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## “WATZ UR NAM?”: Adolescent Girls, Chat Rooms, and Interpersonal Authenticity

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# “WATZ UR NAM?”: Adolescent Girls, Chat Rooms, and Interpersonal Authenticity

**Kelly Mendoza**

Abstract

This paper explores how one case of an educational gaming Web site’s chat room designed for girls challenged the notion of girls’ identity play online and brought forth tensions between freedom and safety in chat rooms. An overview of girls and computer-mediated communication is provided, followed by a case study of negative incidents in several chat rooms on an educational Web site for girls that, as a result of the incidents, moved these chat rooms from unmonitored to strictly monitored. Then, the viewpoints on girls’ using online communication to play with identity versus seeking authenticity are explored, with reasoning that girls’ online authenticity-seeking behavior can be connected to tents of interpersonal communication theory. It is contended that a contradiction lies between the need for freedom and community versus safety and protection in girl-centered chat rooms.

Key words: girls, Internet, computer-mediated communication, chat, Web site

Today's adolescents are living in a world where using the Internet is an everyday aspect of their lives. Young people aged 8-18 spend 6.5 hours per day—outside of school—in front of a screen (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005). Although television is still the most popular medium (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001; Ridout et al., 2005; Woodland & Gridina, 2000), some research shows time spent on the Internet is surpassing television viewing time, with adolescents spending an average of 16.7 hours per week online (Harris Interactive, 2003b). The research on how girls and boys use the Internet indicates that boys are more likely to use the computer and Internet to play games, whereas girls are more likely to use it for social purposes and computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999; Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001; Roban, 2002; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, and Gross, 2001).

Girls use of CMC includes e-mail, text messaging (TM), instant messaging (IM), and chat rooms. This paper explores how one case of chat rooms for girls on a girl-centered educational Web site challenged the notion of girls' identity play online and brought forth tensions between freedom and safety in chat rooms. First, an overview of girls, CMC, and chat is provided as a foundation to understand how girls use these modes of communication. Then, a description of My Pop Studio—an educational gaming Web site that housed the chat rooms—is provided, including a description of the incidents in the chat rooms that led to the challenges between freedom and safety. Next, two viewpoints on how girls chat are reviewed: 1) identity play; and 2) authenticity-seeking. Authenticity-seeking is argued to be more of a problem then identity play, and a greater need for researchers to draw from established interpersonal communication theory when considering girls' behavior in CMC and chat spaces is recommended researchers should

draw from established theories of Interpersonal Communication to adapt tenets of these theories to CMC. Finally, tensions between freedom and safety can be a challenge to web designers who are trying to create educational girl-centered sites.

*My Pop Studio*'s Chat Rooms

Nearly one year ago in July 2006, My Pop Studio (MPS) was launched online (www.mypopstudio.com). Designed by a team of researchers in the Media Education Lab at Temple University, MPS was created for tween girls (ages 9-12) to teach media literacy and health skills through an online gaming format. The site includes four activity modules, or "studios" where girls can go "behind the scenes": 1) *music studio*, where girls can create a virtual popstar or explore how music is used to sell products; 2) *TV studio*, where girls can edit their own reality show or take a poll about TV habits; 3) *magazine studio*, where girls can make their own magazine cover or examine photography manipulation; and 4) *digital studio*, where girls can test their multitasking skills or submit Web comics responding to issues of digital life. The site includes eight separate chat rooms for responses and discussion about the games and activities. To participate in the website and the chat rooms, anyone can sign up for a username and password without requiring a fee, personal information or name, or e-mail address. Since the site launch, MPS has received attention from the press and experienced ebbs and flows in traffic. Eight months after the launch, several unforeseen incidents in the chat rooms led to a closing of these rooms and an implementation of strictly monitored chat rooms that serve a bulletin board function.

As the site grew more popular, more users started communicating in the chat rooms, yet there was no official monitor of the site. If the MPS site team noticed any

comments that were considered inappropriate for the site, such as cussing, excessive flaming, or nonsensical comments (typing in random letters), they were deleted, but this was done in a non-systematic, needs-based way. As the chat rooms experienced more traffic, a monitor was hired in September 2006 to semi-monitor the site by systematically checking and filtering chat room comments and posting messages that promoted a safe chat environment. The monitor also urged participants to chat about the MPS activities and learning goals. It was clear by that a community of chatters had developed because the same usernames would reappear in the chat rooms and users would talk to each other.

