

Revisiting Cyberfeminism: Theory as a Tool for Understanding Young Women's Experiences

Trevor Scott Milford

Introduction: Troubling Binary Thinking

Early cyberfeminists conceptualized cyberspaces as fundamentally liberating, theorizing their capacity to move beyond the traditional binaries and limitations of popular gender and feminist politics. Human-machine mergers made possible by technology were imagined as facilitators of “post-gender worlds”¹ and virtual spaces were initially envisioned as utopian sites of unrestricted, transcendent emancipation from gender-related constraints.² Cyberspaces showed promise to disrupt conventional patriarchal hierarchies, colonial power interests, and militarized, commercialized technologies of advanced capitalism,³ representing a “brave new world.” In this brave new world, the hierarchical and subjugating logic underscoring social binaries and privileging male over female, hetero- over homosexual, Caucasian over non-Caucasian, and even human over animal could be restructured on a socio-political scale to address deep-seated disparity and ultimately move toward social equality.⁴

However, despite this utopian outlook, it quickly became apparent that online spaces are locales in which feminist issues manifest.⁵ As Gajjala notes, early cyberfeminist frameworks “reduce[d] the problem of inequality ... to just a problem of material access to equipment, wiring and technical training.”⁶ Issues of online inequality

instead extend to broader socio-political contexts that impact the construction of cyberspatial environments themselves on a cultural level, where narrative discourses of linear patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist progress routinely are furthered within these constructions.⁷ These discourses have the potential to restrict women's agency online, potentially undermining their equal participation in digital society. Policy and political discourses that address issues of online inequality – in addition to many contemporary cyberfeminist discourses – also show tendencies to adopt these linear progress narratives. In the process of adopting these narratives, simplistic binary notions relating to gender and virtual space are regularly accepted instead of critiqued, including notions of online vs. offline, virtual spaces as liberating vs. constraining, virtual experience as vulnerable vs. empowering, and regulatory approaches to virtual issues that focus on policy responses vs. self-regulation. In many cases this acceptance perpetuates the very binary notions that early cyberfeminists theorized cyberspaces could overcome.

Instead of complicating the intersection of gender and cyberspatial environments, cyberfeminist critiques and legal responses to gendered online issues have too often stagnated, typically investing in yet another artificial dichotomy: virtual spaces as utopian or dystopian, with nothing in between. The “brave new world” foreseen by early cyberfeminists has become an anti-utopia fraught with gendered risk, which can then be used to justify current trends in legal responses that include responsabilization, criminalization, and surveillance of women online. Yet the same critique that can be levelled at early cyberfeminist views of cyberspaces as inherently utopian can also be levelled at the framing of virtual spaces as inherently dystopian: it's just not that simple.

This chapter strives to move beyond this dichotomous vision of cyberspace by building on major areas of cyberfeminist debate to disturb commonly accepted binary notions surrounding gender and online spaces, and considering how cyberfeminists can work together to achieve common goals. In doing so, it maps the trajectory of major contemporary cyberfeminist discourses to consider how cyberfeminist critique could ultimately be mobilized to move beyond these artificial binaries, critiquing current policy initiatives that attempt to govern gender and virtual spaces and contemplating new directions for future regulatory strategies. Finally, this chapter looks at how future cyberfeminist research initiatives could work to

fill these gaps and engage in discussions that are ultimately more productive, inclusive, intersectional, and empowering.

Online vs. Offline: Complicating Feminist Critique and the Virtual Divide

Cyberfeminisms are not a unified feminist movement with a cohesive political or theoretical agenda. Although many self-identified cyberfeminists refuse to define cyberfeminism altogether, according to Flanagan and Booth, the term “cyberfeminism” refers to “a sporadic, tactical, contradictory set of theories, debates, and practices”⁸ relating to gender and digital culture. Daniels suggests that because the contexts of cyberfeminist discourses are not unified, rather than referring to a monolithic singular cyberfeminism, it is more useful to refer to plural cyberfeminisms.⁹ “Cyberfeminisms” is inclusive of the diverse theoretical and political stances that cyberfeminists occupy when engaging in discussions on gender and digital culture or technology, reflecting that the common ground between theoretical cyberfeminist variants is a “sustained focus on gender and digital technologies and on [feminist] practices.”¹⁰ More important than semantic theoretical divisions between “camps” of cyberfeminists is that cyberfeminists share a belief that women should attempt to empower themselves via the appropriation and control of virtual technology in ways that continue to express their identities as females.¹¹ Depending on the theoretical position, this can entail restructuring virtual technology itself to promote gender equality, increasing women’s access to existing virtual technology, or a combination of both.

