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Boyfriends, Babies, and a Few Good Headshots: Examining Girl Gamers' Identity Enactment on Twitter Using the Communication Theory of Identity

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BOYFRIENDS, BABIES, AND A FEW GOOD HEADSHOTS:
EXAMINING GIRL GAMERS' IDENTITY ENACTMENT ON TWITTER USING THE
COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

by

KARI D. STORLA

Under the Direction of Dr. Jaye Atkinson

ABSTRACT

Girl gamers, while a substantial part of the gaming population, are often largely ignored in both the gaming industry and academic literature. In particular, there have been few investigations to date on what comprises the identity of a girl gamer, particularly outside the context of gameplay. To that end, the current study aims to investigate how girl gamers enact their identities as girl gamers on Twitter, a social network site. Eight Twitter accounts whose users self-identified as either Gamer Girls or Girl Gamers on a Twitter user directory were identified and the profiles and tweets of each collected for a two week period. This data was then analyzed according to Hecht's communication theory of identity in order to determine how girl gamers enact their identity in an online context.

INDEX WORDS: Girl gamers, Gamer girls, Communication Theory of Identity, Twitter, Social network sites, Online identity

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KARI D. STORLA

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Introduction

When the popular stereotype of a gamer is considered, the expression girl gamer almost seems like a contradiction of terms. While many people may enjoy the occasional video game, the stereotypical gamer is viewed as young, male, and something of a “computer nerd” (Williams, 2003). While it is considered normal for men and boys to play video games, it is considered an oddity for women and girls to do so. Male is the “‘default’ position” for gamers, as evidenced by the lack of an equivalent term to girl gamer (e.g. boy gamer, guy gamer). Despite this perceived lack of interest from women and girls in video games, however, many women are playing games (Entertainment Software Association, 2010; Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008).

The growing numbers of girl gamers, as well as the video game industry’s growing awareness of girls and women as potential customers, have drawn attention to the issue of girls and women as gamers (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). Since the mid-1990s there has been a growing body of literature on girl gamers (Beavis & Charles, 2007; Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). To date, however, there has been little research on girl gamers and identity outside of a gameplay context. Instead, most of the literature focuses on girl gamers’ game preferences, play styles, and communication while playing games (Jenson & de Castell, 2005; Kafai, Fields, & Giang, 2009; Pelletier, 2008).

To address this gap in the literature, the current project aims to determine how Twitter users who self-identify as girl gamers communicate their identities on Twitter. Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity will be used to investigate how girl gamers communicate their identity through the identity frames of personal identity, enacted identity, and relational identity, as well as some of the associated identity gaps between and among them. The use of Twitter, a social network site, is a particularly useful avenue for collecting data on gamers. The

Internet as a whole is a good medium for gamer research because most gamers have Internet access, enabling to a group of individuals who might otherwise be difficult to locate and contact, and because it “has a disinhibit effect on users and reduces social desirability,” (Wood, Griffiths, & Eatough, 2004, p. 511) that may lead to more honest responses and posts. This may be especially true of Twitter, because, as one Twitter user put it, "Facebook is where you tell lies to your friends; twitter is where you tell the truth to strangers" (brandondiamond, 2010).

Literature Review

Identity

Identity is one of the most important concepts in the study of communication. Identity refers not only to how a person sees him or herself, but also with what groups they s/he identifies and how others see the person (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Identity comes into play not only in interpersonal, face-to-face interactions, but also in online communication. Identity is neither constant nor unconscious but rather something that is deliberately enacted and communicated (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Mitra, 2010).

Communication Theory of Identity. The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) sees identity as communication, with part of the enactment of identity being the creation of messages (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). CTI developed out of a number of different theories and concepts about identity from many different eras, including ancient Africa, Greece, and Asia, the Enlightenment, postmodernism, and Social Identity Theory (Hecht, et al., 20005). CTI identifies four frames of identity that interact with each other to create a person’s identity; these frames are known as personal identity, enacted identity, relational identity, and communal identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004).

The personal identity is identity at the level of the individual and is concerned with how an individual conceptualizes his or her own identity. The enacted identity is more concerned with communication and how an individual asserts their identity in communication. CTI asserts, “enactments are not mere expressions of identity but are considered the identity itself” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). The relational identity consists of four levels. The first is ascribed relational identity and is based on how an individual forms their own identity based on the views of those around him or her. The second is based on identification through relationships with others. The third concerns the relationships between the multiple identities an individual has. The fourth level of relational identity is that of a relationship itself. The last frame of identity is the communal identity, which concerns group identities rather than the identity of an individual. Hecht (1993) describes the communal identity as one in which “communities define a repertoire of identities that are jointly held/remembered and taught to new members” (p. 80). Such communities are not limited to groups organized around any one common factor but could base their communal identities on anything from ethnicity to shared interests.

Associated with these four frames is the idea of identity gaps (Jung & Hecht, 2004). An identity gap is any discrepancy between or among the four identity frames (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 274). This is one example of interpenetration, or “juxtaposition of identities” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 267), an aspect of identity in which CTI is particularly interested. Jung and Hecht’s (2004) research into identity gaps revealed that both personal-relational and personal-enacted identity gaps are negatively correlated with communication satisfaction, feeling understood, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of the conversation. Further research on personal-enacted identity gaps, specifically within the context of intraracial but not necessarily intraethnic interactions, revealed that the personal-enacted identity gap can be associated with negative

stereotypes about personal identity (Drummond & Orbe, 2009). In other words, people may hide their personal identity by either not correcting others' assumptions or by actively enacting a socially acceptable identity in order to avoid the negative stereotypes of their personal identity.

Construction of online identity. The study of online identities reaches back to the early days of the Internet. As more and more people logged on and the Internet became accessible to much larger segments of the population in the mid 1990s, research on online identities proceeded apace. Online identities are unique from "real life" identities for several reasons, not least among them because of the lack of many of the cues people use to help them categorize others (Donath, 1999). Online identities are seen as ambiguous and important, as people feel the need to figure out whom someone is and how reliable the information they provide is, but must do so in the absence of signals upon which they are used to relying (Donath, 1999). Gender in particular is an important part of an online identity and is often one of the first things disclosed or communicated through the choice of name (Burkhalter, 1999).

There is a rather large body of research dedicated to the relationship between online identities and gender. Some researchers have investigated differences between boys' and girls' homepages and profiles online and found that, while adolescents may maintain an online presence for similar reasons, like the ability to express themselves and receive social validation, what topics they write about and the depth of their self-disclosure is correlated with gender (Stern, 2004). For example, while girls were more likely to refer to their appearance, boys mentioned video games nearly four times as often as girls, though both genders mentioned interests like music with around equal frequency. Girls were also more likely to discuss "intimate topics" (e.g., religion, sex, depression, etc.) and address things in a more emotional manner than were boys, which Stern suggests may reflect offline gender communication differences.

Language is also an important factor in how males and females communicate online. Palomares (2009) examined email exchanges between adult males and females and rated the tentativeness of their language. Although tentative language is traditionally more associated with females, Palomares (2009) found that tentativeness is related to context as well as gender; both males and females use more tentative language when communicating with a member of the opposite gender on a topic where their gender is not perceived to be an expert. Similarly, García-Gómez (2009) examines the blogs of teenage girls and found that they may adopt or adapt traditionally masculine language and expressions depending on the context of their posts.

This leads to one of the most frequently discussed topics in discussions of online identity, that of the multiplicity of identity. Virtual communities are just as “real” as offline communities, though they tend to focus on shared interests rather than characteristics (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Just as an individual belongs to multiple communities, and exhibits multiple identities offline, so too they present a multiplicity of identities online. Turkle (1995) writes extensively on this issue, tracing the multiplicity of selves through Usenet groups, MUDs, and other online forums. Rather than presenting the entirety of one’s identity through any one online screen name or MUD character, Turkle argues that individuals, often consciously, showcase only a small portion of their overall character in any one type of online interaction. This is similar to what Livingstone (2008) found in her examination of teenagers’ SNS profiles, pointing out that “designing a profile is not solely a matter of individual choice” (p. 407). Instead, the identity displayed on a SNS profile depends on the particular SNS chosen, who will view the information, and how a user initially sets up their profile. People are choosing to project one identity over another when they construct their identities online.

Narbs. Mitra (2010) argues, “the digitization of human communication led to...the real person being replaced by a discursive narrative of the person” (p. 4). “Narbs” or “narrative bits” are chosen by a person in order to create this discursive narrative of their online identity (p. 8). In compliance with the idea of the multiplicity of selves online, different narbs may be used on different SNS due to the nature of each; people construct their online identities slightly differently depending on the particular SNS. It is only when you combine all of the narbs and all of the narratives created by the narbs from each SNS and combine them that you may begin to approach the sum total of a person’s identity (Mitra, 2010).

Mitra (2010) also outlines a typology of narbs, divided three ways: whether or not they were created by the user themselves or another user (self-narb or other-narb), content-based categories, and functional categories. When examining Twitter, most narbs will be self-narbs, as other users generally cannot see what one user has said to another unless they are a follower of both. However, with content-based and functional categories, there is considerably more variation on Twitter.