At the end of November 2006, several national news stories that promoted MPS increased traffic substantially. User posts to the chat rooms exploded, and the conversation content became increasingly inappropriate for a site targeting tween girls. Two parents e-mailed the site administrators to complain about the content on the chat rooms. There was evidence of cyber-sex dialogues, one luring/stalking situation, and many participants were disclosing private information through chat. Several chat participants gave out phone numbers, e-mail addresses, first and last names, locations (city, town, country), school names, and other identifying factors. For these reasons, in March 2007, the live chat rooms were changed to strictly monitored areas where participants could post comments for approval. Since the move from unmonitored to monitored chat rooms, some changes appear to have taken place in the MPS user community. Table 1 provides a description of these changes.

Table 1

*Changes in unmonitored to strictly monitored chat rooms*

| **Semi-monitored (live chat)** | **Strictly monitored (post for approval)** |
|---|---|
| Live chat | Delayed chat—comments serve a bulletin board function |
| Sense of community | Decrease in posts--missing sense of community? |
| Most chat comments did not address learning goals of the site | Most comments received for approval are now geared toward learning goals, and commenting about games and activities |
| Freedom and exploration (identity, relationships, transgression, sexuality) | Lack a sense of freedom or open exploration |
| Lack safety and protection | Safety and protection |
| Live chat | Monitored and delayed chat—posting comments/bulletin board function |

The move from unmonitored to monitored chat rooms brought forth many questions for the site's creators on how girls participate in chat rooms, and also has changed the sense of community provided by the chat rooms: "there was a more authentic sense of community when there were no controls…but IM/chat social interaction was distracting from the educational goals of the site and creating potential safety hazards" (Hobbs, personal communication, 2007).

Thus, an argument can be made that the search for authenticity by site users was one of the risks in keeping the chat rooms open and unmonitored (freedom), and that in order for the site to be safe for girls, the chat rooms had to be strictly monitored (safety). The site's project team leader describes this tension between freedom and safety: "self

disclosure and authenticity verification are normal communicative processes of social interaction yet they are contradicted by the language of 'privacy and safety' used by adults about online communication" (Hobbs, personal communication, 2007). Although some scholars argue that girls online experience identity play in ways that can be empowering, it is the authenticity girls' seek in CMC that, through behaviors such as self-disclosure, put web designers of girl-centered Web sites in a precarious situation.

Identity Play vs. Authenticity-Seeking

Increasingly, the Internet is becoming the "hub," or central medium tweens and teens use, while other media are in the background or used to direct a young person's online experience (Harris Interactive, 2003a). Because it provides young people with choice, control, and individual direction, the Internet is an active medium: "teens and young adults are searching for independence and control, and the internet gives it to them like no other media" (Harris Interactive, 2003a, p. 2). Seventy percent of youth IM at least twice a week, and 45% use IM every time they go online, mainly to stay in touch with friends and relatives (Lenhart et al., 2001). Teens are more likely to use the Internet for social purposes, such as communicating with friends, meeting new people, getting personal help, and joining groups. Compared to adults, teens are heavier users of multi-user domains (MUDs) and chat rooms, and are more likely to go online to meet new people (Subrahmanyam et al., 2001). Moreover, girls prefer communication uses of Web, using it for e-mail and IM more than boys (Lenhart, et al., 2001).

The Internet is used by girls primarily as a tool of communication and social networking. Teen girls aged 13-18 were found more likely than boys to use the communication tools of e-mail, cell phone, landline phone, IM, social networking

Websites, and text messaging TM (Martin & Crane, 2007). Roban's (2002) study of 1,246 girls ages 13-18 found that girls online spend most of the time socializing, searching for information (song lyrics and school research), and using it when they are bored. When girls socialize online, they discuss boys and romance, school and friends, social plans, personal problems (family fights or depression), or "socially relevant topics" (drugs or current events).

