TEENAGE GIRLS AS SOPHISTICATED PRODUCERS OF NEW MEDIA ON THE

2000s INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

TEENAGE GIRLS AS SOPHISTICATED PRODUCERS OF NEW MEDIA ON THE 2000s
INTERNET

Mary K. Reed

The World Wide Web can serve as a means of creative expression and technological

exploration through individual users' creation of web pages. Teenage girls have been creating

websites and other media on the Web almost since its inception, but their production and

experimentation have been studied by few researchers. This inquiry analyzed the websites

created by teen girls in the early 2000s and explored the motivations behind their activities, thus

arguing that teen girls are sophisticated producers of new media. This was done through an

autoethnographic study, including interviews with four former participants in the subculture, and

practice-based research, including making a website and zines.

Keywords: Internet, teen girls, websites, webmistress, me / you / site

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"Obviously, Doctor," she said, "you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl."

–Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*
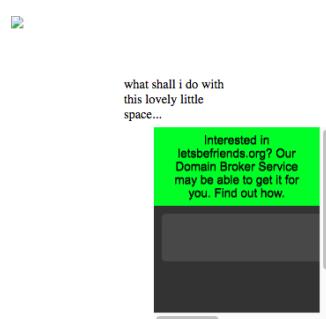
Introduction

Background to the Inquiry

This inquiry was sparked by memories of the Internet of my adolescence. My activities in 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdown closely resembled my teenage years, when I would spend hours alone in my bedroom making things or surfing the Internet. The Internet has been through a number of iterations since the early 2000s, to the extent that the Internet as it was then (2000-2009) doesn't exist now. Even if one accesses websites of the time on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (Internet Archive, n.d.b), few of the sites I remember were archived, and the archive that does exist is full of broken images and inaccessible links (Figure 1.1), leaving almost no trace of the history of this subculture (Weill, 2023b). Virtual gathering places made by teenage girls, such as personal web pages and bulletin boards, have been replaced by ones made by corporations, a change that was already underway when Facebook was launched in 2004 (Bruns, 2013, p. 422). Today, most users take for granted that the Internet consists of these "corporate, registration-only services," (Sousa, 2022, p. 186) rather than infrastructure built by the users themselves.

Figure 1.1

An archived version of one of the researcher's websites from this time period

Note. Screenshot from the Wayback Machine (Reed, 2003)

Problem Statement

Widespread use of the Internet at home was becoming common during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Only three percent of Americans had visited a website in 1995, but by the year 2000, over half of Americans were online, with that figure clearing 70 percent for young adults and college-educated people (McCulloch, 2019, p. 76). America Online entered millions of American homes, physically, through their ubiquitous CD-ROM campaign that sought to persuade even the least tech-savvy to access the Internet. By 1998, AOL was the largest Internet service provider with more than 13 million subscribers (Weber, 1998).

Contemporary coverage of teen girls' use of the Internet of the 2000s was first and foremost focused on the potential dangers of this new world – cyberspace – and the new types of predators that teens would encounter there (Bocij, 2004; Cha, 2001). The first chapter of a contemporary book about girls and the Internet is dedicated to predators ("Victims, Villains, and Vixens: Teen Girls and Internet Crime") before the book even begins to explore the identities and Internet use of the titular girls themselves (Mazzarella, 2005). Kearney (2006), writing at the time of this phenomenon, acknowledges that other researchers have examined girls' websites, but their investigations primarily dealt with community building and identity construction. Kearney's own research studies girls who coded their own websites, but with a narrow focus on the websites of female zine distributors (Kearney, 2006). Even an article from Pixelle's Picks, the technology column of *Teen Magazine*, reassures girls that they "don't even have to know any crazy coding" (Teen Magazine, 2000, p. 121) to build their own website.

Research Question

Considering the lack of sources exploring the creative web-based output of teenage girls in the 2000s, in my practice-based research, I will ask: what motivates the desire to create and consume images and other media, as seen through the lens of the teen girl Internet of the 2000s?

Significance of the Inquiry

      This inquiry seeks to take teenage girls seriously as sophisticated producers of media and images and as possessors of knowledge. Few writing at the time of this historical moment seemed aware of this teen girl subculture of creating digital infrastructure. If society didn't recognize the existence of this phenomenon in the 2000s, it follows that similar advances made by girls today are being overlooked, as well as throughout history.

Conceptual Framework

      I will construct a theory of female spectatorship in order to examine teenage girls and their creative work as subjects of research, not objects. This is in direct opposition to the default lens assumed by Western culture when looking at women and girls: the objectifying male gaze. Through this lens, teenage girls are not granted the autonomy to think, act, create, or desire on their own terms. Their narratives have primarily been presented by adults, often men (Stern, 2000). The concept of the male gaze is credited to Laura Mulvey (1975). Summarized by Dobson (2015), Mulvey's theory "argues that in film, the gaze of the camera itself is encoded as "male" (and heterosexual) and thus in film, viewers, whether male or female and regardless of sexuality, are asked to identify with the male protagonist and *his* desires" (p. 28).

      Dobson (2015) goes on to explain that "the representation of women's desires is essential for the construction of female *subject* positions in representation" (p. 28). One model of representation can be found in Asharya's (2010) description of the gaze inherent to Sofia Coppola's films:

I think there's something to explore, however, if you think about Coppola's film within

gendered notions of spectatorship. There's something in her films that captures the

wistfulness, longing and desire of a type of feminine looking – the same type of looking

that permeates the fashion blogosphere and all of Polyvore[1], this desire to occupy the

same place and space within a beautiful image. It's not an objectification, because I think

the viewer wants to close the space between (her)self and the image. (2010)

The invocation of Coppola's work here is significant. On a personal level, this is because

it was within this subculture that I first became familiar with Coppola's oeuvre; images and

quotes from her films were frequently invoked by other girls online. Furthermore, Coppola's work

has been dismissed as "merely pretty" (Backman Rogers, 2019, p. 3) by many critics, but this

overlooks the rich meaning that can be read on the surface of an image. By elevating the

importance of girls' websites and images as worthy of examination for their own sake, it's

possible to view teen girls as subjects and sophisticated producers of new media.

I will also draw on Christine Hine's model of the Internet as both a *place* where culture is

formed, and a *product* of that culture (Hine, 2000, p. 9). In other words, the Internet is not a

static resource that is simply accessed by users, but it can be manipulated by users to the

extent that users are building the infrastructure themselves. Hine points out that "users are …

free to understand the technology in quite different ways from those that the designers intended"

(Hine, 2000, p. 8).

Positionality

I was a participant in this web-based subculture when I was a teenager. This identity as

a participant means that I have firsthand knowledge that even the researchers of the historical

time period did not possess, but also confers upon me a bias that I cannot be separated from.

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[1] Polyvore was a social, virtual mood boarding website that allowed users to create image collages, often used to curate outfits. The website was active 2007-2018 (Polyvore, 2022), and therefore mostly outside of the scope of the time period examined here, but it can be considered a sort of "inheritance" and evolution of teen girls' online content production.

I am a white, able-bodied, neurotypical, cisgender, bisexual woman from a lower middle class background. My first language is English and I was born a United States citizen. In my home as a teenager, we owned one and later two personal computers, and we had Internet access in our home since I was 12. When I was in high school, we acquired our second computer, and our first home computer was moved into the bedroom I shared with one of my sisters, granting me a digital "room of one's own," which Senft (2008) observed as a key to girls and young women creating their own digital spaces on the Internet. These privileges allowed me to access this subculture, and also contributed to my lack of awareness of the diversity of my digital peers. Paasonen (2002) points out that although the Internet allows users to present themselves however they choose, this does not eliminate real-world identities such as race and class that "regulate and structure access and participation" (p. 28). A user's experience of Internet culture is shaped by the physical settings and experiences from which they access the Internet (Hine, 2000, p. 39). Therefore, although I could suppose my digital peers held a variety of identities, most likely the teens I connected with came from similar backgrounds to myself.

Assumptions to Be Argued

- Creating personal web pages and other media allow teenage girls to construct a sense of self on the Internet
- Teenage girls are sophisticated, often-overlooked producers of new media and community infrastructure
- The Internet is not only a resource accessed by users, but also a site for culture-building and production by its users
- Computers and technology are tools used to create artistic work

Assumptions Not to Be Argued

- This inquiry will not address predators or other users outside the scope of teenage girls
  - While I remember some young adult women and gay teen boys, and it's almost certain that trans and gender non-conforming people also participated in this

subculture, I will be focusing only on cisgender teenage girls since I am speaking

from my positionality.

Literature Review

The purpose of this inquiry is to use the historical time period of the 2000s (2000-2009) as a lens to examine teen girl consumption and creation of media online. The literature review defines the Internet of the 2000s, including descriptions of teen girl websites; gives a brief overview of earlier girls' production of media; and defines the concept of presentation of self.

The Internet of the 2000s

The term "Internet" technically refers to the network – the hardware – connecting computers and servers. The Internet was created in 1969 and became commercially available in 1988. Though less commonly used today, the term "World Wide Web" refers specifically to web pages and websites accessed through software such as web browsers. Contemporary early 2000s sources often shortened this to simply "the Web" (CERN, n.d.). In this paper, the term "Internet" will be used to describe the interconnected networks that allowed people to communicate and post media, as this term is now common and understood usage in place of World Wide Web (McCulloch, 2019, p. 69).

The first "web pages" – documents that could be accessed by other computers over a network – were published in 1990 at CERN, the European Council for Nuclear Research (in French, Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire) (CERN, n.d.). Early personal web pages were a literal "blank page," inviting users to come up with their own ideas for content. Frequently, this content was a collection of images, links, and other media from other parts of the Internet (McRae, 2019). By connecting multiple pages, web*sites* were created. The earliest websites were built by technology professionals and enthusiasts, but with the advent of homepage providers such as GeoCities (launched in 1995) and Angelfire, hobbyists soon had easy access to tools for web page creation and hosting. The free site-building tools provided by these services offered convenience but allowed less control over the appearance of websites; for example, providers eventually started placing banner ads on users' sites (Stern, 2000, p. 94). Towards the end of the 1990s, it became more common for users to purchase their own

top-level domain names to host their websites, rather than hosting their sites on a subdomain of a provider such as GeoCities (Bruns, 2013).

