and Gee (2011) who suggested that identities are enacted using props and other cues that are recognized by others.

I have chosen to break up the implications of the study around three key areas: identity work, the importance of community, and multimodal literacy practices.

**Implication #1**

**Identity Work: Educators should recognize and encourage identity exploration for all students.**

As discussed in Chapter 2, adolescent girls are often encouraged to be silent and passive in classroom environments. They detach from their own knowledge and experiences as they enter a classroom and attempt to conform to the social norms and expectations of that learning environment. Taking on passive roles, girls may simply conform to the expectations of their teacher-completing assignments as instructed, limiting their sharing to socially sanctioned topics, and avoid the challenging and pressing issues that often impact adolescent girls. In addition to silencing themselves at school, many of the research also explained that they kept their blogs hidden from friends and family members because they did not want to be perceived as too weird or condemned for their online interactions.
To combat the self-silencing, teachers should help to broaden the types of identities that are socially recognized and discussed in the classroom. This could include having book discussions around texts that include topics that girls are struggling with but have difficulty giving voice to including: sexuality, gender identity, the impact of religion on choices one chooses to make, and personal violence. Teachers guide students into analyzing the ways characters portray themselves through actions, words, and appearance and compare those identities to their own. In addition, the students could be encouraged to describe and discuss aspects of the characters’ identity that were portrayed front stage and those presented back stage and the potential reasons for the character’s choices.

As these texts are introduced, girls could be encouraged to personally reflect on and connect to the texts before making their ideas public. Rather than engaging students in the public forum of a classroom discussion, teachers could first encourage students to share with a partner or small groups discussions before presenting their ideas to a wider audience. Similar to the privacy settings built into the LiveJournal site, girls should always be given a choice about whether or not they want to share their ideas publicly or keep their ideas hidden.

**Implication #2**

**Building and Maintaining Online Community: Educators should recognize the online discourse communities as spaces where individuals collaborate and learn from one another.**

When particular identities are socially sanctioned and girls might feel shunned for appearing in a manner that deviates from the norm, girls might seek out alternative communities. For all of the girls in this research, online spaces provided an environment where they felt recognized and supported. Within this context, girls found others who had similar ways of thinking, acting, behaving and believing, which created a feeling of safety for sharing aspects of
themselves they were uncomfortable sharing in face-to-face encounters. Following from the findings that suggested girls were more open with their identities online than off, educators should integrate opportunities for girls to socially connect with individuals they do not see face-to-face. This could occur by setting up collaborative opportunities with classrooms in other states. Students in various classrooms could create and share individual blogs or engage in instant message chats focused on their personal experiences, or around a curriculum topic.

Encouraging students to engage in online collaboration is important, however teacher must also be willing to take a hands-on approach to technology. Seeking out collaborative opportunities online through participation in online social networking sites, webinars, and quality professional development can provide a way for teachers to see the ways technology is changing the literacy and social practices. On-going collaboration should not only occur in digital spaces, but teachers and students in the same classroom should be encouraged to listen to and learn from one another.

**Implication #3**

**Expanding Understanding of Narratives: Teachers need to teach and embrace multimodal ways for expressing a narrative.**

Narratives have been traditionally recognized as stories with a linear plot. However, the data collected in this study suggests that online communication is shifting the ways ideas are expressed. The girls in this study wove together stories across multiple data sources, using a wide variety of writing genres and merging together text and visual components. This finding suggests that adolescents should be exposed to and taught how to use a wide variety of genres to convey their knowledge about a particular topic. Teaching students genre structures and encouraging them to use their knowledge using the form that fits their overall purpose can help
students to engage in personally meaningful ways. For adolescent girls, who struggle with voicing their ideas expose to and knowledge of multiple forms of writing can help bridge the gap between silence and stories. Teachers who are trying to integrate more voices into the classroom environment should encourage students to express themselves through a wide range of resources including drawing, photographs, texts, and other forms of expression.

**Limitations**

One limitation for this study was the purposeful selection of research participants. I selected girls between the ages of 16-19 who had a history of blogging and interacting online. For these girls, online spaces were an integral part of their social lives and had been for years. They actively engaged in a wide range of self-sponsored online practices. By selecting these girls, I limited the possibility of understanding the ways girls with minimal online experience interact within this context.