Most young people communicate with their close offline friends: "being in constant contact with friends is highly valued, and there is little interest contacting strangers, though some have contacted people that they have not met face to face, this being mainly among the 21% who visit chat rooms" (Livingstone & Bober, 2005, p. 5). Most adolescents use CMC to keep in contact with their existing network of friends (Gross, 2004), but some adolescents go online to meet new people (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). In one study, 39% of adolescents had communicated online with strangers (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002). Most teens report not being worried about strangers online (Lenhart et al., 2001; Roban, 2002).

The unsupervised nature of chat combined with the interest in sexual topics may be empowering for girls to explore sexual issues they might never get to elsewhere, but it is also unsafe for girls, leaving them vulnerable to sexual predators, cyber-harassment, and cyber-stalking. Girls who meet new people online and develop relationships may seek authenticity and practice self-disclosure of information that would possibly aid predators in contacting or locating girls. There is a tension in the literature on online identity between girls playing with aspects of their identity versus girls expressing authentic identity online. The first view celebrates and praises identity play and the

availability to create identity in many different ways and contexts, whereas the second view theorizes that online communication does follow some rules of interpersonal interaction, and in some cases, allows for people to be more authentic and practice self-disclosure and reciprocity (Baym, 2002). It is tension within these two views that were experienced in the situation of events on the chat rooms of My Pop Studio, and it is argued that authenticity-seeking and relationship-building outweighs identity play as safety concerns in chat rooms designed for girls.

*Identity Play*

Some lines of research have explored how young people pretend, play, experiment, and try on different roles and identities in online communication. Experimenting with identity and "trying on" different roles is seen as a normal part of tween and adolescent development (Baumgarten, 2003). This view sees online communication in a utopian light, where children are free to experiment with identity in a "safe" space outside of the physical world. Walker and Bakopoulos (2004) explored how young people manage chat room relationships and found that "part of the appeal of chat rooms for the young lies in the opportunities to experiment with extended or alternative identities" (p. 3).

Slater (2002) identified four kinds of separation, disembodiedment, and liberation from physical world identities and relationships in online identity. First, people can perform whatever identity they choose. Second, people can create new identities that may not be possible in offline worlds. Third, all online identities are performances, so one can be liberated from the authenticity of offline identity. Fourth, identity can be fluid and dynamic, not fixed to concrete variables. According to Slater, online

interaction allows individuals to be completely free of the body, able to construct themselves in any means they would like, and able to change themselves at any time.

Turkle (1995) examined how internet users are provided the ability to perform identities in ways where they get to control who others believe they are, and where they can experiment with ways of thinking and acting. In ethnographic research of young people who use MUDs, she claims, "A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity" (p. 184). MUD users had a place to work through their own personal identity issues and have a sense of control over their identity's self-creation.

Willet and Sefton-Green (2003) investigated how girls learn online through play by observing a group of girls ages 10-13 in a community arts center. Researchers observed girls chatting online at popular chat Website Habbohotel (www.habbohotel.com). Within Habbohotel, a virtual environment where one can create an avatar and move to different rooms to play games or chat with others, boys preferred to play games and girls preferred to chat (this finding is in line with the research mentioned earlier). Researchers found that chat allowed girls to learn about sexuality and play through experiment by using new forms of language and netspeak (similar to findings of Merchant, 2001). Girls also played with identity by using risk-taking and experimentation techniques regarding sexuality. Sexualized discourse was used for "girls in chat rooms [to] carve out a particular way of 'doing girl', and more specifically doing 'pre-adolescent girl', not only through flirtatious behavior but also through a way of talking, expressing their opinions, and to some extent establishing a particular power relationship with boys" (Willet & Sefton-Green, p. 12). Other ways girls played with

identity were by assuming a false age (usually 15-19), and choosing different gender and sexual preferences of their avatars. The authors claim that girls are experiencing learning about sexuality in a new form. Online learning provides a type of learning that is multi-modal; non-homogeneous; allows for flexibility, experimentation, and risk-taking in discourse content and style; uses a variety of problem solving approaches; and allows learners to move at their own speed.

Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes (2004) explored how youth constructed sexuality and identity in an online teen chat room by analyzing discourse from a teen chat room transcript. Chat was used by participants to explore concerns about sexuality and develop strategies to exchange identity information with peers, such as in their usernames. The authors conclude that teen chat offers a safer environment for exploring sexual identity and practicing new kinds of relationships than the real world.

Grisso and Weiss (2005) examined a one-month period of postings of girls' discourse about sex on two bulletin boards of gURL.com. They found that gURL.com had a safe, supportive environment for girls to discover and assert agency and talk openly about sexual issues and concerns. However, it was also found that in their discourse, girls appropriated sexual "scripts" (from the media) and used language that showed concern with themselves as subject to men's pleasure rather than discussing their own pleasure. It is argued that girls played with identity to police against lesbian or bi-sexual comments, making fun of these posts and affirming heterosexuality. Although girls had a space where they were free to talk about sex, their comments may reinforce gender and sexual stereotypes.

Adolescents have admitted to playing with identity online, but not as much or as

often as the research on identity play suggests. Thirty-one percent of teens have pretended to be older in order to get into a website (Gross, 2004). Teens may pretend to be older when they are chatting with others (Rideout et al., 2005). Livingstone & Bober (2005), based on a United Kingdom national survey of 1,511 children ages 9-19, found that 40% of youth say they have pretended about themselves online. Youth reported pretending or changing information about their name (27%), age (22%), appearance (10%), and gender (5%).

According to the identity play view, the Internet and CMC is seen as an empowering place where youth can play with different ideas and identities, in a safer environment than doing this in real life, as another facet of identity and another means and place to learn, with a sense of control and mastery. Baym (2002) has pointed out that the nature of CMC, including anonymity, reduced cues, and the ability to create one's appearance, gender, race, and appearance are factors in allowing internet users to experiment with identity play. However, Baym also notes that people usually bring their personal aspects to online interactions, and "the focus on disembodied identity reflects the theoretical interests and the lure of the exotic rather than an effort to understand the typical" (p. 42).

*Authenticity-Seeking*

The view on the other end of the spectrum is that the Internet and CMC functions as a realm where youth are more authentic and practice greater self-disclosure more than practicing identity play. Baym (2002) argues for the significance of examining authenticity in computer-mediated identities: "most analytic attention (scholarly and popular) has focused on the cluster of 'disembodied/multiplicity/fantasy,' while most

online identities are along the lines of 'embodied/authentic/reality" (p. 41). Baym elaborates on this point by claiming "some research suggests that anonymity, and its associated lessening of social risk, may allow people to be more honest and take greater risks in their self-disclosures than they would offline" (p. 42) and that "It is too often forgot that in much—perhaps even most—CMC, however, anonymity is not an issue, as people are corresponding with people they also know offline and building their online selves that are richly contextualized in their offline social networks" (p. 43). The incidents that happened in the MPS chat rooms showed evidence that some girls were seeking authenticity from other users, perhaps as part of the relationship building process. In authenticity-seeking, users disclosed personal information that should not be disclosed online.

Contrary to the research in identity play, several studies have found that tweens and teens do not engage in radical identity play. In one study, nearly half of teens—49 percent—said they never pretended to be someone else, and 41% said they pretended a couple times, but it was usually to be older (Gross, 2004). An insignificant amount pretended to be another gender, celebrity, or sibling. Teens who would play or pretend with different aspects with identity online reported doing it more to play a joke on friends than to explore identity. Of those that had pretended, 57% did so while another friend was there (Gross). Another study explored 84 fifth and sixth grade children's interaction in a MUD, where "players create personas—avatars—in which they construct names, genders, and self-descriptions" (Calvert, Mahler, Zehnder, Jenkins, & Lee, 2003, p. 628). Participants were found to create avatars that stayed fairly true to their identities—the avatar's gender, interests, and name often reflected the teen's identity.

