

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

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A Research Proposal

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Abstract

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 research proposal seeks to analyze the websites created by teen girls in the early 2000s and explore the motivations behind their activities, thus arguing that teen girls are sophisticated producers of new media. This will be achieved through an autoethnographic study and practice-based research.

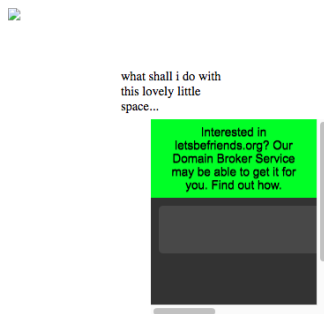
Teenage Girls as Sophisticated Producers of New Media on the 2000s Internet

Background to the Inquiry

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. I found myself reflecting on the online subculture of building websites that flourished when I was in high school. The Internet has been through a number of iterations since the early aughts, 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.), few of the sites I remember were archived, and the archive that does exist is full of broken images and inaccessible links (Figure 1). Virtual gathering places made by teen girls, such as personal web pages and bulletin boards, have been replaced by ones made by corporations, a change that was already underway when Facebook was launched in 2004 (Bruns, 2013, p. 422).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 is comprised of these "corporate, registration-only services," (Sousa, 2022, p. 186) rather than infrastructure built by the users themselves.

Figure 1

An archived version of one of the author's websites from this time period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. 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 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). After breathlessly expounding on the dangers of the web, much of the other scholarship on teen girls' Internet usage focuses on their online sexual explorations or their role as consumers of media. 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 a contemporary 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. 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 Polyvore¹, this desire to occupy the

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.

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.

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.

I am a white, able-bodied, neurotypical, cisgender, bisexual woman from a middle-class background. My first language is English and I was born a US 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). 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

- Building 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

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.
- This inquiry will not focus on teen girls' explorations of sex outside of the realm of identity (sexuality) since this has been studied at length elsewhere

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to use the historical time period of the 2000s 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. "Internet" includes services such as email and chat in addition to websites. (CERN; Diffen)

The first "web pages" – documents that could be accessed by other computers over a network – were published in 1990 at CERN. (CERN) 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, *websites* 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. 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") also 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)

Although the term is infrequently used today, 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)

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, 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).

As Melissa McEwen describes 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).

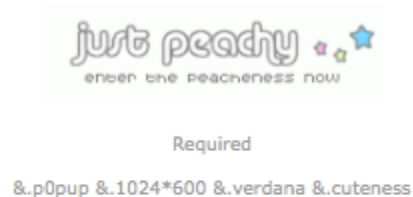
Aesthetic Conventions

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 (McEwen shares that her first line of javascript was “to cheat at Neopets,” a website for virtual pet owners) (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. (The browser Netscape was infamous for outputting HTML code differently than the designer intended.) Requirements could also playfully indicate qualities of the visitor, such as “an open mind.”