Another limitation for this study was the selection of the *LiveJournal* as the research site. This blogging site is recognized as a space where users are “passionate, prolific and private” (Marwick, 2008). The users on this site are described as actively engaged in seeking out other members who have a shared interest in a particular topic, which leads to online relationships. Blog entries are known to be extensive, often multiple paragraphs, rather than the quick statements posted by users on other social online sites. Finally, *LiveJournal* users have control over who reads their entries and often choose to keep their reading audience small. The structure of the site may have influenced the ways girls posted and shared information.

Learning about the girls only through their online practices could be seen as another limitation of this study. Without face-to-face contact with the girls I was limited to the information girls presented through their literacy practices. Girls were also unable to physically
confirm my identity, which might have influenced the information they were willing to disclose. Although this could be seen as a limitation, it could also be seen as a benefit as the girls had the opportunity to speak frankly about issues that concerned them without the physical presence of a perceived adult or authority figure.

**Recommendation for Future Research**

**Recommendation #1**

**Examination of Identity Blogging Work in an Academic Setting**

This study described the importance of looking carefully at the adolescent girls blogs in order to understand how they constructed and negotiated their identities. I recommend that teachers begin to look at ways to use blogs to integrate identity work within academic settings. This could occur by having students set up their own blogs and giving them time each day to create entries that are personally relevant. The collaborative environment of a classroom might lead to students interacting with one another and sharing their understanding of various writing genres, discussing a wide range of interests, and supporting one another in ways that are not easily facilitated in a typical classroom day. Teachers could help facilitate this type of identity work by creating book studies around texts that address issues that could shape and inform adolescent identities and encourage students to share their responses online.

**Recommendation #2**

**Examining Girls’ Identity Work Across Multiple Online Platforms**

Blogs are only one outlet adolescent girls are using to construct and share their identities online. Social networking sites, message boards, and instant message chats are only a few of the other popular sites girls are using to interact and understand more about themselves. Looking across the various sites would provide a way of exploring whether the structure of the site
influences the ways girls present aspects of their identity. By looking across the various sites, a research could understand more about the role a sites structure and social dynamic influences the types of identity work girls are engaged in. Examining the different sites would allow educators to make strategic decisions about the technology they will use and the purpose it could serve in the classroom.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to find out how adolescent girls between the ages of 16-19 construct and negotiate their identities through blogs and blogging. I discussed the importance of recognizing the importance of looking at the ways girls used multiple genres of writing to construct and share aspects of themselves. These identities were shaped and shared within online Discourse communities, where the girls felt their knowledge and ways of interacting would be respected and supported. I discussed the importance of recognizing the ways online spaces blur the boundaries between front stage and back stage performances, as girls make conscious and unconscious decisions about the types of material they allow others to access. Although girls are traditionally encouraged to be silent and disconnect from their own experiences, blogging was seen as a safe space where girls could explore a wide range of personally relevant issues.

This research calls for shifts in the ways educators engage adolescent girls in literacy practices, including expanding the types of identity and personal issues that are socially sanctioned in the classroom. Bringing in outside texts and encouraging girls to share in small or large groups, teachers will increase opportunities for more girls to express a wider range of social identities. Teachers should also recognize the value of online spaces for increasing literacy engagements and social collaboration.
APPENDIX A: LIVEJOURNAL ADVERTISEMENT

Do you publish materials to Livejournal, Flickr, DeviantART, Youtube, or Vimeo? Are you a female between the ages of 16-19?

Would you be interested in participating in a research study that explores issues of identity, technology, and social interactions?

If you are interested in participating or would like further information please contact me at the following e-mail address

Kattie Hogan (Wayne State University Doctorate Student)

Information about the study: The goal of this study is to explore the ways adolescent girls construct and negotiate their identities within online spaces.

To participate in the study you must create and publish materials on Livejournal as well as at least one of the following online sites: Flickr, DeviantART, Youtube, or Vimeo. If you are interested in participating you should contact me via LiveJournal messenger and I will e-mail you additional information and a questionnaire to fill out.

If you are selected to participate in the research you will be asked to

• Share your current blog entries and materials published on other digital sites (Vimeo, Youtube, Flickr or DeviantART) as well as three months worth of archived data.

• Share your understanding of technology, identity, and online literacies through three projects. You will be given a series of questions to guide your thinking and creation process.