The blog (short for "web log") emerged in the late 1990s. In contrast to static personal web pages, blogs were more dynamic, designed to be updated in a regular fashion and display "posts" chronologically. Services such as Blogger and LiveJournal emerged to allow users to easily create and update these pages (Bruns, 2013).

All of these forms of expression fall into the category of "new media," an umbrella term for communications (including images) that are created and published digitally (PCMag, n.d.). The defining characteristic of new media, per Manovich (2001, p. 47), is its ability to be programmed.

The Teen Girl Internet of the 2000s

A 2000 study concluded that girls were drawn to use the Internet to meet new people and interact with others, and to explore the creative possibilities of the medium (Oksman, 2002). In 2004, more than half of blogs were created by teenagers. In the US as of 2001, more than 4 million children ages 12-17 were estimated to have their own web pages (Bocij, 2004). However, this group of adolescents cannot be construed as typical, as creating web pages required use of equipment and Internet access, as well as the means or desire to learn web design skills (Stern, 2000, p. 5; Stern, 2002).

Girls learned to make web pages in part by sharing their knowledge with each other (Oksman, 2002). The website "Lissa Explains It All" was one resource teens used to learn HTML and CSS (common coding languages used to make websites). The site was created in 1997 by then-11-year-old Alyssa Daniels (Goldberg & Ford, 2020). It's significant to note that Daniels began teaching others to code just two years after the emergence of webpage provider GeoCities in 1995 (Bruns, 2013), indicating that teenage and adolescent girls were at the forefront of new media creation. Viewing the page source of other websites was another common tactic used to learn to code (Kearney, 2006, p. 259). Many girls were inspired to begin

learning to code webpages following their experiences on the virtual pet website Neopets, which allowed users to build pages for their pets and personal profiles. Nearly 60 percent of Neopets' visitors were girls (Carpenter, 2017).

There is no agreed-upon term to describe the culture of teen girls and young women creating personal websites in the late 90s/early 2000s. Sources offered the following descriptions: the teenage girl's Internet of the early 2000s (McEwen, 2017), early 2000s Internet girl culture (Carpenter, 2017), fansite culture (research participant interview), pixel trading (research participant interview), and the me / you / site (Weill, 2023a). The wide variety of activities suggested by these names hints at another aspect of this culture: it was decentralized, overlapping with other parts of the Internet (Weill, 2023a).

Although the nature of the Internet makes it difficult to know the identity of another user, other participants self-identified as girls (research participant interview), making this likely the first computer-programming subculture created by and for girls and women (Weill, 2023c).

> "it was common for creators of me/you/sites to employ atypically gendered words like "hostess" (to describe girls who offered web hosting) and "webmistress" (in place of the more widespread term "webmaster"). this play on words is representative of the tensions brought forward in 1990s-era girlie feminism: must girls eschew femininity in order to be taken seriously?" (Weill, 2023c)

As Melissa McEwen described it, "that entire subculture of hobby web development I was part of back then was entirely teenage girls." If you were "cool," you owned a personal domain name or were "hosted" by another girl on her domain (McEwen, 2017). Girls would often link to other sites called "cliques" or "web rings," both of which functioned as communities signaling belonging or shared interests (Stern, 2002). Sites also often included a page known as a "guest book," where visitors could leave public messages to the site's creator, indicating a desire to receive direct feedback from visitors (Stern, 2000, p. 70).
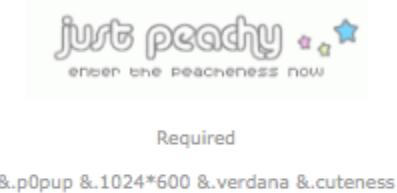
Aesthetic Conventions

The Internet today is characterized by a reliance on large corporate services, increasingly accessed through apps rather than through a web browser, that allow limited user customization (Sousa, 2022). In contrast, the Internet of the early 2000s had a much more DIY aesthetic, and even young users learned to code. For example, McEwen shares that her first line of javascript was "to cheat at Neopets" (McEwen, 2017).

Despite starting with an open-ended "blank page," many girls' websites followed similar aesthetic conventions, in part due to technical considerations of the medium. The first page of many pages was called a "splash page" and would contain a graphic or text-based welcome message, including information about the minimum technological requirements for the visitor to be able to view the site, as seen in Figure 2. This included things such as screen resolution, number of colors able to be displayed by the monitor, and specific web browsers. Internet Explorer "was pretty much the 'cool' browser back then" (Weill, 2023e). The browser Netscape was infamous for outputting HTML code differently than the designer intended, "[making] painstakingly crafted layouts look like garbage" (McEwen, 2017). Requirements could also playfully indicate qualities of the visitor, such as "an open mind."

Figure 2.1

Example of a splash page
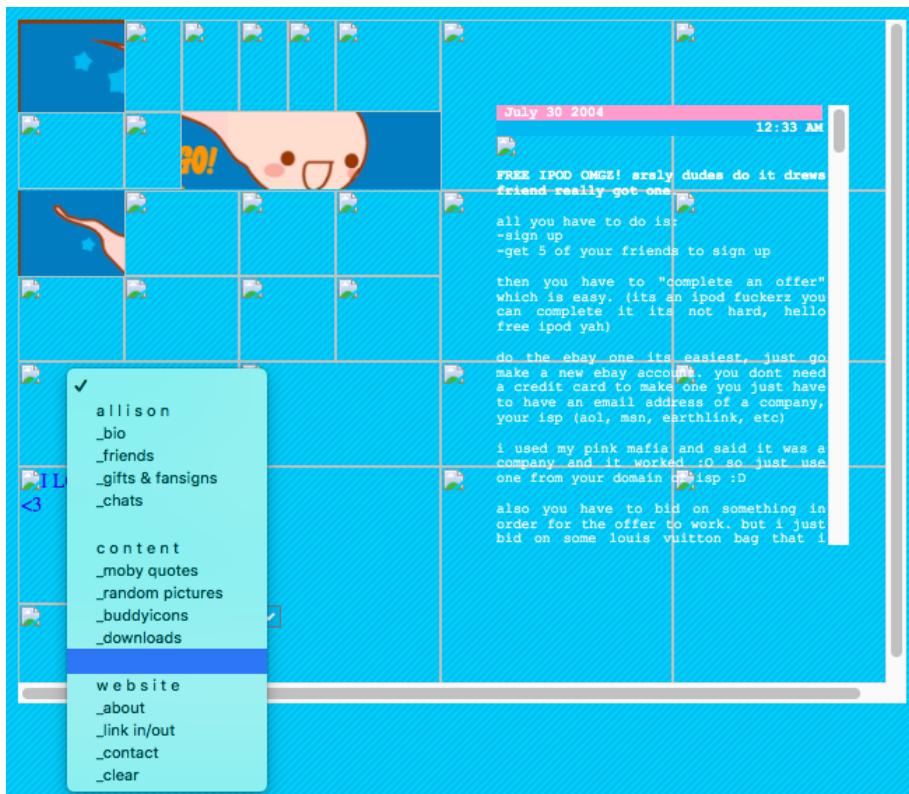
Note. Screenshot from the Wayback Machine (Just Peachy, 2002)

Inside the website, the visitor could navigate to multiple pages of "content," which was often divided into the schematic sections "me," "you," and "www" (the origin of Weill's term "me / you / site" to describe the subculture). These sections would include information on the website owner, content for the visitor such as free graphics or downloadable MP3s, and links to other parts of the Web, respectively. Navigation to these sections could be in the form of graphics, text links, or modules such as drop-down menus (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2

Example of website layout with multiple sections of content

Note. Screenshot from the Wayback Machine (Pink-mafia.com, 2004)

Other Artists' Work Evoking the Teen Girl Internet of the Early 2000s

The historical importance of this subculture and time period can be seen in the work of other artists who have used it as inspiration. Lost Memories Dot Net is an indie computer game created by Nina Freeman, commissioned by the Manchester International Festival in 2017. The

player takes on the role of a 14-year-old girl in 2004, navigating through multiple screens representing personal websites and a chat program from the era. The gameplay includes a simulation of website-building meant to evoke the experience of a teen webmistress (Freeman, 2017).

Another notable work is Rachel Simone Weill's pfft: an evastars retrospective. Weill's work questions the male-dominanted narratives of tech and video game history. Pfft reimagines a pixel art website from 2003 through an interview with its original members (based on the artist). Although the project contains some fiction, Weill maintains that the purpose of this is to "fill the aching gaps where few historical traces remain" (Weill, 2023b).

Teenage Girls' Creative and Media Production

Western girls' creative endeavors in preindustrial times were in the realm of the domestic arts (sewing, knitting, candle making, etc.). Kearney (2006) characterizes these activities as "blurring" the boundaries between labor and leisure, as items such as quilts and rugs often incorporated expressive qualities. This extended to needlework samplers, which were meant to help girls practice the alphabet and sewing skills, but were also used for creative expression (Kearney, 2006).

Letter writing and diary writing evolved in Victorian times to become a means of personal expression for teen girls, as well as a way to communicate with friends. In the early and mid-twentieth century, the growing accessibility of films and music prompted girls to participate in fan cultures. Beyond simply consuming media, girls produced their own scrapbooks and newsletters in odes to their favorite stars, illustrating Kearney's assertion that teenage girls are not merely passive consumers, but producers of cultural media (Kearney, 2006).

This fan culture can be seen as a precursor to girls' production of fanzines in the punk scenes of the 1980s and 90s. A pivotal moment was the creation of a zine called "Riot Grrrl" in 1991, "an attempt to form a community with other female youth whose lives included playing or consuming punk music" (Kearney, 2006, pp. 59-60). The name stuck, and came to define a

subculture of girls and women who challenged sexism and other issues they faced in punk and in the culture at large. Kearney draws a direct link between zine creators and girls creating websites in her study of female zine distro owners' websites[2], many of which were in operation during the early 2000s (Kearney, 2006).

