

“She’s Just a Small Town Girl, Living in an Online World”: Differences and Similarities between Urban and Rural Girls’ Use of and Views about Online Social Networking

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Introduction

This chapter examines the online social media experiences of girls (aged 15 to 17) and young women (aged 18 to 22) from rural and urban environments, focusing on the contrast between “small town” and “big city” participants in online social networks. Reasoning from a long history of social scientific research and thought, we anticipate that rural and urban girls and young women will report different experiences with online social media. We explore this possibility through a series of interviews and focus groups conducted with girls and young women residing in two communities (one small, one large) in southeastern Ontario, Canada.

The Urban/Rural Landscape in Canada

There is no question that Canadian society is moving toward urban living. In 1851, only 13 percent of Canadians lived in centres with populations of more than 1000; a hundred years later, the proportion was 62 percent, and by 2011, 81 percent of Canadians lived in population centres of 1000 residents or more.¹ In fact, the majority of Canadians now live in *large* urban centres: 2011 Census results indicate that 60 percent of Canadians live in urban centres with populations of 100,000 or more, 9 percent live in medium-sized population

centres (populations of 30,000 to 99,999), and the remaining 31 percent live in rural areas and small centres with populations between 1,000 and 29,999.² These data highlight an unequivocal shift in the living situation of Canadians – a shift that mirrors the situation in the US and other countries around the world.³

The impact of urbanization of the North American population has been a focus of social scientific research since the early 1900s. Much of the research and discussion has revolved around the anticipated losses associated with the shift to an urban environment. In the early 1900s, for example, sociologist Georg Simmel noted that since urban dwellers come into contact with vast numbers of people each day, they conserve psychic energy by becoming acquainted with a far smaller proportion of people than their rural counterparts do, and by maintaining more superficial relationships even with these acquaintances.⁴ Stanley Milgram, in his article “The Experience of Living in Cities,” discussed how “the interposition of institutions between the individual and the social world” in cities “deprives the individual of a sense of direct contact and spontaneous integration in the life around him [*sic*],” simultaneously protecting and estranging the individual from their social environment.⁵ Louis Wirth remarked on the “peculiar characteristics of the city as a particular form of human association,”⁶ enumerating what he considered were the key characteristics of urban life: knowing a smaller proportion (though not necessarily a smaller number) of, and knowing less deeply, people whom individuals encounter; meeting each other in “highly segmented roles”; and having social relations characterized by “the superficiality, the anonymity, and the transitory character of urban social relations.”⁷ The notion of the urban environment as anonymous is echoed by Milgram, who explains that anonymity exists on a spectrum, with higher levels of anonymity associated with cities and lower levels associated with small town.⁸ Thus, there was a general concern that urbanization would lead to less personal connection between people.

Support for this perspective, however, is not universal, and some scholars have taken issue with the view that urban life is qualitatively different from life in smaller communities, pointing out that, in many larger urban centres, neighbourhoods function as smaller “communities within communities.” According to John Jakle, for example,

the big city and small town have been stereotyped in the American experience as being at opposite ends of an imagined social gradient – the former more a place of cold impersonality in social relations and the latter more a place of warm personalized community. Assumptions about urban-based “mass society” largely blinded Americans through the twentieth century to the existence of, and importance of, locality-based community in big cities.⁹

Empirical investigations comparing rural to urban life reveal a small number of relatively stable predicted differences. In 1982, Claude Fischer published a study of personal networks of individuals living in towns and cities in northern California. The results suggest that those living in urban settings have fewer relatives in their social networks, and have social networks that are less densely connected; furthermore, individuals within the social networks of urban residents are less likely to share multiplex ties – that is, relationships that are based on multiple different types of connections (e.g., being family members, neighbours, *and* co-workers).¹⁰ These results are consistent with more recent research findings that have found the social networks of rural residents to be smaller and more densely interconnected than those of urban dwellers.¹¹ These same studies reveal somewhat inconsistent results with respect to the homogeneity of social connections (e.g., in relation to age, gender, education, race/ethnicity, and religious affiliation), with rural residents generally (but not always) having less varied social networks; in addition, the social networks of urban residents include more non-kin ties.¹²