Content-based categories are a way to “systematically classify narbs that use specific symbolic strategies” (Mitra, 2010, p. 10). In other words, the different classifications of content-based narbs each use a different medium or set of symbols in order to relate the identity narrative. Text narbs, for example, represent the majority of tweets and consist entirely of words. Picture narbs, usually seen on Twitter by linking to an outside site, are simply images. Similarly, the final two categories of video and audio narbs are likewise self-explanatory and generally appear on Twitter via a link to an outside site. These categories, of course, are not necessarily exclusive and can coexist, such as when descriptive text appears next to a link to a picture.

Unlike content-based narbs, functional categories of narbs are based on the purpose that each serves in the construction of identity (Mitra, 2010). The first of these, spatial narbs, deals with the physical location of an individual, including such things as their home or current location. Obvious examples of spatial narbs include services such as foursquare, which allow a user to “check in” to a SNS with their location. Similarly, temporal narbs deal with chronological, rather than spatial, information, including age and the time at which the narbs were produced. The causal narbs differ slightly from the previous two categorizations, instead dealing with beliefs and attitudes rather than pointing out more concrete information. Finally, the activity category, which examines what sorts of activities and interests users mention in their narbs, is particularly relevant, considering that playing video games is an activity (Mitra, 2010). Given that “one of the most important aspects of social networking is the ability to make connections with people who are spatially distant from an individual” (Mitra, 2010, p. 3), the analysis of activity narbs on SNS is particularly useful as it allows for the study of groups such as girl gamers, whose identity is based on a shared interest rather than shared geographical location.

Girl Gamers

Girl gamers seem to be a difficult group to research. It may be assumed that women do not want to play video games due to some inherent characteristic related to being female, but much of the research suggests that females are subtly discouraged from playing games as anything other than casual participants (Jenson & de Castell, 2010). The construction of a girl gamer identity is often more of a matter of a personal identity rather than an enacted one, as games are not considered to be things that are “for” girls (Jenson & de Castell, 2010; Williams,

2003). The interaction between the dual identities of girl and gamer also lends an interesting facet to a CTI analysis of girl gamers.

Definition. Despite the seeming simplicity of the term, defining the girl gamer is actually a complicated process. Both the term girl and the term gamer are somewhat misleading, and there has been no single definition used throughout the literature for girl gamers. In order to discuss girl gamers, the issue of what exactly a girl gamer is must first be clarified.

The use of the word “girl” is the most obvious source of confusion. Video games are traditionally seen as being within the purview of children, but the majority of gamers are actually over the age of 18, with an average age of 34 (Entertainment Software Administration [ESA], 2010; Thornham, 2009). Adding to this confusion, much of the early research on girl gamers focused on school aged-children (Cassell & Jenkins, 2009). In particular, early research often focused on the need to create video games for girls and use these games as a gateway to introduce girls to technology. Other research has included age groups who would not usually fall under the label of “girl” (Kerr, 2003; Schott & Horrell, 2000; Taylor, 2003). The girl part of girl gamer is therefore used to apply to females of all ages.

The term gamer is equally problematic. Most studies use the basic—and somewhat tautological—definition of a gamer as someone who plays gamers (Kerr, 2003; Pelletier, 2008). However, as Jenson and de Castell (2005) point out, there is a difference between girls who play games and girl gamers. This issue may be linked to the larger debate in the gaming community over the definition of a casual gamer versus a hardcore gamer and arguments over what exactly constitutes as “real” gamer (Carr, 2005).

According to the ESA (2010), 40% of video game players are female; this number increases to 42% in online games. In fact, the ESA (2010, p. 3) claims that women over the age

of 18 make up a larger percentage of gamers than boys under the age of 17 (33% vs. 20%). These numbers, however, do not necessarily match those found in the girl gamer literature. A study of *Everquest* players conducted by Williams et al. in 2008 found that the male/female divide was closer to 80% / 20%. This illustrates the issues that may be caused based on differing definitions of the term gamer. The ESA defines a gamer in terms of a person who plays games rather than the approach used by the Williams et al. study, which bases its definition on observations of people's behavior.

To make a true study of the girl gamer, then, it is necessary to define the group not as someone who simply plays video games. Obviously this is problematic as there is no agreed-upon definition of a gamer (beyond the obvious and basic meaning of someone who plays games). A new definition for gamer is needed because even people who play games regularly may not identify with the gaming culture. Frequent gamers, for example, may be placed into the category of casual gamers, often considered to be people who play games rather than true or "hardcore" gamers (Carr, 2005; Jenson & de Castell, 2005).

The best way to reach the population of girl gamers, then, is to redefine the term gamer as a person who self-identifies as such, regardless of the personal meaning they attach to the term or whether or not others would see them as such. The rationale behind this is that an individual who is willing to self-identify as a gamer is more likely to be involved in the gaming community, consider gaming a significant part of their identity and/or their leisure activities, be more knowledgeable about video games, and be considered by others to be a "real" gamer. Although there is no guarantee of this, of course, it should allow for a closer study of girl gamers as an identity rather than as simply a choice in leisure activities. This somewhat corresponds to self-

categorization theory, as it looks at how people categorize themselves as gamers rather than at how others would choose to categorize them (Kalblfeisch, 2010).

Characteristics. Keeping in mind the limitations of previous girl gamer research mentioned above, a profile of the girl gamer has nonetheless slowly emerged. Girl gamers are, in many ways, an invisible population within the larger gaming community. According to Taylor (2008), girl gamers “occupy a kind of closeted gamer identity” (p. 54). Girl gamers are far more likely to game in private than in public spaces, which contributes to their general lack of visibility (Jenson & de Castell, 2010; Schott & Horrell, 2000). Public gaming spaces are traditionally seen as masculine and women may find them “unwelcoming or threatening” (Bryce & Rutter, 2003, p. 8) or be greeted with “wariness, even hostility” (Beavis & Charles, 2007, p. 696).

As a result, girl gamers tend not to participate in gaming tournaments, try out new games on in-store demo displays, play games in LAN cafés, or even post in online gaming forums though there are, of course, exceptions to this generalization (Beavis & Charles, 2007; Kerr, 2003; Schott & Horrell, 2000; Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009). However, even retreating to the private sphere may not allow girl gamers to play video games uninterrupted. Even if the girl gamer herself owns the video game console(s), her ability and opportunity to play is often controlled by a father, brother, or boyfriend (Schott & Horrell, 2000). In fact, most girl gamers were introduced to gaming through male relatives or friends; it was relatively rare for them to play with other females or to even know of other girl gamers (Kerr, 2003; Taylor, 2003). Despite the perceived rarity of girl gamers, this may not be because girl gamers do not exist within one another’s real life social networks, but rather because they are unaware of each other’s existence (Taylor, 2008). This further supports the literature that claims that a girl gamer identity tends to

be a private, not a public, one. As a result, it is possible that girl gamers may be more likely to enact their identities as gamers online, as the Internet presents a “safe space” where negative effects on their real lives are kept to a minimum.

Another similarity among girl gamers is that their gaming preferences and behaviors depend on context. Studies of the game preferences of adolescent girls reveal that the types of games they play change depending on the context, such as whether or not they are playing along or with others or whether or not they are playing only with other girls or with boys (Carr, 2005; Pelletier, 2008). Past experience with various types of games is also important. This coincides with Kerr’s (2003) findings from interviews of adult girl gamers, which claim that girl gamers choose games based on their mood and the social context. In short, there is no one type of game that girls play, and there is no one type of game that they avoid. Nor are girl gamers inherently less competitive than males, as has been claimed (Schott & Horrell, 2000). Instead, girl gamers seem to enjoy both competitive and cooperative aspects of gameplay (Carr, 2005; Taylor, 2009).

Expression of identity. Girl gamers have many ways in which they express their identities as both girls and gamers, including in both online and offline contexts. Taylor et al. (2009), for example describes how a young girl gamer who competes in *Halo* tournaments, which are comprised almost entirely of male competitors, chooses to dress nicely and wear makeup as a way to express her femininity. On the other hand, she is also quick to defend and legitimize herself as a gamer and not a “*Halo* ho,” by informing the interviewer that she is there to game, not to attract male attention (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 245). This demonstrates the fact that, due to gaming being seen as a traditionally male activity, girl gamers often feel the need to balance between their gender identities as female and their gamer identities, which are often couched in more masculine terms.

Beavis and Charles' (2007) interviews with girl gamers who played *Counter-Strike* at a LAN café that catered largely to a male clientele are another example of this. The women interviewed had difficulty using language to explain why they enjoy the games they do, often inserting qualifiers about how they knew that this sounded particularly odd "for a girl." Many also expressed how they felt simultaneously pleased with being unique in the gaming community and aggravated by the often dismissive attitudes of male gamers (Beavis & Charles, 2007). The women interviewed in this study had several methods of countering this, including announcing their female identities through hyper-gendered usernames, such as Butterfly.