Figure 2

Example of a splash page

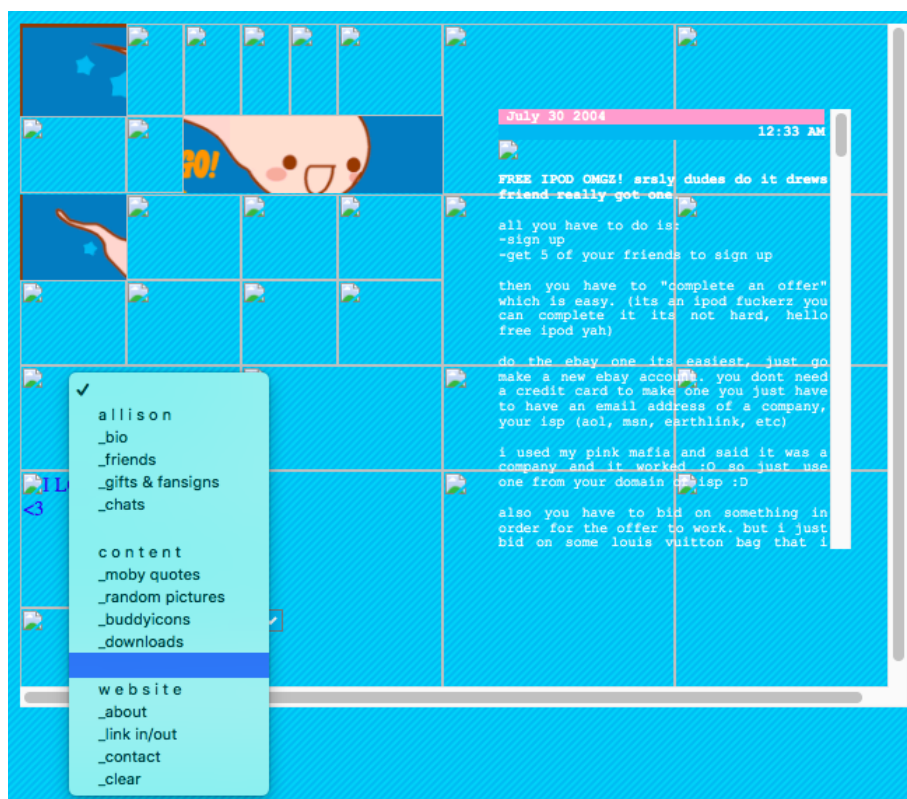


Note. Screenshot from the Wayback Machine (just*peachy, 2002)

Inside the website, the visitor could navigate to multiple pages of “content,” which was often divided into the schematic sections “me,” “you,” and “www.” 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 3).

Figure 3

Example of website layout with multiple sections of content



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

Teenage Girls' Creative and Media Production

Preindustrial girls' creative endeavors 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, many of which were in operation during the early 2000s. (Kearney, 2006)

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 an interesting situation when observing the performances of teenage girls, as their identities are in flux as they navigate the path from childhood to adulthood. 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" (closed, 2001), implying that the websites reflected the evolving identities of their owners.

Methodology

Type of Study

I will be conducting an autoethnographic study. In my initial research, I found gaps in the historical record of teenage girls' use of the internet in the early 2000s – gaps that I have firsthand knowledge of, that could be considered “experiences shrouded in silence” (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography is appropriate for this study because historic documents of this time are damaged and incomplete: 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 of the websites that I remember from this time period were either not fully archived on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, or they contain broken links and broken images. I will need to rely on my own memory and personal journals from the time period to supplement these records.

Bochner (Ellis et al., 2011) describes how significant memories prompt “effects that linger – recollections, memories, images, feelings – long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished.” Over the past several months as I’ve worked towards crafting this thesis proposal, I have felt something important stirring behind the veil of these adolescent memories, but I haven’t yet uncovered what is there.

I will be using the autoethnographic form of creating a layered account due to its focus on data collection and the nature of research to yield additional questions as it proceeds (Ellis et al., 2011). Indeed, in these early stages of my project, I already have some new questions prompted by my initial document gathering. I discovered that one of the websites I remembered from 2001, Lalaland.nu, has been resurrected by the original website owner (Welcome Back, n.d.). I also came across an Instagram account by a zine author from 2000-2011, who is using Instagram to share archival images of her zine, Bubblegum Slut (Bubblegum, n.d.). Another interesting example is “Lost Memories Dot Net,” a browser-based video game designed to

emulate the experience of a 14-year-old girl web designer in 2004, created by another former participant in the subculture (Freeman, n.d.). All of these prompt 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)?