Fischer noted one other significant difference between rural and urban environments. According to his data, urbanization is related to a shift away from traditional values – thus, urban residents are more likely than rural residents to tolerate deviation from traditional strictures related to issues such as sexuality and religion.¹³ While Fischer’s data were collected in the late 1970s, and thus may have limited application to current society, more recent studies have found consistent results, demonstrating that rural Americans are in general more socially conservative than those living in urban or suburban areas, particularly with respect to religiosity, abortion, and same-sex relationships.¹⁴ Recent international research indicates that tolerance – both of differences in general (e.g., neighbours of a different race or religion) and specifically of differences that are perceived as

signalling threat (e.g., drug use by neighbours) – is positively related to community size: residents of larger communities show higher levels of tolerance.¹⁵

The “conditions of full acquaintance”¹⁶ that are thought to characterize the rural environment, especially given the context of increased adherence to traditional values, wield a double-edged sword. As Milgram states, these conditions “offer security and familiarity, but they may also be stifling, because the individual is caught in a web of established relationships. Conditions of complete anonymity, by contrast, provide freedom from routinized social ties, but they may also create feelings of alienation and detachment.”¹⁷ Some empirical data support the notion that small town and rural environments are sites of unwelcome and indeed restricting social visibility, especially for adolescents. Health care providers who work in the sensitive areas of sexuality¹⁸ and addiction services¹⁹ suggest that confidentiality and anonymity are key issues for rural adolescents seeking health care, particularly when that care is associated with potentially stigmatized situations or conditions. Rural adolescents who identify as homosexual, for example, experience higher levels of distress than those living in urban environments.²⁰ The differences, however, are not large, and research on the experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults living in rural environments reveals inconsistent results. Some data suggests that those living in rural areas fare better than those living in urban environments,²¹ while other data suggest that lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults living in rural areas experience greater levels of heterosexist stigma.²²

The Online World for Urban and Rural Canadians

In recent decades, the internet has provided an alternative – or additional – milieu for social life. Social media sites including MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, and Instagram have provided an online environment for rich social interaction since the early 2000s. The online social environment is, in some ways, a curious hybrid of the characteristics that were traditionally associated with rural social life and those that were traditionally associated with urban social life. On the one hand, the architecture of online social networks facilitates the encountering of strangers that is typically associated with urban environments; at the same time, this same architecture impedes the ability to segment, a quality generally

associated with rural environments. Online interactions may often be superficial and can be – and often are – anonymous; however, they are certainly not transitory. One salient aspect of online social networks is that they reduce (but do not eliminate) the effects of geographic distance.²³ In the online social environment, participants can and do maintain relationships with geographically distant friends and family, and establish new relationships with people they have never met in person – and indeed may never meet.

Although residents in rural areas have been slower to take up many online activities,²⁴ at least in part because they are less likely to have high-speed access,²⁵ home internet access is increasing in both rural and urban areas.²⁶ Canadian statistics reveal that in 2009, 68.4 percent of rural households had home internet access (compared to 79.7 percent of urban households), with the percentage even higher for those households that included unmarried children under 18 (84.6 percent of rural households compared to 90.1 percent of urban households).²⁷ According to the 2010 Canadian Internet Use Survey, 70 percent of rural residents have internet access, a figure significantly less than the 82 percent of Canadians living in urban areas who have that same access.²⁸ In the US, among those who have internet access, the majority (over 67 percent) use one or more social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, or LinkedIn), and although there are some significant rural/suburban/urban differences in use, these are small in size (e.g., 70 percent of urban residents use at least one social networking site, compared to 61 percent of rural residents; note, however, there is no significant difference for Facebook use, which is 72 percent for urban residents and 63 percent for rural residents).²⁹ Recent Canadian data on the same question reveal that among those with internet access, 54 percent of those living in rural areas use online social networks compared to 58 percent of those living in urban areas: although there is a small difference between the groups, place of residence (rural/urban) is not a significant predictor of social networking site use.³⁰ Thus, it appears that while rural residents continue to experience a small deficit in terms of internet access, among those who do have access, the use of the internet for social networking is similar to that of their urban counterparts.

