Deleting the male gaze? Tech-savvy girls and new femininities in secondary school classrooms

Citation:

This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use.

©2012, Cambridge University Press

Reproduced with permission.

Downloaded from DRO:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30049393
Deleting the Male Gaze? Tech-Savvy Girls and New Femininities in Secondary School Classrooms

Claire Charles

The implications of new media technologies for learning, including videogames, have been increasingly explored by educators and researchers in a world characterized by multi-literacies (Gee, 2003, 2007; Snyder & Beavis, 2004). Yet such exploration does not always consider the gendered dimensions of the opportunities for identity opened by digital technologies. Nor does it always emphasize the ways in which digital technologies might invite young people to take up gendered identities that are implicated in broader relations of power and marginalization. In this chapter, I explore the use of specific digital technologies in two secondary school classrooms in Melbourne, Australia. I explore the use of these technologies in the classroom in relation to the ways they are implicated in producing young feminine identities.

A key point of departure for this chapter is the contradictory notions around how young schoolgirl femininities are produced and regulated in contemporary commentary. Research in the field of critical girlhood studies has explored how new possibilities apparently exist for young female identity in developed, Western cultural contexts such that regulation of girlhood in these contexts is increasingly characterized around what girls can do, rather than what they can’t or shouldn’t do (McRobbie, 2007). These possibilities gather around being successful and confident within education and the workforce, and the term “girl power” is sometimes used to label these discourses of young feminine “compulsory success” and empowerment (Gonick, 2006). Yet other research points to the continued presence of old familiar notions of (hetero)sexual objectification and marginalization in young women’s lives. The enduring presence of sexual harassment within school cultures is highlighted, as well as the difficulties for young women associated with achieving sexual attractiveness and desirability while at the same time avoiding labels such as “slag” (Chambers, Tincknell, & van
School researchers have shown how these discourses of heterosexuality continue to shape young women's experiences of schooling, despite increasing representations of girls' power in some cultural forms such as media and popular culture.

This chapter explores the way both these different possibilities for young feminine identity can be shaped and mediated by digital technologies in school classrooms. While it has been suggested that girls' use of new media technologies can enable them to contest and negotiate the normative notions of femininity that wider culture presents, in this chapter I explore how digital technologies in school classrooms may not engender straightforward opportunities for negotiation and resistance.

Two specific secondary classroom environments are explored in the chapter. The classrooms are both within independent, elite schools in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, which require significant yearly tuition fees. The first classroom is a Year Ten English (Language Arts) class at a large elite girls' school, in which the young women are using Acrobat Connect Professional (ACP), online conferencing software, to discuss images of women in the media. The second classroom is a Year Eight English (Language Arts) class at a large elite co-educational school, in which students are undertaking a small unit of work on computer games.

The objectives of this chapter are to, first, identify key discourses of young female identity within Western educational contexts. A second goal is to chart how these discourses are mediated by digital technologies in specific secondary school classrooms. And, finally, a third goal is to consider how old stereotypes and new possibilities for young feminine identity might be constituted simultaneously through the use of digital technologies in school classrooms. The chapter thus aims to contribute to understanding of the ways in which digital technologies in school classrooms mediate young feminine identities. In particular, it aims to explore how digital technologies shape the way girls are positioned, as well as how they might position themselves, in relation to key discourses of young femininity.

**Background and Theory**

In this chapter I consider identity primarily in relation to young femininity. I examine key bodies of knowledge and commentary about young femininity and consider how identities for young women are mediated by the

---

1 The research undertaken in this second classroom was funded by a grant from the Deakin University Quality Learning Research Prioritization Area, 2004.
Deleting the Male Gaze?

The presence of particular digital technologies in school classrooms. This chapter is underpinned by a theoretical persuasion toward performative notions of identity and subjectivity. I am interested in how digital technologies in two school classrooms can be understood to be implicated in the performative constitution of femininity. I draw broadly on poststructural notions of identity, and in particular, the work of Judith Butler (1993, 1997, 1999).

