

Teen Girls' Online Practices with Peers and Close Friends: Implications for Cybersafety Policy

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Abstract

Young people's online safety continues to be a high priority for educators and parents. Cybersafety policies and educational programs are continually updated and revised to accommodate for the innovative ways they engage with digital culture. However, empirical research has shown that despite these efforts young people, especially teen girls, continue to experience online problems. To date gender-specific guidelines for cybersafety practice remain in their infancy. This paper provides new evidence suggesting that teen girls' online practices with peers and close friends have important implications for cybersafety policy. Drawing on survey data and group interview responses from girls 13 years of age, the article discusses how the girls managed and negotiated their daily experiences with peers and close friends in online contexts. The girls' online practices are offered for consideration in cybersafety policy development and curriculum planning.

Introduction

This article explores teen girls' online participation with peers and close friends and discusses the significance of their interactions in relation to cybersafety policy. Young people's access to and use of internet-enabled communication devices has been at the forefront of educational discourse and policy development for several years. Particular attention has been paid to online risks such as identity theft, online grooming, cyberstalking, and exposure to inappropriate and violent online material (see, for example, Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig and Olafsson, 2011). Concerns related to cyberbullying and sexting have been also raised, especially in relation to teen girls' online experience (see, Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey, 2012). Less attention has focused on how teen girls use the internet to manage and maintain relationships with close friends. Given that 'talk' is a defining characteristic of teen girls' friendships and they are frequent users of social media services, their online social practices are critical for understanding their cybersafety needs. Drawing on empirical data from a 2011 study, this article discusses how girls 13 years of age managed and negotiated their daily experiences with peers and close friends in online contexts. The girls' practices are offered for consideration in policy development and curriculum planning for cybersafety education.



Cybersafety Policy

Cybersafety is the term used to describe protocols, practices, and key messages about staying safe online. Since the early 2000s, discussions concerned with cybersafety have become fundamental to policy and practice discourses about young people’s safety and wellbeing. In May 2008, the Australian Government committed almost \$126 million dollars towards developing and improving national cybersafety. Part of this funding was directed to the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), which was the Australian regulator for broadcasting, the internet, radiocommunications, and telecommunications at the time. Funding resulted in the *Cybersmart* initiative (now located at <https://www.esafety.gov.au>), an educational approach providing important cybersafety guidelines to the national community through an informational website and a *Cybersmart Outreach Program* that included in-school presentations and professional development sessions for teachers and parents (ACMA, n.d.). Cybersafety recommendations provided internet guidelines for controlling personal information and content and for responding to information shared by others.

In July 2015, the Office of the Children’s eSafety Commissioner took over responsibility for leading online safety education in Australia (www.esafety.gov.au, 2016). In the first 12 months, the office added a number of important services to the cybersafety portfolio (for example, *iParent*, *eSafetyWomen*, and *The Enhancing Online Safety for Children Act 2015*) and extended online safety practice to include digital citizenship principles. The principles of digital citizenship focus on supporting positive engagement with digital technology. In addition, the eSafety Commissioner has re-packaged the *Cybersmart* online safety guidelines under the logo: explore safely. An *eSafety Health Check* protocol has also been developed to encourage safe and positive online experience. Recommendations from the ACMA and the Office of Children’s eSafety Commissioner have similar messages and have become standard conventions for teaching cybersafety to young Australians (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of Australian Cybersafety Recommendations

Authorising Agency	Protocol	Key Practice
ACMA <i>Cybersmart</i>	Controlling Information	Keep profiles private. Protect personal details and passwords. Think before you post.
ACMA <i>Cybersmart</i>	Responding to Information	Block it. Report it. Talk about it.
eSafety Commissioner	Exploring Safely	Protect passwords. Protect personal information. Stay calm and chill. Report it. Think about your digital reputation. Consider the types of photos you send.
eSafety Commissioner	Digital Citizenship	Engage positively. Know your online world. Choose consciously.