The advent of the internet has radically changed rural life, reducing the impact of geographic isolation and increasing access to services, information, and social connection.³¹ In general, empirical

research suggests that the size of social networks is increasing over time across the entire population (rural and urban alike), an effect that can be attributed at least in part to the increased capacity for online social interaction; this increase may be particularly important for rural residents, whose face-to-face social networks tend to be smaller.³² "Some pundits have optimistically imagined that information and communication technologies such as the internet will reduce – and possibly even eliminate – 'the tyranny of space and distance.'"³³ Consistent with these predictions, in many respects the online social networks of urban and rural participants are similar, encompassing large numbers of geographically distributed connections.

Some data suggest that rural residents tend to wait longer to join online social networks, and their network of online connections tends to be slightly smaller, with connections more likely to be with people who live close by.³⁴ Overall, however, there are relatively few documented differences between the online social networks of rural and urban participants, a fact that may be explained by the relative independence of online social networks from geographic constraint, and the "friend of friend" linking that tends to characterize online social networks.³⁵ Online social networks provide opportunity to maintain existing relationships and forge new ones independent of geographic constraint. There is opportunity to identify and connect with like-minded others,³⁶ forming virtual communities with others who are widely distributed in real space. In many ways, these online social networks seem designed to minimize if not fully eliminate the rural/urban differences in social networks, potentially allowing those who live in rural areas a space to develop and maintain larger and less densely connected social networks with others who hold similar values. Thus, for rural residents, and particularly for rural adolescents and young adults, these networks may provide a welcome and indeed necessary space for identity development.

At the same time, the online social environment offers unprecedented opportunity for social surveillance³⁷ (characterized as *inter-*veillance,³⁸ *participatory surveillance*,³⁹ or *lateral surveillance*⁴⁰) and control through

- (1) watching and judging others;
- (2) watching others watching oneself; and
- (3) watching one's own online profile.⁴¹

Within the online social environment, "peers develop strategies for keeping track of one another, and those who write about new media might even go so far as to suggest that contemporary strategies for mutual monitoring merely rehabilitate, in technological form, the everyone-knows-everyone-else's-business world of traditional village life, undoing the anonymity of urbanized modernity."⁴² Social network participants respond to various forms of social surveillance by limiting or controlling their own online presence to conform to prevailing norms.⁴³ Given the ubiquity of online surveillance and the ease with which surveillance can be accomplished, this raises the possibility that online social networks, rather than being a site where aspects of identity can be freely explored, instead become locales of increasingly restricted social expression. This could create increased pressure on rural social network participants, particularly if their smaller, more densely connected, and more multiplexed real-world social networks form a significant part of their online social worlds.

The eGirls Data

At this point in time, it remains an open question whether the online social environment is one that erases or exacerbates rural/urban differences in social experience. The current chapter addresses this question through data collected in a qualitative exploration of the online social experiences of girls and young women: The eGirls Project.⁴⁴

In January and February of 2013 researchers with the eGirls Project held a series of interviews and focus groups with girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 22. All participants used interactive online media (such as social networking, blogging, and/or user-generated video sites) as a regular part of their social lives. Half of our sample resided in an urban Ontario setting and half resided in a rural Ontario setting.

We interviewed six girls aged 15 to 17 and six young women aged 18 to 22. An additional twenty-two participated in four focus group discussions, as follows: (1) seven girls aged 15 to 17 living in the urban setting; (2) five girls aged 15 to 17 living in the rural setting; (3) six young women aged 18 to 22 living in the urban setting; and (4) four young women aged 18 to 22 living in the rural setting. A professional research house recruited our participants on the basis of sex, age (either 15 to 17 or 18 to 22), and location of residence

(urban or rural). While participants were not recruited on the basis of self-identification with regard to other aspects of their identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation, our participant group included members of racialized, linguistic, and various religious groups.

In the interviews and the focus groups, we explored, among other things, the types of visual and textual representations the participants used online to express their identity as young women, and the benefits and pitfalls they experienced on social media. We also asked for their views on the issues and policy responses focused on by policymakers (as identified in the review of federal parliamentary debates previously reported upon and summarized above).