Conceptualizing cyberfeminisms as a plurality is an attempt to reconcile differences between various feminist frameworks that could fall under a digital purview. Through this theoretical lens, questions of difference between schools of cyberfeminist thought become less important, and cyberfeminists, regardless of their differences, can begin to integrate a variety of theoretical backgrounds and intersectional viewpoints into emergent feminist discourses. Such integration is a reparative¹² move away from divisive interfeminist disputes, recognizing that diverse cyberfeminist perspectives can simultaneously yield fruitful theoretical discussions while working toward a common goal of greater online equality. This chapter will embrace this operationalization of cyberfeminist theoretical thought,

in the spirit of acknowledging the diverse perspectives that cyberfeminisms encompass.

If cyberfeminisms refer to a combined focus on gender, digital technologies, and feminist practices, it is helpful next to consider whether cyberfeminisms can be separated from other feminisms. Is a sustained focus on digital technology enough for a feminist framework to be considered cyberfeminist? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to first deconstruct the dichotomy between online and offline spaces so as to examine whether it is accurate to say that any feminist framework does *not* have a vested interest in—or at the very least, does not apply to—digital technology. I begin by outlining the theoretical concept of the cyborg. I then draw upon this theoretical construct and its feminist implications to consider the relationships between ubiquitous technologization, gender, technospatial processes of identity formation, and the replication of offline inequalities within online spaces. In doing so, I attempt to illustrate the confluence between online and offline realms and better situate how all feminisms can, in fact, be considered cyberfeminisms.

Donna Haraway¹³ notes that technologized and non-technologized spheres, or online and offline spheres, intersect in complex ways, concluding that “virtual” and “real” life is an inaccurate binary construct. To transcend absolutist, dichotomized thinking, she puts forth the concept of the “cyborg” to suggest that human and machine have become one. Haraway offers that, “The [theoretical] cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world”¹⁴ where human and machine have become fused figuratively in terms of conflated identity and often literally in terms of shared physical space, whether via technological interaction or corporeally shared space such as implantation with medical technology. Cyborgs contest the underlying ideologies of broader political structures which assume that power binaries are natural as opposed to socially constructed, questioning the fundamental nature of what it means to be human. Paasonen agrees with Haraway that, “The cyborg stands as a metaphor of feminist subject, a boundary figure that moves across the hierarchical categories of the natural and the artificial ... without positioning technology as a masculine other of women and nature.”¹⁵ Sadie Plant shares that considering virtual worlds through the theoretical lens of the cyborg is important because it creates space for women within already existing cultures and also because of its potential to undermine material offline realities of patriarchal control, which are often replicated

online.¹⁶ As Sandoval likewise asserts, "'Cyborg consciousness' has a long lineage sited in forms of opposition to domination."¹⁷ This lineage, she offers, complements the cyborg metaphor particularly well, because both advocate new or reconceptualized techniques of social interaction, including how we collectively think, act, and live.

The idea that cyborg consciousness is rooted in forms of opposition to domination implies a need to reflect on how offline inequalities can be replicated within technospaces. Social inequalities from the offline realm—in particular, offline violence against women and other gender-related disparities—are also reflected in virtual contexts.¹⁸ Much like offline spaces, online spaces deeply entrench sexism, racism, and homophobia;¹⁹ technological architectures, as Gajjala has pointed out, structurally entrench hegemonic colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy.²⁰ Feminist tools of critique traditionally used offline can be mobilized to combat and theorize inequality that is replicated in online spaces, ultimately granting women greater online agency and reducing gendered online violence.²¹ Virtual contexts are further inseparable from "real life" in terms of the pivotal role they play in identity formation and identity performance.

The need to challenge constraining gender stereotypes in virtual spaces is particularly acute for girls and young women. Although girls are confident about their ability to use networked technologies as economic actors (e.g., employee, entrepreneur), the public nature of online performances amplifies the impact of online stereotypes and opens them up to harsh judgment from peers, particularly as they seek to express themselves as *girls becoming women*.²² Extending cyberfeminist literature—which focuses largely on women—to help us theorize the relationship between technology and gender for girls is especially important, as it may help us better understand the ways that networked spaces create affordances and constraints for girls seeking to inhabit feminine identities.

Game scholars, such as Lehdonvirta, have looked at the role of online spaces within identity formation, criticizing the virtual/non-virtual divide more explicitly and arguing that such a dichotomy is a "treacherous fantasy."²³ Taylor writes that, "To imagine that we can segregate these things—... virtual and real—not only misunderstands our relationship with technology, but our relationship with culture"²⁴ and ultimately builds academic research upon false assumptions. Virtual spaces often flow into other mediums and forums that can be either online or offline. Non-virtual social

worlds, social economies, and social institutions similarly permeate virtuality and are complexly intertwined with virtual worlds, virtual economies, and virtual institutions that each shape individuals' lives and identities, which are reflected both on line and off line.²⁵ Virtual spaces, then, are fused together with "real" life into one social space that encompasses both online and offline realities. Virtual citizens perform identity similarly to offline citizens, despite potentially feeling freer to experiment with identity on line;²⁶ online spheres are also subject to similar feminist critiques as offline spheres, rather than providing transcendent spaces for gender-neutral self-expression as early cyberfeminists envisioned.

