

## Social Media and the Teenage Feminist

The internet is a hive of activity for young people and people in general. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Blogger, and the list goes on of potential places to create an identity that may or may not be based on a perceived reality. Teenagers are no longer simply consumers of media, but are able to use the internet to create their own identity that is not necessarily in line with media portrayals of their lives. In this blog post/article, I wish to outline some of the ways in which teenage girls are using the internet in the creation of their “gender identity”. Is there a reaction against the notion of the “living doll” as discussed in Natasha Walter's book about “the return of sexism” (Walter 2010)? Are there those that turn away from aspirations of being a footballer's wife, the next top model, or the next Kardashian? Is there movement beyond “the body project” (Brumberg 1997) where identity centers around the perfection of appearance for the gaze of others?

The teenage years can be a turbulent time for young girls. Bodies are changing and discomfort and insecurities often follow (Frisén 2006). In a survey of 400 girls between the ages of 14 and 16 in Ireland, 70% said they were dissatisfied with their body shape and 49% reported that they had dieted in order to lose weight (Mooney et al. 2010). Meanwhile, mass media perpetuates ideal, often unobtainable, beauty standards that the teenage girl entering womanhood is expected to meet. The culture of celebrity further emphasises these body ideals as the female form is constantly under the microscope, being critiqued for being too fat or too thin.

Walter (2010) comments on the narrow view of womanhood that is represented in the media; media that influences girls in their gender performativity (see Thiel-Stern 2009). With the term “gender performance”, theorist Judith Butler (2006) speaks of gender as a “doing” rather than a “being”. As de Beauvoir (2011, p. 283) famously said, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. Gender is performed in the sense that the individual becomes female or male through the acts, gestures and desires that are articulated through the body. It is through the repetition of these articulations and acts that gender is materialised (Butler 2006; Davies 2003). Narrow media portrayals of womanhood can give the illusion of an unrevisable “natural” gender that in reality conflicts with the heterogeneity of ways of being.

In theory, giving teenage girls control over their identity portrayal on the internet should open for a diversity of feminine expressions and perspectives, as womanhood is anything but homogeneous (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Perhaps the internet can help us move away from the cookie-cutter, plastic image of the living Barbie doll, to something a little more realistic.

## Blogging

According to Findahl (2010) 20% of girls between the ages of 12 and 13 have their own blog. Girls are the most active internet users with regards to social media (Johansson et al.2013), which is often cause for concern as parents and other adults worry about the risks that girls may be exposed to on the internet, in particular with regards to the possibility of coming into contact with sexual predators (Lenhart 2007; Sveningsson Elm 2009). However, Thiel-Stern (2009) suggests that girls can gain power through the internet as it provides an avenue for resisting “mass culture's constructions of commercialized femininity and sexuality”. Teenage girls can find a space to portray an identity that is more in keeping with reality as they perceive it, engaging in topics beyond the stereotypical issues of boys, make-up, fashion and gossip. As writer John Crace (2009) comments in an article in *The Guardian*, “Some of the web's most influential voices now belong to bloggers as young as 13”.

Even if the internet can provide teenagers with an outlet for discussions beyond stereotypical “girl stuff”, Crace (2009) mentions that some of the most popular teen blogs are those written by girls interested in style and fashion. This has proved to be a profitable market for designers and retailers who have their clothes freely “advertised” through the blogs. However, girls blogging about fashion does nothing to dispel the cultural discourse that equates femininity with appearance. Indeed, many blogs that I came across whilst searching for one to examine more closely revealed teenage girls representing themselves in accordance with stereotypical, exaggerated femininity (see, for example, Barberio 2012; Fornander n.d.). That being said, amongst Crace's (2009) list of influential teen bloggers was one that seemed more dedicated to social change rather than personal style and self-adornment. When feminist Julie Zeilinger started blogging in 2009 at age 16 she said:

I began blogging this year because the mainstream feminist blogs I read weren't representing the teenage perspective on issues that directly affect us. I write about feminist issues from a teenager's perspective, such as reproductive justice, body image and sexism in the media – anything that is impacting my generation and needs to be discussed (Quoted in Crane 2009).

Zeilinger identifies as a feminist searching for that branch of feminism that she, and others who fall under the category “teenager”, can relate to. In failing to find it amongst the mainstream feminist blogs, she created a space of her own where she could express herself as a *teen* feminist.

In this post I shall take a closer look at Zeilinger's blog, the “FBomb”, in order to provide an insight into how teenage feminists are “doing” femininity as a kind of backlash to commercialised femininity and the sexism that results from females being viewed by themselves and others as “living dolls”.

## The FBomb

The FBomb (2009) advertises itself as a “blog/community created by, and for, teen and college-aged women and men who care about their rights and want to be heard”. Articles are not just written by the blog's creator, Zeilinger, but by a community of young feminists. Whereas blogs focusing on fashion are often littered with images, words are instead the dominant communicative tool on the FBomb. Both teenagers and college students create their feminist identities through writing, showing themselves as both literate as well as socially and culturally aware, as they comment on pop-culture, politics, literature and idols and successful women beyond those who live beneath the sign of Hollywood Hills. Here is a space where women are no longer relegated to the position of the gazed upon object (see Hällgren 2012). Indeed, the lens is never directed towards the self, but instead towards the wider world in which the girls/women wish to make their opinions heard as subjects of their society. Only the women's words are presented for scrutiny, not their female form.