Reflecting on Kearney's work, Stern (2000, p. 20) asserts that "girls build their own cultural productions from the tools immediately available to them, and yet, they strategically adapt such tools to their own purposes." This echos Hine's observation that "users are in principle free to understand the technology in quite different ways from those that the designers intended" (2000, p. 8).

Presentation of the Self

Identity formation is often cited as a use or outcome of online interactions, particularly amongst adolescents (Dobson, 2015; Kearney, 2006; Marwick, 2013, Mazzarella, 2005; Paasonen, 2002; Stern, 2002). The concept of performance of self, put forth by Ernest Goffman in 1959, refers to an individual's actions and choices in any situation in which they are being observed by others. This should not be construed as an entertainer's performance, but an observation that human behavior changes depending on the situation and who they are being observed by (Goffman, 1973). This theory has been a useful lens for many to examine users' interactions online (Marwick, 2013; Paasonen, 2002; Westlake, 2008).

The Internet theoretically allows users to create alternate versions of themselves, but most users' identities follow from their embodied "real world" selves and their performances of self online tend to represent aspects of these real world selves as they are. "Online and offline communications are not separate forms of existence, experience, or identity work" (Paasonen, 2002, p. 32). Individuals tend to present an "idealized" version of themselves in terms of what is considered the "officially accredited values of the society" (Goffman, 1973, p. 35). This presents

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[2] The researcher was delighted to find Mad People Distro, which distributed her zine *heartshaped* in 2004, referenced in Kearney's study (Kearney, 2006, p. 256).

an interesting situation when observing the performances of teenage girls, as the path from

childhood to adulthood represents a site of identity formation (Stern, 2000, p. 15). Many of the

archived websites that I visited contained messages that the site was "closed" or "on hiatus" and

would "be back in a while with a new name, style, and new content" (Rawr-ness.net, 2002;

Sugar High, 2001), implying that the websites reflected the evolving identities of their owners.

Methodology

The inquiry was conceived of as an arts-based research project to examine the motivations of teenage girls creating websites and other media in the early 2000s. After gathering background information in the Literature Review, the arts-based research project was designed as an autoethnographic study.

Type of Inquiry

Autoethnography was chosen as the research approach for this inquiry because the researcher's personal experience represented a valuable resource. Autoethnography combines aspects of autobiography – reflections on one's personal experience – with ethnography, a method of researching another culture by becoming a participant observer. An autoethnographer reflects upon their experiences within a particular culture, but they must also analyze that culture using methodological tools and consider how other participants may have experienced that same culture (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography is appropriate for this inquiry because historic documents of this time are damaged and incomplete. In researching the literature review, gaps were found in the historical record of teenage girls' use of the Internet in the early 2000s. Despite the truism that "the Internet never forgets" (Boufford, 1999; "The Internet," 2012) (in the sense that photos or text posted in the past will always remain theoretically retrievable in the future), many websites from this time period were either not fully archived on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, or they contain broken links and broken images. The author's memories and personal journals from this time period were necessary to supplement these records.

The autoethnographic form of a layered account was used, due to its focus on data collection and the nature of research to yield additional questions as it proceeds (Ellis et al., 2011).

Practice-Based Research
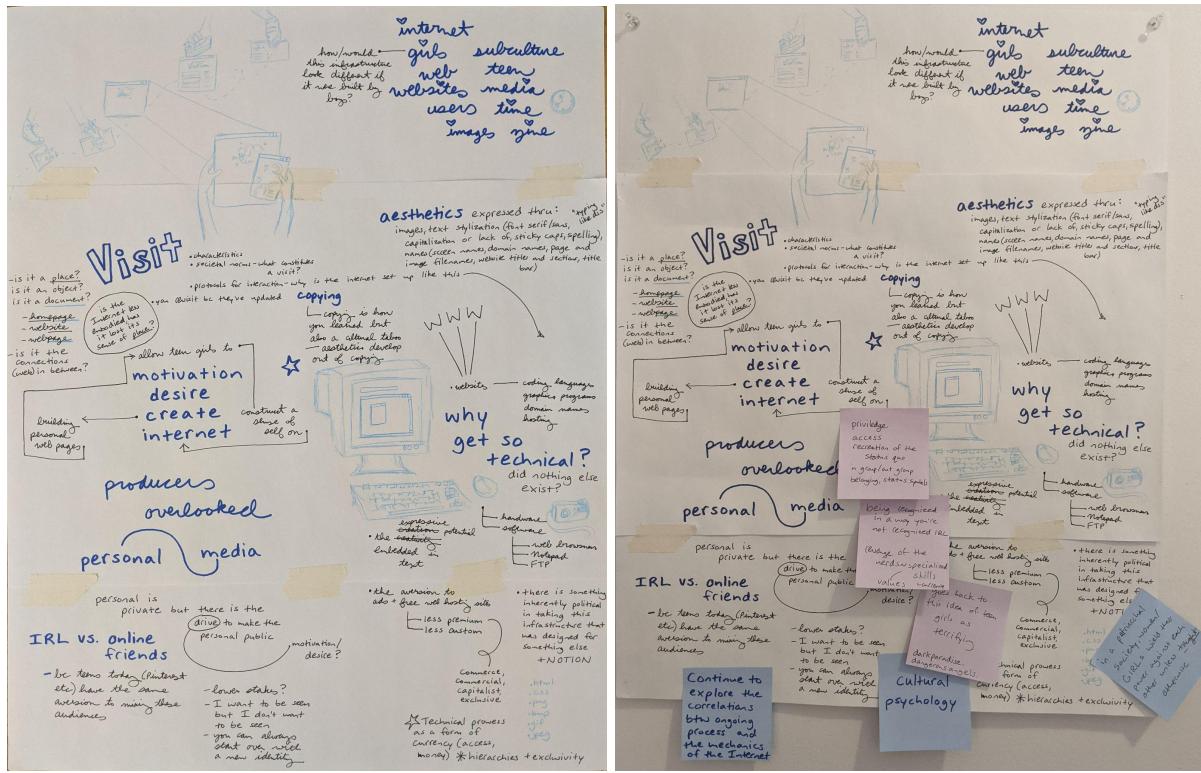
The term "practice-based research" was deliberately chosen to center the *process* of creating art objects (Sullivan, 2006, p. 26). This partially reflects the researcher's value of the process over the "finished product" in her personal art-making practice. It is also in reference to Refsum's (2002) assertion that visual arts must "build its theory production on that which happens before art is produced, that is, the processes" (as cited in Sullivan, 2006, p. 27). Additionally, this idea of process and unfinished work slyly references the mechanics of the Internet: works on the Internet are never "finished;" one can always press "edit" after "publish."

A concept map was created as a visual representation of early ideas (Figure 3.1).

A series of zines was created as the primary method of practice-based research. The zines were created using an iterative process, with each zine building on the information gathered previously. Each new zine was denoted with a numerical system (version 8.0, version 8.1, version 8.2), similar to the way computer software is identified. This references the naming convention teen girls in the 2000s used to identify new layouts of their websites.

Figure 3.1

Concept map created for the inquiry (left: original, right: with additional notes added as the inquiry progressed)

Design of the Inquiry

The experiences of other participants in the culture must be considered in an autoethnographic inquiry.

Participants

Mary Reed, the researcher, was the main participant in this inquiry by analyzing data gathered through interviews and documents and processing this knowledge through art-making. At the time of her participation in this Internet subculture of the early 2000s, she was between the ages of 14 and 18. She grew up in a lower middle-class household in Tennessee. She has a bachelor's degree in fashion design and is currently working towards completing her master's degree in art education. She currently lives in New York City.

Other former participants in the subculture were identified through the document collection process. They were contacted through email and asked to participate in confidential interviews, which were conducted over Zoom video conferencing software. All participants signed a consent form (which can be viewed in Appendix I). The research design was approved by SVA's Internal Review Board.

The following women were interviewed (all names are pseudonyms):

Jessica started making websites as early as 6th grade. She grew up in a lower middle class household in Massachusetts.

Ashley grew up in Texas.

Amanda started making websites in late elementary/early middle school. She grew up in a middle/upper middle class household in Oklahoma and Georgia.

Jennifer started making websites in 8th grade. She grew up in an upper middle class household in Georgia.

As adults, all of the participants work or have worked in the tech industry.

Data Collection

Interviews

All interviews were conducted as 45-minute individual interviews over Zoom video conferencing software. Participants had the option to turn their video camera off. Interviews were recorded using the functionality provided by Zoom. Only the audio was transcribed by the researcher after the interview.

All participants were asked the same interview questions. See Appendix II for a list of questions asked. The researcher also asked herself the same interview questions and recorded her own answers to ensure that she fully reflected on the many aspects of her own participation in the subculture.

Historic Documents

Website examples. Examples of teen girl websites from the early 2000s were gathered through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (Internet Archive, n.d.b) and saved as screen captures. To find relevant websites, the researcher started by using a few URLs she remembered from the time period of 2000-2009, and followed links from those websites to other sites (much the same way a teenage girl from the time period would discover new sites). These documents provided a visual and textual example of the media artifacts of the historic time period.

Personal journals. The researcher's personal journals from 2001-2004 (the time period she was active in this subculture) were reviewed for all mentions of her activities on the Internet, including creating websites. These documents served as a first-person account of the historic time period. They provided a more objective account to supplement the researcher's memories, which may be biased due to nostalgia.

Research Journal

Since the inquiry sought to explore an Internet subculture, the researcher chose to create a website to maintain a research journal. The website was designed and coded by the researcher using HTML and CSS. The research journal was updated throughout the inquiry to include reflections on the information gathered and the progress of the practice-based research (artistic research project). The website was made publicly available on the Internet at dangerous-angels.net.