In contrast to pretending, nearly half of youth report that they have practiced self-disclosure online about a personal aspect of themselves. According to Livingstone & Bober (2005), 46% reported giving out personal information to someone they met online, such as their hobbies (27%), e-mail address (24%), full name (17%), age (17%), name of their school (9%), or a photograph of themselves (7%). A lesser amount of youth reported they forgot about safety about safety when online: "And though they often know the rules, a minority (7%) admits to forgetting about safety guidelines online" (Livingstone & Bober, p. 26). Valkenburg & Peter's (2007) study of adolescents' online communication and relationships found socially anxious teens reported the Internet as a means for intimate self-disclosure, which led to increased online communication.

Furthermore, as children get older, they take more risks online. Older children were more likely than younger children to engage in risky behavior and give out personal details to someone they had not met (Livingstone and Bober, 2005). For instance, only 25% of 9-11 year-olds engaged in risky behavior, whereas 61% of 16-17 year-olds took risks and gave out more personal information to strangers. Younger, more skilled Internet users also took risks, and younger youth who were heavier Internet users reported increased risky behavior (Livingstone & Bober).

One reason that girls may practice self-disclosure of personal information online is that some girls report that they can be more authentic, real, and who they "really are" better online than in face-to-face interaction. Roban's (2002) study of girls aged 8-18 found that most girls spend their time online socializing, and 52% of frequent Internet users "feel more comfortable expressing emotions online than in person or other means of communication" (p. 18). Thirty percent of adolescents saw online communication as

more effective than offline communication when disclosing intimate information (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Another study of adolescents using a MUD found that girls expressed themselves more than boys in writing (Calvert, et al., 2003).

Clark (2005) examined how girls use online chat and cell phones through in-depth interviews with 44 teen and 12 tween boys and girls. She claims these technologies provide a means to be in *constant contact* with peers and exercise control over relationships with parents. Being in constant contact was more important to girls, who believed they could express themselves better through writing and chat, and control their emotions and self-presentation to others.

Theil (2005) offers an understanding of how adolescent girls, through IM, negotiate and articulate their identities. Using in–depth interviews with 12 diverse girls and narrative analysis of their IM conversations, IM was found to provide girls with a sense of freedom without the presence of parents. Girls felt more comfortable conversing with boys using IM rather than face-to-face or phone because they had time to think about what they wanted to say, and they did not have to worry about appearance or losing face, is in real-life conversation. In addition to these functions, IM also operated as a diary function, where girls would reflect on their innermost feelings and thoughts with friends.

One goal of authenticity-seeking and self-disclosure of personal information in chat rooms is to develop relationships. Harris Interactive (2003b) found that youth reported using the Internet “to meet someone new” or to “meet someone really different from me” (p. 2). Youth aged 9-19 reported that 32% have visited chat rooms, 30% have made new friends online, and 8% have met face to face with someone they met online

(Livingstone & Bober, 2005).

A study in Singapore investigated young people's risky Internet behavior in meeting someone face-to-face that they initially met online (Liau, Khoo, & Ang, 2005). Of this group, 74% had chatted online, and those who have chatted were older than those who had not chatted. Sixteen percent of Internet users have had a face-to-face meeting with someone they met online, and of this group, 22% went alone for the meeting. Older adolescents were more likely to meet someone face-to-face. To compare, a survey in the U.S. showed that only 7% of youth had a face-to-face meeting with someone they met online, and 23% of this group went alone for the meeting (Wolak et al., 2002).

A national Youth Internet Safety Survey of 1501 youth (190 boys, 708 girls) aged 10-17 in the United States found that 25% of Internet users had formed casual online friendships in the year prior to the survey, and 14% had formed close online relationships or online romances (Wolak et al., 2002). An extension of this study explored the characteristics of youth who formed relationships online (Wolak, et al., 2003). Sixteen percent of girls (and 12% of boys) reported close online relationships. Girls who had a higher level of conflict with parents or who were more troubled were more likely to have online relationships. Older girls, those with home Internet access, and those who reported higher Internet use were more likely to have a close online relationship. The authors conclude that, although online relationships can have helpful aspects for youth, such as a sense of friendship and someone to talk to, these youth may be vulnerable to online exploitation, especially if they do not tell parents about the relationship, or if they decide to meet the person face-to-face (Wolak et al., 2003).

