Israeli Girls and Digital Subcultures:
Language, Gender and Playfulness on Blogs

Thesis submitted for the degree of
"Doctor of Philosophy"

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

My dissertation is an attempt to untangle female adolescence through its documented visibility in a media-absorbed environment. This work juxtaposes the emerging disciplines of Girls' Studies and New Media Literacies, and explores the ways new literacies facilitate girlhood performances online: How do girls use performative and playful blogging practices to make meaning? How do they perform gender identities; do they conform to gender roles or subvert them? Which literacy skills are girls acquiring through blogging and how are these skills positioned vis-à-vis traditional literacy? How do girls employ visual imagery and narratives from various genres to transcend their social and cultural boundaries?

<u>Theoretical contexts</u>

The liminal aspects of cyberspace create a playful environment that encourages exploration of identity as well as play with communication. Judith Butler (1990) further develops Goffman's phenomenological principal that rejects the concept of a fixed identity and argues that both identity and body are neither natural nor a-priori to culture and discourse. Thus, identity and gender are performed and naturalized rituals. Butler focuses on the performance of the normative, demonstrating that performativity can also enforce norms and does not necessarily subvert the social structure, as Shechner and Turner originally claimed (McKenzie, 1998).

The "Communication as Culture" paradigm views texts as semiotic battlegrounds and explores how they are accepted by audiences. Subversion is therefore a passive practice of counter-reading (Hall, 1993; Radway, 1984), while more active forms are studied in the realm of fandom (Jenkins, 1992) or subcultures (Hebdige, 1979). The Web, interpreted both as space and text, suggests an opportunity to apply the

prisms of Cultural Studies and Performance Studies, in order to make meaning of the multimodal environments of user-generated content.

Girls are still marginalized in subcultures and perceived as consumers rather than creators of culture and media (McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Kearney, 2006). The new field of Girls Studies is a sub-genre of third-wave feminist scholarship grounded in cultural studies (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007) that aims to change that. Recent work in the field focuses on girls as active producers of culture, notably in new media forms such as personal home pages, blogs, and instant messaging (Bortree, 2005; Mazzarella, 2005; Stern, 2002, 2004; Kearney, 2006; Stern, 2007).

Web subcultures, such as those of gamers and hackers, are male dominated; blogging, however, is dominated by girls (Herring, et al., 2004) and projects their "bedroom culture" (McRobbie & Garber, 1976) into the public realm. The Israeli case study is valuable since seventy-five percent of the bloggers on the *Israblog* hosting platform (the largest in Israel and equivalent to *LiveJournal*) are teenage girls. This statistical majority is more pronounced in Israel since it is not overshadowed by j-blogs and political blogs to the extent suggested by American-based research.

Various conceptualizations of blogs have been offered. Defining blogs as frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence led to conceptualization of the blog as a genre (Herring et al., 2005). Blogs, however, are not documents merely to be read, they are websites conceptualized in spatial terms as gathering places (Caroll, 2004) where their *intra* as well as *inter-connectivity* generates communities as well as discursive fields (Nardi et al., 2004).

Whether blogs are viewed as literature (Himmer, 2004), journalism (Gallo, 2004), or a social activity (Nardi et al., 2004) seems to depend on the practice of the blogger. The current working assumption of blog-related research, therefore, refers to various blogging practices (Schmidt, 2007) and attempts to define practices rather than the elusive frame of the blog.

Once again, the Israeli case study proves valuable since Israeli girls explore the boundaries of the blog as a bridging genre and a multimodal text by engaging in design, collection, and play practices, rather than plain text journal-like writing. Online technologies have profoundly changed the concept of literacy as music, video, and animation became the equivalent of traditional literacy's alphabet (Coiro et al., 2008). The emerging new media literacies create new demands, strategies, and semiotic contexts, including creativity with the media as an essential skill (Varis, 2005).

Online adolescent ethnographies focus on written content and only some have briefly mentioned the visual and play practices that girls engage in online (Davis, 2004; boyd, 2008c, Willett, 2008). A simple Google search, however, suggests that Asian and American girls engage in a few practices similar to those of Israeli girls, such as collecting and designing non-material "dollies" and expressive "buttons," though these are left unexplored by academics.