Zines (Practice-Based Research)

Two zines were created for this project: *heartshaped version 8.1* and *heartshaped version 8.2*. heartshaped is the title of Mary Reed's ongoing zine series which was started in 2004, overlapping with the time period she was creating websites as a teenager.

heartshaped version 8.1. This zine was focused outwards. The researcher gathered images and text from historical teen girl websites and combined these with her own responses in the form of poetry. This zine was distributed to classmates and professors at a critique on February 21, 2023.

heartshaped version 8.2. This zine had more of an inward focus than *heartshaped version 8.1*. The departure point for this zine was excerpts from the researcher's historical journals.

Limitations of the Inquiry

As previously acknowledged, this historic time period and subculture were not adequately documented. There is a digital archive of some of the websites from the time; however, most are collections of broken links and broken image files.

Many of the researcher's personal records from this time (websites, LiveJournals, physical journals, letters) were also lost or destroyed. Knowledge of the time period will rely heavily on reconstruction and memory.

This also means that locating contact information for participants in this subculture was difficult. Email addresses and other contact information listed on historic websites are unlikely to be functional, and teen webmistresses often used pseudonyms. All of the research participants were identified through work from the past 10 years that makes reference to the Internet of the early 2000s. This means that participants represent a sample that is skewed towards people who have a lifelong identity with creating work on the Internet. The sample of participants overrepresents girls who later went on to work in tech, and lacks representation of girls who followed other career paths. Additionally, although five women expressed interest in participating, only four followed through with the scheduling and consent form process.

The inquiry was also restricted by time. The practice-based research portion of the inquiry was limited to four months due to the length of the Spring 2023 semester. The interview portion of the inquiry had to be conducted within seven weeks due to the time required for

research approval by the IRB. The original design of the inquiry included a group interview which was not able to be conducted due to time constraints.

Data Analysis

The interviews, historic documents (websites and journals), and research journal were analyzed using thematic analysis with a reflexive approach (Morgan, 2022). Deductive codes were assigned at the beginning of the inquiry. As the inquiry progressed, inductive codes were identified through the practice-based research, emergent themes from participant interviews, and reflections in the research journal.

Coding

The research began with two deductive codes: *Teen girls as producers* and *The Internet as an opportunity to construct a sense of self/performance of self*. See Table 3.1. These codes were suggested by the content of the Literature Review.

The inductive codes (see Table 3.2) were identified through writing in the research journal, interview responses from research participants, and the practice-based research of making the website and zines.

Table 3.1

Deductive Codes

Color	
Yellow	Teen girls as producers
Pink	The Internet as an opportunity to construct a sense of self/performance of self

Table 3.2

Inductive Codes

Color

Lavender   Girls learned to code and taught each other

Blue   The ecosystem of chat, forums, and website building

Green   Nostalgia for pre-social media social Internet

Peach   Elitism, tech snobbery, and an outcast mentality on the part of teen
            webmistresses

Grey   Performance of community

Cyan   No one else IRL was online

Neon   A growing disillusionment with the Internet

Definitions

The following definitions have been provided to make the information in this paper more accessible to readers who may be unfamiliar with the terminology of the Internet (past and/or present).

Affiliate – webmistresses who agreed to mutually link each other on their sites, thus increasing each other's visitors (Weill, 2023d)

CSS – Cascading Style Sheets, a web browser language used to style the elements of an HTML page (W3Schools, 2023)

Host/Hostess – hosting refers to physical server space that is accessed by the Web when displaying a webpage. In the me / you / site culture of the teen girl Internet of the 2000s, girls who owned their own domains and custom hosting would often select other girls to "host" on their domains (Weill, 2023d)

HTML – HyperText Markup Language, a web browser language that forms the underlying structure of a basic web page (Lissa Explains, 2016)

IRL – acronym for "In Real Life." This term was more widely used and more relevant in the early 2000s, before smartphones and the mobile web allowed people to access the Internet anywhere, at any time. In the 2020s, "the Internet has become real life. Popular culture and internet culture overlap more often than they diverge" (McCulloch, 2019, p. 272)

Wayback Machine – a project of the Internet Archive, the Wayback Machine has been archiving websites from the World Wide Web since 1996 (Internet Archive, n.d.a)

Presentation of the Data

Following the design of the inquiry, this section presents the data from each form of

research undertaken (historic document analysis, research journal, practice-based research,

and participant interviews). Data related to the deductive codes is presented first. Additional

data is presented chronologically, as the research methods tended to inspire additional

questions and areas of inquiry.
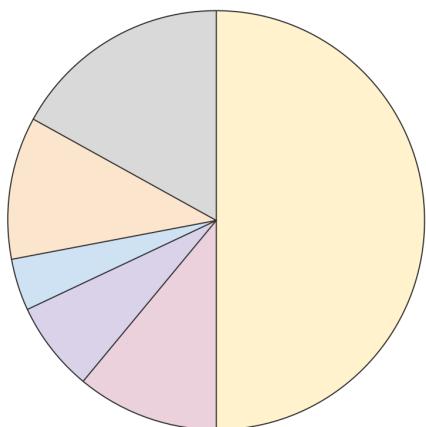
Teen Girls as Producers

Teen girls as producers was the first theme examined. Across all forms of data, this

theme consistently showed up in a high number of instances, especially in the historical

documents (archived websites and personal journals – see Figure 4.1).
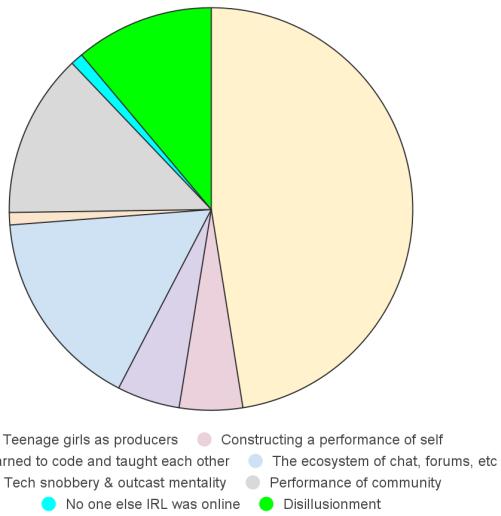
Figure 4.1

Incidence of themes in historical documents (archived websites and personal journals)

Document Analysis: Historical Websites

- Teenage girls as producers
- Constructing a performance of self
- Girls learned to code and taught each other
- The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
- Tech snobbery & outcast mentality
- Performance of community

Document Analysis: Personal Historical Journals

- Teenage girls as producers
- Constructing a performance of self
- Girls learned to code and taught each other
- The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
- Tech snobbery & outcast mentality
- Performance of community
- No one else IRL was online
- Disillusionment

When interviewed, Ashley self-described her teen self in this way:

Definitely didn't see myself as like, a computer person, or, you know, a techie. For me it

was more like, creative, or more like, almost scrapbooking or something. I just really saw

it as a more personal and creative endeavor.

Amanda had a similar response:

At the beginning, it was just like, I wanted to make my weird little websites. And that was

like, a way to play with the computer…I wanted to share stuff I was making…that was

kind of the core desire, was the ability to, like, make stuff…I've always been like…a

crafty kid…wanted to make things and it was just another thing I knew you could make.

These responses give evidence that research participants not only saw themselves as

creative producers, but also saw webdesign as a means to pursue making.

The Internet as an Opportunity to Construct a Sense of Self/Performance of Self
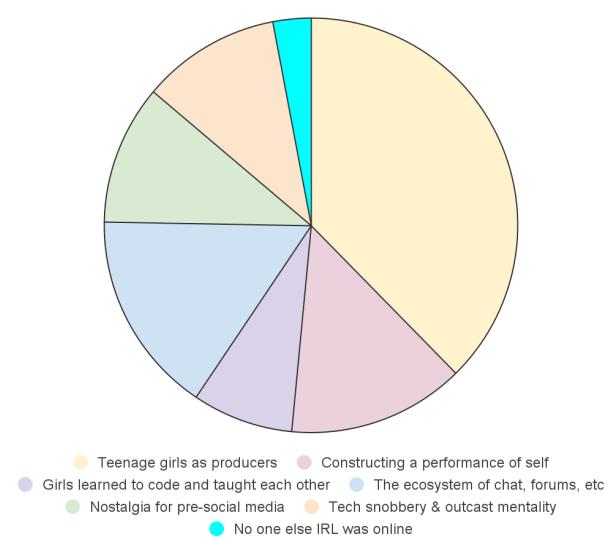
The original research question for this inquiry asked, "What motivates the desire to

create and consume images and other media *concerning the performance of self*, as seen

through the lens of the teen girl Internet of the 2000s?" Much of the scholarship about teen girls'

websites of the early 2000s hypothesized that they were using the medium as a way to

experiment with identity (Mazzarella, 2005; Stern, 2002; Stern, 2000). This clause was removed

from the research question to widen the scope of the inquiry, but I was still interested in

examining how teenage girls used the Internet in this way, particularly from a personal

perspective, as "who am I?" has been a guiding question I've been asking myself since

adolescence. ("I've been trying to figure out "who am I" and all that nonsense since what fifth

grade?" (Reed, 2002c))

While not insignificant, this theme was only present in 10-15% of the data across

sources. Most interestingly, it only showed up in one participant interview, and it played a

relatively small role in my own personal journals from the time period.
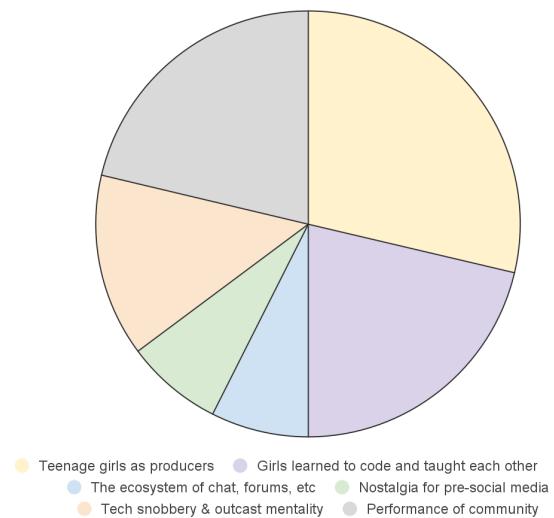
Figure 4.2