With participant permission, the interviews and focus group were audiotaped and transcribed by our research assistants for analysis. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms were used to identify participants.⁴⁵

In this chapter, we examine four themes that were salient in the interviews and focus groups:

1. awareness of and reflection on the urban/rural contrast;
2. the nature of online social networks;
3. freedom and constraint in online self-expression; and
4. managing conflict at the online-offline junction.

This chapter seeks to tease apart differences – and identify similarities – in how rural girls and young women versus urban girls and young women use social media and think about the associated benefits, risks and other issues.

I'm a "Small Town" Girl

One thing that became acutely evident from the data is that rural research participants are at least somewhat aware of their "ruralness," while urban research participants are oblivious to their own "urbanness." Four of the rural participants (two younger focus group participants, one younger interview participant, and one older interview participant) spontaneously noted the impact of small-town life on their online experience, but not one of the urban participants remarked on the importance of the urban nature of their lives. This discrepancy makes sense if we consider the representativeness of each of these living environments: according to the 2011 census,

approximately one in three Canadians lives in rural areas or centres with 10,000 or fewer residents, while over half live in large urban centres with populations of over 100,000. Thus, our rural participants are decidedly different, in their living environment, than the majority of Canadians with whom they are likely to compare themselves.

The nature of the differences attributed to the rural/urban divide differed across respondents. Chelsea (17, rural) identified her community as safer than urban environments, remarking that while some [presumably rural] girls are "naïve" about the risk of encountering a sexual predator online, she didn't "find a lot of them in [town] because we are a small town." Cassandra, 19, attributed the appeal of online "drama"⁴⁶ to the lack of other available activities in her community: "small town, nothing to do." Sixteen-year-old Nicole contrasted the online presence of "rural girls" with that of "city girls," noting that city girls appeared "flawless" and "perfect" in their online photos, generating acknowledgement in the form of many "likes." She goes on to discuss how these online photographs are "photoshopped" to make the girls appear more attractive, since in person these apparently "flawless" girls are less attractive, looking just like "typical" girls. According to Nicole, city girls are more likely than their rural counterparts to "amp" themselves on the internet through practices such as the photoshopping of images because in small towns "everyone knows each other," implying that in such densely connected real-world networks it is more difficult to successfully present an online look that is different from your real-life appearance. Using concepts introduced by Goffman,⁴⁷ the densely connected social networks of rural girls make it more difficult for them to maintain a "back stage/front stage" separation, and breaches of this distinction create greater complexity for impression management. Nicole also commented on the multiplexed nature of rural social networks:

Nicole: My sister, the other night this guy is coming over and she told me his last name, and I heard about his brother and he's just, you know, one of those guys that's into drugs and stuff. And I'm like "he shouldn't come over," and she's like "just because you think you know him doesn't mean he's a bad guy," but obviously everything that happens gets around town.

This issue is also reflected in the comments of a fourth participant, Paula, 17, whose account illustrates the impact of multiple interconnections in a small rural community:

Paula: And I think it's different living in a small town, 'cause you just really know everyone on Facebook. Like, you actually know them, and they live on your street, or they're your cousin, or they go to your school ... Or your cousin goes to your school. Happens to all of us ... for example, like, I think if I lived in Toronto and [Beth, another rural girl in the focus group] lived in Toronto and I saw her post all that stuff and she went to my school, I'd think, "Oh, she's different." But I know [Beth], because I live in [name of town] and it's a small town. So you've built more of a relationship than social media ... I think some people post things on Facebook, but I know that's not really how they are, because I've actually interacted with them not using the internet.

Her comments reflect an experience of dense and multi-stranded real-world social networks that blend seamlessly with social networks in the online environment. Her perspective, consistent with that of a number of other rural participants, is that the multi-stranded online and offline connectedness that characterizes her social world is *different* from the social reality experienced by girls living in urban environments. Urban girls and young women, who also describe this overlap between face-to-face and online environments, might disagree: but whether or not the difference is borne out in experience, our rural participants *believe* that their online social experience is different from that of girls and young women living in urban environments.