Methods

Practice-Based Research

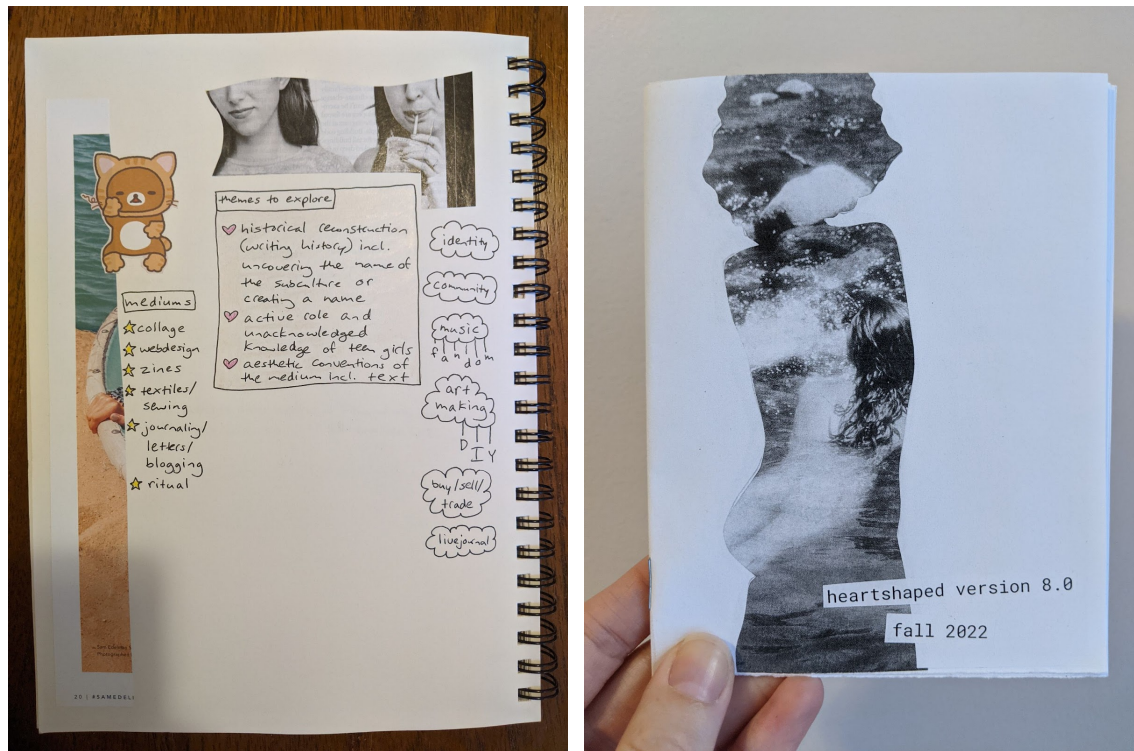
I am deliberately using the term “practice-based research” because I will be centering the *process* of creating art objects (Sullivan, 2006, p. 26). This is partially because I value the process over the “finished product” in my personal art-making practice. It is also in reference to Refsum’s (2002) 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.”

While I developed this thesis proposal, I created collages as a way to “think through” my ideas. These preliminary works sometimes mimicked the layouts of table-based web pages of the early 2000s, as seen in Figure 4.

I will create a series of zines as my primary method of practice-based research. An example can be seen in Figure 4. The zines will be created using an iterative process, with each zine building on the information gathered previously. Each new zine will be denoted with a numerical system (version 1, version 2, version 2.2), 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 4

Process collage and zine created by the author



Interviews

I will interview several people who participated in this subculture. I will conduct 45-minute small group interviews over Zoom. See the Appendix for preliminary interview questions.

Research Journal

I will create a website to maintain a research journal. I will code the website myself and update it on a weekly basis. The entries will be in various forms, including collages, photos, audio recordings, and text. I will reflect on the information I gather and the progress of my artwork. I will purchase a top-level domain name for this website and it will be publicly available on the Internet.

Document Collection

I will gather examples of teen girl websites from the early 2000s. These will be gathered through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (Internet Archive, n.d.) and saved as screen captures. I will analyze these texts to inform my practice-based research, using thematic analysis with a reflexive approach (Morgan, 2022).

Limitations of the Study

I am studying a time period in the past that was 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. I also destroyed many of my personal records from this time (websites, livejournals, physical journals, letters) because they were embarrassing. Knowledge of the time period will rely heavily on reconstruction and memory.

Participants

I will be the main participant in this study as I analyze data gathered through interviews and documents and process this knowledge through my art-making. I am a woman in my mid-thirties; at the time of my participation in this subculture, I was between the ages of 14 and 18. I have a bachelor's degree in fashion design and I am currently working towards completing my master's degree in art education. I live in New York City.

I will be interviewing B, whom I met in 2001 through our mutual participation in this subculture. B is a woman in her 30s. She is a fine artist living in the San Francisco Bay area.

I will also be interviewing E, a woman I became acquainted with in adulthood whom I discovered also participated in this subculture as a teenager. E is a woman in her early 30s. She is an engineer and web developer living in Los Angeles.

Interestingly, both I and the other confirmed participants grew up in the southeastern United States. We are all cisgender white women.

I have also identified some other former participants in the subculture through my document collection process. I will reach out to these individuals in hopes of recruiting them to join the small group interview.

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Appendix

Preliminary Interview Questions

1. How would you describe or name this subculture of website-making?
2. What led you to learn to make websites?
3. What is your relationship to the Internet now?