Scrolling through the list of posts, it is clear that many of the girls/women feel frustration and anger due to society's treatment and representation of them, as well as the continual policing of women's bodies. Posts such as *How I Learned Being Seen as “Sexy” Doesn't Equate to Happiness* (Gabby C 2016a), *Teen Girls Are Going To Keep Rebelling About Sexist Dress Codes* (Gabby C 2016b) and *Dress Codes: Stepping Stones to Rape Culture* (Amy A 2013) are just a few of the posts where this frustration is visible. These three posts are particularly interesting from the point of view of “doing” femininity as they reveal a paradox. In the first post, by Gabby C, attention is drawn to the ideal of the “sexy” girl. Gabby C (2016a) writes:

By 14, I realized being considered “sexy” meant that boys would forget to ask me how I was doing, that I wouldn't have to expose any part of myself to them. I found that if I wore tight dresses and straightened my hair, my peers seemed to like me more. I began messaging teen boys online for approval and validation and found out that an older boy wanted to touch me.

Gabby C discusses her position as an object to be formed in order to gain the approval of others. Whether or not she becomes an accepted and included member of society seems to be tied to whether or not she can “do” “sexy” femininity correctly. Her identity is bound to the expectations of others. As Hällgren (2012) says, “it could be argued that learning to be a woman also means learning to be objectified in the gaze of a judging other”.

At the same time as girls are expected to reveal their curves in order to be “sexy”, they also receive the message that the female form is to be hidden from view for fear of being a distraction to others. Gabby C (2016b) continues her discussion of society's control over female bodies in her post titled *Teen Girls*

### *Are Going To Keep Rebelling About Sexist Dress Codes:*

When girls wear short skirts, we call them “inappropriate.” When girls make bold decisions about their lives, we call them “vain.” When girls call themselves feminists, we call them “ugly.” When girls ask for justice in an unfair educational system, we call them “unheard.” But teen girls are refusing to tolerate any of the above any longer.

There is obvious anger in Gabby C's words; an emotion that is evident throughout the post. The final paragraph reads:

So, in response, young women will continue to advocate for their right to gender expression and respect in their schools and make their voices as loud as they possibly can. Is this not loud enough, administrators? (Gabby C 2016b).

In this post, Gabby C is able to freely express her feelings and opinions with regards to the policing of the female form. She shows herself to be someone who is knowledgeable about the various online campaigns that resist this policing, and she wishes to add her voice to the debate. There is a sense that she is moving towards an identity of “activist”.

In the post *Dress Codes: Stepping Stones to Rape Culture* Amy A (2013) adds to the discussions of female dress codes. Amy A sees a relationship between dress codes and rape culture, saying:

Girls are the distractors and boys are the distracted, which puts the onus of responsibility on the girls to keep from distracting the boys. To me, this sounds an awful lot like victim blaming when it comes to rape – women are just so attractive to men that men can't resist them.

Once again, a tone of anger is evident in Amy A's post, especially when it comes to the final paragraph where she comments on what schools *should* be focusing their energies on as opposed to regulating clothes. The blog provides Amy A with an avenue where she can be more than a “teenage school girl”, moving to a position where she is a “commentator” on the life of a teenage school girl. She moves from the position of an object for the judgement of others to a position of subject where it is *she* who is doing the judging.

### **From object to subject**

Thiel-Stern (2009) comments on the fact that girls are often seen to be victimised through social media. However, through the FBomb (2009) girls are seen to gain power and a voice to critique how society portrays, represents and attempts to control their gender. Teenagers and college students are using blogging as a form of rebellion and online activism, finding a space for lending their voice to the feminist movement as well as society in general. Teenage girls are constrained by both the gender hierarchy (Hirdman 2001) where a man's status is higher than a women's, and a hierarchy of age where teenagers are not yet adults and are therefore still under the guardianship of others.

The girls and young women who blog on the FBomb (2009) are seen to be independent thinkers who are decided, vocal, and often angry, words that are stereotypically associated with males (Bem 1993; Smedler & Drake 2006). They are not doing gender according to the stereotypical “rules”, but are instead actively engaged in criticising those “rules” that seek to position them, treating them as objects rather than subjects in the world. They are looking for the freedom to create their own identity, presenting themselves according to their own wishes.

According to Bailey et al. (2013) participation in social media could allow girls and young women to “take back the pen from the consumeristic forces of mainstream media and rewrite social scripts about what it means to be a girl”. This appears to be the goal of the girls and young women who add their voice to the Fbomb (2009), and yet it may be wondered how this voice translates into their everyday lives. Is blogging the *only* arena they have for activism? Is it possible for this online activism to translate into action in the real world? Without further investigation, the answers to these questions remain unknown. However, regardless of whether or not the girls and young women blogging on the FBomb carry their activism with them in their everyday lives, online is a space where it is possible to openly identify and have a voice as a Feminist, challenging society's gender norms. Young women find a space to comment on their world, creating their identity as “young feminists who are just a little bit pissed off” (FBomb 2009).

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