Much of the literature, particularly the articles that focus on school-aged girl gamers, pays attention to gender identity as a performance in the context of gameplay. Kafai et al. (2009), for example, note that what girls say they do in games can differ dramatically from what they actually do, particularly in context where actual behaviors would be seen as unfeminine. Similarly, Jenson and de Castell (2005) found that girl gamers consistently report playing games that are not seen as being appropriate for females when playing with a male gamer rather than when playing on their own. Thornham (2009) noted that women positioned themselves as people who would play games when others would but not in and of themselves. In other words, girl gamers (though it must be remembered that the definition of gamer in the literature is often simply someone who plays games) tend to *not* express their identities as gamers or to express it in ways that they believe corresponds to a female identity.

However, other reports of girl gamers, particularly those who are closer to the definition of a hardcore gamer, reveal ways in which girl gamers express their identities as such. Taylor (2009) has written extensively on the ways in which female *EverQuest* players express their identities, particularly in online forums dedicated to the game. Not only do in-game factors (such

as character class, character design, level obtained, et cetera) express an identity as either a female or a gamer, many girl gamers also actively seek to express themselves through the use of forum signatures, including complicated images. A signature that includes a picture of the player's character and name may simultaneously communicate both a gamer and a female identity through the use of images of in-game status symbols and a feminine character name (Taylor, 2009). Taylor notes, and rightly so, that in many cases the expression of a gamer identity is inextricable from demonstrating knowledge and prowess in *EverQuest* (p. 104).

Choice of character is also often related to a female identity, though of course this issue is complicated by the presence of males who play female characters (Turkle, 1995; Taylor, 2009). Nor is it true that girl gamers will always choose to play a female character if it is an option. Other factors, such as displeasure with unrealistic portrayals of female bodies, a wish to play a character of a particular type or particular stats, or simply the desire to play a character of a different gender than one's own all influence gamer's character choice (Carr, 2005; Kerr, 2003; Taylor, 2009). Just as many of the characteristics of the girl gamer depend on context, so too does the expression of the girl gamer's identity.

Social Network Sites

For girl gamers, social network sites have become a way for girl gamers to connect with one another, a fact recognizable due to the increasing amount of attention paid to social network sites in the past few years. In particular, social network sites offer numerous possibilities for studying how identities are developed and enacted in an online environment. This is particularly true for relatively small communities that are in some way isolated, such as the community of girl gamers. Social network sites present the opportunity to examine how girl gamers represent themselves not only if they are members of any sort of girl gamer group but also if they present

themselves as such in isolation. In other words, social network sites, with their wealth of user-generated content and the implicit connections to identity that such posts have, provide a great resource for examining how the users of such sites enact their identities.

History. Social network sites are an integral part of the Internet today. The first website commonly recognized as a social network was 6degrees.com, launched in 1997; today there are dozens of such sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007). MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter are arguably the three most well known social network sites, though the landscape is continuously changing. According to boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites (SNS) can be defined as:

Web based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others. (p. 211)

Within this definition there are many variations from SNS to SNS. For example, one of the most important differences among SNS is how public or private a user's profile is. This depends on both the particular SNS and the individual user's preferences for privacy settings. What constitutes a profile also varies wildly, though most contain basic information like demographics, likes and dislikes, and a photograph. In addition, the relationships formed with other users may be different. Some SNS are based on maintaining offline connections while some may be designed toward connecting with strangers. Likewise, some require both users to confirm a relationship (as on Facebook), while others allow for one-directional relationships (as on Twitter) (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Previous research. Currently, the majority of the research on SNS has focused on MySpace and Facebook, two of the most popular SNS in both the United States and around the

world. A large percentage of the SNS research focuses on profiles, self-disclosure, and impression management (Livingstone, 2008; Utz, 2010). Livingstone (2008), for example, analyzed teenager's profiles on SNS and found that teenagers consciously choose how to represent themselves through their profile. Teenagers choose how to represent themselves by their selection of a particular SNS, which is usually determined by which SNS the majority of their friends are on, what personal information they include in their profile, interactions with friends, and privacy settings. Livingstone also found that users might represent themselves differently on different SNS. This effect is due largely to the different ways in which different SNS profiles can be customized by each user, as well as different user bases on each SNS (e.g. the professional users of LinkedIn versus the more socially-oriented users of Facebook); this leads to unique profiles on each SNS. Utz (2010), on the other hand, focused on how people form impressions of others based not only on that individual's SNS profile but also those of the individual's friends. Utz found that content generated by an individual's friend did have an effect on impression management, particularly when it related to issues where "other-profitable traits" (Utz, 2010) needed to be ascertained.

Other research deals with other aspects of SNS. Leung (2009) investigated the reasons why people choose to generate content online, such as posting a status update or blog post on an SNS. Although there were several reasons, two of the most important were for recognition and social needs (Leung, 2010). Beer (2008), in a response to boyd and Ellison's (2007) article on SNS, argued that SNS were also used by companies, not just individual users. Beer argues that an analysis of SNS should include the impact of advertisers and companies, especially because SNS can be utilized by companies to find out what their customers buy, who buys what, what

advertising messages are successful, et cetera. This is important because it points to the expanding definition and uses of SNS beyond boyd and Ellison's original definition.

Twitter. Twitter is a SNS founded in 2006 (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The function of Twitter can be compared to the status update portion of Facebook. Users compose messages known as "tweets" that are 140 characters or less, similar to a text message. As of September 2010, Twitter has 175 million users who compose an average of 95 million tweets everyday (Twitter, 2011a). Interestingly, Twitter describes itself as both "a real-time information network" and as "a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent messages" (Twitter, 2011a; Twitter, 2011b).

Like other SNS, Twitter users have the ability to construct a profile. A user's profile on Twitter is rather simple compared to most other SNS: it consists of a username, location, homepage link, 160 character long "bio," and a photograph (Twitter, 2011c). Users also have the option to change the background image and theme of their profile. When visiting a user's profile, visitors can see a chronological list of all the tweets they have posted. Relationships on Twitter are based on the concept of following, with friends being referred to as followers (Twitter, 2011b). Unlike on Facebook, both users do not need to confirm the relationship.

Relatively little research has been conducted on Twitter as of this moment, though it should be noted that Twitter only rose to national attention relatively recently and is still less prominent than Facebook. Most of the research that has been done has focused on the uses of Twitter for journalism, particularly for small news outlets or for engaging the audience (Ahmad, 2010; Stassen, 2010). Any other information on how Twitter specifically operates as an SNS and as a site for identity production online must be obtained through research done on other SNS and other Internet communities.

The Current Project

The current project aims to synthesize the areas of research of identity, girl gamers, and SNS in such a way that they can form a cohesive whole that addresses girl gamer's identity enactment on SNS. By using a CTI analysis of Twitter accounts to do so, this investigation will reveal facets of the girl gamer identity which previous studies, with their focus on identity in gameplay contexts, have not yet uncovered. Both Twitter as a medium and girl gamers as a demographic are appropriate choices for this study, given that (as discussed above) the Internet and SNS are common avenues for small and geographically-distant groups to communicate. In addition, CTI's four frames of identity mean that it can be employed to analyze both individual girl gamers and the community of girl gamers; the combination of all of these factors allows for a thorough and novel approach to the study of girl gamers, SNS, and identity.

Method

Account Selection

Twitter accounts were chosen from the WeFollow database (www.wefollow.com). WeFollow is a directory of Twitter users who voluntarily create accounts on the site, tagging their Twitter profiles with several keywords. Accounts were chosen from those who had tagged themselves as either a Gamer Girl (<http://wefollow.com/gamergirl>) or Girl Gamer (<http://wefollow.com/twitter/girlgamer>). Initially, this resulted in 260 Gamer Girl accounts and 50 Girl Gamer accounts.

Accounts were excluded from the analysis for several reasons, including the amount and kind of tweets (e.g. had not been updated in several days, updated less than twice a day or more than twenty times a day on average, most Tweets were from automated services like foursquare, most updates were replies to other users) or the type of user (e.g. belonged to an industry

professional, website, or company, was in a language other than English, was shared by more than one person, owned by a male). In addition, only public accounts were considered for this project. After these exclusions were made, five accounts from the girl gamer category and six accounts from the Gamer Girl category remained. From these, four accounts from each were chosen by the incredibly advanced method of drawing usernames written on identical notecards out of a hat.

Participants

Eight Twitter accounts were followed for two weeks. The four Gamer Girl accounts chosen were those of T2kizz, nicolespag, KylieOwen, and _Hit_Girl_. With the exception of Kylie Owen, who lives in the United Kingdom, all of them live in the United States. The four Girl Gamer accounts chosen were those of AnimatedAbi, missdjm, marmaladegirl, and aquadeer. Three of the account owners live in the United States, and marmaladegirl lives in the United Kingdom. One user from each category is a mother, and an additional user from the Gamer Girl category was pregnant at the time the data was collected. Three accounts, two from Gamer Girls and one from a Girl Gamer, explicitly referred to boyfriends or husbands; two of these were also gamers.