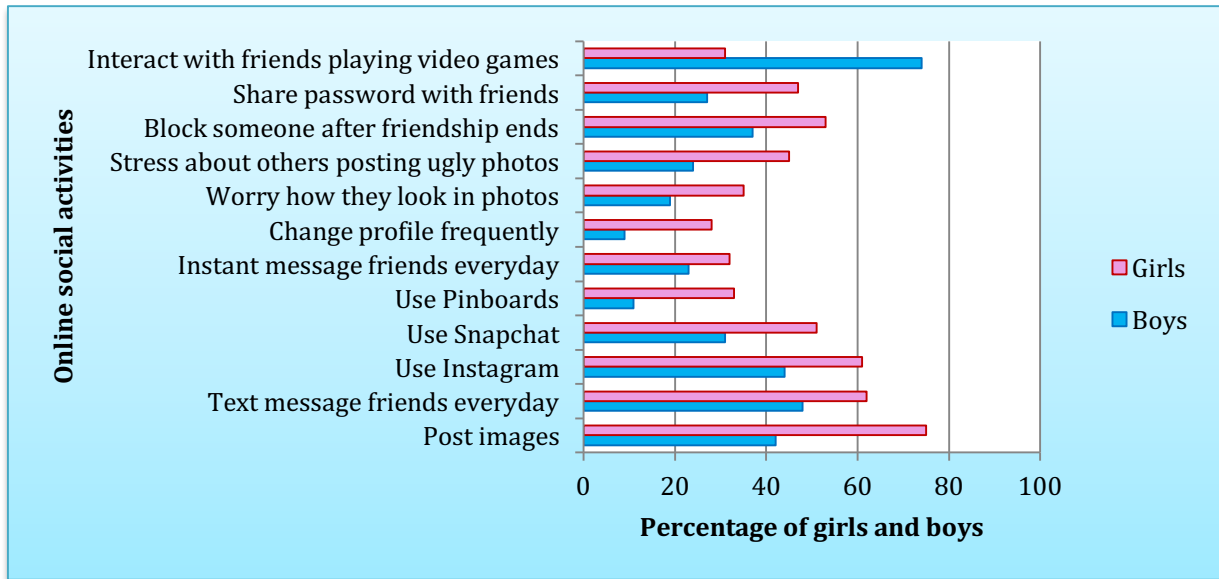
Despite these ongoing efforts, long term benefits from cybersafety education have been difficult to ascertain. Young people have continued to report online problems and their claims about cyberbullying and sexting have not abated. Indeed, cyberbullying has become the second most common form of bullying in Australia (Bully Zero Australia Foundation, 2016). Moreover, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that teen girls, especially young teen girls (i.e., girls 12 to 14 years of age), face online challenges that differ from boys (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011; Cross et al., 2009; Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, Zickuhr & Rainie, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2011). However, to date, gender-specific cybersafety practices remain in their infancy.

Gender-Specific Practices

Differences between girls' and boys' online participation have been widely reported. In 2008, the ACMA reported that girls and boys aged 8 to 17 years allocated their online time to different activities. Girls were more likely to participate in social activities such as instant messaging and online chatting (34% girls, 24% boys), emailing (26% girls, 16% boys), and visiting social websites (25% girls, 19% boys). They were more likely to author online content (47% girls, 38% boys), create their own profile on a social network site [SNSs] (41% girls, 27% boys), and post images or artwork (22% girls, 12% boys). Boys reported spending more time playing video and computer games (28% boys, 18% girls). The report concluded that Australian girls were more likely to use online services for social activities compared to boys.

More recent studies have confirmed that girls and boys have gender-specific online practices. For example, McAfee (2010) found that girls were more likely to share information about themselves online. This sharing included providing a description of themselves to strangers, uploading photos of themselves with others, and giving their password to friends. Lenhart et al. (2011) also found that girls were more likely to share their password with friends (47% girls, 27% boys). In addition, they found that girls were much keener texters than boys and that young teen girls (i.e., 12 to 13 years of age) were more likely to have a mobile phone than same age boys (67% girls, 47% boys). Common Sense Media (2012) surveyed young people 13 to 17 years of age about their online practices and social activities. They found that girls posted more photos online (75% girls, 42% boys), changed their profile more frequently (28% girls, 9% boys), were more worried about how they looked in photos (35% girls, 19% boys), and tended to stress about others posting "ugly photos" (p. 23) of them on social media sites (45% girls, 24% boys). Pew Research Centre also surveyed teens aged 13 to 17 (Lenhart, Duggan, Perrin, Stepler, Rainie, & Parker, 2015) about their online communication. They noted that after a friendship ended, girls were more likely to take steps to unfriend the person (63%, boys 53%), block the person (53% girls, 37% boys) or untag them in photos (49% girls, 35% boys). In the same study, girls spent more time each day text messaging (62% girls, 48% boys) and instant messaging (32% girls, 23% boys) friends. In contrast, girls were much less likely than boys to interact and spend time with friends while playing video games (31% girls, 74% boys). In all studies, girls and boys used 'media' to socialise and maintain friendships but girls' practices were dominated by social media services especially visually-oriented platforms such as Instagram (61% girls, 44% boys), Snapchat (51% girls, 31%), and online pinboards such as Pinterest (33% girls, 11% boys). Table 2 summarises the gender practices reported in the Common Sense (2012) and the Pew Research Center (Lenhart et al., 2015) studies.