Incidence of themes in research participant interviews

Interview with Jessica

- Teenage girls as producers
- Constructing a performance of self
- Girls learned to code and taught each other
- The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
- Nostalgia for pre-social media
- Tech snobbery & outcast mentality
- No one else IRL was online

Interview with Ashley

- Teenage girls as producers
- Girls learned to code and taught each other
- The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
- Nostalgia for pre-social media
- Tech snobbery & outcast mentality
- Performance of community

Interview with Amanda

- Teenage girls as producers
- Girls learned to code and taught each other
- The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
- Nostalgia for pre-social media
- Performance of community
- No one else IRL was online

Interview with Jennifer

- Teenage girls as producers
- Girls learned to code and taught each other
- The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
- Performance of community

Teenage girls as producers ● Constructing a performance of self
● Girls learned to code and taught each other ● The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
● Performance of community ● No one else IRL was online
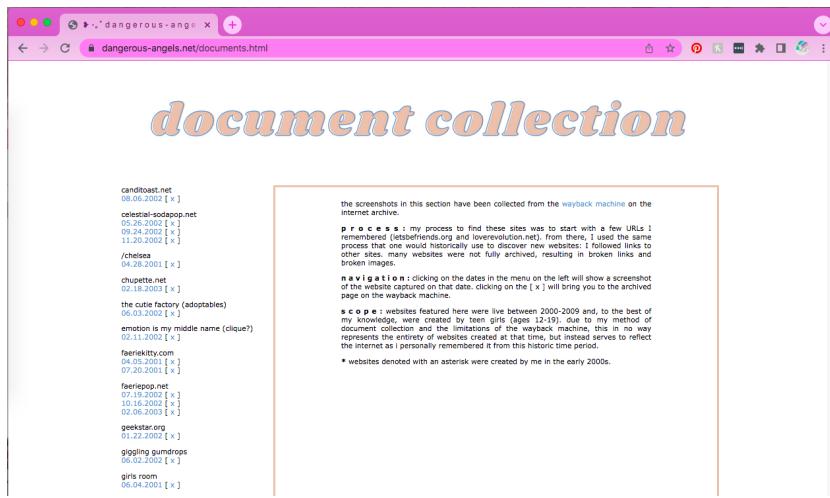
Document Analysis: Historical Websites

The first data collected consisted of screenshots of historical websites that had been archived on the Wayback Machine. It would be necessary to retain the ability to access the websites on the Wayback Machine, so a repository was needed to store the screenshots and the URLs together. To address this, a section called "document collection" was created on the website that was being developed for the research journal, which was kept in blog format.

Figure 4.3

Document collection section on dangerous-angels.net

Research Journal as Unplanned Practice-Based Research

      I chose to build the website from my own HTML and CSS, rather than using a commercially available website builder. This choice was made out of a desire to mimic production methods that were available to me as a teen. Although I had no expectation that this method would yield data, I quickly realized that the process of coding and tinkering with HTML was my first form of practice-based research. Through the process of creating the website, several hypotheses were produced in the research journal about why teen girls of the 2000s might have produced these artifacts, leading to the following emergent themes: *Teenage girls learned to code and taught each other* and *The ecosystem of chat, forums, and website building*.
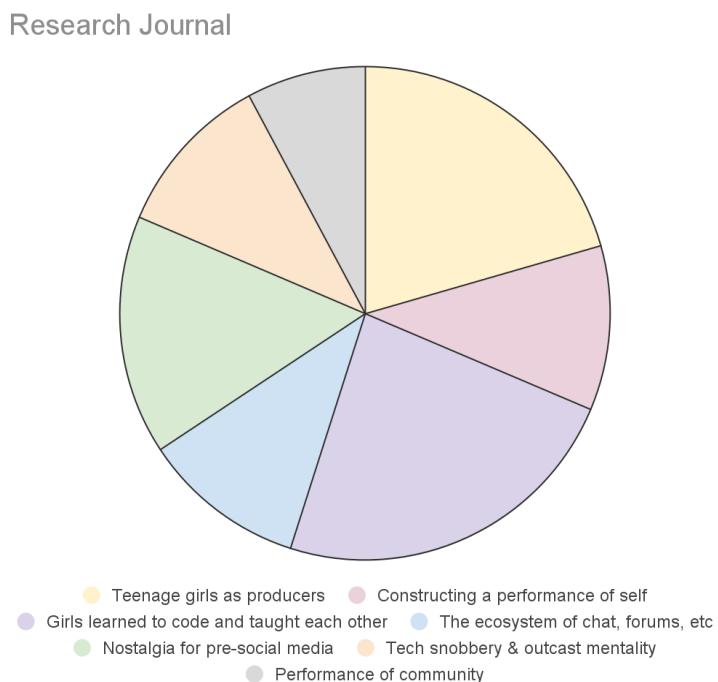
Girls Learned To Code and Taught Each Other

      I was intrigued to find that the very act of designing and coding a website put me into the same generative flow state that I associate with art-making. Noticing the emotional impact of the coding process contributed to my first emergent theme. I wondered why, in addition to creating websites, teen girls chose to learn and teach themselves to code (rather than relying on

commercial page builders such as MySpace and Geocities). I spent a lot of time reflecting on this process in my research journal, resulting in an over-emphasis of this theme in the coding of that data.

Figure 4.4

Incidence of themes in research journal

Research Journal

- Teenage girls as producers
- Constructing a performance of self
- Girls learned to code and taught each other
- The ecosystem of chat, forums, etc
- Nostalgia for pre-social media
- Tech snobbery & outcast mentality
- Performance of community

The Ecosystem of Chat, Forums, and Website Building

The idea that girls' websites were part of a larger interconnected web of media emerged in a research journal entry about a forum that I used to frequent, which I rediscovered through the document collection of historic websites. The interview with Jessica also pointed to this theme, as she spoke about teen girls engaging in a fluid ecosystem of chat, forums, and website building. This theme was present in all forms of data collected.

Practice-Based Research: Zinemaking and Writing

Creating the zines was the second form of practice-based research. Rather than creating an informative document about the subculture, I followed my typical zine-making process, which is to juxtapose found images with my own personal writing. In this case, I selected some of the screenshots of archived websites from my document collection process to serve as imagery. I then selected words from the text of the websites, choosing words that I felt had significant meaning within the subculture (for example: content, affiliates, domain, and hosted) and used these words to craft acrostic poems.

One of my professors brought up an important point when I shared *heartshaped version 8.1*. I hadn't credited the sources (historical websites) pictured. This prompted me to reflect in my research journal:
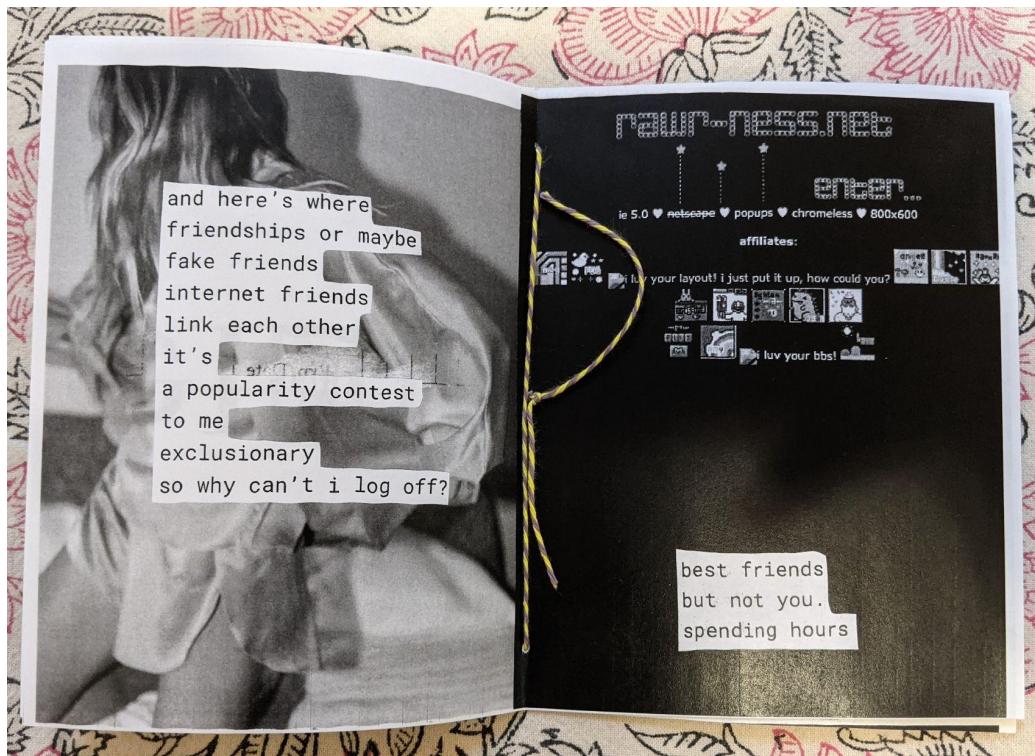
> This was a humbling moment for me and brings up a major theme of my project: I have suggested in the draft of my paper that contributions of teen girls have been overlooked or ignored. chilling to realize that my own work could be seen to contribute to this/being complicit. (Reed, 2023a)

Performance of Community

As mentioned above, I wrote several acrostic poems for my zine *heartshaped version 8.1*. The emergent themes found within these poems surprised me. I found myself writing about the *lack* of friendship I experienced within this subculture. As discussed in the literature review, girls' websites prominently linked to their friends and "affiliates," and being "hosted" by another girl was seen as a status symbol.

Figure 4.5

Poems in the zine heartshaped version 8.1

Additionally, when research participants were asked about their relationships to other people in the subculture, none described the warm ties observed on archived websites: girls naming each other their best friends on their sites and dedicating layouts to each other. Ashley recalled:

> There were a lot of things built in to make it seem like you had a lot of friends, you know, things like the QB patches and affiliates and tag boards and things like that, comments…but in terms of was I actually talking with people on a one-to-one basis? No, I was mostly joining web rings, and then sort of not engaging in the community aspect beyond that.