Rural/Urban Contrast in Online Networks

All of the girls and young women participating in this research described their online social networks as large and geographically dispersed, composed both of individuals with whom they have significant real-world interaction and others with whom they are connected only online. Parents and even employers were identified as part of the online social networks of many of the interview and focus group participants, although some reported restricting content or access to content for these groups, and others indicated

that they explicitly excluded parents and/or employers from their online social networks. While some online interactions represented extensions of face-to-face activities (e.g., online negotiation of plans for the evening), in other cases online interactions were identified as a way of maintaining relationships with connections that were more geographically distant (e.g., family/friends who had moved away, or were more distant because the participant had themselves moved). In addition, many of the girls and some of the young women reported online connections with no "real world" component: online acquaintances and even friends whom they had never met in person and were not planning to meet in the future.⁴⁸

One might anticipate that the observed differences in real-world rural and urban social networks would translate into the online environment in one of two ways: either rural participants would describe online networks that were denser and more multiplex than those described by urban participants, or rural participants would be more likely to befriend or otherwise interact with strangers online to satisfy a desire for a broader, more diverse social network than what is available to them in the physical world. Neither of these hypotheses was supported by the data. In their spontaneous discussion of their online networks, our respondents demonstrate no such difference: with respect to their discussion of the size and nature of their online social networks, our rural and urban respondents are indistinguishable. We cannot rule out the possibility that a detailed quantitative analysis of network size, density, or multiplexity would reveal rural/urban differences. In their discussions, however, our participants do not signal any salient differences; moreover, although rural participants identify various ways in which their online experience differs from that of their urban counterparts, the nature of their online social networks is *not* an identified difference.⁴⁹ Finally, there are indications in our data that rural and urban girls and young women are in fact linked in their social networks, a situation that likely arises from the "friend of friend" connections that give rise to many social network invitations: for example, Trish (rural, 18) revealed that "half" of her friends "added" her boyfriend from Montreal as a connection, thus creating a link between people living in her rural community and those living in the urban centre of Montreal. This suggests (but again does not confirm) that those living in geographically separate urban and rural environments may in fact share online community.

Free to Be Me (or Not)

Evidence suggests that the internet provides an environment where young people can explore alternative identities, a function that might be particularly important, and valuable, for rural girls and young women, whose self-expression could be more limited by their social environment.⁵⁰ At the same time, the online social world is not entirely distinct from the face-to-face social environment, and there is every reason to suspect that events and activities in one milieu would spill over to the other, potentially limiting online self-expression for fear of real-world consequences. We reasoned that this concern might affect rural girls and young women – with their densely interconnected and multiplexed real-world social networks – more than it affected those living in an urban environment. Surprisingly, neither expectation was reflected in our data.

Most of our participants (rural and urban, younger and older) agreed that online profiles are not “real” profiles, but instead are carefully crafted to promote a particular image. Thus, they do not identify online social spaces as spaces of individual self-expression, but instead experience these as spaces of socially enforced conformity. Profiles are characterized as “real but limited” (Abby, urban, 17), and what is posted online is identified as “a way of hiding yourself” (Paula, rural, 17), providing “an idea of what they’re like, but not the whole idea” (Courtney, rural, 17). Girls and young women, both rural and urban, typically create online profiles to “fit in,” posting information “that’s not really how they are” (Paula, rural, 17), and sometimes even getting caught up in this manufactured online image: “they get so caught up with it that they have to post pictures all the time of their ‘other’ image or who they wanna be and forget about who they really are. That’s not good” (Vicky, urban, 17).

With respect to this enforced conformity, there appeared to be no difference between our urban and rural participants, and their descriptions of the “right” kind of online image, and the need to present such an image, were effectively indistinguishable and interchangeable.

Both urban and rural participants noted the importance of presenting the “right” image online, to parents, employers, and male and female peers. Several discussed limiting or editing content to conform to this image. In particular, overly sexualized images and images of drinking were considered as potentially problematic, since they could upset parents, negatively affect employment, and result in being labelled as “slutty” by male and female classmates. Many

participants refrained from including these kinds of images in their online profiles. At the same time, appropriately sexy images were identified by a number of participants as necessary for popularity with girls and desirability to boys. In some cases, parents and/or employers were excluded from online social networks in order to restrict access to content that might be considered problematic, and one respondent went so far as to maintain, for a period of time, a "clean" parallel online profile intended only for close family.