Table 2
 Summary of girls' and boys' online social activities (adapted from Common Sense Media, 2012 and Pew Internet, 2015)



The summary provided in Table 2 highlights how girls' online activities appear to be more socially conspicuous and impression-oriented than boys. Given the historic view that intimate sharing is more central to teen girls' social practice (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982), this online orientation is not surprising. What is concerning is that these gender-specific practices have been linked to girls' online problems such as: cyberbullying and covert aggression (Cross et al., 2009), online drama and rumour spreading (Marwick, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2014), name-calling, meanness, and struggles with gossip (Marwick & boyd, 2011), and coercive pressures concerned with sexting (Albury, Crawford, Byron, & Mathews, 2013; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Across the studies cited, girls aged 12 to 14 were reported as more susceptible to these particular problems than slightly older girls (i.e., teens aged 16 to 18 years).

Given that teen girls' everyday interaction with peers and close friends has implications for their online safety and wellbeing, detailed investigation into the ways in which they manage their online experiences with friends is an important avenue for informing cybersafety policy. The fundamental aim of this study was to determine what online practices and strategies teen girls used to navigate online contexts with peers and close friends. The implication of the girls' actions, practices, and interactions for cybersafety policy and educational practice are discussed in this paper.

Methodology

This paper draws on survey and group interview data collected from four secondary schools in Queensland, Australia between April and June 2011 (Thompson, 2015). The study consisted of two stages. The first stage involved an online survey and the second stage involved group interviews (in the form of virtual classroom activities) and an online reflective journal. The purpose-built online survey was completed by 130 girls aged 13 years from four co-educational secondary schools. Survey questions included tick-the-box and Likert-scaled questions set out in four sections. The survey sections were designed to collect

information about the girls' school context, engagement at school, access to digital devices at school and home, and online practices and strategies. At the end of each section, a free-text option provided the girls with an opportunity to share their own ideas about the section content. In the final section of the survey, the girls were asked to respond to and interpret a set of purposefully designed emoticon illustrations. The emoticons were designed by an art teacher from a non-participating girls' secondary school. Each emoticon was designed in consideration of themes found in popular teen literature (e.g., *Girlfriend* magazine) and subjects brought up in casual conversations with teen girls. The task was designed to encourage the girls to share more detail about their online experience with other teen girls. Examples of emoticon illustrations are provided in *Figure 1*.

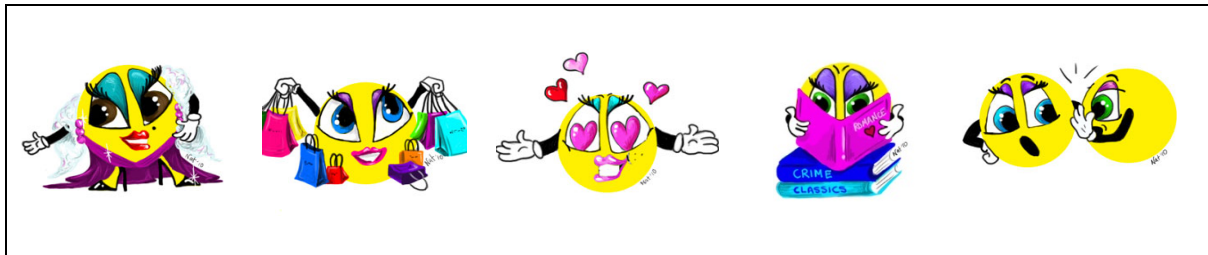


Figure 1. Examples of emoticon illustrations.