The gender theory of Judith Butler offers a way of thinking about gender as performatively constituted through repeated and ongoing textual practices. Now well known and frequently drawn upon in understanding gender, Butler’s theory suggests that gender is performatively constituted in the very textual practices that purport to represent it. She proposes that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. That identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1999, p. 33). This way of thinking about gender/sexuality destabilizes the idea that sex and gender exist within individuals, causing them to behave in certain ‘gendered’ ways. Rather, it suggests that gendered subjects are the effect of “gendered” behaviors, rather than the cause.

As Anoop Nayak and Mary-Jane Kehily explain, “in contrast to the notion of a subject (the girl) producing action (putting on lipstick), Butler suggests that it is the action that produces the subject” (2006, p. 460). Thus, she argues that genders and sexualities are performatively constituted, rather than pre-existing within individuals.

Many researchers have drawn attention to the role of popular culture, including digital technologies, in mediating performative articulations of gendered identities (Ang, 1996; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Martino, 2000, 2001; Walkerdine, 1997, 2008). This work is theoretically diverse and offers various approaches to thinking through relationships between media and subjectivity. It is not my aim to contribute to such thinking here. Instead, I draw on the general idea that gendered identities do not pre-exist engagement with media and that they are performatively constituted and negotiated through the use of digital technologies.

The main problem that contextualizes this chapter is the question of whether digital technologies today provide girls with opportunities for being a young female outside particular notions of girlhood and heterosexuality that dominant culture offers them. Existing studies into girls’ use of digital technologies suggest that girls may use such technologies to create identities outside the confines of dominant heterosexuality. They focus on how girls generate possibilities for themselves outside traditional notions of heterosexuality (Kearney, 2006; Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007; Thomas, 2004). As Sharon Mazzarella and Norma Pecora note, we have recently
Charles witnessed "a proliferation of studies on girls actively creating their own culture, and in the process transgressing dictates of normative or "emphasized" femininity" (2007, p. 113). Girls as producers of media and culture, often with the help of new digital communication technologies, is often conceptualized by feminist researchers as a space of resistance, a space in which girls are actively making meaning. They sometimes comment that girls are enabled, by these technologies, for making meaning (Harris, 2004; Kearney, 2006), and positioning themselves outside the dominant ways in which they are positioned within mass cultural representations.

Often these studies focus on digital technologies in girl cultures\(^2\) outside schooling. In this chapter, however, I am interested in digital technologies that have been integrated into "official" classroom curriculum and pedagogy. Thus, the students are not actively producing culture on their own terms in the research upon which I draw. Instead, they are positioned as consumers or users of specific technologies that have been selected and provided by adults within the institutional practices of schooling. In this rather different context, that remains bound by traditional hierarchies between student and teacher/researcher, I suggest that girls' use of digital technologies may not simply constitute resistance to dominant discourses of young femininity. I want to explore how digital technologies may support and shape articulations of young female identity, in a school context shot through with power relations, that are rather different to those created by girls on their own terms, in their cultural practices outside schooling. It is important to consider these school classrooms as very different contexts from girls' out of school cultural practices. Within the classroom site, digital technologies may make available particular opportunities for young female identity. These opportunities thus need to be understood in the context of broader research into young feminine identities.

**Key Discourses of Young Femininity.**

In this chapter I am interested in two key bodies of knowledge about young feminine identity existing within feminist research literature. The first of these bodies of knowledge suggests a set of gendered power relations in which young women are marginalized and constrained – in particular ways that relate to dominant discourses of heterosexuality – within education, work, and other institutions. This body of knowledge suggests

\(^2\) Examples of girl cultures discussed in the literature cited are girls that form groups around textual practices such as zines and Web design.
that young women can be objectified by a "male gaze," as well as dis advantaged or intimidated within competitive, "masculine" professions such as Information Technology. While these notions might now be considered somewhat dated, as they relate to what girls can't and shouldn't do, and how they are constrained, feminists undertaking school-based research have often observed how these notions continue to be relevant within schooling. They have explored the way girls can become objects of a male gaze within schooling and become subject to sexual harassment and violence (Kenway & Willis, 1997). The presence of digital technologies in young people's lives has recently been implicated in such concerns about gendered power relations and sexual violence.