Seventy-one percent of girls said it is wrong to meet people they met online in

person, and only two of the 75 girls in focus groups report meeting an online friend in person. Moreover, girls report making good friends online and feeling that if they were to tell their parents, their parents would not understand. When asked if they would consider a cyber-romance for someone they met online, 36% said an in-person romance is always better than an Internet one; 29% say no, that is creepy; 13% said maybe, if they had the opportunity for a real romance; 12% said maybe, but they'd have to get to know the other person well; 9% said yes, if the person wasn't a pervert; and 1% said yes, they would want to but would afraid friends would make fun (Roban, 2002). However, when asked for advice about cyber-romance, frequent tips girls give are to be careful not to give out any identifying information, don't meet strangers face to face, don't get too carried away, and know who you're talking to (Roban, 2002, p. 12).

Even though girls seem to have some knowledge of cyber-safety, there is some evidence that girls experience a sense that CMC and online relationships are "less real" than offline relationships. Merchant's (2001) study of how girls engage in chat rooms found that girls who frequent chat rooms viewed any offline friends as somewhat fictitious, or "not really real" (Merchant, 2001). Forty-two percent of girls expect that people in chat rooms may lie, however, the researchers note "they [girls] appear to have difficulty accepting that someone they bond with emotionally could be lying to them" (Roban, 2002, p. 12-13). Thus, the anonymity, disembodiment, and lack of cues of online communication may allow girls to feel more comfortable and trusting in developing relationships with strangers: "Contrary to adult wisdom, these young people see chat rooms as 'safe' places in which to initiate relationships. Here they can move at their own speed, retreat if they want to, control the way their identity is presented and

perceived" (Walker & Bakopoulos, 2004, p. 22).

Unfortunately, the danger of girls developing relationships online is that they may be with sexual predators. The Internet Crime Forum (2001) in the United Kingdom reports incidents of adult sex offenders meeting children online and gaining their trust are increasing in the United Kingdom and the United States. Conversations in chat rooms are oftentimes unmonitored, so they can become sexual in nature. These environments are places where sexual predators lurk to create relationships with children and teens (National Academy of Sciences, 2003). Furthermore, Walker and Bakopoulos's (2004) in-depth interviews of several adolescents about developing relationships online reveal that some teens met their online romance in person, and some had sexual encounters with them, which usually did not develop further into a sustaining face-to-face relationship. They found youth taking extreme risks in online relationships: "Each of these stories these young people tell. . . .shows them trying to remain in control but still putting themselves at risk" (Walker & Bakopoulos, p. 22).

Thus, the research on girls, CMC and chat rooms illustrates that girls enjoy going online to communicate mainly with their group of offline friends, but some girls are open to meet new people online. In these encounters, girls may participate in authenticity-seeking, self-disclosure, having a certain degree of trust (for strangers), and experiencing a contradiction between knowing online safety and feeling that online relationships are "less real" than in person. Based on this information, it is beneficial to examine how interpersonal communication theory can inform research on girls and CMC.

### Drawing From Interpersonal Communication Theory

Authenticity-seeking and relationship-building is a normal part of girls' offline

and online life. In order to understand these behaviors and girls participation in CMC, researchers cannot overlook the established field of interpersonal communication. Drawing from interpersonal communication theories provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing CMC phenomenon.

Baym (2002) claims that theories of relationship development are based on face-to-face communication (including nonverbal cues, physical proximity, and facial expressions), thus, they are not valid when analyzing CMC. Although interpersonal communication theories are based on para-social interaction and may not directly apply to CMC, they are still useful because tenets from these theories can drawn as parallels to CMC. For example, the notion of authenticity, self-disclosure and reciprocity, relational development, and uncertainty reduction are interpersonal communication tenets that can be applied to CMC.

