

Meet, prey, like: A study of gifted girls' interactions with social media

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Abstract

Gifted and talented girls today struggle with similar social and emotional challenges as those in the past, but their world looks different. With the changes in the media and communication ecology, they are navigating a highly digitised and mediated social landscape. This article explores gifted teenage girls' lived experiences of Facebook, utilising phenomenological research on the experiences of five female students in high profile leadership roles in their secondary schools. The findings suggest these participants experienced a complex juggling act as they managed the tensions resulting from their in-school micro-celebrity status and online social media presence. Suggestions are offered on how educators and school leaders can act to best support gifted and talented girls in their use of social media.

Introduction

Social media plays a large part in teenage life and brings with it a host of potential benefits as well as possible harms. It is necessary for young people and those around them to ensure their online safety and encourage positive usage. Social media, as a subset of a greater new media landscape, is highly topical. What is the impact on gifted girls given their unique needs and challenges? How can we act to help them harness the positive aspects of this tool, while protecting themselves from its harmful effects?

This article is based on a research investigation on the Facebook experiences of five gifted girls occupying high profile leadership roles in their respective large, urban high schools. Employing a phenomenological approach to the collection and analysis of the data, this study explores the underlying essence of their experience with Facebook. The article is divided into five sections. The first section offers a background to the study, including a description of the methodology utilized. The next sections fall under three key themes: Meet, Prey and Like. Each of these sections includes a review of the literature in two fields (gifted and talented, and social media), findings and discussion pertinent to each theme. The final section suggests conclusions, including implications for educators, and future directions. In addition to raising awareness of the topic, the aim of this article is to encourage discussion and action, and to provide some possible strategies of how to best support gifted girls with their social media engagement.

Background

There is significant research on the unique needs and social and emotional challenges experienced by gifted and talented girls (e.g. Callahan & Cunningham, 1994; Hollinger & Elyse, 1984; Kerr, 1991; Reis, 1987, 2002c; Silverman, 2000). Some research posits that “gifted children have excellent social adjustment,” but clinical experience shows gifted girls may “suffer great loneliness and endure inner conflicts between their desire to fit in and their ideals” (Silverman, 2000, p. 291). In a world where the norms of social engagement are being rewritten, especially with the advent of new media forms such as social networking media, gifted girls' social and emotional well-being is an even more important area of research.

Giftedness and leadership

This study bases its understanding of giftedness on Gagné's (2009) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), which delineates between gifts as naturally exceptional abilities in a physical and/or mental domain, versus talent which is the excellent mastery of competencies - a result of the deliberate development of gifts through a talent development process which takes into account environmental, temperamental and chance factors. The domains in Gagné's model include mental aptitude with the intellectual, creative, perceptual and social domains, and physical aptitude with the muscular and motor control domains (2009). Those who are gifted in the social domain display traits such as perceptiveness, influence, persuasion, eloquence and leadership (Gagné, 2009). Considering the environmental catalysts of leadership talent development, such as in-school opportunities like prefects, sports captaincy and cultural leaders, it is appropriate that school student leaders come under this definition of gifted and talented in the social domain.

While intellectual giftedness is not a requisite of giftedness in leadership, literature suggests the two are interconnected (Batson, 2000; Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 2000; Sisk, 2000). Sisk's (2000) findings also showed an overlap between gifted student leaders and intellectually gifted students.

Leaders are decisive which relates to the intellectual characteristics of analytic thinking, complex thought processes, and exceptional reasoning ability. Decision-making requires leaders to be rapid learning (intellectual characteristic) with a facility for abstraction (intellectual characteristic) to handle enormous amounts of information. (pp. 6-7)

Gifted and talented girls today are situated in a digitally mediated ecology, particularly with the advent of social networking media. Social networking media is a form of 'social media,' which refer to online technologies that allow people to create and publish content of their choice for viewing by a select audience (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Social networking media, in particular, allows users to create a personal profile

on which they can upload information such as photographs or thoughts, and it also allows them to connect to other users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

The social media site of focus for this study is Facebook as it is the dominant social networking site in the industry with a reported 901 millions monthly active users, over 125 billion friend connections (Facebook Newsroom, 2012) and the most traffic at seven billion total visitors per month (Sutter, 2012).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach underpinned by phenomenological principles, such as that of seeking to understand a person's reality by focusing on their perceptions and experiences of a phenomenon, ultimately seeking to identify the essence of their experience (Becker, 1992), in this case gifted and talented girls' lived experience using social networking media.

Participants

Three sampling strategies were used to select the participants: 1) stratified purposeful sampling for school selection (approaching schools that represent a variety of locations, types and deciles); 2) criterion-based sampling for students (selecting participants who meet the criteria of being in recognized school leadership roles and being active Facebook users); 3) random sampling for the final five participants (the participants for the study were randomly selected from the pool of volunteers): Alice, Bridie, Gina, Sarah and Imogen (pseudonyms were used). The participants were 17 or 18 years old at the time of the study, and were in significant leadership roles in their schools and users of Facebook. They volunteered to take part in this research having responded personally to an advertisement poster at their schools.

Data collection and analysis

Unstructured interviews lasting no more than 100 minutes were conducted with each participant. According to Creswell (2007), the purpose of phenomenological interviews is to be able to describe the meaning of people's experiences of a phenomenon.