Participants were also concerned about the "small world" problem, whereby information posted to a social network profile could "leak" to unintended audiences. One rural participant, for example, remarked that her mother was concerned that other members of their church would see the "party" photographs of her daughter, thus engendering judgment of both mother and daughter:

Amelia (rural, 18): We're a Christian family, so we go to church ... but I will go out and, um, I will go out and have some drinks with some friends ... I've had a couple of, I guess argue, well not arguments, but talks with my parents about how, um, my mom doesn't want pictures of me drinking on Facebook just because I'm friends with people who are from, just like the church community, and she said "I just don't want people seeing that and making judgments" ... I said, "why are you so worried about what people will think when it's not what they think of you, it's what they think of me," but she explained it to me ... "you are my child, I've raised you a way and I don't want people to make judgments about me from your actions."

While the question of judgment *vis-à-vis* traditional values *might* be specific to the rural environment, the issue of overlapping social groups certainly is not. Alessandra (urban, 21), discussing conflict over a photograph in which she appeared with the ex-boyfriend of a Facebook contact, noted "we have small social circles, I can't escape it if your boyfriend is at the same bar as me," while Cindy (urban, 20) noted that the notoriety that could be associated with a compromising photograph would easily travel between the three high schools in the city through social connections between students.

Thus, it appears that rural and urban participants share an experience of online social networks as spaces for tightly constrained social display that is limited both by peer group expectations and

by the concern that posted information might “leak” across social groups and into offline environments. We observed no evidence of differences in the expectations or experiences of rural and urban participants: in particular, rural participants appeared no more likely to use online social spaces as sites of exploration, nor did they exhibit higher levels of concern about information reaching unintended audiences.

Managing Online/Offline Connections

“Drama” is a common aspect of online social experience,⁵¹ played out in full view of social network members through status lines, posts, and comments on photographs. As Regan and Sweet note, online drama serves three interrelated functions: social aggression, monitoring and evaluating the behaviour of others, and amusement/leisure.⁵² Although both girls and young women described “drama” in their online social environments, the issue was particularly relevant for the younger participants, and some of the young adults, when discussing online drama, identified it as something that happened “in high school.” There were few identifiable differences between the discussions of rural and urban participants. All indicated that drama is often triggered by photographs and played out in terms of traded comments visible to the entire social network; that drama usually starts between two people, but others often join the fray; and that people not involved follow the online drama just to see what is happening (a form of entertainment).

While much drama is born and carried out in the online environment, both rural and urban participants described some occasions when offline drama moved online (e.g., when conflicts over relationships played out in the online environment). Reports of these experiences of interlaced real-world and online conflict were characteristic of the reports of both urban and rural participants, though more common for the girls than for the young women. In addition, most incidents that were described by participants were conducted in full view of the online social network, through tweets, Facebook timeline posts, or comments on photographs that were available to all online “friends” in the interconnected social network. In fact, this semi-public nature was intrinsic to much online drama, allowing initially uninvolved others to join and even take sides, and allowing those choosing to remain uninvolved to watch the drama from the sidelines as it unfolded.

The vast majority of participants appeared aware of the "hot-house" atmosphere of the online environment that can exacerbate online conflict. Both rural and urban participants seemed to be aware that face-to-face communication simply *works* better in these situations, and thus might be preferable to online interaction in order to minimize conflict. Monica (rural, 16) put it this way: when communicating face-to-face, "you can kind of see their reactions, and know how they're speaking to you." Monique (urban, 16) provides a very similar perspective:

There's so much more happening when you're talking to someone face to face, you know your tone and body image and just everything else. It's so much easier to have those miscommunications over the internet, and so when you're talking about something serious, or you know if there's a fight going on ... it should be done in person because you know you never really know what exactly, like because the words are taken out of their context [and] it's hard to really know how to react to that

There is some awareness that online communication can lead to misunderstanding: Chelsea (rural, 17) said that she doesn't joke around in written comments because "it might be taken the wrong way, and I've had it done. And I'm like, whoa, I didn't even mean it like that. And I'm like, okay, I'm not even touching my phone [for text messaging] for the rest of the day."

