

Chapter 8

The Representation of Female Friendships on Young Women's MySpace Profiles: The All-Female World and the Feminine 'Other'

Amy Shields Dobson
Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the representation of female friendship on MySpace, based on a sample of 45 public MySpace profiles owned by young Australian women, aged between 18 and 21 years old. Two prominent constructions of female friendship on this social network site are outlined: firstly, female friendships as idealistically party-oriented, 'wild', and rowdy; and secondly, female friendships as close, loyal, and intimate — comparable in the depth of feeling and connection expressed to romantic partnerships or family ties. These idealised, performative constructions of female friendship, in the context of online self-presentation, also seem to rely on exclusivity, and opposition of selves and friendship groups to a feminised outsider/'other'. Some of the political implications of such representation are discussed from a feminist perspective. I suggest some ways in which ideals and goals of female representation to emerge from second-wave feminist media and performance critique might be said to have actualised and failed to actualise in these online performances of friendship and identity created by young women.

This chapter contains explicit content

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the representation of female friendship on online social network sites, based on a sample of 45 public MySpace profiles owned by young Australian women, aged between 18 and 21 years old. This chapter draws on research

conducted for my doctoral thesis, which examines the performance of popular modes of femininity by young women on MySpace, employing media and performance theory. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a display of sociality and friendship with other young women is one of the most prevalent aspects of these young women's self-presentation, a finding in line with ethnographic work which documents the central importance of friendships with other

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females in the lives of teenage girls and young women (McRobbie and Garber, 1976; Hey, 1997). On 40 of the 45 public profiles examined, young women depict themselves with female friends, often displaying several albums with dozens of images of themselves and their friends in each album. All 45 of the profile creators in my study centrally reference time spent with friends, or the importance of their friends in text displayed on their profiles. On some of the profiles examined, much space is devoted to lengthy descriptions of a profile owner's close friends, or to textual dedications to friends.

In my examination of the data contained in the 45 MySpace profiles, two key constructions emerge in the presentation of close female friendships. Friendships are presented as idealistically party-oriented and rowdy. They are also presented as idealistically close, loyal, and intimate—comparable in the depth of feeling and connection expressed to romantic partnerships or family ties. Both of these constructions lead to an overall image for viewers of an idealistic female-centred world which is all-encompassing and self-enclosed, and able to satisfy almost all of the young women's social and emotional needs. Close, loyal, and exceptionally fun friends are constantly present, and time with friends and wild parties together abound.

The friendships that occupy most of the photo imagery and text examined from the profiles are most commonly between two or more young women, with male friendship, and in many cases, even romantic relationships with males, playing a significantly smaller role in the self-presentation examined. Of course, several young women display close friend relationships with young men. Also, in several cases, the boundaries between non-sexual and sexual relationships with other young women are blurred on these profiles, as I discuss. However, in none of the profiles examined are sexual relationships with the close friend in question claimed or directly named as such by the young women involved. Rather,

displays of sexual affection and homoeroticism between female friends are depicted with undertones of 'tongue-in-cheek' and seduction of a (male) viewer, as I explain. Henderson (2008) and McRobbie (2008) have both noted a similar phenomenon in their recent writings on young women's culture in the West.

In this chapter I do not attempt to delve into the actual practice or 'reality' of these relationships by examining communication between friends or comments displayed on each other's profiles. My primary concern is with the *representation* of female friendship as part of an individual's overall identity performance in this public forum. I textually analyse female friendships on the MySpace profiles by examining the images and textual self-descriptions posted by the profile owners. I employ a feminist framework to do so, with particular reference to feminist representational theories from media and performance studies. I suggest that the representation of friendship on these young women's MySpace profiles depicts young femininity as active, pleasure-seeking, and sometimes also more typically 'masculine' in the type of hedonistic and rowdy behaviour shown to be engaged in by young women. This contributes to a construction of female subjectivity often called for by second-wave feminist representational critics and scholars. However, such presentation of female friendships is also quite romanticised, perhaps serving to contribute towards the construction of a kind of idealised, young, 'new femininity' (Tincknell, Chambers, Van Loon, and Hudson, 2003; Gill, 2006). Whilst self-alignment with this dominant construction of a kind of post-feminist 'new femininity' perhaps allows young women greater freedom in terms of the type of behaviour they can be publicly seen to participate in, it also seems reliant on a typically 'masculine' performativity, or 'laddishness', as I discuss. Further, I argue, these close female friendships, in their performance on MySpace, seem to rely on exclusivity, and opposition to a stereotypically feminine 'other', in the same way

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