Girls can also turn this gaze on each other, using it to police each other's appearance and behaviour (Renold, 2000). Some researchers have referred to this idea as an internalized male gaze (Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2003; Hey, 1997). Being constituted a "slag" is a danger for girls within dominant notions of heterosexuality, as it is boys who are supposed to be sexually active and desiring (Albury, 2002), while girls ought to be concerned mainly with protecting themselves from victimization (Fine, 2004). Furthermore, girls can be marginalized in public spaces such as classrooms. As some early studies show, boys frequently demand more of teachers' attention and time (Spender, 1982). In relation to the worlds of work and leisure, particularly in relation to new information and communications technologies, literature also has suggested that girls are on the margins, intimidated and perhaps excluded from becoming adept users of such technologies (Schott & Horrell, 2002). All these notions can be linked to normative discourses of gender (patriarchy) and heterosexuality in which girls are positioned as inferior to boys and men (Weedon, 1997).

There is a long tradition within feminist theory that discusses an unequal gendered power relationship in which women are positioned as passive objects to be "looked at" by men who are positioned as sexually desiring subjects (Lumby, 1997; Weedon, 1997). This is often referred to as a "male gaze."

See, for example, a media release from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, reporting on a research review which highlights the role of new digital technologies such as mobile phones and the internet in teenage sexual harassment: http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/media/media081110a.html. See also the following media reports from the United Kingdom, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article534788.ece, and from Australia, http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/gang-rape-filmed-on-mobile-phone/2007/04/04/1175366325678.html, http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2006/s1775589.htm, all of which report on incidents in which teenage boys filmed assaults of girls on mobile phones and then made the films available to other youth through social networking sites such as MySpace and the production of DVDs.
New Femininities?

Contrasting with notions of marginalized, objectified femininity, images of young female success and empowerment have become increasingly common in public discourse and popular culture. The ubiquity of images and representations of girls' power in contemporary cultural practices has generated much engagement and inquiry within feminist sociology, youth studies, and cultural studies. This scholarship (Aapola et al., 2005; Gonick, 2006; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007) explores how girls are frequently represented across a number of cultural practices as subjects of excellence, capacity, and personal empowerment. It shows how dominant discourses in relation to young femininity have arguably shifted from a set of discourses constraining who and how girls can be toward notions about what they can do.

Recent feminist work has drawn attention to the exclusions that are produced, as well as the power that is maintained, through celebratory discourses about girls' success and empowerment (Gill, 2008; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007). As Angela McRobbie argues, "the dynamics of regulation and control are less about what young women ought not to do, and more about what they can do" (2007, p. 721). Thus, normativity, in relation to femininity, is produced through discourses about what girls can do. This production of normative girlhood has the effect of marginalizing those who fail to live up to the "can-do" (Harris, 2004) image of young femininity.

Through images of empowerment, epitomized by pop groups such as the Spice Girls, young women are presented as moving outside the notions of marginalization that characterize much earlier feminist analysis. As McRobbie argues, consumer culture invites young women to "overturn the old sexual double standard and emulate the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men" (2007, p. 732). According to this commentary, girls and young women are increasingly represented as sexually desiring subjects (Gill, 2007, 2008). Thus, young women are increasingly presented as sexually powerful, rather than sexually objectified.