With the ubiquitous technologization that characterizes life in the new millennium,²⁷ many contemporary Western subjects are unable to escape the fusion of offline and online life that stems from pervasive reliance on technology. Corporeality is linked to identity and subjectivity, as Haraway's cyborg metaphor suggests, blurring the lines between the virtual and the non-virtual. For example, in Canada, the internet penetration rate in 2011 was 81.6 per cent,²⁸ meaning that only 18.4 per cent of Canadians did not use some form of virtual technology. Smartphone use is widespread; debit and credit cards are relied upon for financial transactions; closed-circuit surveillance is extensive. It is nearly impossible to avoid interaction with digital technology in the course of living contemporary life; the daily life of most Canadians is saturated with the use of virtual technology. As Haraway has argued, this reliance on technology means that contemporary subjects can potentially be theorized as embodying cyborg subjectivity and can therefore be subjected to cyberfeminist critiques relating to technologization. Since most members of the Canadian public can conceivably be interpellated as feminist subjects by virtue of living technologized lives, it stands to reason that most Canadians also have a vested interest in the various feminist critiques that can be made of technologized spaces. While additional research is required to more deeply conceptualize the relationship between cyborg subjectivity and corporeality, both in generally Western and in specifically Canadian contexts, future work could build upon these themes by considering the argument that most Canadians stand as Harawayan metaphors of feminist subject. Such potential research has wide-reaching implications for the spread of cyberfeminist initiatives to wider Western populations, Canada included.

As this section has sketched, *online* and *offline* are absolutist terms that do not adequately capture the complex intersections between virtual technology, gender inequality, and “real” life: focusing on one to the exclusion of the other does a disservice to [cyber] feminist goals of combatting gendered inequality, since the inequalities entrenched in both “real” and virtual realms are inseparable. In addition, as several scholars point out,²⁹ cyberfeminisms are inherently inclusive, plural, non-monolithic, and integrative of diverse feminist perspectives. It stands to reason, then, that traditional offline feminisms can be mobilized within cyberfeminist frameworks, and that traditional cyberfeminisms can be mobilized within offline feminist frameworks. After all, the central difference between cyberfeminisms and non-cyberfeminisms is simply a focus on digital technology – and since digital technology cannot be separated from offline life, this is, in effect, not a difference at all.³⁰ While online spaces do have unique nuances with feminist implications, feminist tools of critique are, by nature of this close relationship, in fact cyberfeminist tools of critique. It is time for this false dichotomy to be acknowledged, so that all those concerned with gendered inequalities may come together in a ubiquitously technologized world.

Agency vs. Vulnerability: Liberation, Constraint, Risk, and Self-Disclosure

Discourses on gender and virtual spaces have traditionally either painted virtual spaces as inherently liberating or inherently constraining for girls and women (as well as those from other gender-related minorities, including those who identify as transgendered, non-gender normative, and/or non-heterosexual). It has been established that although early cyberfeminists viewed virtual spaces in a utopian way that stressed their liberating potential, later discourses on gender and virtual spaces – which have been echoed by policymakers and popular media – stress the potential risk, although cyberfeminist scholars are beginning to question whether there are ways to interpret these risks as liberating. These discourses that construct a risk/benefit binary appear alongside discourses dichotomizing girls’ online experiences as either empowering (agential) or vulnerable.

This section adopts the perspective that constraints or risks can indeed be liberating and that vulnerability is not necessarily

disempowering, suggesting that it is a false dichotomy to see online spaces as either liberating or constraining, or to see girls' virtual experiences as either empowering or vulnerable. In this section I begin to examine nuances of risk-centred media, policy, and theoretical debate, considering the implications of these nuances for online identity and self-expression. After establishing a working definition for online agency and using it to begin considering issues related to surveillance, privacy, and self-disclosure, I then view issues related to media stereotypes, authenticity, and body image through this lens. I advocate moving away from cyberfeminist discussions that focus on false risk/benefit binaries like liberation vs. constraint and empowerment vs. vulnerability, looking at how girls' experiences might be reoperationalized as simultaneously empowering and vulnerable as opposed to exclusively one or the other. My goal is to embrace more critical discussions that aim to maximize agency while minimizing constraint for all girls within virtual environments.

Contemporary media, theoretical, and policy discourses have established diverse potential constraints upon girls' and women's free and empowering virtual experiences. These discourses have been approached from both cyberfeminist and non-cyberfeminist theoretical perspectives, and by self-identified cyberfeminists as well as non-cyberfeminists. While some question conceptualizing online spaces solely as risk-based, all contribute to the current prevalence of risk in discourses surrounding girls and virtual technology. This is not to say that discussions of risk should cease altogether. Rather, these discussions should be reframed to focus on the potential for liberation and increased agency in girls' use of virtual technology, the reduction of potential constraints upon them, and an ultimate goal of increasing virtual gender equality rather than bolstering patriarchal protectionism.