However, rural girls tended to react quite differently to being the target of negative online comments or bullying. All of the rural girls who were interviewed individually and some of the rural girls in the focus group stated that they had or they would talk face to face to someone who insulted or attacked them online. The rural girls were also more likely to comment on, and report attending to, the possibility that online drama could lead to breakdown of real-world relationships. Monica (rural, 16), for example, stated that, if she learned that she had been sitting at home alone on a night when friends were hanging out together, she would deal with the issue in person rather than starting drama online by posting a sarcastic status line about her friends. Another rural girl, Lynda (17), indicated that she would choose a face-to-face confrontation with anyone bullying her online rather than continuing the online interaction. A third rural girl, Nicole (16), said that in response to problematic comments

on Facebook or twitter, she would text the person and say “let’s not put it on Twitter or Facebook ‘cause no one else needs to know our problems, you know?” These and other rural girls appeared to value private (and typically face-to-face) interaction as a way of settling (or at least not escalating) online conflicts.

Rural girls indicated that face-to-face interaction was preferable because it gave them better opportunity to assess, and limit, the impact of their comments or responses. One rural girl indicated that she would simply refrain from posting negative commentary on someone’s online photo because, “you kind of have to put yourselves in their shoes, you never know how they’re feeling that day, you never know what’s going on in their life, and some things are enough to push someone over the edge” (Monica, rural, 16). Another rural girl, Chelsea (17), acknowledged that while she was able to “brush off” anonymous “hate messages” on Tumblr, these messages might “upset” others.

Despite acknowledging that face-to-face communication has the advantage of helping to avoid miscommunication and therefore encouraging dispute resolution, *none* of the urban girls indicated that they would move an online conflict to the offline context. The urban girls appeared to prioritize “winning” the argument over resolving it amicably. For example, Alicia (urban, 17) said it was easier to put an online bully “in her place” over MSN because, “she can’t really see me.” All the urban girls in the focus group agreed, “it’s easier to say what you think [online] because your face isn’t attached to it.” Lauryn (urban 17) can’t imagine *anyone* taking an online conflict offline because it precludes a “public” victory in the dispute:

No one would actually go up to someone and be like “hey can we talk about this in private,” and then go somewhere in private and be like “hey I don’t like what you’re doing, I don’t like what you’re saying, and stuff,” but it seems like people want it, like want the attention, want everyone to see that they’re tough.

None of the urban girls raised emotional reactions—their own or those of others in their social network—as a reason to move from online to face-to-face interaction.

One potential explanation for this difference is as follows: all of the girls want to have friendships in the offline world, and all of the girls want to put forward a good, powerful, popular image online.

However, when these two things come into conflict, their relative importance is different for urban and rural girls. For rural girls, with their smaller, more interconnected offline networks, offline relationships are of primary importance. We suggest that for rural girls, because there are fewer possibilities for offline friendships, maintaining an offline relationship is more valuable than "winning" an online conflict. For urban girls, with wider, more dispersed offline networks and many more possibilities for meeting new people, it appears to be the opposite: online image is ultimately given more weight. As a number of urban girl focus group participants explain:

Jacquelyn (urban, 17): Yeah, everyone wants to prove, I don't know, everyone wants to prove that they can, like, they can outdo the other person or, like, show them that they're better than the other person and they want everyone else to see.

Abby (urban, 17): Intimidate.

Jacquelyn (urban, 17): Like, intimidate them.

Researcher: How come, like, why is that a good thing?

Eve (urban, 16): I just, like, it's power, you know, it's a feeling and you want more.