Thus, this work continues and connects the pioneering works of Sherry Turkle (1997) on identity construction and Brenda Danet (2001) on play with communication, moving beyond them to contemporary new media genres, practices, and literacies interpreted in girlhood contexts. My theoretical contribution is an attempt to conceptualize the blog as a stage – a site of performance – through analyzing common teenage girls' blogging practices as performance codes, cues, and metaphors.

Methodology

The dissertation is based on an ethnographic study conducted from August 2004 to December 2007, employing Christine Hine's (2000) "connective ethnography" concept alongside danah boyd's (2008c) insider research approach, across various offline and online spaces. The study included materials from 140 Hebrew-language blogs of girls aged eleven to fifteen, complemented by fifteen in-depth interviews and participation in four national offline bloggers' meetings attended by many of the

girls. Half the blogs used in the study were volunteered by the girls and the other half were selected through the "random blog" option on the *Israblog* website.

Approaching teenage girls' blogging space as ethnography of performance encompasses aspects of traditional ethnography as well as ethnography of communication. Blogs were interpreted by the girls as texts (diary or personal newsletter), place (room, gathering space) or being/entity ("my best friend," "a part of me"). As Markham (1998) suggested, different metaphors require different interpretive methodologies; thus, I constantly move between popular culture, social semiotics, subcultural style/fashion, sociolinguistic discourse and narrative analysis.

Online field definitions are very fluid and different literary practices often translate into different spatial metaphors; thus, I have redefined the boundaries of the field and have had to engage in entering the field practices three times. The way I chose to become an insider, a participant observer, was to open a blog on *Israblog* and engage in practices similar to those of my case studies. My research blog is entitled "Doctor Blog" and my field observations were reflective in real time. This experience wasn't always easy, pleasant, or reaffirming, and is the only case I know of in which the ethnographer's field notes – the essential documentation that is considered intimate and often unspoken of (Sanjek, 1990) – were made public and interactive during real time field research.

Dissertation chapters - findings

The first chapter identifies unique interaction patterns among teenage girl bloggers, defining blogging practices of play and collection as central to the blogging experience of girls. Girls design graphic blog ornaments called "buttons" as identity signifiers, social gestures and symbolic activism practices, as well as play with "virtual cities" they create and develop on blogs, in similar patterns to playing with collections and doll houses. Analyzing blogging practices in terms of collecting practices provides insights to the consequences of activity in digital virtual spaces, and problematizes the perception of copyright: girls clearly understand copying as

stealing, yet they copy extensively from others, while protecting their copied collections using copyright discourse.

Some forms of play contribute to girls' socialization into the adult world of labor, as playful gift-economy design practices are framed by industrial labor discourse, creating a competitive "blog design industry", including knowledge sharing practices and a critic system, involving thousands of blogs. At the same time, playful blogging helps girls acquire new media literary practices such as complex search capabilities and graphic design and animation, offering girls a larger degree of control over contemporary means of cultural production.

The second chapter delves deeper into blog content, using semiotic and narrative analysis to identify two blog genres that represent two distinct subcultures and gendered identities crafted with new media literacy practices. These distinct blog genres parallel existing stereotypes among teens – The "freak" and the "fakatsa" (a glocal version of a "Californian" fashionable teenager). The chapter outlines the manner in which stereotypes are identified and performed through blogging practices and new literacies. This analysis suggests that the blog is not only a text or a space, but an avatar of the blogger when its appearance and narratives are judged by other teen bloggers in the same way body and characters are judged in real life.

The two identified blog genres are analyzed as a spectrum of identities to play and move between, as well as narratives used to perceive and cope with female adolescence. Both genres are forged through juxtaposing an intertextual local and global bricollage of images from the media and popular culture; often exploring and even subverting the boundaries of each stereotype they represent. The attributes of each stereotype are extracted through content analysis of incidents of flaming on the respective blogs.

The "freak" and the "fakatsa" created a spectrum other girls had to relate to and differentiate themselves from. One of the strategies girls employed was to avoid gender performativity and focus on the performance of glocal identities, evolving

mainly around Manga and Anime fandom (global), and youth movements (local). One of the intriguing fandom practices among Israeli Manga and Anime girls is their affinity to "bishi" characters – boys who are drawn with close resemblance to girls in homosexual Japanese genres. It would seem these genres allow girls to ignore the information about gender and visually consume a "standard" love story without the risk of being stereotyped as a mainstream "girly" girl like the Fakatsa type.