In stage two, 16 of the same girls were involved in a group interview and a reflective journal. The interview consisted of a series of group activities introduced through a PowerPoint presentation using the web conferencing platform Elluminate Live™. The girls were divided into groups of four. Each group took part in four activities: a practice session using the Elluminate Live™ tools, a group discussion about five of the survey emoticons, a group analysis of two video clips, and a group discussion of two vignette illustrations. The emoticons selected for discussion denoted a series of representative practices commonly linked to teen girls' interactions with friends (e.g., gossiping). The videos were short publically available YouTube clips that depicted scenes of difficult interaction between teens (e.g., homework encounter turns nasty and gossip travelling via mobile phones). The vignette illustrations showed two scenes of the same girl engaged in a sequence of actions that involve the use of technological devices and social media. In one illustration, the girl is using devices and social media by herself; in the second illustration, she is sequenced across a number of interactions involving mobile phone communication between friends. While these tasks were somewhat difficult for the girls, the use of video clips and vignette illustrations provided an effective process for eliciting their stories while maintaining their privacy (Barter & Renold, 2000; Hazel, 1995; Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010; Punch, 2002).

At the completion of the group session, the girls were given a hyperlink that took them directly to an online reflective journal. The journal task consisted of five online pages, each page asking them a series of questions about individual group activities. The questions were scaffolded using six question stems modified from the Bain, Ballantyne, Mills and Lester (2002) reflective thinking framework. The questions included the following stems: i) Describe in detail...; ii) How did you feel about...; iii) What experiences have you had that helped you to understand...; iv) What do you think the key issue is...; v) What do you think should happen if...; and vi) Do you have anything else to say about... . Scaffolding the questions in this way seemed to sustain the girls' focus on the task while promoting a smooth transition from simple descriptive answers to more carefully reasoned entries. The online journal was designed to support attention to privacy and safety while simultaneously providing a space for the girls to write about their personal experience.

A first level qualitative approach was used for the data analysis discussed in this paper (Saldana, 2009). For this purpose, the three data sets (i.e., survey responses, group interview contributions, and online journal accounts) were consolidated into two main groups: frequency/prevalence themes that included how many or how often practices were undertaken and, analytic themes which included accounts of the girls’ online actions, practices, and strategies with their peers and close friends.

Results

Cybersafety Practice

Controlling information. The girls easily described cybersafety recommendations for controlling online information. More than three quarters of them said they used recommended safety strategies on a daily basis. The three key strategies named were: keeping profiles private (84%), protecting personal details (75%), and protecting personal reputation (75%). The girls shared several examples of how these practices were translated into everyday use (see Table 3).

Table 3
Controlling Online Information (n=130)

Recommendation	Percentage (Number)	Girls’ Account
Keep profiles private.	84% (109)	Use media service privacy settings. Be selective about sharing profile. Never accept strangers as friends. Not friending people they hadn’t met.
Protect personal details.	75% (96)	Don’t use your full name. Don’t share your birth date. Don’t share your home location or country you live in. Use a made-up name.
Protect Personal Reputation ‘Think before you post’	75% (96)	Be polite. Don’t bitch about anyone. Don’t use foul language. Don’t say mean things. Don’t post inappropriate pictures.

In the main, sharing profiles with known people such as family and friends, “never accepting friendships with strangers”, and not friending people that they “hadn’t actually met” were key processes cited for keeping their social media profile private. “I always check to see if I personally know the person before accepting their friend request.” The girls clearly understood that they should not share personal details on their profile. Many of them reported using made-up names and not “mentioning anything personal” on their profile or in online messages. A small number of girls regularly checked their own profile to confirm privacy settings. “I googled myself and found my profile so I went straight to my privacy settings and changed it back.” The girls translated the ACMA *Cybersmart* think-before-you-post campaign into: never bitching about anybody; never pretending to be someone you’re not; never using foul language; not spreading rumours; and not saying mean things. Several girls said they avoided posting pictures to social media but it was not clear if this practice was used for controlling information or if it was related to parent rules and regulation for internet use. On the whole, there was a strong and consistent tendency for the girls to control their

privacy. Safety was cited as the main reason for this diligence. “My safety is very important and I am very strict with privacy. I always use privacy settings because if I am on a social networking site, I want to feel safe.” Largely, the girls appeared to govern their overall online participation in a cautious and responsible manner.