This image of young female empowerment is not restricted to sexual practices and relations. It also spills over into the worlds of work and education. In these spheres, it is now often young women that are imagined to be the success stories (Ringrose, 2007). These images of young female success, for many researchers, are linked with, and supporting of, the kind of subjectivity suited to today. This is a subject that is consumable and consuming. Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine propose that "what is happening under neoliberalism [is] an intensification of feminine as site (both subject and object) of consumption" (2008, p. 230). The neoliberal, successful girl subject should be able to consume in an appropriate
manner, through achieving qualifications that will allow her to enter the professional workforce (McRobbie, 2007). At the same time, she constructs herself as an object that is worthy of being consumed, through, for example, becoming an attractive “TV blonde” (McRobbie, 2004) who will succeed in a media and communications industry in which she will be consumed by others.

Feminist critique of these images of girl power has included important exploration around the extent to which old notions of objectified hetero-femininity have really been overturned at all within popular representations of girls’ empowerment and new femininities. For example, McRobbie notes that she must repetitively get “done up” and make herself into an object of a gaze (2007, pp. 725–726). Rosalind Gill (2008) explores how the regulation and surveillance of young women has moved from being objectified by others (e.g., men) toward subjecting the self to relentless scrutiny. Thus, notions of hetero-femininity, in which girls are positioned as objects to be looked at and desired, are not entirely abandoned in this new world of girl power. Indeed, in some respects, they are even more important within an image-saturated culture (Hopkins, 2002), and are merely refigured as being about individual choice and empowerment, rather than obligation.

In this chapter I am thus concerned with contributing to feminist inquiry into how familiar notions of hetero-femininity may in fact be intertwined with contemporary cultural representations of girls’ power. Scholars have done significant work exploring this intersection within popular culture and media texts, but less work exploring it in relation to educational contexts, and particularly classrooms. They have sometimes constructed schooling as a site in which new femininities are (re)produced in relatively straightforward ways. Anita Harris, for example, argues that the elite girls’ school is “important in the production of a new young womanhood around taken-for-granted excellence and forward planning for brilliant careers” (2004, p. 106). Yet she does not consider how embodied femininities might be produced and negotiated in this environment, or the ways in which “old” notions of objectified femininity might still exist. In this chapter I explore how old and new notions of young femininity might be interwoven through the use of digital technologies in school classrooms.

I draw on fieldwork undertaken for two separate studies, in two different secondary school English classrooms in Melbourne, Australia. In what follows I will consider each site separately, briefly outlining the distinct projects and methodologies before considering the findings in relation to the aims of this chapter.
Tapping into Girl Power: Digital Technologies and Elite Girls’ Schooling

The first classroom I explore is a Year Ten English classroom at “Lyla Girls’ Grammar School” (LGGS), an elite, independent secondary school for girls. This fieldwork was undertaken as part of a larger study concerned with elite girls’ schooling as a site for the (re)production and engagement of normative femininities (Charles, 2009). Most data for the study were generated in the classroom through team teaching activities during October and November in 2004 and 2005. Together with the classroom teacher, I developed an eight-week unit of English curriculum.

Included in the unit was an activity in which students were invited to respond to a slide presentation created with Microsoft PowerPoint depicting a series of images of women. I designed a presentation of contrasting images of women in order to generate discussion around embodied femininity. Some of them have been associated with girl power, such as the Spice Girls, Madonna, and Britney Spears. Others were chosen precisely because they were different. Grace Jones and K.D. Lang, for example, were chosen for the way they appear to transgress normative embodied femininity.

The school had recently purchased a license for the program Acrobat Connect Professional (ACP) for use in the classroom, during the time in which fieldwork took place. This online videoconferencing software was accessible to every student in the classroom, through the use of notebook computers that each student was obliged to purchase and take with them to every class. In November 2005 students were invited to view the embodied femininity presentation using ACP.

The slide presentation was installed onto the content pod, and a discussion took place in which students were invited to respond to questions from their computers as each image was displayed. Each student’s name would appear beside the text as she typed her response into the chat pod. I was able to control the scrolling of the images as the class chatted about each one. The chat lasted the most part of a seventy-minute lesson and generated about thirty pages of transcript in total. The students’ approach to the discussion was uninhibited, and they seemed unaware of a teacher.