Connecting interpersonal theory to mass communication was advocated by Rubin and Rubin (1985), who argued that interpersonal communication could be connected with uses and gratifications models, where uses and gratifications could be broadened to a communication paradigm rather than exclusively a mass media paradigm. In uses and gratifications, “the media cannot influence an individual unless that person has some use for a medium or its messages” and a person “is seen as a goal-directed, active participant in the communication process” (Rubin & Rubin, 1985, p. 36). They provided four ways that describe why interpersonal communication occurs, connecting to theories of human motives, which is a significant component of uses and gratifications (see pp. 43-44). First, human communication is *instrumental* and involves achieving goals and fulfilling needs. Second, communication is *ego-defensive* where self-disclosure is a way to

confirm one's self. Third, people need to fulfill their motives and developmental needs through personal expression, so communication is *value-expressive*. Fourth, communication serves a function of *knowledge*, such as reducing uncertainty (Uncertainty Reduction Theory) or examining rewards and costs (Social Penetration Theory). Thus, the authors make parallels between interpersonal needs and motives in uses and gratifications with interpersonal communication theory, and provided ideas for research agendas. They wrote this article when CMC was not in widespread existence, but today, Rubin and Rubin's argument is even more relevant, where media is used for interpersonal purposes.

One example of combining elements from uses and gratifications and interpersonal communication tenets with a mass media phenomenon was a study by Peter, Valkenburg, and Schouten (2005), who surveyed adolescents aged 12-14 to see which were most motivated to talk with strangers on the Internet. They found five motivations to talk online, including entertainment (to have fun, enjoy, and relax); social inclusion (belonging to a group and searching for social networks); maintaining relationships (interacting with people they already know); meeting new people (trying new things and risk-taking); and social compensation (using the Internet as an alternative to face-to-face communication). It was found that the typical adolescent who talks with strangers has less frequent but more intense chat sessions.

Thus, a call for future research on CMC and girls urges researchers to draw from interpersonal communication theory into their studies. Based on the incidents in the MPS chat rooms, several hypotheses about how girls experience CMC support this call. First of all, it is natural for girls to follow the norms of face-to-face communication,

including self-disclosure and reciprocity, especially when they want to get to know someone online. Second, girls desire authenticity in chat. Authenticity-seeking is how girls are socialized to develop a relationship with someone, and they are not interested in pretending to be someone else when building relationships. Third, authenticity-seeking helps to explain evidence in the research that shows—even though they know it is unsafe—girls give out personal information online. Giving out personal information could happen in any face-to-face conversation, but girls forget about the boundaries and risks of CMC with strangers. Livingstone and Bober (2005) recommend that future research examine what kinds of personal information children are giving out and why in order to create better education and policy initiatives. Fourth, girls are using the Internet as a social means to stay in touch with friends, but the norm of communicating online with friends may blur the line between other people—strangers—who may seem like friends too. Fifth, girls may sometimes play with identity and pretend, but eventually as a girl gets to know another person online, the information disclosure would have to be increasingly authentic, particularly before a face-to-face meeting. Lastly, the final argument is that tween girls are new to CMC and trying to “learn the ropes” of online communication, therefore, they are drawing from their knowledge of interpersonal communication norms and behavior. Studies show that tweens are less likely to have used CMC than teens, and a large jump happens between ages 11 and 14, where the older group is more likely to use e-mail, IM, and social networking sites (Martin & Crane, 2007).

Freedom vs. Safety

Based on what happened in the MPS chat rooms and the move from semi-

monitored to strictly monitored chat rooms, there is a tension between 1) trying to make a chat space for girls that allows them the freedom and lack of restriction to say what they want and create a space of their own; and 2) Providing a safe and protected space for girls. Thus, in the future the MPS team must design ways for girls to communicate with each other to enhance freedom and community, but at the same time, keep the site a safe space for girls. MPS is moving into an evaluation phase, and focus groups and surveys with girls can provide ideas that will help create a safe community. Eventually, the site's design will be updated, and hopefully freedom and safety can be combined in effective ways for girls.

To conclude, the story of the MPS chat rooms provides an interesting case where a Web site design of a community space for girls unfolded into an unsafe space and brought forth critical questions about girl-centered chat rooms. Although girls may play with identity online, in chat rooms, they are more likely to be authentic (self-disclose) and seek authenticity from others (uncertainty reduction and reciprocity). In order to understand incidents like these, researchers can draw on tenets of interpersonal communication for understanding girls' chat behavior.

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