Risks identified in media, policy, and theoretical debates on girls and young women and digital technology include (among others): surveillance by other online users,³¹ privacy risks,³² concerns related to self-disclosure (particularly in terms of future employment, sexual harassment, reputational damage, or constraints on higher education),³³ potential sexualization and resulting miscellaneous threats to personal safety in response to self-images that are posted online,³⁴ other reputational risks,³⁵ body image risks related to internalization of gendered media representations,³⁶ and cyberbullying and cyber gender harassment.³⁷ Upon looking at each of these issues more

deeply, however, it becomes clear that not all of these areas are exclusively sites of risk and constraint for girls in virtual spaces. Without discounting that for some they may indeed represent constraints upon agency or unrestricted use of virtual technology, for many girls and young women these areas can also facilitate liberation. Even when these areas do present certain constraints, research has shown that girls are aware of these constraints and are cognizant of potential online risk, proactively enacting strategies to independently manage them.³⁸

Policy, media, and many theoretical discourses have linked online gendered risk to online publicity, invoking publicity as a thread that underscores a multitude of gendered risk-based discourses about femininity online. Various scholars have identified that such discourses often condemn – or at the very least problematize – girls’ and women’s online self-disclosure.³⁹ These discourses suggest that girls and women who publicly self-present online can subject themselves to many of the aforementioned risks, including increased surveillance,⁴⁰ privacy intrusions,⁴¹ unwanted sexual intrusions by males,⁴² reputational concerns,⁴³ employment-related concerns,⁴⁴ and cyberbullying or cyber gender harassment.⁴⁵

Too often, popular discourses neoliberally and patriarchally responsibilize girls and young women to self-protect against potential online risk, or recommend that they be protected through legislative initiatives,⁴⁶ accepting online risks and gendered constraints as inevitable and focusing on identifying and managing gendered characteristics that could precipitate negative behaviours. In doing so, these discourses latently blame girls for attracting online risk, situating those who experience gender-related victimization as less or more blameworthy, depending on how well they self-protect against it. Cyberfeminisms acknowledge that such discourses entrench gender inequality. First, these discourses neglect to consider that “risks” are not simply constraining and could simultaneously be a source of agency or liberation. Second, in neglecting to consider the root causes of systemically entrenched constraints upon empowerment and free expression for girls online, they do nothing to actually address issues of inequality. Instead, they merely provide individualistic band-aid solutions that function on a micro-level, as opposed to a macro-level, to responsibilize individual girls and young women.

Before dissecting specific constraints to illustrate how they can simultaneously be liberating, it is important to consider the role of

agency in women's virtual citizenship. While there is some disagreement within cyberfeminisms regarding how and by whom "agency" should be defined,⁴⁷ Koskela offers a helpful conceptualization, arguing that agency is found in the act of presenting, as opposed to the act of being seen. It cannot be simply a matter of who is looking at content that is posted online, since in presenting their private lives on the internet, posters are aware that anyone may see content that is posted. A partial answer, she suggests, is that agency refers to "what, how and when [online content] is controlled by the person(s) whose images are circulated."⁴⁸

Although girls and young women usually have *some* control over which images of themselves are circulated online, Koskela cautions that *exactly how* these pictures will be used and disseminated is beyond their control. She warns that self-disclosed content "obviously can be used for repressive purposes as easily as for empowering purposes."⁴⁹ The mere fact that online photos can be used for undesirable purposes such as control, surveillance, sexualization, slander, or other forms of exploitation should not necessarily be interpreted, however, as a loss of agency. Koskela offers that these concepts themselves need to be re-operationalized in a sense that allows girls and young women the greatest possible agency. I embrace Koskela's framework to argue that when online spaces offer girls and young women more control over their online self-presentations, they more effectively promote agency than spaces that do not, and such spaces are therefore more liberating, regardless of the forms that these self-presentations may take.

For the sake of this chapter I operationalize control as the discursive ability to be cognizant of the exercise of power and, relatedly, to be able to freely decide whether to conform to enacted power or resist it; however, it is important to note that meanings of control are not universal and may change from agent to agent and context to context. Adopting a fluid, discursive framework for discussions of agency and liberation makes it possible to link these concepts to public self-presentations as well as private self-presentations, provided that both entail control on behalf of those whose content is being circulated. Framing control and agency in these ways can enable cyberfeminists to move forward to examine concepts such as online surveillance in terms that make it possible to associate these concepts with increased agency for girls and young women, rather than simply constrained agency. With this conceptualization of

agency in mind, it is useful next to turn to specific discourses that could be refocused to recognize their potential for agency, rather than simply their potential for constraint.