5 Lyla Girls’ Grammar School is a pseudonym that is used throughout the chapter.
6 APC is a software package that can be used to run virtual meetings and interactive web conferencing, described as “a complete web communication system” (retrieved from the “launch demo” option on February 25, 2009, from http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnect_pro/).
Deleting the Male Gaze?

presence as they expressed their reactions and thoughts regarding each image. Typing at a speed with which I could not keep up, the students demonstrated their familiarity with the nature of such technologies. Many had probably had experience with live chats, given the popularity of social networking sites.

Representing a new form of media, students learn how to manipulate and control Web-based communication software, which is designed to enable business professionals to “communicate and collaborate instantly” (retrieved February 25, 2007, http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/). In this way, ACP can be considered part of the process through which LGGS girls are constituted as subjects of girl power. Students are already learning to use the communication tools of the companies for which they may well work post schooling. Through competently taking up this technology in their classroom, the students constitute themselves as tech-savvy girls endowed with economic capacity (McRobbie, 2007). They constitute themselves as subjects who can competently manipulate and use the new technologies that characterize many contemporary workplaces.

LGGS is a school in which everyday use of new communications technologies is highly normalized. Notebook computers for every student has been compulsory since the early 1990s, in stark contrast to the average government secondary school in Melbourne, where designated rooms equipped with a class set of desktop computers remain the primary means of accessing computer-based technologies for students. I argue that the normalization, and mandatory nature, of such use of new communications technologies at LGGS constitutes its students as particular kinds of girl subjects. The subject produced through such practices can be associated with girl power.

This process is one through which girls are produced as particular kinds of subjects. Poststructural theories of identity, such as that of Butler, reject rationalist notions of identity in which there is a “fully formed ‘I’” (McRobbie, 2005, p. 84) that directs and controls its own gendered identity. Thus, although the girls didn’t necessarily speak about themselves in terms of “girl power” or “tech-saviness” during this lesson, I argue that simply by virtue of being in the room, competently using online videoconferencing software, they are produced as subjects of girl power within such a school environment.

The digital technology, in this instance purchased and provided by the school, operates as a mechanism through which girls are expected and encouraged to position themselves as empowered subjects who can master the new Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and software packages they may encounter in the workforce. Developing competency
with these digital technologies in the classroom can also be conceptualized as a rehearsal at being the working/consuming subjects who may one day draw upon the services of less-privileged women to help support their lifestyles and the demands of their careers (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 231). In this way, the use of APC in the classroom positions the girls in relation to key discourses of girl power.

Yet this “new” competent girl subject is juxtaposed, through use of APC, with some “older” practices associated with hetero-femininity. Students engage in “othering” practices, making other women objects of a gaze, as they use the technology. They use it as an opportunity to police the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities and femininities. Boundaries between “too sexy” and “not sexy enough,” frequently policed within discourses of hetero-femininity, are explored through use of ACP in the classroom.

Students comment, for example, about singer Grace Jones having “skanky ho eye shadow,” and another suggested that Madonna is “too old to be prancing around.” The same student, Shali, expressed disgust when she hears that one of the Spice Girls had allegedly been a stripper prior to her involvement in the band, typing “ew, I didn’t know this stuff when I was ten.” When an image of Britney Spears appears, some students could be heard describing her as “skanky” or a “slut” under their breath. One student typed “Brit = shit” into the chat pod. In a later interview, one student recalled that “everyone said slutty” when the image of Spears was shown.

This use of digital technology, within this educational context, thus operates as a practice through which old intersects with new. Girls who are perfectly positioned to take up the privileged girl power identity, continue to re-create older, more familiar discourses of objectified femininity. There is a contradiction between the school-based positioning of these girls as subjects of girl power, and the actual talk and discourse that occurs in the classroom around femininity, and icons of girl power. This suggests that, as other studies have shown (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009), girl power identity does not simply replace or “delete” earlier discourses of young femininity that involve constantly policing the boundaries between acceptability and unacceptability in relation to sexuality.