This emergent theme was termed *Performance of community*. This theme had a presence in interviews with Ashley, Amanda, and Jennifer, and it had a strong presence (17%) in both forms of historic documents (websites and personal journals).

Interviews

Each participant was asked the same questions (seen in Appendix II), as well as clarifying questions where appropriate. Participants were also asked if they knew of any additional resources, which resulted in finding one additional participant.

The interviews strongly supported the themes of *Teen girls as producers*, *Teenage girls learned to code and taught each other*, and *The ecosystem of chat, forums, and website building*. The interviews also suggested the themes of *Elitism, tech snobbery, and an outcast mentality on the part of teen webmistresses*; *No one else IRL was online*; and *Nostalgia for pre-social media social Internet*. (See Figure 4.2.)

Elitism, Tech Snobbery, and an Outcast Mentality on the Part of Teen Webmistresses

In my concept map (Figure 3.1) and research journal, I touched on the idea that girls' abilities to code and host each other's websites could function as a form of currency. Additional support for this theme was found in a resource shared by one of my research participants. Rachel Simone Weill's *pfft: an evastars retrospective* is a speculative reimagining of the subculture of the teen girl Internet of the early 2000s, which she terms "me / you / site culture." On the website for her project, she states:

> the me/you/site webmistress of 2002 might have self-described as some mix of quirky, alternative, nerdy, or outcast, which came across in the textual content of the me/you/site. one might encounter the occasional sexual innuendo or playful use of words like "bitch/beeotch," "whore," and "slut" to refer to oneself or friends. but more common to the language of the me/you/site was elitism and tech snobbery. (Weill, 2023a)

This outcast mentality squared with my interview participants' descriptions of themselves as nerdy teens, excerpted below.

Jessica: I was like, not one of the popular kids…I was also really into video games and I got into torrenting anime at a really young age…I was just like a sort of closet nerd because I didn't, like, have that many friends at school who were also into this.

Amanda: [as a kid] I think my greatest desire was to work at a renaissance faire as the person who ran the falconry exhibit.

Amanda: I was on the computer, I think, earlier than a lot of my peers.

Jennifer: I had been homeschooled til I was in high school…and so I didn't really, like, understand how social things worked.

Ashley: Like a lot of teenage girls, I went through that sort of tension of…wanting to be taken seriously sometimes meant eschewing the feminine things, and being more like a, you know, alt girl, or quirky…ways that we tried to take our identity, like our authentic identity, and squeeze it into some predefined category, right. It was like, okay, if I'm not a cheerleader, than what am I?

The themes of elitism and tech snobbery hovered around 10% in the research journal, historic websites, and two of the interviews. It was not explicitly present in either of the other two interviews, and was barely present in my personal historical journal. However, the similarity of this code to *Performance of community* may account for some overlap between themes.

No One Else IRL Was Online Yet

The interview with Amanda pointed to the possibility that this subculture emerged because participants didn't know any other people "in real life" who were using the Internet.

Amanda characterized herself as online before many of her peers. In McCulloch's taxonomy of "Internet People," she identifies a group of people that she calls "Old Internet People." This term describes the first people to go online in the 80s and 90s, who were primarily interacting with people they didn't know (McCulloch, 2019). Even though Amanda was going online in the late 90s and early 2000s, because her real-life peers were not yet there, her use of the Internet much more closely resembled McCulloch's "Old Internet People." A person using a technology designed for communication will either find some other people to communicate with, or come up with an alternative use for it.

This idea that the subculture arose because "no one else was online yet" also suggests a reason for its decline. Amanda stated she stopped making websites once "social media kind of begun…AIM had begun…more people were available online." Both Jessica and Amanda mentioned being online before most other people they knew. In my research journal, I had also reflected on whether the arrival of Facebook and other Web 2.0 platforms caused girls to abandon their sites (Reed, 2023b).

Nostalgia for Pre-Social Media Internet

All of the interview participants acknowledged some form of nostalgia for a pre-social media social Internet. Unsurprisingly, this theme did not show up in the historical documents. This theme will be addressed in more depth in the Discussion section, as it points to some interesting implications.

Document Analysis: First-Person Historical Account (Researcher's Diaries)

I have kept a (physical) personal diary/journal since I was in middle school. The earliest surviving journal dates back to 2001, when I was 15 years old. The topics I wrote about in these journals ranged widely, including school, family, friends, and crushes. I also often wrote about my progress on personal creative projects, including sewing projects and websites.

Analysis of these journals (Figure 4.1) shows a representation of every theme except *Nostalgia for a pre-social media social Internet*, as this was not relevant to the time period. A

final emergent theme was also identified: *A growing disillusionment with the Internet*. Appearing only once in 2002 and once in 2003, examples of this theme jumped to six in 2004, and can be exemplified by the following:

"I am so seriously thinking of giving up the internet. Not completely, but definitely most of it." (Reed, 2004a)

"[redacted] sent me a letter today. She is the only one of my penpals whose livejournal I read, and the fact that I like her letters so much more than her journal definitely says something about the internet…" (Reed, 2004a)

Summary

The following themes were revealed:

● Teen girls as producers

● The Internet as an opportunity to construct a sense of self/performance of self

● Girls learned to code and taught each other

● The ecosystem of chat, forums, and website building

● Performance of community

● Elitism, tech snobbery, and an outcast mentality on the part of teen webmistresses

● No one else IRL was online

● Nostalgia for pre-social media social internet

● A growing disillusionment with the Internet

Discussion

Following the presentation of the data, this section discusses the factors motivating teen girls of the 2000s to code their own websites. The findings also suggest several reasons people may be revisiting these methods of production today.

- Teen girls used the medium of webdesign to satisfy a desire for artmaking and play
- Teen girls used the ecosystem of personal websites, forums, and cliques to satisfy a desire to create and inhabit exclusive spaces on the Internet
- Teen girls used the medium of webdesign to satisfy a desire to demonstrate belonging
- The teen girl Internet of the early 2000s represents a powerful site of yearning for former participants and new users

A desire for artmaking and play

Teen girls used the medium of webdesign to satisfy a desire for artmaking and play. As seen in the previous section, the theme "teen girls as producers'' was a major finding. Contemporary sources in the literature review also suggested making websites served as a creative pursuit for girls (Oksman, 2002).

In my exploration of Web Revival websites (discussed in greater detail below), I came across a website created by a former participant in the me / you / site culture of the early 2000s. Her site contained this astonishing story of beginning to make websites:

so at some point in the late 90s i inherited a copy of the Internet for dummies & it replaced julie of the wolves as my favorite book. i was v poor growing up so i didn't have the Internet at home, but i did have a compaq presario with windows 95 installed, so i made my own imaginary Internet using folders and wordpad documents. (Lu, 2020)

This description of an adolescent making a website that was not even connected to the Internet speaks to the ability of the medium to serve as a site for art-making and creative production. In addition to the finished product of a website, the act of coding and

experimentation with code was also a form of creative expression, as well as a community-based practice, in the case of girls teaching each other to code.

A desire to create and inhabit exclusive spaces on the Internet

Teen girls used the ecosystem of personal websites, forums, and cliques to satisfy a desire to create and inhabit exclusive spaces on the Internet. This desire perhaps stemmed from the self-identification of teen webmistresses as nerds and loners. As pointed out in the literature review, making a website required computer access, Internet access, skills to design, build, and publish a website, and time (Stern, 2000).

Stern suggested that teens making websites would also be socioeconomically advantaged (Stern, 2000), since computers and Internet access were not required for all aspects of everyday life at this time. However, my personal experience and findings from the research do not necessarily support this. Growing up, I would characterize my family's socioeconomic status as lower middle class, as did interview participant Jessica, and Lu quoted above described herself as poor.

This paints an intriguing picture of at least some of the girls who participated in this subculture: less privileged in terms of physical material possessions, but with access to tools to depict themselves however they wanted to a group of people they had never met before (and would likely never meet in real life).

Teen webmistresses may have been deprived of social and monetary currency in the physical world, but online, they had the currency of code. The ability to code websites and create graphics could be used to win favor of affiliates and hosts. It's true that Photoshop and other graphics software is expensive; however, McEwen pointed out that girls simply pirated it (downloaded free versions illegally) (McEwen, 2017).

This also helps explain why domain ownership and being "hosted" had such cachet. Registering a domain name incurs an annual fee, and server space to host pages is generally paid monthly. Accessing both these things required a credit card, and permission to use that

credit card online, which was still a somewhat rare way to purchase goods and services in the early 2000s.[3] Therefore, domain ownership required money, and getting hosted by another girl required proving your webdesign skills.

A desire to demonstrate belonging

Teen girls used the medium of webdesign to satisfy a desire to demonstrate belonging. This desire directly follows from the exclusive, elitist culture that was fostered in many corners of the subculture. Did some girls forge meaningful friendships with others in the subculture? According to their own websites, they did. However, this was not strongly supported in the interviews I conducted with former participants.

My own personal journal from 2002 contains an interesting case study to examine this desire to replicate the BFF culture I witnessed and desperately wanted to participate in. My sister knew that I enjoyed making websites, and she introduced me to a friend of hers at our high school who also made websites. Interestingly, this friend (whom I'll call Sarah) was familiar with many of the same websites I was, and was hosted by a popular domain.

Sarah and I linked to each other's websites on our own sites, and when she got a domain of her own, she offered to host my website. This was a huge honor; in my personal journal, I described it as "It's sooo awesome" (Reed, 2002a). We faithfully linked each other, chatted on AIM, and posted on the same forums. However, my personal journals speak to a desire for an IRL friendship that simply didn't exist. We sometimes hung out in person, but in a letter I wrote and never sent to her, I despaired that "I don't feel like I can talk to you about anything," and "I feel like we don't know anything about each other" (Reed, 2002b).