Peer-to-peer surveillance in online spaces is gendered, with females more likely than males to engage in surveillance of self and of others.⁵⁰ While peer-to-peer surveillance can potentially constrain personal control by dictating the nature of online self-portrayals,⁵¹ it can concurrently liberate girls and young women by allowing controlled self-portrayals to reach a broad group of online peers and by circulating self-images that online users have constructed themselves and want to see circulated. While users of social networking platforms are more or less likely to disclose certain personal information based on who is able to see them on line,⁵² posting images and personal information can be an agential expression of self-control, where girls are empowered to explore various facets of identity and negotiate experimental selves.⁵³ Peer-to-peer surveillance can also provide a venue in which girls and young women are able to challenge normative standards of online gender expression and reach a wide audience while doing so, enabling resistance to patriarchal and heteronormative expectations of online gender performance. In this way, flouting privacy can be liberating, especially if girls gain other social capital by doing so.⁵⁴

Allen asserts that in addition to surveillance by their peers, girls and young women on line – as well as women more generally – are “particularly vulnerable to privacy problems because they are perceived as inferiors, ancillaries, and safe targets.”⁵⁵ Women on line can have their privacy “probed by others who implicitly assume that daughters, pregnant women, mothers and wives are more accountable for their private conduct than their male counterparts.”⁵⁶ Online self-disclosure can also solidify patriarchal ideologies where men hold unrestricted access to the bodies of females. These risks, which are articulated in popular media and policy discourses stressing that girls should be more private online, can encourage girls and young women to limit self-disclosure while neglecting the empowering aspects of virtual self-exposure.⁵⁷

Despite the plethora of constraints and risks articulated in mainstream discourses on gender and virtual expression, girls can also experience agency and liberation through online self-disclosure. Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie, for example, “found girls bending and switching gender to improvise nonconformist femininities and

learning to express parts of themselves that they had been made to feel were taboo offline.”⁵⁸ This process of identity transformation can become a performance in itself, where girls display and publicly perform a somehow dysfunctional “old self,” constructing the virtual exposure of private selves as paths to success and self-realization.⁵⁹ Queer, trans, and racial theorists are also beginning to consider the relationship between agency and online self-disclosure, where online self-disclosure has potential for minority subjects to contest normative standards situating gendered self-disclosure as more permissible when expressed by heterosexual,⁶⁰ Caucasian,⁶¹ and cisgendered females.⁶²

White contributes that by asserting control over when they are available and what can be seen on line, virtual actors can encourage spectators to “enter” into their personal environments and the posting of online content can be considered an assertion of personal agency,⁶³ countering the Western assumption that “what goes on inside the home is private.”⁶⁴ Colley et al praise the potential of online disclosure to maintain positive relationships between girls and young women on line;⁶⁵ Gonzales and Hancock have similarly found that exposure to self-presentation on social networking sites can have a positive influence on self-esteem.⁶⁶ Applying critical feminist frameworks to surveillance and privacy studies shows promise to highlight these empowering aspects and encourage greater critical thought about culturally and socio-legally entrenched expectations of online gender performance,⁶⁷ building a cyberfeminist collective that can more feasibly work toward increasing agency for girls on line.

Authenticity vs. Inauthenticity: Body Image and Consumer-Media Culture

Various scholars have asserted that media representations of femininity can intersect with identity performance, often relaying conflicting messages about what it means to perform “girl” online.⁶⁸ Media representations can demonize perceived articulations of sexuality by girls and stress the importance of cautious, private, or ethically sensible self-portrayals on the one hand, while simultaneously emphasizing public engagement with celebrity culture, emulation of celebrity body image ideals, and consumption of appearance-focused media on the other hand.⁶⁹ These conflicting media representations are regulated by peer-to-peer surveillance in social networking,

where girls and young women who do not conform to particular representations – and even those who conform particularly well – can be subject to negative judgment or harassment from other users.⁷⁰ Girls who perform privately, for instance, can be judged as prudish or uptight; women who perform publicly can be judged as attention seeking, superficial, or “slutty.”⁷¹ Since it can be impossible for girls and young women to adhere to both sets of media expectations for gender performance – to simultaneously be private and “responsible” as well as public and “mediatized” – in response they can self-censor or go offline, even at the expense of the increased social and economic opportunities associated with a greater online presence.⁷²

Conflicting media representations of how to “properly” perform femininity within online spaces and the pressures they can exert upon young women frame another false dichotomy: online self-portrayals as either “authentic” or “inauthentic.” Girls who self-portray “too privately” can be viewed as inauthentic because of their tendency to self-censor; however, those who portray “too publicly” can also be viewed as inauthentic, especially when their online profiles reflect appearance-focused media or celebrity culture.⁷³ Regardless of whether girls adhere to private or public media discourses on gender performance, then, they always face the critique that they are performing inauthentically, even if they are attempting to present a persona that represents aspects of an authentic self.⁷⁴ Further, since girls routinely use virtual technology to express parts of themselves they had been made to feel were taboo offline or to “try out” new or experimental identities, the boundaries between authentic and inauthentic self-portrayals are not distinct. Senft has described how girls perform different identities online, outlining that they may display particular character attributes without personally identifying with the roles they are playing. Girls may also engage in “deep acting,” attempting to more strongly identify with feelings or images they are trying to project.⁷⁵ There are no clear lines distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic online self-portrayals; self-portrayals can be – and arguably always are – a mixture of both.