Research Design

Once participants were selected, their activity on Twitter was observed over a period of two weeks from September 30, 2011 to October 13, 2011. All Tweets sent over this time period were recorded, although any replies to other users (@username) were excluded from the analysis. The reason for this was because these Tweets are generally considered to be semi-private and are not automatically shared with all of a Twitter user's followers. However, any replies to other users that included a deliberate attempt to display the message to all followers

(i.e. to make it public, by writing .@username or -->@username) were included. Profile information was also collected by taking screenshots at both the beginning and end of the two week period in order to observe any changes that might take place. No attempts were made to interact with or otherwise contact any of the participants.

Analysis

Profile Overviews

Each Twitter profile has five main components that must be considered in this analysis. First, the choice of username itself may be indicative of identification. Second, the user's bio, in which she describes herself in 140 characters or fewer, can provide a view on how both the user views herself and wishes others to view her. Third, the user's profile picture functions in a similar manner. Fourth, the profile's theme, or background, can offer information about the user, particularly if it is a customized rather than generic theme. Finally, the user's tweets themselves are one of the most important aspects to analyze, particularly when they are compared with the methods in which the user is more likely to expend conscious effort into trying to effect how she may be perceived (e.g. the bio and profile picture). No changes were made in any portions of any of the participants' Twitter profiles (bio, profile pictures, usernames, or themes) between the beginning and end of the observation period; any discussion of these components applies to the entire observation period and the screenshots provided are taken from the end of the observation. In this analysis, first the Gamer Girls and then the Girl Gamers will be discussed.

Gamer girls.

The Gamer Girls were the four participants who self-identified as such on WeFollow. The four accounts chosen were those of T2kizz, nicolepag, KylieOwen, and _Hit_Girl_. Each

woman displayed a wide variety of interests on Twitter, although games were not always mentioned.

T2kizz. T2kizz’s name, profile picture, and theme do not have any readily apparent connection to gaming: the significance of her name is not clear, her profile picture depicts her posing in a bikini, and her theme is one of the standard options (see Figure 1). In her bio, however, T2kizz describes herself as “a pretty big nerd” who has gaming consoles that she sees as her “electronic babies” (T2kizz, 2011b). Despite this, the majority of her tweets concerned either running marathons or food and baking. She had only three tweets that concerned gaming in any capacity: two retweets about Xbox Live and one tweet about *Magic: The Gathering*, a collectible card game.

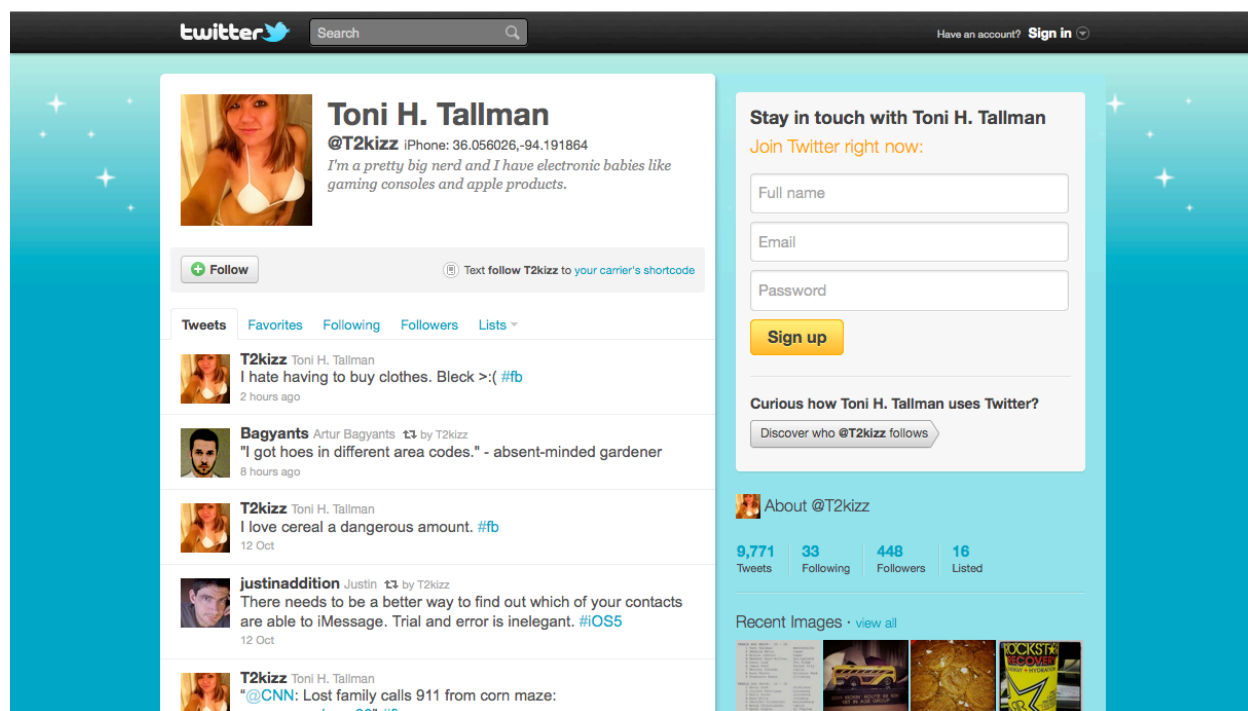


Figure 1. T2kizz’s Twitter Profile

nicolespag. Similarly, nicolespag’s name, profile pictures, and theme contain no obvious links to gaming, although she tweeted much more frequently about games than T2kizz did. Her

username is her real name and her profile pic is a simple headshot (see Figure 2). Her theme, while not a standard option, references a woodworking website which she and her husband run; she explains this in her bio. nicolespag also calls herself a podcaster, “WoW player & PSN lover” (nicolespag, 2011). Like several of the other participants, nicolespag is also a mother, although during the time of data collection she was still pregnant with her first child. nicolespag often tweets about “geeky” things, including games. Many of these gaming tweets reference an all-women gaming podcast on which she works.

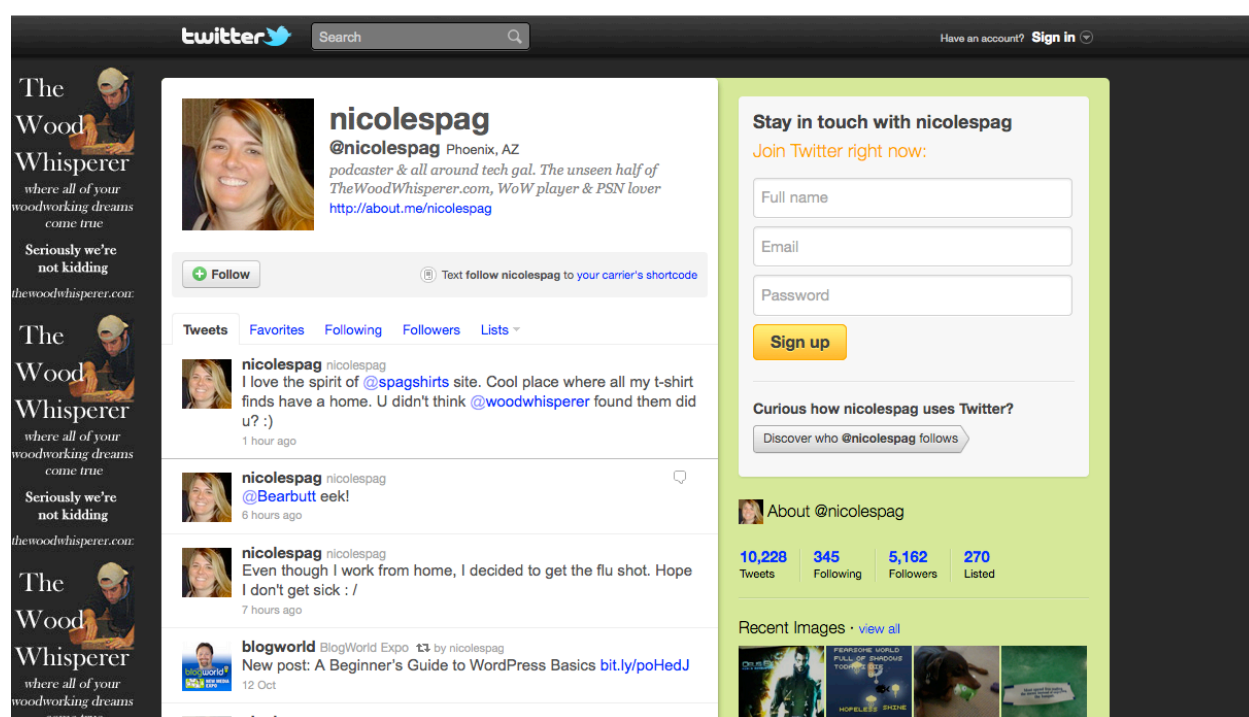


Figure 2. nicolespag’s Twitter Profile

KylieOwen. KylieOwen is interesting in that, although she registered her account under the Gamer Girls tag on WeFollow, nothing seen on her Twitter account during the period in which it was observed mentioned games or gaming. Her username is her real name and her profile picture is likewise an actual photo (see Figure 3). The theme she chose is generic and also has no connections to gaming. She described herself as a student from the United Kingdom who

is an Irish Dancer currently working two jobs (KylieOwen, 2011). Dancing and daily life were mentioned frequently in her tweets, fitting her bio, but games never were. However, it is important to note that KylieOwen had a broken phone or was traveling for a good portion of the observed period of time, and so her tweet production may not have been typical.