Finally, the chapter suggests that the connection between blog space and body/geographical space is bidirectional. This is demonstrated by an analysis of rituals at bloggers' meetings in which teen bloggers perform their blogs and the blogosphere through fashion and the borrowing of some online literacy practices to geographical space and the human body.

The third findings chapter addresses vernacular literations and language play on blogs. Some of the Hebrew abbreviations documented in girls' blogs are in keeping with language play documented in Hebrew chat, IM, and SMS, but other forms are unique to blogs and to girls' blogging subculture associated with the specific blog genres discussed in the previous chapter. The most intriguing finding is the documentation of play with orthography and typography as part of blogging subcultural practices.

The original Hebrew typography developed by girls and referred to as "Fakatsa Style" resembles hackers' "l33t" (Raymond, 1991) and is performed as part of a girly fashionable identity that cares about the look (aesthetics) of words. The chapter also demonstrates the penetration of English, Spanish and Japanese words from specific media texts to Fakatsa slang, supporting the same gendered identity performance.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the blog as a performance space, an avatar materializing performativity in the virtual space and a performative text of vernacular literacy. Its findings suggest that performance studies are essential to the interpretation of

online culture, thus many of the current contradictions and blurred boundaries become clear when viewing online metaphors as settings. Concepts like copy right infringement and privacy are understood differently when adopting the metaphor of shared space rather than published page. Based on the interpretation of metaphors as settings, this study also suggests that motion skills take part in the essential new media literacies.

Based on the examination of gender identity performances and interpretation of "girl power", this study argues that excesses sexuality imagery often compensates for the loss of the female voice expressed through mouth-less imagery and language patterns on blogs. Girls always wanted to become dolls, thus, online settings allow them to build a continuous identity in which they embody the doll as their avatar. This study also demonstrates how language and literacies are indeed technologies of the self, arguing playfulness with communication resonates with the post modern concept of the plasticity of the (Barbie) self .

Finally, following the ethnographic account of Fakatsa girls who started as a speech community in 2004 and ended up as a stereotypical representation of a stereotype (=simulacrum) and a blogging-meme by 2007, this study problematizes online identity discourse and suggests a theoretical connection between stigma, simulacra and memes. This study demonstrates we represent ourselves no better than mass media represent us, arguing that the self craves for attention but withdraws/breaks under the pressure to perform, when noticed. The study offers an empirical path of examining post modern concepts as process-driven ethnographies.

Specifically to Israeli society, this study supports earlier findings that youth are de-ideologizing, and seem to care about popular culture and stylistic choices more than issues central to the collective discourse in Israel. A significant number of the girls who participated in this study lived outside Tel Aviv area, often in peripheral small towns in the far south or north of Israel, and a large population of Russian origins was noted.

This study argues these girls use the blogosphere as a cultural equalizer socializing online with uptown Israeli girls and often borrowing their blog practices for desired identity performances. By interacting with global (mainly American and Japanese) culture, peripheral girls are in fact bypassing the Israeli cultural center of Tel Aviv repositioning themselves vis-à-vis a larger global center which Tel Aviv is also peripheral in relation to it. I argue "hegemony" is also a relative concept of cultural center, since both Japanese and Israeli girls use American "global" culture to subvert gender identities preferred by their local traditions.

Israeli Girls and Digital Subcultures:
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Doctoral dissertation summary

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Theoretical Context

The liminal aspects of cyberspace create a playful environment that encourages exploration of identity, as well as play with communication. Judith Butler (1990) further develops Goffman's phenomenological principal that rejects the concept of a fixed identity and argues that both identity and body are neither natural nor a-priori to culture and discourse. Thus, identity and gender are performed and naturalized rituals. Butler focuses on the performance of the normative, demonstrating that performativity can also enforce norms and does not necessarily subvert the social structure, as Shechner and Turner originally claimed (McKenzie, 1998).

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studied in the realm of fandom (Jenkins, 1992) or subcultures (Hebdige, 1979). The Web, interpreted both as space and text, suggests an opportunity to apply the prisms of Cultural Studies and Performance Studies in order to make meaning of the multimodal environments of user-generated content.