Interestingly, this distinction appeared significantly less apparent among the older group of participants. The rural young women, like their younger counterparts, tended to prefer face-to-face interactions to address conflict that originated online, and this tendency was also demonstrated among the urban young women. One urban young woman recounts an incident that occurred to her:

Mackenzie (urban, 20): Um, I've really only seen one, I guess [stumbles over words] It wasn't a catfight between two girls, but it was like two girls seriously bad-mouthing a third friend, and you just don't want to get into that, because you're, like, I know that if I say anything, even just to say I'm not involved in this ... that automatically makes me involved in this somehow So I just [pause] didn't put anything on Facebook, but I did go to them the next day and was like, "hey, still friends with this person. Not a bad person. So going to say straight up from here, you guys may have a problem with her, but I do not."

Another urban young woman, Cindy (20), clearly states that conflict should be resolved privately and not on Facebook. This shift for urban participants – from a focus on “online power” as girls toward a preference for resolving conflict offline – could be a maturational effect. We noted less focus on “drama” among *all* young women in the study when compared to the girls who participated, as well as a relaxation of the need to appear “cool,” or “popular,” or “powerful.”

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that small-town life is changing. Not only are fewer and fewer people living in rural areas or small urban centres, but the nature of the residents has also changed. In the US, for example, immigration has changed the demographic profile of small-town residents,⁵³ many small towns have become “bedroom” communities for nearby larger urban centres, and wealthier urbanites move (full- or part-time) to smaller urban or rural centres for a different way of life.⁵⁴ At the same time, it remains true that “everyone in a small town knows everyone else’s business.”⁵⁵

The focus of this paper is the contrast between the online experiences of girls and young women living in rural (small town) versus urban environments. Our primary finding is that there are in fact very few reported differences in online experiences between these two groups. Although some rural participants identify their “ruralness” as having an impact on their online social lives, the discussions of rural and urban participants are virtually indistinguishable with respect to the nature of their online social networks and the character of their online social activities. For the most part, rural and urban participants describe their online networks in very similar terms, with these networks including family, relatives, close friends, and acquaintances (including those developed online) from both nearby and more distant geographic locations. Their descriptions of social surveillance from online and offline connections are, similarly, virtually indistinguishable, and rural and urban participants report similar social constraints on the content of their online profiles.

Our data do suggest one interesting difference. “Drama” was salient in the online experiences of almost all of our participants, and in the majority of cases it played out online and was visible to an audience that included all members of the online social networks

of the participants. Indeed, in some cases, "audience" members commented on and even joined in the online drama, encouraged by the original participants as part of a process of establishing friendship or social value. Young women, both urban and rural, reported less "drama," and described it in similar ways. Rural and urban girls, however, demonstrated a difference. While rural girls described "drama" in terms similar to those used by their urban counterparts, they differed in one way: for rural girls, taking drama "offline" or at least to private communication appeared to be, in at least some circumstances, a preferable alternative. When rural girls described moving a semi-public online conflict to a private and often offline context, they offered two rationales: first, that face-to-face interaction offered the opportunity for clearer communication; second, that they were better able to assess the impact of communication and limit the degree to which they were inflicting emotional pain when communicating face-to-face. This privileging of face-to-face relationships makes sense, given the smaller real-world communities in which rural girls live: in a town of ten thousand compared to one of one million, there are simply far fewer alternatives for everyday real-world social interaction, and girls and young women living in small towns can ill afford to alienate large numbers of friends and acquaintances. No matter how large, rich, and indeed engrossing the online social world is for these girls and young women, real-world social interaction remains of primary importance, and when there are few real-world relationships to choose from, it is important that those relationships be maintained.

This finding warrants further exploration. We observed this difference in participants recruited for a qualitative research study examining the online experiences of rural and urban girls and young women, and additional research is required to determine if the differences generalize to other populations. If, upon further research, this distinction appears to hold, it would be an important factor to consider when designing policy and educational responses to issues, such as cyberbullying, that are raised by online social interaction. The finding suggests that rural and urban girls might be responsive to different educational interventions, with urban girls more likely to respond to an intervention that unpacks the online power dynamic involved in cyberbullying, and rural girls more likely to respond to an intervention that focuses on the emotional impact of cyberbullying. Educational and policy responses

should take into account the different perspectives uncovered by this research, and build both into their approaches to new media education and policy.

Notes

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