Related to debates about online authenticity and inauthenticity are intersectional discussions about the role of agency in authenticity, where inauthentic self-portrayals are usually operationalized as inauthentic. Rather than discussing agency in the context of whether or not online self-portrayals are authentic or inauthentic, however, it is more productive to discuss agency in the context of media pressures

themselves and the gendered agency or lack of agency that they facilitate. Since agency is related to control over online self-portrayals, it does not necessarily matter whether portrayals are authentic or inauthentic. More important than authenticity is girls' ability to assert control over the way they are portrayed online and the external pressures that shape this ability. Since meanings of online performances are negotiated with audiences who interpret these performances and ascribe meaning to them, asserting this control also entails an ability to manage peers' processes of meaning-making relating to online portrayals, including their perceptions of these portrayals as authentic or inauthentic. Both self-portrayals themselves and their associated processes of audience meaning-making are impacted by a variety of media pressures. Since these pressures play such a considerable role in how girls self-present on line and how their online self-presentations are received by others,⁷⁶ it is important next to outline some of these pressures and examine their implications for girls' and young women's agency in more detail.

Numerous scholars identify a contemporary "consumer-media culture" that is primarily concerned with celebrity, sexually suggestive clothing, obesity, eating disorders, and overall body image, that has become a powerful influence upon self-formative processes, especially for adolescent females.⁷⁷ This consumer-media culture is underscored by a competitive discourse in advertising, where girls and young women are encouraged to conceptualize themselves as winning competitions with their peers, particularly in terms of attaining body ideals such as being prettiest or thinnest. This discourse is reflected not only in print media but across other forms of media as well,⁷⁸ including virtual and online social media.

Girls may rely upon media and consumer-media culture to gain authoritative knowledge to mark how young women are "supposed" to be, interpreting fictionalized gender portrayals as realities to which they should aspire; however, these portrayals are often unrealistic, resulting in idealized and internalized social roles that they typically are unable to fulfil.⁷⁹ Consumer-media culture perpetuates an unattainable "thin ideal," wherein "both women and men [overestimate] the thinness of body type preferred by others."⁸⁰ Girls who are aware of this thin, sexy ideal show tendencies to internalize it and believe that it is important to meet the expectations that it presents,⁸¹ despite their potential to be judged by their peers as inauthentic, attention seeking or "slutty" for doing so.⁸² The pressure to meet

this unattainable thin ideal can constrain girls' and young women's online agency by rendering them unable to exert true control over their own body image portrayals. This pressure has been associated with potentially harmful consequences, including increased rates of eating disorders,⁸³ body dissatisfaction,⁸⁴ and relationship dissatisfaction.⁸⁵

Online spaces are also venues in which girls may distance themselves from and bring themselves closer to aspects of celebrity, including how many hits a profile or webcam receives and how many friends a woman has on Facebook. Terri Senft notes that "On the web, popularity depends upon a connection to one's audience" and cites Jodi Dean's explanation: "Most people in technoculture know full well that they aren't really celebrities. ... In fact, this anxiety about not being known ... is a key component of the celebrity mode of subjectivization."⁸⁶ A relationship between intense celebrity worship and negative body image in adolescence has been noted; social networking-based quasi-social relationships with celebrities with "good" bodies have been found to contribute to negative body image and further reinforce unattainable thin ideals.⁸⁷

The considerable constraints presented by media representations of girls and young women may partially explain why scholarly and policy discourse around empowering articulations of girls' and young women's sexuality, sexual agency, and sexual desire is limited. This dearth is troubling, since sexual agency has historically been accepted as a positive aspect of male sexual identity and a natural part of male sexual development.⁸⁸ Western discourses on girls' sexuality overwhelmingly conclude that "girls and women cannot hope to benefit from sexual self-presentations and representations, and that this will inevitably lead to an "unhealthy" sexuality."⁸⁹ Cyberfeminisms show promise to retool discourses on sexualized online self-presentations in new, more agential ways, affording girls a platform where they can benefit from empowering sexual online expression.

Sexuality can be depicted in an empowering way as a component of a broader social discourse that includes supportive and respectful interpersonal relationships, healthy self-conceptualization, and agency as control over self-depictions, regardless of whether or not they are sexualized. Girls can also potentially explore prospective sexual identities through transformative sexualities presented in sexualized media.⁹⁰ Royalle invokes Koskela by offering that sexualized

images can be empowering when their working conditions permit individuals to be in control, for example, in images where young women are acting out their own fantasies as opposed to those of dominant men.⁹¹ Azzarito likewise describes that sexualized media can be used to positively define and complement female bodies in opposition to specific, narrow, heteronormative male representations of femininity.⁹² Agential sexualized online self-representations show promise to help contest these norms.