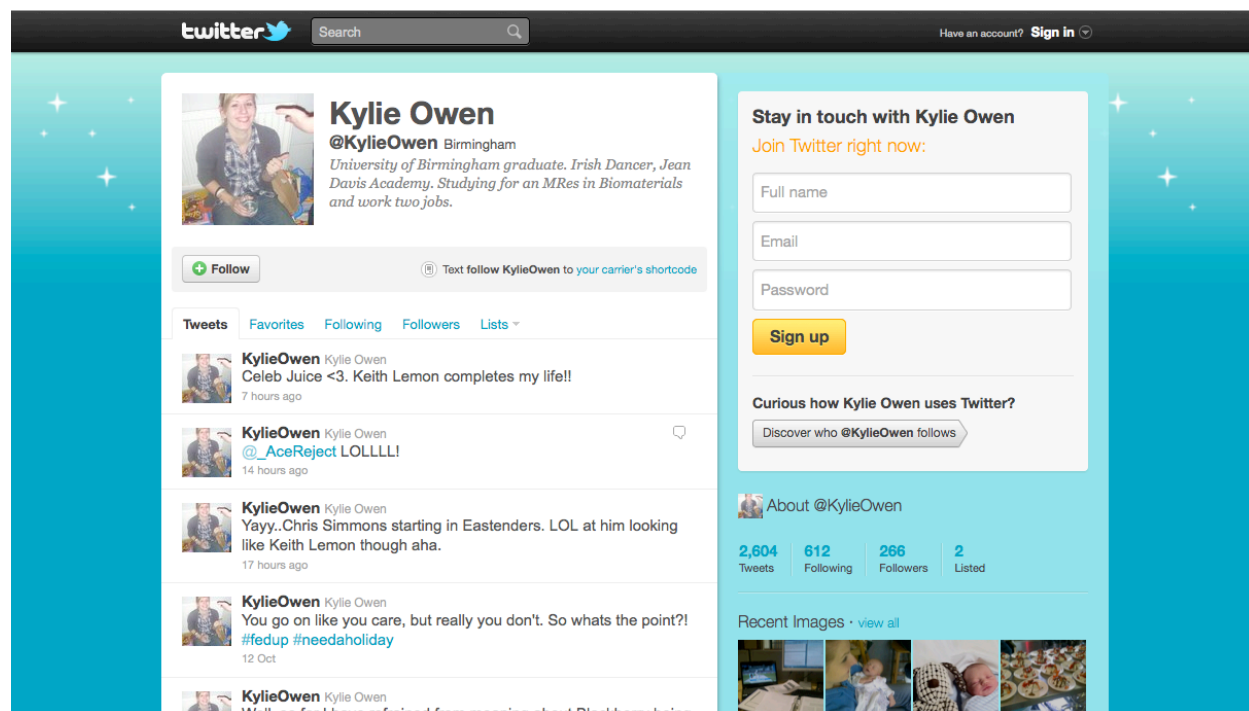


Figure 3. KylieOwen's Twitter Profile.

Hit_Girl. Unlike the other Gamer Girls, *Hit_Girl* was more obvious about her geeky tendencies on her Twitter profile, if not always specifically her interest in gaming. Her username has a possible but tenuous connection to gaming, in that it could be a reference to hit points (in addition, it could also be her chosen online gaming handle, as could many of the other Twitter usernames). The profile picture *Hit_Girl* chose is a drawing of Impulse (Bart Allen) from DC Comics, while her theme is a drawing of what appears to be *Hit_Girl* herself (see Figure 4). Given that *Hit_Girl* describes herself as “obsessed with gaming, comics, [... and] drawing,” among other things, it is likely that she drew both of these images herself (*Hit_Girl*, 2011d).

_Hit_Girl_ tweets about a wide variety of topics, including games, comics, school, art, and her daughter.

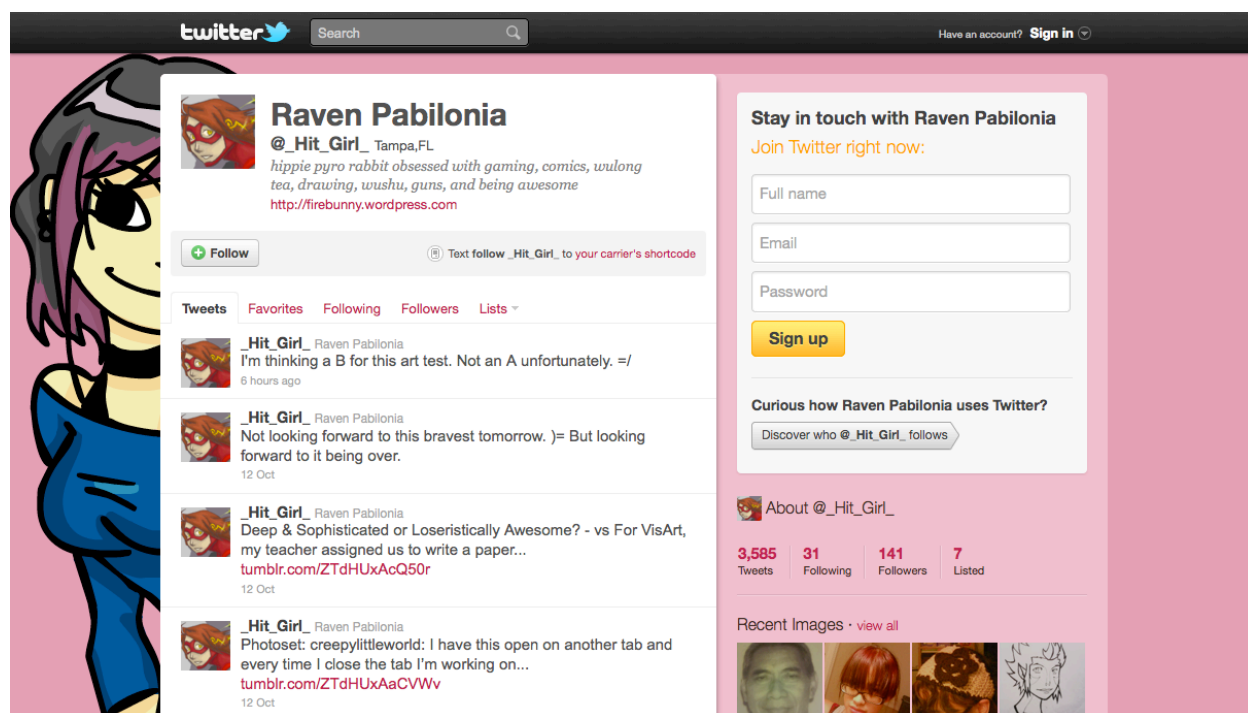


Figure 4. *_Hit_Girl_*'s Twitter Profile

Girl gamers.

The Girl Gamers were the four participants who self-identified as such on WeFollow. AnimatedAbi, missdjm, marmaladegirl, and aquadeer were the four accounts chosen for this analysis. Among all of them, the four women's Twitter accounts covered a wide range of topics, including some who tweeted about games a large percentage of the time and some who almost never mentioned games.

AnimatedAbi. AnimatedAbi's Twitter profile makes very few references to gaming, despite her self-inclusion in WeFollow's Girl Gamer category. Her username bears no connection to gaming and her profile picture is a simple headshot (see Figure 5). Like many of the other participants, her theme is one of the standard options. AnimatedAbi describes herself as

an “animator, girl gamer, geek” in her bio, also saying, “fitness is taking over” (AnimatedAbi, 2011). The majority of AnimatedAbi’s tweets concern exercise and fitness, lending credence to this self-assessment. Only one of her tweets references gaming and it does so in a very indirect manner.