Responding to online content and messages. The girls described a number of strategies for responding to inappropriate online content and messages (see Table 4). Key strategies included: blocking offensive or unknown people (64%), reporting problems to adults (69%), and talking about it to parents (69%) and friends (56%). Although these percentages were lower than might be expected given the heavy push towards cybersafety, in the main, the girls seemed reasonably confident in their ability to manage online messages. As pointed out by one girl, “you can always block, delete, and report [it], where as in life you can’t”. At the same time, more than one third of the girls said they would not block the person if they knew them. Some girls (close to 12%) offered a more mature talk-it-out approach: “I would not block a person that I know. I try to work it out with [them] face-to-face if they’re mean to me. I would ask them face-to-face why they said that”. On the other hand, some girls ignored it (4%), just deleted the problem message (2%), or simply logged out (2%). Several girls had quite strong views about people who were involved in online gossip. “I think they should be locked up in jail, I mean murderers do and lots of people commit suicide because gossip was spread about them.” A significant number of the girls claimed they reported online problems to parents. “I always tell my mom or dad if someone is making fun of me online and if someone is talking bad about me, friends or family.” While several girls said they would ask a friend for help with online problems, more girls acknowledged that they spoke to their parents about these concerns. Hope for adult intervention was clearly articulated by many of them. These girls suggested that parents were in a better position to make sure the person who sent the message would “get in trouble” and be “heavily dealt with”. Because the **actual** number of reports by the girls was not collected, it was difficult to confirm the full extent of their reporting practice.

Table 4
Responding to Online Content and Messages (n=130)

Strategy	Percentage (Number)	Girls’ Account
Block it.	64% (82)	Yes, I do block people who are sending me rude pictures or messages or haven’t been nice to me.
Report it.	69% (90)	I blocked her and reported her to Facebook staff as well as a teacher.
Talk about it to: parents	69% (90)	Just tell an adult and they’ll stop them in their tracks.
...friends	56% (73)	I go to my friends with all my problems.
Talk-it-out.	12% (15)	I try to work it out with someone face-to-face if they’re mean to me before blocking them
Ignore it.	4% (5)	Just step away and do not get involved with it.
Delete it.	2% (3)	Just delete it!
Log out.	2% (3)	If you see a rude picture then get off straight away.

Patterns of Online Interaction

Normal. In this study, most of the girls constructed their everyday online experience as intensely participatory and well-established. Just over 90% of them owned a mobile phone and close to 70% had their own computer, laptop, and/or tablet device. By and large, the majority of the girls reported online participation that included networking, texting, and messaging with friends. All but one girl had internet access and more than three-quarters of them reported up to three hours a day of internet activity. Several of the girls described their everyday practice as “multitasking”. That is, doing homework online, researching projects on the internet, asking friends for assistance with schoolwork, chatting on the phone, networking and messaging friends, playing games, and listening to music “all at the same time”. Many of the girls spoke freely about their Facebook activity and confirmed that this activity was a good way to organise social activities and find out what was happening with friends. These girls described similar levels of cybersafety awareness and appeared to be equipped with the necessary tools to surf the net safely. They were plugged-in and switched on: a state of engagement that seemed to be the norm.

Cautious. A small group of girls operated from a much more cautionary stance. These girls talked about the ways in which they engaged in overly meticulous and elaborate practices to safeguard their identity and protect themselves from harm. One girl constructed her approach as follows:

Well, I do use Facebook and Hotmail but I’m quite cautious about the dangers of Facebook. I make sure I check my personal settings and how non-friended people see my profile. I also have Hotmail but I set random reminders from things such as Facebook and random advertising things and chains even from friends to junk and delete them. I make sure I don’t open them or put all my emails into files then with the ones I don’t want I sweep them which removes them permanently and makes sure more messages don’t come from them.

The potential danger of Facebook was clearly noted in this extract. These dangers included: different categorises of people (e.g., “non-friended people”), inappropriate viewing of profile information, chain emails from friends, and advertising emails containing possible viruses. The girl negotiated and managed these dangers by checking personal settings (e.g., how non-friends see personal profile on Facebook), setting personal reminders to junk and delete files, and not opening random advertising and other emails that might contain viruses. Many of her strategies appeared to be consistent with cybersafety recommendations (i.e., controlling and responding to online information). However, her strategies for removing email viruses and deleting files from her computer appeared to be somewhat excessive, especially for internet-use patterns consistent with her age group. In any case, her account demonstrated how some girls talked in an overly protective and excessively concerned way about their online safety. The extent to which perceptions about online dangers interrupted or minimised her everyday interactions with peers and close friends was not clear.

Confident. Some girls accepted social networking risks as commonplace to online communication. These girls did not worry about being overly diligent with their personal identity and were somewhat relaxed in terms of content postings and image uploads. When using Facebook, they talked to friends about their personal experiences, posted images that weren’t too revealing but were happy for friends to see what they were up to and what events they were attending. Privacy settings designed by SNS providers were the main safety

measure used. They considered this practice sufficient to protect them from more extreme problems. They were more likely to say “their parents trusted them to do the right thing” and often commented about needing “a bit of privacy”.