• Participate in three instant message interviews that will ask additional questions about you and the project you have created.

• At the completion of the study you will take the same questionnaire that you took in the beginning of the study. You will be compensated for your time.
APPENDIX B: [BEHAVIORAL] RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study: Narratives of Possibilities: Adolescent girls constructing and negotiating multiple identities across blogs and digital art spaces

Principal Investigator (PI): Kattie Hogan  
College of Education-Reading, Language and Literature  
Phone #

When we say “you” in this consent form, we mean you. “We” means the researchers and other staff.

Purpose
You are being asked to be in a research study examining the ways adolescent girls construct and negotiate multiple identities online using blogs and other digital art spaces because you actively maintain a blog on the blogging site Livejournal and you create and post content on at least one of the following digital art spaces: Flickr, DeviantART, Youtube, or Vimeo on a regular basis. The data collection, for this study, will occur electronically through instant messaging and e-mail communication. 6-8 girls between the ages of 16-19 will be selected to participate in the study.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

In this research study, the researcher will seek to understand the stories being constructed and shared online. The researcher believes that the stories girls are telling are to explore and make sense of their identities. The stories blur the boundaries between public and private lives and create new ways for the girls to see themselves and their social communities. Online tools, in particular, allow girls to use various writing skills to represent themselves, including traditional print, visuals, and music.

Study Procedures

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to complete various components of the research. These activities will include:

• Filling out an initial questionnaire, which will be distributed to you through e-mail. This questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire will ask you to share information including your age, how you perceive your own identity, as well as ask you to share links to your Livejournal, Flickr, DeviantART, Vimeo, or Youtube account. The questionnaire will help the researcher determine if you meet the criteria for the research. You will be notified by e-mail if you are accepted into the study.
If you are not accepted into the study you will also receive an e-mail explaining the reason(s) you have not been accepted into the study.

• If you are accepted into the study, the researcher will examine the entries you post on your blog or digital art space during the 12-week study. In addition, the researcher will also ask that you share archived material that has been published on those sites. The researcher will review material that dates back three months prior to the study beginning.

• At three points in the study you will be given a series of questions and asked to construct an essay, story, art piece or video blog that addresses the topic. The three topics that will be focused on in these questions include: different ways that you identify yourself, how you communicate with others online and off and how you use technology to share your ideas with others. -The time you spend on creating these reflective pieces will vary, but you should expect that it would take at least one hour to complete. Questions that will be asked include:

-What is your earliest memory of using online spaces?
-In what ways, if at all, do you feel like the audience influences the way you create material?
-How would you describe yourself? What traits, characteristics, or behaviors might people associate with you?
-How are characteristics you have shared above similar to or different from the ways you present yourself online?
-What are some important events that have occurred in your life? What did you learn about yourself or others through those events?
-What online communities, if any, have you joined? How would one go about joining an online community?
-Are the communities that you participate with online similar to or different from the communities that you interact with or display offline?
-Have you ever created an online community? What did you do to recruit members? How is your community doing now?

• After completing each reflective artifact (essay, story, art piece, or video blog) you should arrange time to complete an interview with the researcher through instant messaging. The instant message interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes and will include questions such as: Explain what you made and why you chose to make that. How do you feel that creation represents technology, identity, or the social communities that you engage with? How is this piece similar to or different from your previous pieces?

• Finally, at the end of the 12-week study you will be asked to complete the same questionnaire that you took in the beginning. Again, this questionnaire should take approximately 15 minutes.

During the course of the study your privacy will protected in the following ways. First of all, all written text will be copied to a Microsoft Word document and the names of people as well as specific locations, such as the name of your school, will be changed to pseudonyms, or made up names. Your screen name used to interact on websites as well as through instant messaging will
also be changed. At the beginning of the study you will be asked to select new names that will represent you as well as your online accounts.

Benefits

You may not benefit from being in this study; however information from this study may help other people in the future. For example, educators and other professionals might benefit by understanding more about the ways girls are using online spaces to publish and share their ideas.

The possible benefits to you for taking part in this research study include learning more about your own identity, enhancing your communication skills, and understanding more about the ways technology is influencing your life.

Additionally, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks

By taking part in this study, you may experience the following risks: stress from sharing personal stories and understandings of yourself with others. You might also feel anxious as you construct materials that represent your understandings of yourself and the social groups that you hang out with.