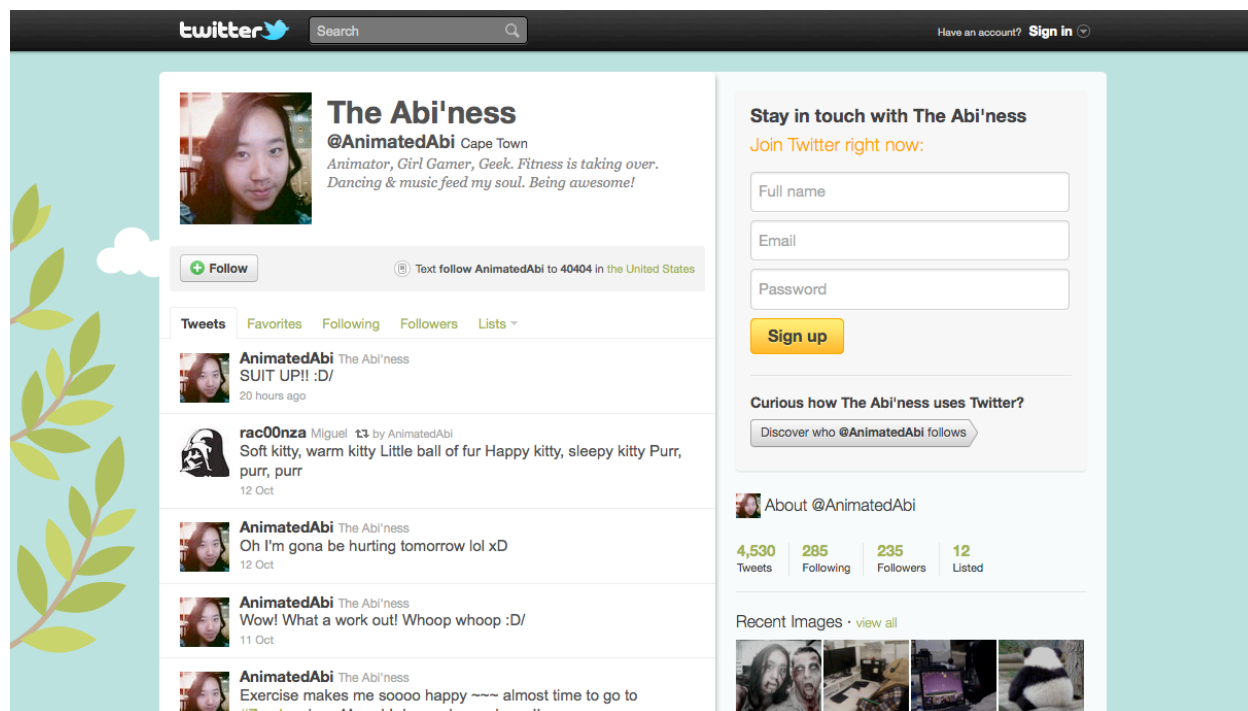


Figure 5. AnimatedAbi’s Twitter Profile

missdjm. missdjm was the most prolific tweeter of all eight participants and also one of the most likely to reference gaming. Her username contains no gaming references and her profile picture is a headshot; however, her theme is a custom design that incorporates her gamer tags and user IDs on several gaming platforms (see Figure 6). missdjm describes herself as “pretty much a woman of many sorts,” including a gamer, nerd, anime lover, and blogger (missdjm, 2011c). Many of missdjm’s tweets focus on games, particularly *Gears of War*, although it should be noted that many of them are automatic updates from raptr, a SNS for gamers that connects

with Twitters and informs others of the user's current gaming activities. Besides games, missdjm also tweets about work, her son, and her boyfriend (who is also a gamer).

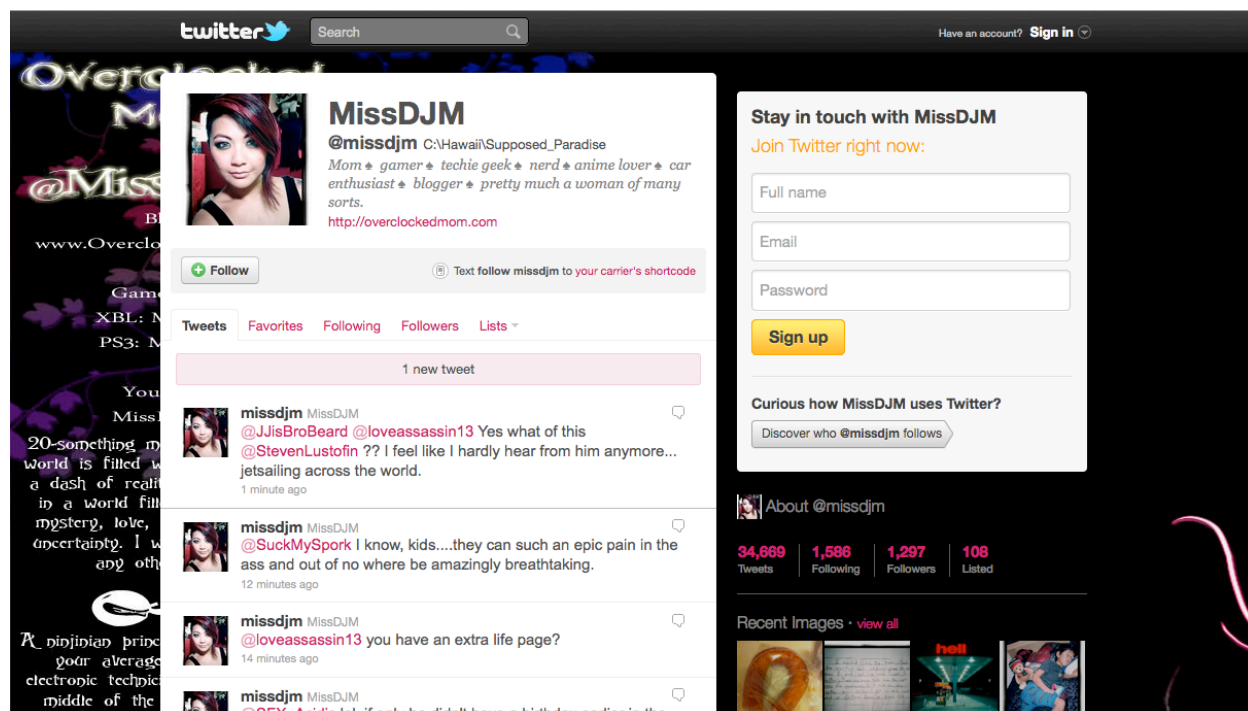


Figure 6. missdjm's Twitter Profile

marmaladegirl. Like KylieOwen from the Gamer Girl category, marmaladegirl is also from the United Kingdom. However, unlike KylieOwen, marmaladegirl's Twitter profile has a much greater correspondence to her self-identification as a gamer. While her username has no obvious connection to gaming and her profile picture is a basic headshot, her Twitter theme is a custom design that includes a depiction of an Atari joystick (see Figure 7). Marmaladegirl describes herself as someone who rants about “(web) design, [...] sci-fi, gaming, [and] comics,” claims that are largely supported by the content of her tweets (marmaladegirl, 2011b). Involved in both off- and online gamer and geek communities, marmaladegirl often tweets about games, geeky topics, and politics.