Careless. None of the girls openly admitted to engaging in online risky behaviour. However, a few of girls described online encounters and practices that had a more lackadaisical, almost careless approach to personal safety. These particular girls were somewhat dismissive of the rules and protocols recommended for online safety. They openly reported using other girls’ names to camouflage their own identity or to attract attention and one girl claimed that she made up lies so people would think she was trendy. In contrast to the majority who agreed that they used code names to protect their identity, these girls constructed this practice as peculiar. As one girl put it, “I never use weird names to protect myself that is just sad :(.” For the most part, these girls’ actions appeared to be attention seeking types of behaviours, perhaps to gain social acceptance or group recognition. Regardless of intent, these girls exuded a confidence that had potential to make them vulnerable to online problems.

Non-user. Two girls said that they did not use social media services at all while one girl talked about a general unfamiliarity with most social media services. “I don’t have anything like chatrooms, Twitter and all that stuff. I don’t even know what most of that stuff is anyway”. A small number of girls said they only used texting facilities on their phone to keep in touch with parents. All of these girls claimed genuine disinterest in Facebook. They said that they preferred face-to-face communication with friends. One girl explained,

I think people my age shouldn’t have Facebook. I don’t have Facebook, it causes an unnecessary invasion into people’s private lives and encourages people to lie about their age. I know there will be plenty of people who disagree with me but that is my view.

The girls were not questioned about their disinterest in Facebook although undercurrents of risk and danger as well as adult regulation and control were noticeable in their contributions.

Not normal. Several girls raised points of interest in relation to non-users. The excerpt below highlights some of these points.

I think most girls my age use things like Facebook and mobile phones, in fact you are actually considered weird not to. There is only one person in my group without Facebook and we all try and talk her into getting it because it’s a really fun and good way to connect. But I always know where to draw the line, whether I have been on line too long or whether or not to add a person. There are times when I talk to people and get no response for different reasons and for the most part, I don’t care if they don’t reply unless it’s someone I have a crush on then I care but I think that is fairly normal for a 13 year old girl.

This girl’s account highlights the significance of digital device ownership and social media use in teen girls’ lives. She suggested that most normal 13-year-old girls had mobile phones and used Facebook. Girls who did not use mobile phones and Facebook were “weird” or not normal. By attaching certain attributes to the use of digital devices and SNSs, this girl’s account highlighted how non-digital girls were pressured to become digital, to take up or adopt the rules of conduct appropriate to digital culture for girls their age. This girl shared the expectation of being connected, and, in part, suggested that the boundary between normal

digital citizenship and not normal digital citizenship influenced teen girls’ online practice. In other words, being connected (i.e., using digital devices and Facebook) created a social boundary that controlled who was in and who was out of the ‘normal’ group. This girl’s account hinted that pressures to be connected raised tensions between girls who had stricter controls on their internet use and device ownership.

The girls’ patterns of online interaction have been summarised in Table 6. It is important to note that there was reasonable evidence to suggest that these girls attached particular attributes to digital device ownership and social media use which established a tension or boundary between what was seen as normal and not normal practice. Consequently, it’s possible that at least some of the girls felt pressured to adopt or create the impression that they were wholly engaged with digital culture to avoid being cast as not normal or weird. There was also some suggestion that these girls had particular expectations and rules of conduct for online communication with friends and that these hopes influenced the ways they managed and regulated their online practice. Further analysis of the girls’ contributions showed that regardless of their customary pattern of interaction (e.g., cautionary or casual), their online conduct with close friends was different to their interaction with same-gender non-friends, that is, other girls.

Table 6
Summary of the girls’ patterns of online interaction.