There may also be risks involved from taking part in this study that are not known to researchers at this time.

Study Costs

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.

Compensation

For taking part in this research study, you will be paid for your time and inconvenience. You will receive a $25 gift card each time you complete a reflective piece and accompanying interview and you will receive an addition $25 gift card if you complete all aspects of the research. All gift cards will be sent electronically to your e-mail at the completion of the 12-week study. You will be able to select your own gift card from the cards available on the site http://www.giftcertificates.com/ The researcher will ask you which gift card you would like during the first interview.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. However, the study sponsor, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Wayne State University, or federal agencies with appropriate regulatory oversight [e.g., Food and Drug
Administration (FDA), Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP), Office of Civil Rights (OCR), etc.) may review your records.

When the results of this research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in the study you can later change your mind and withdraw from the study. You are free to only answer questions that you want to answer. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Your decisions will not change any present or future relationship with Wayne State University or its affiliates, or other services you are entitled to receive.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Kattie Hogan at the following phone number ______. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at______. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call_____ to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.
APPENDIX C: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Please note...If you are unsure or hesitant to answer a particular question just let me know. Thanks.

1. How old are you?

2. Where do you live? (Please give city and state)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Yes, I would say that word describes me.</th>
<th>No, that word/idea does not fit me.</th>
<th>Unsure/Comments… If you are unsure if that category fits you or you have a statement to make please feel free to address your ideas in this column</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Musical artist (singer, song writer, player of an instrument)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crafter (Do you create painting, jewelry, scrapbooks, or other artistic project on your own time?)</td>
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<td>Creative writer (Do you write poetry, short stories, zines, or other materials in your free time?)</td>
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<td>Visual artist-(e.g. photographer, cartoonist, sculptor)</td>
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<td>Celebrity follower (you watch TV or read magazines or the internet (Twitter) to find out the latest gossip about celebrities)</td>
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<td>Movie fanatic (attend/watch at least 3 movies a week, you can quote lines from a lot of movies, you can name many of the latest movies and the stars who are in those movies)</td>
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<td>Music Lover (addicted to your I-Pod, memorize song lyrics, finding and posting song lyrics, attending concerts, finding and supporting new artists)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>That word describes me.</td>
<td>Does not fit me.</td>
<td>Category fits you or you have a statement to make? If you are unsure if that category fits you or you have a statement to make please feel free to address your ideas in this column</td>
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<td>TV junkie (spend 3 or more hours a day watching TV)</td>
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<td>Lover of animals</td>
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<td>Spiritual, but not connected with a church</td>
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<tr>
<td>Only child</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caregiver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adopted</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SEXUALITY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Flirtatious (love to dress up or act in a way that gets other’s attention)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Girlfriend (currently in a relationship with someone)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heterosexual (You are primarily attracted to males)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bisexual (equally attracted to both males and females)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Yes, I would say that word describes me.</td>
<td>No, that word/idea does not fit me.</td>
<td>Unsure/Comments...... If you are unsure if that category fits you or you have a statement to make please feel free to address your ideas in this column</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homosexual (primarily attracted to females)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GLBT Ally (You show your support toward gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people through participation in clubs, rallies, or other events/friendships)</td>
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<td>Out of the closet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unable to talk to anyone about</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Yes, I would say that word describes me.</td>
<td>No, that word/idea does not fit me.</td>
<td>Unsure/Comments...... If you are unsure if that category fits you or you have a statement to make please feel free to address your ideas in this column</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>your sexuality</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure of your sexuality</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**SCHOOL RELATED**

| Honor Roll Student                           |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| National Junior Honor Society Member         |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Struggling student (you find school hard and your grades are pretty low) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Involved in student clubs at school (volunteer groups, bible clubs, book clubs, etc.) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Drop out                                     |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| High school graduate                         |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |

**OUT OF SCHOOL**

| Sports (Travel events, clubs outside of school, coaching, etc.) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Babysitter (caring for children that are not your own on a regular basis) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Employee (you work at a job outside of the house that you get paid for) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Obsessive calorie counter (goal weights, tracking food intake, etc.) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Obsessive exerciser (attend a gym for hours each day, competitive with reaching goals) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Involved with pro-anorexia/pro-bulimia sites or are involved with online support sites for eating issues |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
| Engage in self-injury (You are familiar with sites similar to To Write Love on Her Arms) |                                           |                                     |                                                                                                                  |
3. In addition to the labels in the list above, what are some other ways that you identify yourself?