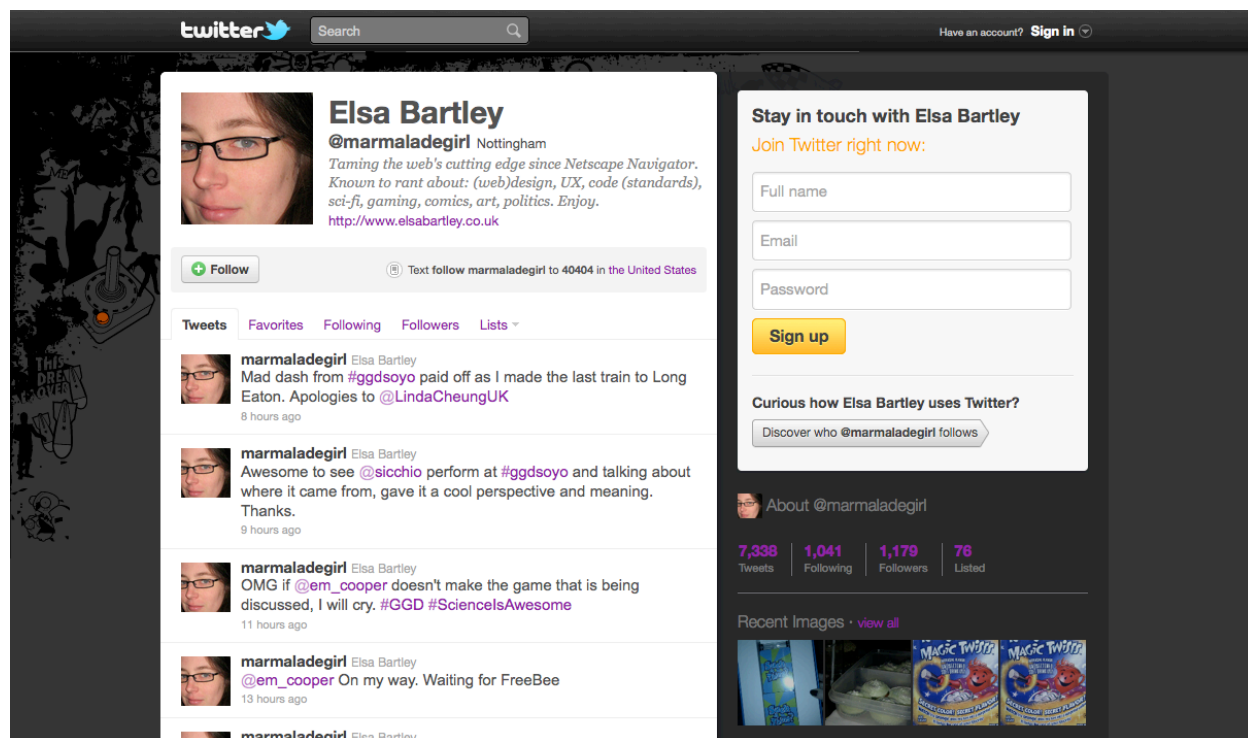


Figure 7. marmaladegirl's Twitter Profile

aquadeer. *aquadeer* is unique among all the Girl Gamer participants in that she, like KylieOwen, made almost no mention of games on her Twitter profile during the period of data collection. Here username and profile picture are consistent with the others' in their lack of connection to gaming and the use of a headshot (see Figure 8). Her theme is unique but it is not properly sized; although the entire graphic used on her theme cannot be seen, it appears to be some sort of crest. Her bio is likewise uninformative, simply offering the information that she is known as DJ Doe and that she "loves string cheese" (*aquadeer*, 2011b). *aquadeer* mostly tweets about music, TV shows and movies, also writing occasional tweets in Japanese. Only one of her tweets has any connection to gaming and it merely a link to a screenshot of a Solitaire game with a final score of 666 rather than any outright reference to games or gaming.

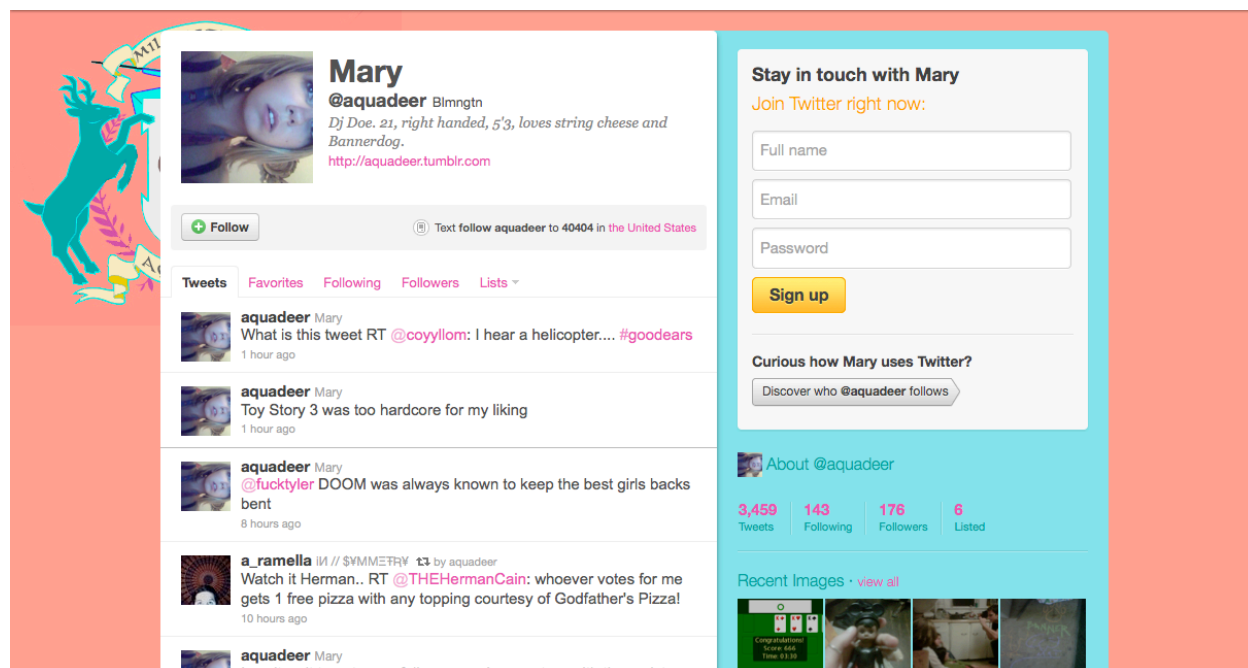


Figure 8. aquadeer's Twitter Profile

Analysis of Tweets

Although the sample size is too small to allow for any detailed statistic tests, several patterns did emerge from the gathered tweets. Girl Gamers had a greater variation in the amount they tweeted than did Gamer Girls but also had a higher average number of tweets per day (see Table 1). Girl Gamers also tweeted more frequently about games (see Table 2).

Table 1
Tweets

Accounts	Total Tweets	Average Tweets Per Day	Standard Deviation
Gamer Girls	141	10.07	0.69
T2kizz	34	2.43	
nicolespag	42	3	
KylieOwen	22	1.57	
_Hit_Girl_	43	3.07	
Girl Gamers	416	29.71	7.92
AnimatedAbi	16	1.14	
missdjm	260	18.57	
marmaladegirl	35	2.5	
aquadeer	105	7.5	
Total	557	39.21	5.83

The difference in the number of tweets produced is largely due to the presence of two outliers, missdjm and marmaladegirl, who together account for almost two-thirds of the total tweets produced by all eight participants. The range for the total number of tweets was 22-43 for Gamer Girls while it was 16-260 for Girl Gamers, which also reflects this difference. While it may be easy to conclude that Girl Gamers simply tend to tweet more than Gamer Girls, the sample size is not sufficiently large enough to allow for this conclusion. The differences in the number of tweets may be due to individual variation rather than group identification.

A more substantial pattern does emerge when the percentage of tweets that concern games and gaming is considered (see Table 2). For both Gamer Girls and Girl Gamers, there are two participants with relative few to no tweets about gaming (T2kizz and KylieOwen for Gamer Girls and AnimatedAbi and aquadeer for Girl Gamers). The remaining two participants from each category, meanwhile, had remarkably similar percentages to each other within their category, which may be indicative of a greater overall pattern. Girl Gamers tweet about games with almost twice the frequency as Gamer Girls; this is supported whether or not the participants who rarely or never tweeted about games are included in the analysis.

Table 2
Gaming Tweets

Accounts	Number of Gaming Tweets	Percentage of Total Tweets
Gamer Girls	17	12.06
T2kizz	3	8.82
nicolespag	7	16.67
KylieOwen	0	0
_Hit_Girl_	7	16.28
Girl Gamers	102	24.52
AnimatedAbi	1	6.25
missdjm	88	33.85
marmaladegirl	12	34.29
aquadeer	1	0.95
Total	119	21.36

Identity Enactment on Twitter

Although data on how often each participant tweeted and what percentage of their tweets mentioned games and gaming is certainly useful in an analysis of girl gamers, such data provide little information on how girl gamers navigate the various levels of identity described in Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity. To that end, a more in-depth analysis of the tweets produced by each participant is beneficial. This closer examination of the gathered tweets allows for a better view of girl gamer's personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities. In this analysis, the personal and enacted identities are considered together due to the difficulty in distinguishing one from the other with the limited data collected from each participant. Gamer Girls and Girl Gamers tend to approach their identities on Twitter differently, placing a greater emphasis on some parts of their identity as defined by CTI while being less communicative about others.

Personal and enacted identities. Given the nature of the data collected, it can be quite difficult to separate signs of personal and enacted identities, particularly given instances in which the two might overlap. For example, a participant might have signed up under the Gamer Girl or Girl Gamer tag on WeFollow because she considered it to be her personal identity but may not have enacted that identity on Twitter itself. Similarly, a participant may self-identify as a Gamer Girl or Girl Gamer on WeFollow as part of her enacted identity but, if she does not consider it a personal identity, the actual data collected from her Twitter account may not match up with that self-applied label.

The accounts of KylieOwen and aquadeer are the two best examples of this dichotomy. Four of the accounts had a substantial percentage of their tweets and two had at least several tweets dedicated to gaming (see Table 2). The accounts of KylieOwen and aquadeer, however,

had zero or one tweets about gaming respectively. In addition, aquadeer's tweet is a link to a screenshot of a solitaire game, something that would generally not be considered indicative of a gamer identity (aquadeer, 2011a). Both KylieOwen and aquadeer identified as either a Gamer Girl or a Girl Gamer, but little to nothing in their Twitter accounts supports these self-identifications. This could be due to a conflict between the two identities, as mentioned above or even because of a shift in either the personal or enacted identity over time (i.e. when the user signed up as a Girl Gamer she identified as such but no longer does).

The personal and enacted identities are seen more specifically in tweets that reference games without making specific reference to the larger gaming community. *_Hit_Girl_* in particular did this often, tweeting, "I like #Uncharted. The characters are a little older than me so I can still aspire to be like them. Thanks, Lara Croft, but out" (*_Hit_Girl_*, 2011c). This reveals more of a personal identity, as *_Hit_Girl_'s* connection to both video games and characters is framed as something individual that she defines herself. In general, this use of identity and these sorts of game references were seen more commonly among the Gamer Girls than they were among the Girl Gamers, whose tweets tended to be constructed more along the lines of relational and/or communal identities. This may be indicative of the greater emphasis on the gamer portion of the way these Twitter users chose to self-identify on WeFollow (*Gamer Girl* versus *Girl Gamer*), but this would be difficult to establish without additional data.