Pattern of Interaction	Characteristics	Girls’ Account
Normal	Intensely participatory and well equipped.	I think it’s important for teenage girls to be involved in things like Facebook, it is a good way to keep in touch with people and it’s a great way to communicate.
Cautious	Overly meticulous and use elaborate practices to safeguard identity to protect themselves from harm.	I have a question only my real friends know which I use to identify them. I do so casually as I may get teased because I am overprotective of myself.
Confident	Accept social networking risks as commonplace to online communication.	Most girls I’m friends with do talk to other people online but I know we are all careful with what we say and do.
Careless	Somewhat dismissive of the rules and protocols recommended for online safety.	I make up lies so people think I’m trendy.
Non-User	Do not use social media services and/or have very limited interaction with texting/messaging.	I don’t have anything like chatrooms, Twitter and all that stuff. I don’t even know what most of that stuff is anyway
Not Normal	Do not use mobile phones or Facebook.	I think most girls my age use things like Facebook and mobile phones, in fact you are actually considered weird not to

Other Girls

The online conduct of ‘other girls’ drew considerable response from the girls in this study. Recounts about their online interactions with these girls included problems such as: being called names, swearing and foul language, rude comments, gossiping, telling secrets, sharing inappropriate images and content, showing off, and spamming on Facebook. “I think most girls my age can be very mean and secretive online.” “They worry about appearances, getting a boyfriend and being popular.” While the girls did not construct other girls’ poor conduct as cyberbullying and sexting, they readily described their actions as “mean”. Several girls provided specific accounts of other girls’ online conduct.

I think most girls can be really mean on any social network and can hurt girls’ feelings and can end up getting in a lot of trouble.

I think most girls my age take inappropriate photos of themselves and post them on Facebook for boys’ attention.

They often post pictures of themselves posing and have friendship fights over Facebook.

Girls are most likely to always talk about boys on Facebook and be very immature and swear to others, which is why Facebook should be banned!

Girls are more likely to behave badly towards each other online as they can be as tough as they want and use foul language and the looks and size of the person who is affected cannot react the same as they would in person.

I think Year 8 girls should be able to go online and talk to their peers without all the swearing because some girls in our grade just have a mouth like you wouldn’t believe.

It was clear that relationships with other girls had significant impact on the girls’ everyday experience and that the character of these relationships was based on particular expectations and rules of conduct. These expectations and rules of conduct appeared to define, shape, and regulate the ways in which the girls negotiated their online interactions. For example, the expectation that friends would be kind and supportive operated to weaken privacy practices and loosen content sharing protocols (e.g., “Only my two closest friends can access my information”). ‘Best friend’ talk or in-group standing was particularly powerful in shifting privacy settings. In contrast, expectations that other girls could be unkind, gossip, divulge secrets, and behave inappropriately operated to strengthen privacy practices (“I block people who I think are mean”) and minimised sharing (“I keep my private stuff private”). In other words, out-of-group standing created rigid and strictly regulated online privacy boundaries. At the same time, there was evidence that best friend practices (“keeping secrets hidden from everyone but friends”) were misused by close friends (“I thought she was my friend”). The ways in which the girls constructed ‘best friends’ and ‘other girls’ hinted that the idea of close friendship and the potential for meanness constituted significant and powerful structures in how these teen girls navigated social interactions in online contexts.

Discussion

This study confirmed that teen girls understood and used online practices and strategies consistent with cybersafety recommendations. The analyses showed that the girls, like other teens their age, were well-connected with peers and close friends. For most, digital devices and social media applications such as Facebook extended their everyday experience well beyond the schoolyard. This communicative flexibility was valued by almost all of the girls and most of them demonstrated a strong desire to stay connected with social media. Sharing information and connecting with friends through online networks was the norm. The girls who did not engage with friends using mobile phones and internet services were the minority. Although the girls enjoyed online multitasking they were most interested in the social aspects of online participation. These trends were consistent with the gender-specific patterns of online interaction discussed earlier in the paper.

Most of the girls claimed that they used different practices at different times for different people. However, some girls described a broader cross-section of practices than others and these girls appeared to be somewhat more able to navigate in and out of different online contexts and assume or adopt different online personas more readily. These girls appeared to have higher levels of online freedom and showed a tendency towards a more relaxed style of risk management. At the same time, some of the girls described actions limited to a few practices such as text messaging and face-to-face chatting. Their ability to navigate in and out of various online contexts and to adapt their identity for successful negotiation appeared to be restricted to a smaller set of strategies (e.g., using SNSs privacy settings and blocking people), greater attention to online safety, and heightened concerns about personal privacy. Differences between girls' patterns of interaction highlighted two significant points. First, limiting online participation appeared to keep teen girls safe but it also seemed to inhibit their freedom to explore and develop the social skills needed to interact with confidence in online contexts. Second, young teen girls appeared to have different types of experiences in online contexts and, therefore, cybersafety guidelines might better service teen girls by offering a diverse set of options to address the interactional practices of different groups of girls. The point of policy is to address the majority. However, the research analyses suggested that the interpretation of cybersafety policy by mid-range policy actors such as curriculum writers, school leaders, and teachers (Singh, Thomas, & Harris, 2013) required a translation that explicated and elaborated on the everyday interactions and online practice of young teen girls (Thompson, 2015).