Playing with Fire: Young Feminine Identity and the Sims in the Classroom

The second school site considered here is a Year Eight English (Language Arts) classroom at a private, co-educational school in Melbourne. This
research was part of a small study designed to explore the gendered dimensions of teenagers' engagement with digital culture online, and the implications of these apparent differences when translated into classroom practice in literacy curriculum organized around ICTs. Three computer games were incorporated into an English curriculum unit offered at Year Eight to a mixed group of fourteen-and fifteen-year-old students. In this section, I focus on one of these, The Sims, as an exemplar of a game popular with girls as well as boys and one that has been used in other studies exploring the utilisation of commercially produced computer games in the classroom (McFarlane, Sparrowhawk, & Heald, 2001).

A "god game" where players have the power, like gods, to create their own universe and direct the lives of the characters who inhabit it, The Sims invites players to re-create contemporary suburban life though building houses, socializing, raising a family, and getting a job. Players must look after their avatars, ensuring their health and social needs are met during play. Flanagan (2003) describes The Sims as providing "subtle yet powerful methods of enculturation by which social values, interaction styles and every day activities are practiced" (p. 1). The popularity of the game with the young people in the study, and the strong consumer and social values built explicitly into the game, made it a useful choice for a unit designed around extended textual analysis. It also made it a rich site through which to explore complexities around gender and digital media.

The unit of work was delivered by the English class teacher, with myself and the other researcher present, over a two-week period. The unit included some initial lessons that were spent experimenting with the games and learning to play. Time was then allowed for students to discuss their responses to the game in small groups, and these discussions were audio-taped by the researchers. Researchers also conducted audio-taped interviews with small groups of students as they were playing the games. This was followed by some lessons in which students were invited to produce written responses to the game, both creative and analytical. They were asked to save a short clip from their game and present it to the class via data projector and to share their analysis of the clip. Drawing on some classroom observations of students playing The Sims, interviews with students, and observations of students presenting their saved clips, I explore how the classroom space becomes a site in which old notions of heterofemininity are juxtaposed with new notions of girl power.

While many students were not familiar with their games, one girl, Emily, was familiar with The Sims and was a highly skilled player. Emily and her friend Catherine created young female avatars with luxuriously
furnished houses, and Emily was able to work out how to obtain more money than the standard amount of twenty thousand dollars that players receive to build a house. When I observed Emily and her friend Catherine playing, they had created female avatars with hip, trendy clothing, including tight trousers and midriff tops. They had created expensively furnished houses for their characters to live in. Both Gill (2008) and Harris (2004) have drawn attention to the dominance of the “midriff” in the new, sleek girl-power image of young femininity. Here, Emily and Catherine cited, and created, such an image in the construction of their avatars.

As the girls developed characters and houses, they talked to each other about what furniture to buy, and where their bedrooms would be located, thus constituting themselves as consuming young women:

Emily: We can have like, massive bedrooms. I want to put mine here.
Catherine: Oh, how cool is that, come on, we need to buy some furniture here, or a car.
Emily: Do you want that one?
Catherine: Yeah.

Emily’s comments in some interviews and discussion indicated that she enjoys experimenting with the game by, for example, blowing up the characters. This demonstrates her expertise and knowledge of the game, and the opportunities for subversion built into it. In addition to blowing up characters, Emily explained to me that more money could be obtained by subverting the rules of the game:

Claire: Okay, and now you’re building them a house.
Emily: Yes, a big house.
Claire: How much money have they got? Do they get a certain amount of money or something?
Emily: You get twenty thousand dollars, but we know how to cheat so you can get more money, so you can make a really cool house.
Claire: How do you do that, how do you get them to have more money?
Emily: Oh um, people just find out cheats and they just go around and then, yeah, so I end up with a cheat and it means you can build out of the bounds, and you get more money and you can just like move people around. It like gives the game like a totally different spin, because if you have limited money you can only make a little house.