4. In addition to the labels above, what are some ways that other people might identify you? How do you feel about the labels other people place on you? Do you feel misunderstood or do you feel that people’s labels are accurate?

The next set of questions will center around your use of blogging. Please think about your Livejournal blog when answering the questions.

**Blogging**

1. Please provide a link to your Livejournal blog.

2. **Identities:** What identities do you think you project through your blog? (You can use the checklist above to help you explain your blogging identity).

3. Do you feel like your blog is an accurate view of your life or do you leave things out or make things more exciting?

4. **Experiences:** Please describe your experiences with blogging. (Why did you start blogging? Have you always had the same blog? If not, why did you change? What about Livejournal interests you)

5. **Audience:** Who would you say is your target audience for your blog? (Who do you want to read your blog? Do your friends influence the way you blog?)

6. **Community:** What is your involvement on various blogging communities? (What are your favorite communities to participate with? What is your level of participation in communities? (mostly reading, reading and commenting, just reading? Do you moderate any communities? If so, which ones?) What draws you to a community?)
Performances: Are there any parts of yourself that you keep hidden or separate from your blog? If you do keep parts of yourself hidden, why do you think you do that?

The next questions will be related to your digital art spaces including: DevianART, Tumblr, Flickr, Youtube or Vimeo.

Visual Art Spaces

1. Please provide links to your accounts on Tumblr, Youtube, Vimeo, Flickr, or DeviantART.

2. Identities: What identities do you think you project through your digital creations? Are these identities similar to or different from the identities you show on your blog?

3. Experiences: Please describe the ways you got involved in creating and publishing digital artifacts. (Why did you start creating? Who taught you? What is interesting about creating and sharing your work online?)

4. Audience: Who would you say is your target audience for your digital creations? (Who do you want to view your material? What do your viewers say about the work you have done?)

5. Audience: Do your friends influence the different ways you create (e.g. Do they pick songs for you? Do they encourage you to represent particular events or theme?)

6. Performances: Do you ever feel like you will be judged about what you write/create for your digital art space or blog?

7. Community: In what ways, if at all are you involved with communities on the digital art sites? If so, what is your level of participation with others? What draws you to a community? How are the blogging or digital art communities similar to or different from the communities that you interact with offline? (e.g. Are you able to tell different stories or explore different topics online than off? How do you decide what stories are told on which site?) 8.
Performances: Are there any parts of yourself that you keep hidden or separate from your digital art space? If you do keep parts of yourself hidden, why do you think you do that?

Performances: Are the identities you project on your digital art spaces similar to or different from the identities that you display in your blog?
NOTICE OF FULL BOARD APPROVAL

To: Katia Hogan
   Teacher Education
   23123 Harmon

From: Dr. Scott Mills or designee
   Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: October 21, 2011

RE: IRB #: 083011B3F
   Protocol Title: Narratives of Possibilities: Adolescent Girls Constructing and Negotiating Multiple Identities Across Blogs and Digital Art Spaces
   Sponsor: Protocol #: 1108010012
   Expiration Date: September 14, 2012

Risk Level / Category: 45 CFR 46.404 - Research not involving greater than minimal risk; Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were APPROVED following Full Board Review by the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 10/21/2011 through 09/14/2012. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 09/30/2011)
- Protocol (received in the IRB Office 08/15/2011)
- The request for a waiver of the requirement for written documentation of informed consent has been granted according to 45 CFR 46.117(1)(2). Justification for this request has been provided by the PI in the Protocol Summary Form. The waiver satisfies the following criteria: (i) The only record linking the participant and the research would be the consent document; (ii) the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality; (iii) each participant will be asked whether he or she wants documentation linking the participant with the research, and the participant’s wishes will govern; (iv) the consent process is appropriate; (v) when used requested by the participants, consent documentation will be appropriate; (vi) the research is not subject to FDA regulations, and (vii) an information sheet disclosing the required and appropriate additional elements of consent disclosure will be provided to participants not requesting documentation of consent.
- Research Information Sheet (dated 10/19/2011)
- The request for a waiver of the requirement for parental permission has been granted. The research poses minimal risk to participants. Collecting parental signatures would increase the need for collecting additional data such as home address or phone numbers, which is beyond the norms of online communication. In addition, collecting parental permission would be the only link between participants and the research study. By not collecting parental permission the participants’ identity is further protected.
- Advertisement
- Debriefing Form
- Data collection tools: Art or Essay Reflections, First Interview, Second Interview, and Third Interview.

* Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a “Continuous Renewal Reminder” approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator’s responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. Data collected during a period of approved approval is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data.

* All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE implementation.
APPENDIX D: LITERACY ARTIFACTS

Literacy Artifact #1

How do you see the world?

What role has technology played in shaping your vision???

Using drawing, photography, video blog, poetry, a story, collage or other medium create a reflection that explores the ways you have been shaped by technology.

As you put your piece together you might want to consider:

- Your earliest memories of technology use
- How technology use at home was similar to or different from at school
- Who you interacted with online as a child and now as an adolescent
- The various websites that have captured your attention.
- You might want to look back over your old online posts and share some of your thoughts about those old posts
- What would your world look like without technology

HAVE FUN.......BE CREATIVE.....REFLECT YOUR EXPERIENCES
Literacy Artifact #2

At school you can probably define different groups of people. There might be popular kids, nerds, the smart kids, Christian kids, athletes, etc. Each of those groups displays their membership in different ways. For example, the athletes might wear their uniform to school before a game or the Christian kids may gather before school and pray. The clothes we wear, the way we talk, and the behaviors we display to others can send messages to others about our own identity. In this reflection, I would like you to represent the different communities that you interact with. These could be groups of people at school, clubs that you have joined, online communities, etc.

Please respond by choosing at least one of the following suggestions or come up with an idea of you.

- **This is me**…Take a minimum of three pictures of items that are important to you and then explain what those items reveal about you.

- **Public and private lives**…. sometimes we tuck our real dreams and styles away to please others. Explain, in writing, how different social groups impact what you can and can’t show to others.

- **I want to be like them**….sometimes we strive to look like people in a magazine, play a sport like a star athlete, or have a sense of style like our best friend. Using words, images, music or other means explore what you are currently like and what gets in the way of you being more like your dream. What would your life be like if you were able to be that dream person or have that dream look?
Literacy Artifact #3

Write a letter to your past, present or future self. In this letter, you might want to reflect on your experiences as a child, wisdom you have learned along the way, or plan for the future. Please include as many details as you can. If you need some suggestions please look at http://www.futureme.org/.
APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Following the work of Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999) the semi-structured research questions below will guide the interviews. However, following the notion that an interview is a collaborative process between the researcher and participants I shifted questions in response to the participants’ responses.

FIRST INTERVIEW:

To explore the ways the participants view their use of blogs and other online engagements.

- Describe your experiences with blogging. (Probes: What lead you to begin blogging? What topics do you generally blog about? How do you decide what topics to blog about? Who do you see as your audience? If you had to use a metaphor to describe your blogging practices, what would it be?)
- Describe your experiences with creating representations on digital art spaces, such as Flicker, Youtube, or DeviantArt. (Probes: Which of the digital art spaces do you publish your work on? What lead you to begin creating within those spaces? What topics do you generally represent through these sites? What metaphor would you use to describe your engagement with those art spaces?)
- In what ways does your choice of online medium impact or shape the ways you represent your experiences? (Probes: From your perspective, are some topics easier to represent on blogs and digital art spaces than others? What factors would you helped you create or got in the way of expressing what you wanted to say?)
SECOND INTERVIEW:

To explore participants’ perceptions and intentions of communicating in different communities or with a viewing audience.

• Since you created your first artifact and engaged in the first interview is there anything else you might have thought of about or changed your mind about since we spoke last time?

• Can you explain all of the different social communities you interact with online through your blog or digital art space? (Probes: What types of groups do you join? How do you go about finding a group that interests you?)

• Can you explain the different roles you might see in an online community? (Probes: Who do you see as the person “in charge” of the communities? What are some of the behaviors that you see leaders or other members display? Can you explain how you would know that this community is a good place for you to be? Are the communities online similar to or different from the groups or social situations you participate with offline? If you could give someone advice about joining an online community what would it be?)

• What are the different behaviors or ways of speaking that are acceptable in an online community? (Probes: How would you know that you belong in that community? Are there any members in the community who don’t seem to fit? What makes them outsiders?)