When I asked myself the interview questions, I reflected at length on this relationship and my personality as a teen. I was often unsure of myself and "really shy and afraid to talk to people." This echoes Ashley's statement "at that time, I had a hard time making friends." The

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[3] Online sales accounted for 1.9 percent of total retail sales in 2004, up from 1.6 percent in 2003 (U.S Census Bureau, 2005).

teen girl Internet of the early 2000s provided a way to show belonging through images and displays of skill, a potentially much more natural environment than "the hallways of our school" (Reed, 2004b).

A powerful site of yearning for former participants and new users

The teen girl Internet of the early 2000s represents a powerful site of yearning for former participants and new users. From the beginning of my research, I found contemporary projects inspired by the teen girl Internet of the early 2000s. I found that one of the websites I remembered from 2001, Lalaland.nu, had been resurrected by the original website owner (Lala Land, n.d.). I also found "Lost Memories Dot Net," the browser-based video game designed to emulate the experience of a 14-year-old girl web designer in 2004 (Freeman, 2017), a few years before beginning my research. These discoveries prompted me to wonder what motivates others to return to or resurrect their projects from this time period. Is it simply nostalgia, or is it something more, perhaps related to the same reason teenage girls in the 2000s initially created these websites?

Another discovery suggested the latter. In March 2023, one of my classmates sent me a TikTok video made by a twenty-one-year old, which contained the following text:
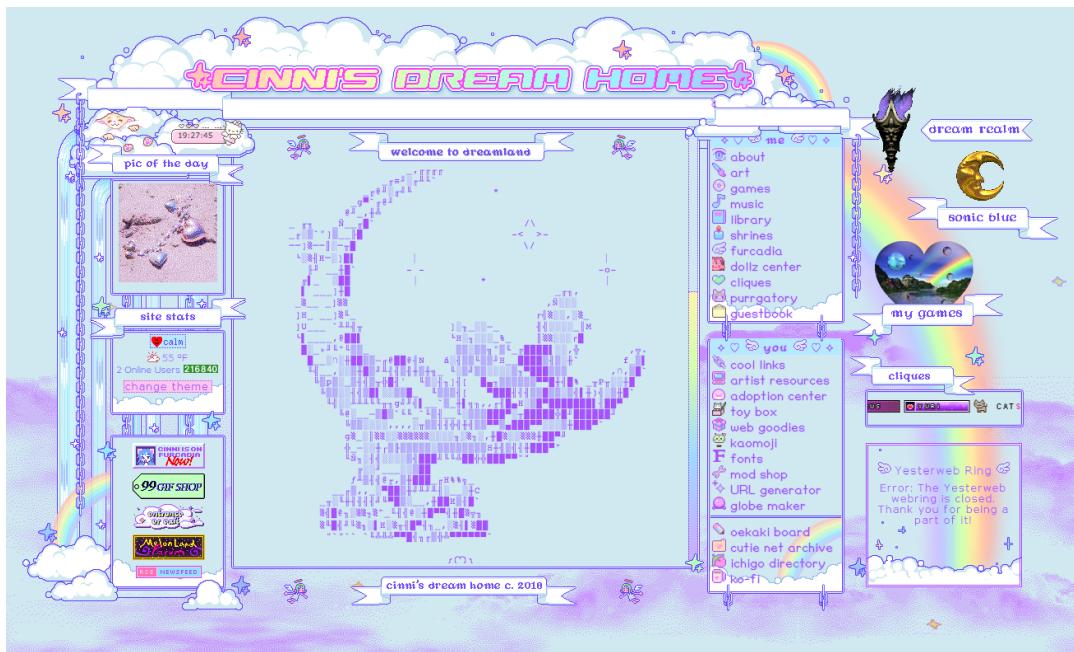
everyone needs to learn basic html/css coding so that we can go back to having our own home pages again. The web should belong to us not social media companies. Let's customize them however we want and post status updates & our fav songs & decorate them with fun gifs & links to all of our friends home pages (Hatcher, 2023)

Scrolling through the comments on Hatcher's video led me to two more projects. The first was Neocities, a website builder whose name and purpose recall Geocities. Neocities provides free web hosting space and an in-browser HTML editor (Neocities, n.d.). The other was SpaceHey, a MySpace-inspired social network created by a twenty-year-old (Röhm, n.d.). Both websites contained webpages and sites created by people who had participated in the Internet

of the early 2000s, as well as people who, like Hatcher, had been infants or children during that time.

Figure 5.1

Example of a Web Revival website hosted on Neocities

Note. Screenshot from cinni's dream home (cinni's dream home, 2018)

These projects emphasize the creativity and fun of making a website from HTML (Neocities, n.d.), which connects them to the desire for artmaking and play, as seen on the me / you / sites of the early 2000s. They also represent a reactionary movement away from the corporate social media platforms of Web 2.0. This movement is known as the Web Revival, Old Web, or Web 1.0 Movement (Melon, 2023). For users who participated in the Internet of the early 2000s, the impulse to participate in the Web Revival may be partially driven by nostalgia. However, Melon contends that "Web Revival enthusiasts come from all walks of life" (2023). He suggests people are drawn to the Web Revival in reaction to corporate social media's tendency to emphasize profit over creativity and warm interactions. Hatcher's Tiktok quoted above makes a similar point.

Conclusions

As I explored the world of the me / you / site of the teen girl Internet of the 2000s, I felt something important stirring behind the veil of adolescent memories, but I wasn't sure what it was. Bochner (Ellis at el, 2011) describes how significant memories prompt "effects that linger – recollections, memories, images, feelings – long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished." After giving a presentation of my research proposal in December 2022, one of my classmates asked me in bafflement, why did teenage girls make these websites? "I don't know!" I responded with delight. "That's my research question!" *What motivates the desire to create and consume images and other media, as seen through the lens of the teen girl Internet of the 2000s?*

This conclusion offers an answer, with implications for my own work as an artist and an arts educator, as well as implications for the field of arts education. This section also includes suggestions for further research and reflections on the inquiry.

Summary of the Inquiry

The question was explored through analysis of historic documents (archived websites and personal journals), interviews with former participants in the subculture, and practice-based research including making zines and a website. From the beginning, unexpected themes emerged from the practice-based research, including the recognition that coding a website functions as an artistic practice.

Contemporary research from the 2000s suggested that girls used their websites to experiment with identity and form communities. However, through examining historic documents and conducting interviews with the research participants, it was seen that what appeared to be community-building was often an exercise in creating exclusive in-groups. Although pseudonyms were often used, girls were likely to present the same personality online as offline. These girls were often on the fringes of teen society in their offline lives, but on the Internet, their tech savvy translated into social currency that often culminated in excluding other girls whose websites were not considered "elite."

The inquiry also found that many people are still emulating the production methods of teen webmistresses of the 2000s, including both original participants and new users. This speaks to both the ability of coding to function as a rich medium of artistic expression, and the growing frustration with what is seen as the rampant corporatization of the Internet.

Reflection on the Inquiry's Relationship to My Work

As previously mentioned, I was surprised to find that the act of coding a website functioned as an iterative artistic practice. Throughout this work, my understanding of myself as an artist has evolved. I now see technology and the Internet as primary mediums for my work. In the past, I've done extensive artistic work on Instagram, including an "outfit of the day" blog that unfolded as an inquiry-based piece where I asked questions such as "How does behavior change when the subject knows she's being watched?" (Reed, 2019) However, I hadn't previously thought of myself as a "tech artist," possibly because of existing stigmas about the role of technology in art.

When I interviewed myself, I reflected on my earliest memories of using the Internet and interacting with a computer. My first memory of going online was at school, in sixth grade, but my first memory of using a computer was much earlier, when I was around five years old. The computer at our local library had a program called Funny Face (Figure 6.1), which allowed "children of all ages" to select from a menu of different facial features to create a face (Hewer, 2017). I realized that this meant my first interaction with a computer had been to make something. In other words, computers have functioned as an artistic production tool in my life from the very beginning.

Figure 6.1

Children's computer game Funny Face, 1992


Note. Image from DOSBox (Hewer, 2017)
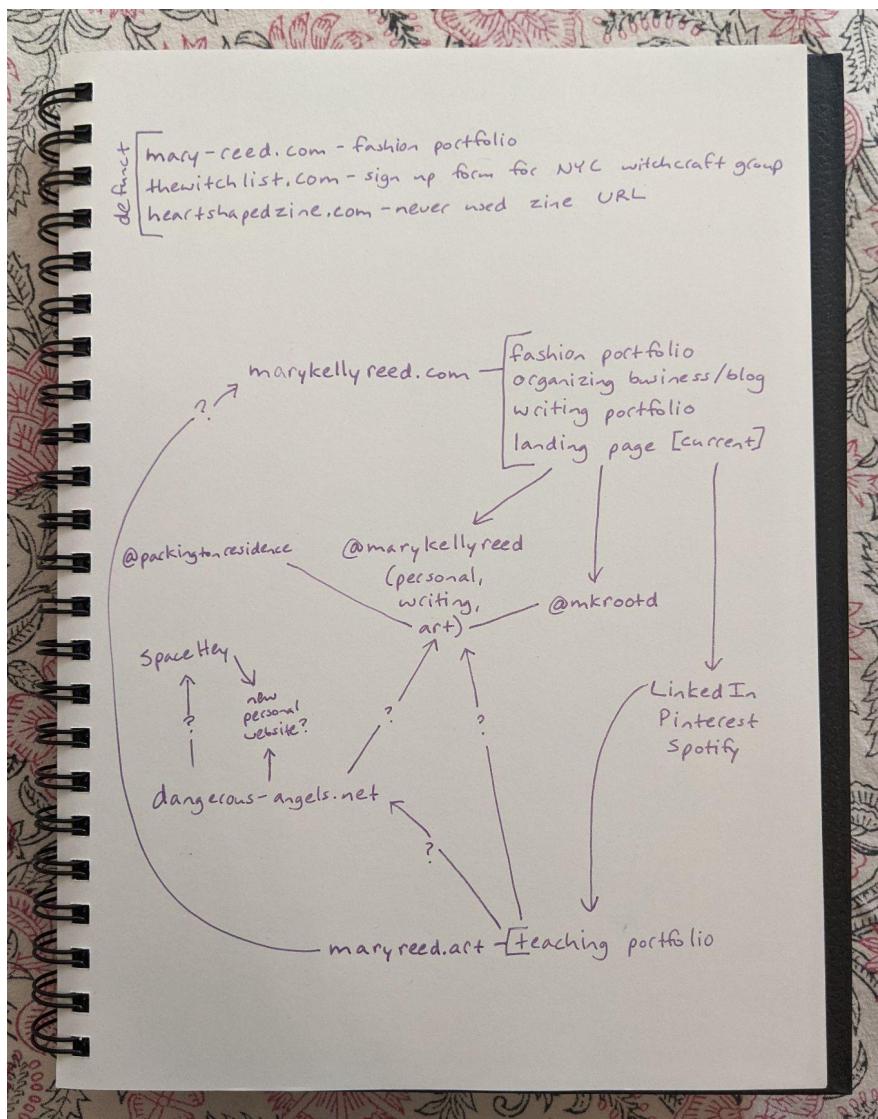
This has direct implications for my work as an art educator. When I embarked on my masters program, I think I had a much more narrow understanding of what was expected of a visual arts teacher. I assumed that I would be expected to teach students established techniques to use traditional art media. In fact, I was worried that the non-traditional portfolio I submitted with my application might be a barrier to entering the program. This inquiry has inspired me to design curriculum that integrates thoughtful uses of technology and the Internet.