Girls are still marginalized in subcultures and perceived as consumers rather than creators of culture and media (McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Kearney, 2006). The new field of Girls Studies is a sub-genre of third-wave feminist scholarship grounded in cultural studies (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2007) that perceives girls as active producers of culture. Recent work in the field focuses on girls' creativity, notably in new media forms such as personal home pages, blogs, and instant messaging (Bortree, 2005; Mazzarella, 2005; Stern, 2002, 2004; Kearney, 2006; Stern, 2007).

Web subcultures, such as those of gamers and hackers, are male dominated; blogging, however, is dominated by girls (Herring, et al., 2004; Lenhart et al., 2007) that project their "bedroom culture" (McRobbie & Garber, 1976) into the public realm. The Israeli case study is valuable since seventy-five percent of the bloggers on the *Israblog* hosting platform (the largest in Israel and equivalent to *LiveJournal*) are teenage girls. This statistical majority is more pronounced in Israel since it is not overshadowed by journalist blogs and political blogs to the extent suggested by American-based research.

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Once again, the Israeli case study proves valuable since Israeli girls explore the boundaries of the blog as a bridging genre and a multimodal text by engaging in design, collection, and play practices, rather than plain text journal-like writing. Online technologies have profoundly changed the concept of literacy as music, video, and animation became the equivalent of traditional literacy's alphabet (Coiro et al., 2008). The emerging new media literacies create new demands, strategies, and semiotic contexts, including creativity, with the media as an essential skill (Varis, 2005).

Online adolescent ethnographies focus on written content and only some have briefly mentioned the visual and play practices that girls engage in online (Davis, 2004; Boyd, 2008c, Willett, 2008). A simple Google search, however, suggests that Asian and American girls engage in a few practices similar to those of Israeli girls, such as collecting and designing non-material "dollies" and expressive "buttons," though these are left unexplored by academics.

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concept across various offline and online spaces. The study included materials from 140 Hebrew-language blogs of girls aged eleven to fifteen, complemented by fifteen in-depth interviews and participation in four national offline bloggers' meetings attended by many of the girls. Half the blogs used in the study were volunteered by the girls and the other half were selected through the "random blog" option on the *Israblog* website.

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Findings

The first chapter identifies unique interaction patterns among teenage girl bloggers, defining blogging practices of play and collection as central to the blogging experience of girls. Girls design graphic blog ornaments, called "buttons", as identity signifiers, social gestures and symbolic activism practices, as well as play with "virtual cities" they create and develop on blogs, in similar patterns to playing with collections and doll houses.

Analyzing blogging practices as collecting practices provided important insight into strategies employed by the girls in order to disturb the perfection of digital reproduction and keep the joy of striving for closure (Danet & Katriel, 1989). Furthermore, collecting practices problematize the perception of copyright: girls understand copying as stealing and protect their collections using copyright discourse, yet they ignore the fact their collections are copied from other sources online too.

Some forms of play contribute to girls' socialization into the adult world of labor and others draw on children's playful exchange practices. Blog design practices are framed by industrial labor discourse, creating a competitive "design industry", including knowledge sharing practices and a critic system that helps other girls learn, improve, and become part of the game by opening their own "business" (a blog that serves as a designs "factory"). Collection and design practices help girls acquire new media literacies and it offers them increased control over contemporary means of cultural production.

Although some norms of gift exchange exist on *LiveJournal* (Pearson, 2007), a community of practice that is practically an "industry" involving thousands of blogs, seems unique to the Israeli case study. Another common practice on *Israblog* involves blog contests, such as "Best Written Blog", "Best Designed Blog", "Blog Oscar", and many others. Girls use competition as means of communion by initiating various contests and allowing little time between them. This way, almost every girl wins something sometime, but important elements of the performance are eroding as competition rituals become a daily routine.

The second chapter delves deeper into blog content, using semiotic and narrative analysis to identify blog genres that represent distinct subcultures and gendered identities crafted with new media literacy practices. Two main blog genres were found, consistent with existing stereotypes among teens – The "freak" and the "fakatsa" (a derogatory referring to a local version of a "fashion victim" uptown girl, ideally portrayed by movies like "Legally Blond"). The chapter outlines the manner in

which stereotypes are identified and performed through blogging practices and new literacies mentioned earlier, such as identity buttons and design choices. Fakatsa blogging style sides with the "think pink" ideology, using kitsch and fantasy iconography, fairy tales narratives, and rhetoric of perfection; while Freak blogging style combines gothic iconography, and the writing of personal narrative as gothic narrative in literature and films.