Cyberfeminisms are tasked with further exploring the relationship between media representations of gender and girls' online agency. In doing so, we must move beyond discourses focusing on binaries of online spaces and media discourses as simply being either risky or beneficial and either agential or inagential, recognizing that there are constraining and liberating factors that work simultaneously to frame girls' online experiences. We must also move away from discourses that focus on authenticity and inauthenticity and ultimately stifle young women's sexual expression and expand the scope of cyberfeminist discussions to encompass broader gendered media discourses. In doing so, we can build a more inclusive vision of virtual citizenship and media participation that allows girls greater opportunities for control and agential self-expression, ultimately achieving the goal of reducing gendered constraints upon agency.

Legal vs. Extralegal Regulation: Potential Responses to Online Gender Inequalities

That girls are cognizant of potential online risks and constraints upon agency and can independently enact strategies to manage them⁹³ stands in opposition to pop cultural discourses wherein young women are described as naïve virtual citizens who are in need of protection, censorship, or governance.⁹⁴ Legal initiatives attempting to deal with gender-related online risk are largely punitive, framing girls as either victims or perpetrators, and focusing on criminalization, "getting tough" on online harassment, or advocating that girls and young women not self-disclose on line.⁹⁵ These initiatives largely function on an individual as opposed to a collective level, attempting to identify characteristics of girls who are susceptible to online risk and subsequently "protect" them or punish their abusers.⁹⁶ In taking this approach, current legal responses neoliberally and patriarchally neglect to consider the root causes of online gender inequality,

buying into uncritical pop cultural notions of what it means to be a female virtual citizen.

In this chapter, I have argued that it is prudent for regulatory responses to begin deconstructing uncritical binaries within prevailing media, policy, and cultural discourses that dictate socially accepted standards for the performance of femininity online. Simply aggregating the characteristics of individual young women in the name of “protection,” or responsabilizing girls to self-protect, perpetuates false dichotomies of girls online as either victims or perpetrators, and either criminals or non-criminals. It also neglects to consider constraints upon girls’ and young women’s agency that are enacted by broader systemic frameworks, buying into the idea that online spaces are inherently risky and constraining and that gendered risks and constraints are inevitable. Cyberfeminist theoretical debate often focuses on a divide between legal and extralegal responses to online gender inequality, with theorists often rejecting one scheme in favour of the other.⁹⁷ As a result, yet another false binary has developed: the idea that online gender inequality can be addressed either by legal or by extralegal regulatory responses, but not by both. I conclude this chapter by briefly touching upon alternative policies and self-regulatory practices that could potentially address issues involving online gender inequality to better reflect cyberfeminist goals and move away from punitive responses that embrace dichotomous views of girls’ online experiences.

While legal and policy responses to child pornography and sexting, for example, can implicate girls in child pornography offences, legal initiatives like Nova Scotia’s *Cyber-safety Act*⁹⁸ and proposed amendments to the *Criminal Code*⁹⁹ have begun to address cyberbullying and online harassment. Using child pornography laws to address sexting has been criticized for potentially criminalizing those whom the law was supposedly intended to protect (including young women exploring their sexual agency),¹⁰⁰ for being unreasonably harsh or punitive,¹⁰¹ and for constructing sexist narratives that generate stereotypes of girls and young women as self-exploitative, hypersexualized, or victims in need of patriarchal protection.¹⁰² This sort of legal response continues the trend of punitiveness, responsabilization, and the policing of female sexuality, without disturbing the underlying context that may inform the behaviours addressed.¹⁰³

Legal frameworks do, however, show some promise when it comes to dealing with issues related to constraints upon women’s

online agency. Karaian has outlined, for example, that education-based, macro-level legal responses that address issues of systemic inequality and underlying structural harms – rather than responsabilizing girls and young women to “act more safely” – could reduce girls’ online inequality.¹⁰⁴ Hasinoff similarly argues that girls’ online self-portrayals could be legally enshrined as an act of media authorship, where those who virtually self-disclose could invoke copyright law to control the information that they distribute on line.¹⁰⁵ Keats Citron has also suggested that rights relating to gendered respect and sexual agency could be enshrined in civil rights discourses, submitting that concepts like “respect for women” and “sexual agency” could be implemented as fundamental constitutional rights or within tort law, making it possible for those who have had their rights violated to sue those who have violated those rights.¹⁰⁶ These approaches would move punishment for gendered online harm out of the exclusive realm of “tough” criminal sanctioning (that can illogically catch young women in its dragnet), without undermining the empowering potential of young women’s own consensual transgressions of constraining normative sexual morality.