Emily and Catherine’s creative response to the game involved planning some features for an updated version of The Sims. As Emily explained, “we’re just making a whole new one with more modern furniture, more clothes, and ... more facilities for recreation and vacation.”
Through playing The Sims in the classroom, Emily constituted herself, and the avatars she created, as girl-power subjects. She rehearsed being a consuming subject, demonstrating an ability to obtain and spend money on items such as clothing and furniture. She also developed her capacity to engage with the new communications technologies that might characterize her future workplace. As well as simply navigating the game, Emily was capable of finding “cheats,” which the other girls did not know how to do, thus breaking with a “good-girl” image that is characteristic of older, more familiar notions of young femininity.

She simultaneously cited notions of a “masculine, rational, productive, worker self, and a (hetero)sexualized feminine, (appropriately) reproductive identity that both consumes itself into being and is the object of consumption” (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 230). She did this by constructing herself and her avatar as potential worker/consumer subjects and constructing her avatar in the image of an appropriately “consumable” young woman. Thus, she constituted both herself and her avatar as subjects of girl power.

Emily was the only girl in the classroom who appeared to use The Sims in this way. Other girls were either not as familiar with the game, or they were assigned to one of the other two games that were available. Nevertheless, her case is interesting, in terms of the newer discourses of young femininity that shaped her engagement with the game. In the same classroom space, however, some older, more familiar notions of heteronormative gender relations were at work through the actions of one group of boys, which was the only male group playing The Sims. The image of a young woman who is the victim of misogyny, and a male gaze, was cited through the use of this computer game.

At the front of the classroom, with everyone watching on the data projector, the group created a female avatar, trapped her in a burning house, and watched her scream and eventually die. One of the boys, Mark, explained, “Look see, I’ve set off a rocket. Ready? So she’s [the avatar] trying to put the fire out but we’re going to stop her doing that, because fires are good for her. See light a rocket. Here she goes.” As the fire progressed, fuelled by the wooden furniture the boys purchased for the house, another boy, Steve, said about the avatar “let’s kill her, Mark. Wake her up and then kill her!” When at last it became apparent that the avatar had died, the boys’ pleasure turned to anticipation of the arrival of the Grim Reaper—“how’s it going, Grimmy?”—and the ritual music and appearance of that figure that accompanies a death in The Sims.
This can be understood as playing with "older" notions of femininity in which a girl is helpless and vulnerable, the hapless object a male gaze. Once again, the construction of opportunities for young female identity within this classroom was working on two possible levels. First, at the level of the computer game, in which the female avatar was positioned as an object of misogyny and violence. Here the boys were also drawing on familiar tropes from horror films – as their teacher exclaimed at one point, "You've turned this into a horror film!" – demonstrating how familiar narratives of female-as-victim can carry over into newer forms of popular culture.

Second, within the "real" environment of the classroom, in which the young female students remained silent and quiet, as their male classmates loudly and enthusiastically laughed at what is happening in the game, dominating the classroom space, and the teacher's and researchers' attention in that moment. Furthermore, the same group of male students was far from silent when Emily and Catherine presented their clip, yelling instructions to the girls such as "Invite someone over – it's too boring!" (Mark), or "Fast-forward!" (Steve), managing to assert their presence in the classroom, even when it was not the boys' turn at the front. It's important to note that this behaviour was largely confined to the one group of boys, and within the group, the behavior was mainly initiated by Mark and Steve. These two examples, of "girl power" and of "girl marginalization," mediated by The Sims, are not representative of what the rest of the class was doing. Nevertheless, they are significant in demonstrating the kinds of constructions of young femininity that can be mediated by digital technologies in secondary classrooms.