This analysis suggests that the blog is not only a text or a space, but an avatar of the blogger when its appearance and narratives are judged by other teen bloggers in the same way body and characters are judged in real life. These two identified blog genres are analyzed as a spectrum of gender identities, as well as narratives used to perceive and cope with the perils of female adolescence.

Other girls avoided gender performativity and focus on the performance of glocal identities, evolving mainly around Manga and Anime fandom (global), and youth movements (local). One of the intriguing fandom practices among Israeli Manga and Anime girls is their affinity to "bishi" characters – boys who are drawn with close resemblance to girls in homosexual Anime genres. It would seem these genres allow girls to ignore the information about gender and visually consume a "standard" love story without the risk of being stereotyped as a mainstream "girly girl" like the Fakatsa.

Finally, the chapter suggests that the connection between blog space and body/geographical space is bidirectional. This is demonstrated by an analysis of rituals at bloggers' meetings, in which teen bloggers perform their blogs and the blogosphere through fashion and the borrowing of some online literacy practices to geographical space.

The third chapter addresses vernacular literations and language play on blogs. Some of the Hebrew abbreviations documented in girls' blogs are in keeping with language play documented in Hebrew chat, Instant Messaging, and mobile phone Texting, but other forms are unique to blogs and to girls' blogging subculture associated with

Fakatsa identity performance discussed in the previous chapter. The original Hebrew typography developed by girls and referred to as "Fakatsa Style" resembles hackers' "l33t" (Raymond, 1991) and other cases of deviant orthography as part of subcultural style (Sebba, 2003; Androutsopoulos, 2007), and is performed as part of a girly fashionable identity that cares about the look and aesthetics of words. The chapter also demonstrates the penetration of English, Spanish, and Japanese words from specific media texts to Fakatsa slang, supporting aspects of this identity performance.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the blog as a performance space, an avatar materializing performativity in the virtual space, and a performative text of vernacular literacy. Its findings suggest that performance studies are essential to the interpretation of online culture, thus many of the current contradictions and blurred boundaries become clear when viewing online metaphors as settings. Concepts like copyright infringement and privacy are understood differently when adopting the metaphor of shared space rather than published page.

Based on the examination of gender identity performances and interpretation of "girl power", this study argues that excessive sexuality imagery often compensates for the loss of the female voice expressed through mouth-less imagery and some language patterns on blogs. Girls always wanted to become dolls (Rogers, 1999), thus, online settings allow them to build a continuous identity in which they embody the doll as their avatar. This study demonstrates how language and literacies are indeed technologies of the self, arguing playfulness with communication resonates with the post modern concept of the plasticity of the (Barbie) self. This study also suggests that some motion skills, through which playful orthographies are produced, form part of the new media literacies.

As a result of the ethnographic account of Fakatsa girls, who started as a community of practice in 2004 and ended up as a stereotypical representation of a stereotype

(=simulacrum) and a blogging-meme by 2007, this study problematizes online identity discourse and suggests a theoretical connection between stigma, simulacra, and memes. This study demonstrates we represent ourselves no better than mass media represent us, arguing that the self craves for attention but withdraws/breaks under the pressure to perform, when noticed. Thus, this study offers ethnography as an empirical path to a process-driven examination of post modern concepts, such as simulacrum.

Specifically to Israeli society, this study supports earlier findings that youth are de-ideologizing and seem to care about popular culture and stylistic choices more than issues central to the collective discourse in Israel (Golan, forthcoming). A significant number of the girls who participated in this study lived outside the Tel Aviv area, often in peripheral small towns in the far south or north of Israel, and a large population of Russian origins was noted.

This study argues these girls use the blogosphere as a cultural equalizer socializing online with uptown Israeli girls and often borrowing their blog practices for desired identity performances. By interacting with global (mainly American, Argentinean and Japanese) cultures, peripheral girls are in fact bypassing the Israeli cultural center of Tel Aviv repositioning themselves vis-à-vis a larger global center which Tel Aviv is also peripheral in relation to it. I argue "hegemony" is also a relative concept of cultural center, since both Japanese (Hjorth, 2003) and Israeli girls use American "global" culture to subvert gender identities preferred by their local traditions.