In terms of extralegal and self-regulatory means of addressing online constraints on agency and gender equality, the promotion of feminist identity is promising. Feminisms can encourage the critical evaluation of women’s work and politics; feminist young women tend to have more positive body images because of their greater ability to critique gendered cultural norms and consequently resist the unattainable thin ideal presented in contemporary media.¹⁰⁷ Feminism, respect for women, and promotion of gender equality can also be taught in schools, representing a macro-level solution to systemic patriarchy via the education system.¹⁰⁸

Media literacy initiatives have been proposed as a possible way to promote greater media awareness,¹⁰⁹ higher long-term self-esteem, and the redefinition of female sexual norms, although immediate self-objectification has been forewarned of, as being a possible negative consequence of such interventions.¹¹⁰ Media literacy initiatives could also encourage website designs that address girls and young women less as consumers or potential employees and more as emergent virtual citizens.¹¹¹ Finally, Welles suggests reconceptualizing ideas of sexuality and agency on a broad cultural level. As she writes, “Researchers suggest that a ... woman’s ability to be conscientious about and fully present in her sexual experiences is

correlated with her ability to act as an agent. The ability to make responsible and self-affirming sexual decisions is a crucial act of agency."¹¹² Such macro-level extralegal initiatives could work either alone or in tandem with legal responses that are comparatively more critically feminist in nature to address constraints upon girls' online agency and ensure that both online and offline gender inequality are ultimately reduced.

Conclusion: Future Directions for Cyberfeminist Research

This chapter has begun to question some of the uncritical binaries that underscore mainstream political, theoretical, and media discourses on gender and virtual spaces, laying the groundwork for the deconstruction of oversimplified dichotomic conceptual lenses that impede cyberfeminisms from achieving greater online gender equality. These false binaries include (but are certainly not limited to) ideas of online vs. offline, cyberfeminisms vs. non-cyberfeminisms, cyberspatial environments as inherently utopian vs. dystopian, empowerment vs. vulnerability, risk vs. benefit, privacy vs. self-disclosure, online authenticity vs. inauthenticity, victimhood vs. blameworthiness, and regulatory responses to online gender inequality as legal vs. extralegal. If we look at these binaries more closely, it becomes clear that issues involving gender and virtual space are not, in fact, that simple: girls' virtual experiences are complexly nuanced and are not universal. This volume strives to continue deconstructing these and other related dichotomies in the interest of facilitating more productive cyberfeminist discussions by working toward common goals of decreasing virtual gender inequality and increasing girls' and young women's online agency.

I have suggested that a useful first step in deconstructing these dichotomies and ultimately achieving greater online gender equality is to consider online agency as "what, how and when [online content] is controlled by the person(s) whose images are circulated."¹¹³ Doing so shows potential to reframe discourses on gender and online spaces to focus less on responsabilization, self-protection, and victim blaming, and more on the potential for liberation, acknowledging that agency rests in the ways that girls are able to control their online portrayals rather than their ability to comply with normative gendered standards of online self-presentation.

Future cyberfeminist initiatives, in addition to continuing to deconstruct uncritical binaries and engaging in more inclusive, agency-based discussions, must therefore begin to shift from micro-level discussions and punitive policy initiatives to those that function on a more collective macro-level. Potential constraints upon girls' agency cannot be reduced without widespread social involvement both at home and at the institutional level, for example, via educational or family-based initiatives that stress media literacy and the promotion of respect for all genders. It is important to abandon punitive patriarchal and neo-liberal discourses that identify characteristics of girls who are susceptible to online abuse and often responsabilize those who are "at risk" to self-protect against potential victimization. Such discourses accept gendered harm as natural and acceptable, perpetuating the notion that girls should not use virtual spaces to self-express and are blameworthy when online self-disclosure leads to victimization.

It is also important to begin to consider the positionality of marginalized young women within cyberfeminist discourses. Cyberfeminisms have far too frequently neglected the experiences of girls and women who are racialized, socio-economically underprivileged, from non-heterosexual sexual orientations, and/or lack access to virtual technology. As Fernandez and Wilding eloquently submit, "We do not support pan-capitalism. It is a predatory, pernicious and sexist system that will not change even if there was equal representation of gender in the policy-making classes. Our argument is that women need access to empowering knowledge and tools that are now dominated by a despicable 'virtual class'."¹⁴ Cyberfeminisms must entail a commitment to the erasure of ideologies of colonial domination that run through Western culture. It is critical not only to ensure that discourse about cyberfeminisms is accessible to all girls and women – not only a privileged few – but also to recognize and reinforce the everyday cyberfeminist acts that girls and women engage in as they navigate an increasingly seamless online/offline existence.

In moving past problematic discourses, it is imperative that cyberfeminists begin to deconstruct prevailing media representations of gender and pop cultural expectations that dictate socially accepted standards for the performance of online femininity. Deconstructing these narratives on a macro scale can begin to challenge arbitrary normative standards of online gender performance and ultimately

critique online spaces and current policy initiatives for how they entrench these sexist narratives. Most of all, it is crucially important to solicit girls' own perceptions and experiences—including the experiences and perceptions of those who are non-heterosexual, trans, racialized, or otherwise marginalized—and to use these intersectional insights to plot the course of future cyberfeminist initiatives. Working from the “ground up” to ensure that girls themselves have a voice in discourses on gender and virtual space is a key part of moving beyond patriarchal binary thought, increasing girls' online agency, and constructing virtual spaces that better reflect gender “e-quality.”¹¹⁵

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