My role as an educator also has implications for how I present myself on the Internet in the future. In a conversation about the professional use of social media, one of my professors advised us to "lock up" our personal accounts, restricting access to trusted friends and family. This presents a conundrum that I've been wrestling with over the course of this inquiry: my identity as an artist is crucial to my work as an art teacher, and I draw the majority of my inspiration for my work from my personal life. Indeed, I've often used social media, particularly Instagram, as a medium to make artwork of a deeply personal nature. I drew a mind map to reflect on this (Figure 6.2), but it's something I'll continue to grapple with, especially as my and others' use of the Internet evolves. This concern is shared by professionals in other fields, as seen in this reflection from one of my research participants:

I think the Internet is different now…I'm further in my career, and…I can't just go on the

Internet and say whatever I want anymore. It all relates back to my work…I'm not, like,

an individual on the Internet anymore. I'm, like, a public figure. So yeah, I can't treat it the

same way I used to.

Figure 6.2

Mind map of the interconnectivity of the researcher's websites and social media accounts

Educational Implications

Knowing that the Internet and coding offer rich opportunities for artistic expression, I suggest arts educators build these mediums into their curriculum from the ground up, rather than developing one-off lessons to satisfy STEAM initiatives.

The ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) Standards state that students should "choose the appropriate platforms and tools for meeting the desired objectives of their creation or communication" and "manage their personal data to maintain digital privacy and security and are aware of data-collection technology used to track their navigation online" (ISTE, 2023). I would argue that students should also be encouraged to question established Internet platforms and explore the ethical implications of their data collection.

In my exploration of Web Revival communities, I came across a message board topic titled "Things You Wish You'd Been Taught In School" (Melonland Forum, 2022). Several users expressed that they wish they'd learned to make websites in school. One user stated "there was a programming club at our school but it didn't really teach us any actual coding."

Suggestions for Future Research

This inquiry has been a richly rewarding and generative experience for me. The following list includes areas that I did not get to explore, which I plan to revisit in the future, as well as other related topics that additional research is needed in.

- I did not have time to explore the "material/tangible" side of this subculture, which for me included writing physical letters to penpals met online; making, selling, and trading zines; trading mixtapes; altering and making clothes, and creating tutorials for others to do the same. Much of this activity was facilitated by the blogging platform LiveJournal and the now-defunct teen auction website LaundroMATiC (LaundroMATiC, 2003), a platform that also included a thriving forum and blog service.

- My inquiry focused primarily on girls located in the United States, but one of my research participants shared links to personal websites from the same time period based in Brazil. Much study is needed of this phenomenon in other countries.

- All of the research participants mentioned fandom culture, which included webrings, fanlistings, and fanfiction for fans of anime, books, and movies. Some contemporary 2000s scholarship explores this topic, but more research is needed, particularly autoethnographic study. This also indicates a connection to the fan media created by mid-twentieth century girls, discussed in the Literature Review.

- One research participant mentioned an intriguing link between the aesthetic conventions of pixel trading websites and the Internet of Japan in the 2000s, which was the first in the world to develop a mobile Web. According to this research participant, the pixelated artwork developed for use on the Japanese mobile web was appropriated by girls for use on pixel artwork websites of the early 2000s.

- The burgeoning Web Revival subculture of today is another area ripe for study, both in terms of the earlier Internet subcultures that inspired it, and as a reaction to the heavily corporatised environments of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0.

- Cartoon dollz are another visual touchstone of the teen girls' Internet of the late 1990s/early 2000s that was not examined in this inquiry. Cartoon dollz were originally created as avatars for a chat program called The Palace, but eventually came to be saved as graphics and distributed through email newsletters and dedicated dollz websites (Carpenter, 2018). Research participant Amanda described editing the dollz pixel by pixel in Microsoft Paint as "weird little proto-graphic design," suggesting an overlooked area for further study. Today, dollz can be found on Web Revival websites (Dollz Mania, 2021). They are also featured on a tarot deck by the artist Molly Soda (Soda, 2023).

Reflections on the Design of the Inquiry

When I conceived of this inquiry as an autoethnography, I did not originally plan to interview other people. I'm glad that I did include others; not only because this added other important perspectives to my research, but also because it opened up other areas of the inquiry not previously known.

However, if I were to redesign the inquiry, I would focus on casting a wider net for research participants. As noted in "Limitations of the Inquiry," participants were identified through published work on the Internet relating to the me / you / site culture of the early 2000s. This resulted in an overrepresentation of webmistresses who continued to use the Internet heavily as adults. Other former participants in the subculture may have had different experiences in adolescence that led to different uses of the Internet as adults.

This may be why I found my experiences of the 2000s Internet differed somewhat from my research participants. Although I was familiar with fandom culture, my primary association with the Internet of this time period was with making. Beyond making websites, this extended to finding resources to learn to make and alter clothes, sharing pictures of what I'd made online, and selling clothes. Much of this was facilitated by the website LaundroMATiC. None of the other research participants mentioned this website, and I have not been able to find any contemporary 2000s media related to it. I am eager to do further research in this area in the future.

Closing Thoughts

As my interview with Ashley drew to a close, I explained that I had been keeping a blog/website for the inquiry and that I would send all research participants the link once I had finished the research. She responded with enthusiasm, "Maybe we can do a link exchange!"

Twenty years later, I am not immune to the emotional impact of a peer expressing interest in linking to my website and my work. Throughout scheduling and conducting the

research interviews, I was amazed that these women were willing to talk to me, as I deeply

admire their work. The suggestion that one of them might admire my work in return was thrilling.

I did not consider myself particularly successful as a webmistress in the early 2000s. My

websites were often short-lived and I never had more than a handful of "affiliates." Perhaps

that's part of why I've become a chronicler and historian of this subculture. The girls who

created these websites still command my attention, admiration, and reverence.

I would love to do a link exchange.

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Appendix I

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Linda Kourkoulis, Principal Investigator and faculty advisor, and Mary Reed, researcher and Master of Art Education candidate, Art Education Department, School of Visual Arts. The purpose of this study is to understand the motivations of teenage girls who created websites and learned to code in the early 2000s. Mary Reed has chosen this topic of study because she was also a participant in these activities.

Why are you being asked?

You have been asked to participate because you created a website during the time period of 2000-2009 when you were between the ages of 12-19. You are ineligible to participate if you are currently located in the European Economic Area.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

What would you do?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will participate in one recorded individual Zoom interview lasting up to 45 minutes. You will also be given the choice to participate in a subsequent group interview lasting up to 45 minutes, occurring within 3 weeks of the first interview. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately 45-90 minutes over a period of up to 3 weeks.

Are any risks expected?

The researcher does not expect anything more than minimal risk, which means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. If distress happens at any point in the interview process, the video will be stopped and not recorded. The participant will be given the option to resume if they choose, or conclude the interview there.

Will your information be protected?

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information private and confidential. Information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. Your responses will be used by Mary Reed to inform the content and direction of her artworks. This may include direct quotes that do not identify you.

Group Interview: While I, Mary Reed (the researcher), treat the privacy and confidentiality of all the participants in this interview with high importance, because the nature of group interviews is such that I cannot guarantee your privacy or confidentiality will be completely secure and

protected, your consent to participate acknowledges that you accept that risk. I do ask everybody in this interview to try to do their best to keep our conversations confidential.

However, when required by law or college policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

We need to make you aware that in certain research studies, it is our legal and ethical responsibility to report situations of child abuse or child neglect to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

Could your responses be used for other research?

Your information will not be used or distributed for future use, even if identifiers are removed.

Who will benefit from this study?

The benefits for participants in the study are affirmation of the drive and initiative they took when they were adolescents and the opportunity to discuss an enjoyable and engaging activity during their formative years. The research benefits the fields of education and art education with new information about what motivates the desire of teenage girls to create and consume images and other media on the internet.

Whom do you contact if you have any questions?

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact:

Mary Reed – (615) 557-3459 – mreed3@sva.edu

Linda Kourkoulis – (212) 592-2449 – lkourkoulis@sva.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the School of Visual Arts, Office of Academic Affairs at (212) 592-2514 or provost@sva.edu.

Documentation of Consent

Sign below if you are 18 or older and willing to participate in this study.

Signature _____   Date _____

You can print this form for your records.

Appendix II

Individual Interview Questions

1. My inquiry (research project) explores the subculture of personal website-making that you and I both participated in when we were in high school. How would you describe or name this subculture of website-making?

2. Can you characterize a typical participant in this subculture?

3. What was your relationship to other people in this subculture?

    a. How would you describe yourself socially in high school? Was your online personality the same or different?

4. What led you to learn to code?

5. Did you own a domain name or were you hosted by someone else? What was that process like?

6. What is your relationship to the Internet now?