Relational identity. Many of the more interesting observations gained in this analysis dealt with the relational identities. Several participants displayed the first type of relational identity, the identity based on the way in which others view them. For example, many seemed to be concerned with how they would be perceived when they communicated their identities as girl gamers. T2kizz hashtagged her tweet about *Magic: The Gathering* with #nerd, indicating an

awareness that she might be negatively perceived for engaging in such activities and taking preemptive steps to define her identity for herself instead of letting others use it to insult her (T2kizz, 2011a).

_Hit_Girl_ tended to hedge her statements about games, adding “just saying” or “#kindakidding” when talking about her attraction to video game characters or how she thought, “one of the most satisfying things in a shooter is a good headshot” (_Hit_Girl_, 2011a; 2011b). Such hedging indicates that, while _Hit_Girl_ is comfortable expressing her identity as a girl gamer, she feels she needs to do so in a way that others will find socially acceptable. Given the traditional associations between women, sexuality, and violence, it seems entirely probable that her need to do so originates at least partially in her identity as a *girl* gamer rather than just a gamer. This also ties into the idea of relationships between identities, in that her identity as a gamer and her identity as a woman interact and have an effect on how she communicates.

The second type of relational identity, which concerns relationships with others, was mostly demonstrated by missdjm. missdjm tweeted several times about gaming and relationships, saying that “the best way to [her] heart [...is] any guy that wants to play Gears [of War] with me” (missdjm, 2011a). Both she and her boyfriend play video games, and she describes their relationship based on the dichotomies between their nerdy and gaming preferences: “I'm an Android, he's an iPhone. I'm a PC, he's a Mac. I love coding, he likes simple made templates. I ♥ Gears 2, He ♥ Gears 1” (missdjm, 2011b). In other words, the basis for the original interest between missdjm and her boyfriend, if not their entire relationship, is their shared love of video games. Missdjm's identity as a girl gamer not only led to her relationship, her relationship has subsequently influenced how she enacts her identity as a girl gamer.

Communal identity. Many of the participants also displayed a communal girl gamer identity, although interestingly only the Girl Gamers missdjm and AnimatedAbi referred to themselves as either a gamer or a girl gamer at any point (missdjm, 2011c; AnimatedAbi, 2011). This tended to be more prevalent among the Girl Gamers than the Gamer Girls. Although nicolepag did participate in and tweet about her all-female gaming podcast, these tweets represented only small minority of her overall gaming tweet production. The Girl Gamers missdjm and marmaladegirl, on the other hand, had many more communal gaming identity tweets.

missdjm, for example, has tweets from raptr, the gaming SNS. She also tweeted about her participation in Extra Life, a charity marathon in which members of the gaming community find people to sponsor them to play video games for 24 hours in order to raise money for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. Missdjm also retweeted numerous tweets that concerned games, particularly about the newly released *Gears of War 3*. All of these are ways in which missdjm participated in the gaming community and defined herself as a girl gamer on Twitter in doing so. Frequent mentions of *Gears of War 3*, particularly when they are connected to the larger gaming community, serve to paint a picture of missdjm as a hardcore gamer, as opposed to a more casual one who may only play dance games (which, it must be noted, missdjm did tweet about and express a good deal of interest in, if certainly not anything approaching the levels of her adoration for the *Gears of War* franchise).

marmaladegirl, on the other hand, tended to tweet about her activities that were more connected to offline gaming communities. She frequently mentioned or retweeted things about the Game City video game festival, which she planned to attend. In addition, she tweeted about her participation in Gambling Lambs, an offline gaming group. Finally, she attended a Geek Girl

Dinner, tweeting about the video game discussions that took place that night, claiming that if one woman did not “make the game that is being discussed, I will cry” (marmaladegirl, 2011a).

In the case of marmaladegirl, such discussions and mentions of her offline gaming activities serve as a way to establish her identity as a girl gamer within the larger community. By being involved in and making her involvement in such activities and organizations as Gambling Lambs and Game City known, marmaladegirl is raising the profile of girl gamers. Instead of merely talking about gaming online, where she might be accused of not actually playing games or not actually being a woman, marmaladegirl’s offline involvement establishes the authenticity of the girl gamer identity, making them more visible and giving them credit as legitimate gamers.

Conclusion

Overall, girl gamers enact their identities as girl gamers a number of different ways on Twitter. Mentioning games or referencing people and events in gaming communities are frequently used methods, as are retweets. Gamer Girls appear to display stronger personal and enacted identities on Twitter than do Girl Gamers, who have stronger communal identities. The Gamer Girls *_Hit_Girl_* and *nicolespag*, for instance, showed much more evidence of personal and enacted identities than the Girl Gamers *missdjm* and *marmaladegirl*, who had stronger communal identities. Although the reasons for this are unknown, it could be connected to the choice of label for self-identification.

Girl Gamers were found to tweet about games and gaming with approximately twice the frequency as Gamer Girls. Whereas 24.52% of Girl Gamers’ tweets concerned games and gaming, only 12.06% of Gamer Girls’ did; Girl Gamers also tweeted more on average (see Tables 1, 2). Relational identities were in evidence in both groups, but the remaining three categories of CTI tended to be divided depending on whether a participant was a Gamer Girl or a

Girl Gamer, with a stronger correlation between the communal identities and Girl Gamers and between enacted and personal identities and Gamer Girls. Finally, it should be noted that the self-identification as either a Girl Gamer or a Gamer Girl on WeFollow did not necessarily indicate either the same explicit self-identification on Twitter itself or even any references to games and gaming at any point during the period in which data was gathered. Together, these findings seem to indicate that a girl gamer identity may be much more complex and nuanced than previously thought, perhaps to the point where it could easily have several sub-classifications.

Limitations of Current Study

The current investigation is most obviously limited in both its size and its period of data gathering. Future studies could benefit from both a larger sample and an extended observation period. This would limit the effect that the chosen period of observation had on the study.

Although the two weeks were chosen so as not to coincide with any major gaming conventions in order to not skew the results, the data gathering period did include the death of Steve Jobs.

The majority of the participants tweeted about his death, leading to a somewhat different than their typical output. In the case of AnimatedAbi, the tweet she wrote about Steve Job's death was the only tweet she had that mentioned gaming, so the effect was more obvious. In addition, limits were imposed by what information was included in the study. Investigations that included more aspects of the Twitter profile and interaction with other Twitter users, such as @ replies, follower and following lists, and the link to a personal website would provide more data for analysis and different perspectives on girl gamer's identity enactment.

Limits also exist in that there is little demographic information available about the Twitter accounts participating in the study other than what can be gleaned from the Twitter

profile and tweets themselves. This makes it difficult to generalize the data collected or to draw a profile of the girl gamer beyond females who play games. It is, of course, also possible that the profiles studied contained fake information, but this is both a known risk when studying online identity and somewhat mitigated by the fact that there was substantial correlation between the information provided in users' tweets and their bios, indicating at least some degree of truthfulness.

Directions for Further Research

In addition to making adjustments for the limitations already described, future research on this topic could progress several ways. First, future studies could integrate the current study with other literature on girl gamers and their identities. Future research could also investigate how girl gamers enact their identities as such in both online and offline or in both gameplay and non-gameplay contexts; this would provide a more complete picture of the girl gamer identity. By combining these multiple areas in which the girl gamer identity is expressed, a more accurate picture of the girl gamer could be established, rather than just a brief glimpse. Second, the same girl gamers could be followed on several different SNS to see what effect, if any, the choice of SNS has on how the girl gamer identity is communicated.

Third, future studies could combine the current data-gathering methods with some way of prompting data directly from the study participants. Those Twitter users participating in the study could be directly asked for their opinions on their identities as girl gamers. This would provide an additional measure of information that could be compared to the actual production of those users. Finally, the ways in which girl gamers and boy gamers enact their identities could be compared and contrasted, utilizing any combination of the approaches described above.

Whatever approach is taken, more research is needed on girl gamers and their identities. The current study has contributed to the literature by providing a first look into how girl gamers enact their identities as girl gamers online but outside of the context of gameplay. Specifically, this study has identified that the girl gamer identity may not be a single identity but instead a collection of identities. The label a woman chooses to apply to herself (Gamer Girl, Girl Gamer, or even just Gamer, which was not investigated in this study) may say more about how she sees her identity than the umbrella term girl gamer does. In addition, the current study has revealed some of the ways in which girl gamers communicate their identities as such outside of a gameplay context, investigating how they incorporate games into their identities as a whole instead of just how they present their identities while playing games. Future research will hopefully provide more detailed and nuanced perspectives on the girl gamer, helping to increase its perception as a legitimate identity within the gamer community.

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