**Future Trends**

More young women, particularly in middle-class settings, are becoming competent users of online technologies. These appear to be increasing in particular school environments, in this case, independent, high-fee paying schools. Thus, young women in these environments will be more frequently constituted as tech-savvy subjects within the spaces of mainstream, formal school curriculum. This will perhaps be in contrast to young women in less-privileged circumstances, who may be given fewer opportunities to constitute themselves in relation to such notions of female success within the dominant institutional practices of schooling. This new girl subject of capacity is a relational identity, reliant upon other young women who are the "failed" subjects of girl power (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Thus,
digital technologies in particular school classrooms may be tied up in new forms of class (re)production.

Here it is important to distinguish between digital technologies that are endorsed within mainstream school curriculum and pedagogy occurring in classrooms, and those that constitute the "literate underlife" (Finders, 1997) of schooling, existing in the liminal spaces such as corridors between classes, and beneath desks. These digital technologies, for example, mobile telephones, are often not part of endorsed "official" curriculum and thus, they may not provide young women opportunities to constitute themselves as subjects of excellence within the dominant discourses that frame what it means to be a successful subject of education and work.

Future research possibilities thus include working with young women in less-privileged environments in order to investigate how "old" familiar femininities may still be articulated through use of digital technologies. It is important to attend to the possibility of continuity, as well as change, in the way young female identities are shaped by the presence of digital technologies in schools, and the opportunities for identity that these provide. While these technologies may well encourage girls to position themselves as subjects of girl power, they may also continue to effect more familiar gendered power relations and girl identities. More work is needed around the specificities of young women's identities in terms of factors such as ethnicity, class, religion, and location and how these factors might be constituted through, and shape, the use of digital technologies in school contexts.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have considered how digital technologies shape young feminine identities in two specific secondary school classrooms. I have taken, as the central problem contextualizing this chapter, the contradictory discourses around young femininities and (hetero)sexualities in schools today. Commentary and research increasingly draw attention to discourses of girl power, in which girls are subjects of success and excellence in education and work, as well as sexually empowered. Yet alongside this, research literature continues to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment in schooling, and the positioning of girls as "objects" of a male gaze.

I have emphasized the importance of exploring the use of new digital communications technologies in secondary school classrooms in relation to both these discourses of girlhood. Existing studies of girls' use of digital
technologies have emphasized their significance in allowing girls a potential space to explore identity outside the confines of adult surveillance. In this chapter, however, I have explored how, within a school context shot through with power relations, digital technologies may invite girls to position themselves in relation to, rather than in straightforward resistance to, dominant discourses.

Girls at LGGS are well positioned to produce themselves as subjects of girl power, through the routine, and the "compulsory" access they have to new, expensive, digital communications technologies in an elite school context. Many demonstrate the capacity to engage with the online technologies that will characterize their potential future workplaces. Thus, they rehearse their identities as economically independent, consuming young women. In addition to this, however, some older notions of surveillance and objectification of other women enters the classroom through use of this technology.

Some students in the Year Eight classroom playing The Sims also produce themselves as subjects of competency with new technologies. Emily, in particular, constituted herself as a potential working and consuming subject, as well as producing an avatar in the image of the consumable girl-power figure. At the same time, in this lively co-educational classroom, a group of boys cited more established notions of heterosexual femininity, in which a female avatar is positioned as a helpless object, rather than an empowered subject. Outside the game itself, the girls were momentarily sidelined as the boys' noisy enthusiasm claims the attention of fellow students, researchers, and the teacher.

Through these examples of digital technologies in secondary classrooms, we can see that older notions of femininity are not simply nor straightforwardly replaced by newer femininities, even in privileged school contexts. I have explored how digital technologies in these classrooms shape and mediate the way girls position themselves, and are positioned, in relation to key discourses. Thus, I have argued for the importance of attending to the role of digital technologies in shaping gendered identities in schools. I have also suggested some pathways for future research, which would need to involve investigating the ways in which the gendered identities of young women and men in less-privileged school contexts are being shaped and produced through digital technology.

References