Pressures to conform to cybersafety recommendations became particularly noticeable when the girls discussed their online engagement with close friends and other girls. The high visibility and socially dense character of online participation appeared to be an important platform for gaining acceptance with friends and shaping social relationships with other girls. Tensions that emerged appeared to push the girls to take-up two sets of practices: a strict protective set for other girls and a more relaxed set for close friends. Transitions between the two positions were most conspicuous in the ways the girls handled risk management. For example, most of the girls modified safety guidelines substantially to be more inclusive with friends. Openly sharing content, images and experiences, code names, even passwords was common practice amongst friends. The girls did not appear to consider these adaptations to be in breach of cybersafety guidelines. Instead, these actions were considered to be an important part of being a good friend. While the girls reported having difficulties with other girls, it was deception from best friends that appeared to be most hurtful. This finding is crucial to understanding the types of risks that teen girls face in online contexts. While

internet studies have shown that girls' propensity for over-sharing is problematic (see, for example, Marwick, 2012), contact with 'best friends' appeared to make them more vulnerable to particular forms of interpersonal conflict. While risky content, privacy risks, and contact risks from unknowns (Livingstone et al., 2011) require constant vigilance, the girls' friendship practices suggested that cybersafety education might be extended to include skills and understandings concerned with girls' relationship building practices, friendship expectations, and impression management strategies. Striking a balance between online safety protocols and teen girls' friendship practice requires a closer examination. However, the analyses suggests that policy actors responsible for implementing cybersafety policy at the mid-range level (e.g., the school) need to take into account the differences between girls' and boys' online practices and the types of risk they each face in online contexts.

The practices and experiences claimed by the girls emphasised how policy discourses concerned with cybersafety are often written in a generic way and, therefore, do not take into account the specific needs of young teens. Consequently, it is important for policy translators such as education department advisors, regional directors, and school principals to take account of gender-specific realities of young people's everyday practice (Singh et al., 2013; Thompson, 2015). While it is clear that cybersafety policy covers a wide range of online users, the analyses suggests that young teens, especially girls, are likely to be a vulnerable group with specific needs. Their specific needs should be taken into account in statements about cybersafety and recommendations for online practice. Young people can be significant contributors to the planning and development of programs and protocols aimed to ensure their safety and wellbeing (ACMA, n.d.; Office of the Children's eSafety Commissioner, 2016) and therefore, it seems appropriate to engage teen girls in discussions about cybersafety and online friendship practices. This process should take place at different stages of policy development such as formulation, dissemination, and enactment (Singh et al., 2013; Thompson, 2015).

One other point should be raised. The girls described many behaviours and experiences that had the attributes of bullying and cyberbullying. However, the girls did not construct these experiences in this way. Instead, they described these interactions as "mean". The girls' accounts of inappropriate image sharing showed similar tendencies. The girls did not describe this practice as sexting. It was simply described as "taking inappropriate photos of themselves for boys' attention". These trends raise theoretical questions about why the girls did not associate this conduct with the terms cyberbullying and sexting. While this avenue of questioning was not pursued at the time, there is some research evidence to suggest that inconsistent definitions for cyberbullying and sexting have seriously limited how these practices are understood by young people (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Sourander et al., 2010). The analyses points to the need for further investigation of young teen girls' experience and understanding of these particular issues.

Conclusion

This study provided valuable insight into the online experiences of teen girls from four Queensland secondary schools. The starting point for this study was at a time when the everyday interaction of teens was changing and the need for research in the field was undisputed. Since then, teen girls have become increasingly active in online contexts using newer devices and additional social media services. Discourses associated with cybersafety have come to emphasise the importance of digital citizenship. Given these changes and the

specificity of this study's research location, care must be taken in drawing conclusions about teen girls' practice in other contexts. At the same time, the girls articulated an everyday experience dominated by particular online practices and actions specific to interactions with same-gender friends. Through this telling, the girls offered valuable tools for considering the online interactions of other girls their age. The need for gender-specific cybersafety guidelines was clear but further investigation is recommended so that the typicalness of girls' online practices at various ages and in different sociocultural contexts can be examined. Additional research would help to support clearer directives for cybersafety policy.

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