• Have you moved away from any communities? What prompted that move?
THIRD INTERVIEW:

To develop an understanding of how each participant defines her sense of identity and how others have influenced those identities.

• How do you think your friends or family would respond to your blog entries and the types of information you have shared during this study?

• In what ways have experiences you’ve had online shaped the ways you think about yourself? Could you tell me more about…(Probes: the way you learned more about a particular identity through online practices? How your sense of self changed as you interacted with people online? Any support you received to be a particular type of person from online communities or your viewing audience)

• In what ways do you see the self that you have presented on one site similar or different from the self that is presented on other sites, at school, or at home?

• In what was has television, media, or your peer shaped the way you understand yourself? (Probes: What characters would you like to be like? Which would you like your friends to be like? Are there images on television you disagree with? How do you respond to those ideas? In what ways are you similar to or different from your peers?)
REFERENCES


Fine (Eds.), Construction sites excavating race, class, and gender among urban youth (pp. 121-139). New York: Teachers College.


Wissman, K. (2007). “Making a way”: Young women using literacy and language to resist the

ABSTRACT

NARRATIVES OF POSSIBILITY: ADOLESCENT GIRLS CONSTRUCTING AND NEGOTIATING FRONT AND BACK STAGE IDENTITIES THROUGH BLOGS

by

KATTIE HOGAN

December 2012

Advisor: Dr. Gina DeBlase
Major: Reading, Language, and Literature
Degree: Doctor of Education

For young woman, the issue of self-expression is important to consider because there are many contexts where their voices and experiences are discounted, silenced, and suppressed. Venues for self-expression can provide a way for those voices and experiences that have been ignored in classrooms and other social outlets to be recognized. This research study explored the ways four girls between the ages of 16-19 used blogging to construct meaning of their experiences and negotiate their identities through a wide range of literary practices including nonfiction and fiction writing, photographs, self-created drawings, and other materials. Writing in these blogs girls moved between front stage, public performances and back stage performances, making strategic decisions regarding how they presented themselves to their audience. Contained within their artifacts are portrayals of self, continuously shaped and reshaped through on-going literacy practices.

This research specifically explored the ways online narratives, posted in blogs, allow girls to construct identities and negotiate understandings of self between front stage and back stage identities. The girls’ movement between the two regions highlights the ways they take up or resist messages from their larger social and cultural Discourse communities. Narrative and
discourse analysis were used to analyze the data. Narrative analysis provided the framework for understanding individual stories as well as the larger stories that surfaced in the reoccurring themes presented by each girl. Discourse analysis, provided a lens from which to understand the various social groups in which the girls were members. I came to understand how girls represented and negotiated their lives through specific words, phrases, and images. As I read the blog entries, I gained insights into various aspects of the girls’ identity as they constructed and shared their experiences within the blog and across other data sources.

Implications for this study center on the use of literature and creating discussion spaces for girls to open up and share their emerging understandings of self. Examining the ways girls used blogging recognizes that digital environments are shifting the ways narratives are constructed and negotiated, offering new ways for girls to articulate and share their experiences.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Kattie Hogan

For the past six years, I have been a both a doctorate student and a full-time middle school special education teacher. Each of those roles played a significant role in shaping my identity and the ways I understood and interacted with the larger world. There were many days when I found myself quickly taking off my teacher hat, driving down to the university, and stepping into the role of a learner. My mind listened to the new strategies and theories being presented, while it echoed with the voices and struggles of my students. I was continuously reminded of the importance of integrating theory, research, and practice.

My professor said that when she worked on her dissertation, she found herself closer to those students than any other class. She said that in the process of writing about students’ learning, you learn to love them. My research has been different. I did it online, separated in some ways from the people I was learning about. However, as I reflect back on my journey, I too fell in love with the research process and the participants. Although I never met my participants face-to-face, I spent hours immersed in their words and began to imagine each of their voices and the ways they would interact if they were a part of my classroom. The girls became a part of my world.

In addition to my online research, I also found myself far more engaged and connected with the students I was teaching. I listened, laughed, and opened up spaces for students to describe their experiences. I marveled at the students’ strength, honesty, and openness and found myself more attentive, both as a teacher and as a researcher. Although this journey has been incredibly challenging, I can finally say that I am finished with this project and look forward to future teaching and research opportunities.