The chosen strategy for interview data analysis was based on Moustakas' (1994) six- step modification of the Stevich-Colaizzi-Keen method, which is often used in phenomenological research. The first five steps help to organize ideas and refine main themes whilst the sixth step determines the key findings or essence of the phenomenon.

Meet

Gifted literature: Friend-ing the right people

Some adolescent gifted and talented girls experience social difficulties because they see their gifts and talents as a social disadvantage (Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988; Reis, 2002b; Silverman, 2000). In the quest to develop friendships with the “right” group of girls, they may “sacrifice their gifted friends” (Silverman, 2000, p. 303). Some may experience loneliness and isolation, especially if they have been rejected by their peers who may not value high achievement, or they may lack the time to develop friendships due to commitments to their work (Reis, 2002b). This is further exacerbated by the traits of sensitivity, tendermindedness and vulnerability often seen in gifted students (Karnes, Chauvin & Trant, 1984). According to Reis (2002b), many gifted and talented girls feel the pressure to conform because being gifted is seen as being different to the norm.

Gifted girls do not want to be considered different from their friends and same-age peers. Indeed, a tendency exists for many females, regardless of age, to try to minimize their differences. For many gifted girls, however, the problem becomes more difficult as...their talents and gifts set them apart from their peers and friends. (p. 7)

Kerr (1991) explains that the process of social adaptation to hide gifts and talents, which includes an “accommodating personality” and a “resourceful adaptation to the environment” (p. 140) is a barrier to achievement. Yet, Silverman (1989) suggested these traits and skills could be seen as strengths and useful for female student leaders. Silverman (2000) also believed high achievement and social acceptance need not be mutually exclusive if gifted and talented girls had “the support of others like themselves” (p. 305).

Social media literature: Social networking media and the development of relationships

The ability to develop acquaintance-level and intimate relationship connections with other users is one of the primary uses of Facebook for teenagers (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Stern, 2004). Pempek et al (2009) suggest Facebook is a positive influence in relationship development because “students are using Facebook to facilitate pre-established relationships” and “the communication with friends that occurs on Facebook may help young adults resolve key developmental issues” (p. 236). One of the functions of Facebook includes being able to gain instant feedback from network friends on items that have been posted onto their profile. Stern (2004) suggests this feedback is important for young people as a means of self-validation and for developing intimate relationships. Lenhart and Madden’s (2007) extensive study on the online behaviour of American teenagers showed that “teens get to feel like they are part of a group of

like-minded friends, and can visualize their network of relationships, displaying their popularity for others" (p. 24).

Findings and discussion

The participants explained that Facebook was a great site through which they could **meet** virtually with their friends and acquaintances, to continue their social relations offline into their online sphere. This, however, influenced the manner in which they portrayed themselves and the content they chose to share with their network. Like most adolescent girls, a key developmental need is a sense of belonging, but for gifted and talented girls, this is often at the expense of the expression and development of their giftedness (Reis, 2002b; Silverman, 2000). The function of enhancing their online image provides gifted and talented girls with an opportunity to portray themselves in a way that makes them appealing to the group they wish to belong to. For example, Alice explained how she was careful not to share too many posts of items and thoughts that were of value to her because, "If I posted some of this stuff for everyone to see, they might be, 'She's weird.' They'd judge it."

Participant experiences validate the idea that Facebook 'airbrushing' or image management provides a way for gifted and talented teenage girls to enhance aspects of themselves that are deemed a priority according to sex-role stereotypes, such as appearance and attractiveness (Silverman, 2000, 2005). When asked about the types of photos posted on her Facebook profile, Gina responded, "You wanna look your best on Facebook...You want someone to see you. You want them to say, 'Woah! She's really pretty.'" Online image management through Facebook also allows gifted girls to hide the gifts and talents that may make them socially less desirable (Clark, 2008), in order to meet their social belonging needs (Reis, 2002b; Silverman, 2000).

On the other hand, social networking media provides an opportunity for gifted and talented girls to share the reality of their life rather than having popular culture texts such as films and books portray stereotypical images of gifted students (Cox, 2000; Vialle, 2007) - if they feel comfortable doing so, that is. Participants discussed how they have had to deal with the judgment that comes as a result of putting yourself out there online. This is Sarah's rationale for posting less about herself. "I don't post statuses often...If I was more into posting things about my life, there would, I would probably have more negative." Contrary to Hum et al.'s (2011) research, which contended that young people preferred sharing publicly on the Facebook wall, these participants were far more reticent to share openly and would rather utilize the site's private messaging and closed group functions.

Although these experiences are not necessarily confined to those of gifted and talented girls, gifted and talented girls could be particularly vulnerable to judgments made about them due to their traits of tendermindedness and sensitivity (Karnes et al., 1984), which could be a reason why the participants in this study minimized the amount they posted regarding personal details

of their lives. The more they posted, the greater the opportunity to be judged, the more they may internalise these judgments. Therefore, in posting less, there were fewer opportunities for others to judge them based on their online identity.

Prey

Gifted literature: Girls preyed on by society's expectations

Girls are somewhat prey to the influence of socio-cultural expectations on their role in society. Literature points to gifted girls' exposure to sex-role stereotyping and socialization (for example, through popular culture, media, and underlying societal gender biases) as being contributing factors to gifted and talented girls choosing to minimize or hide their gifts (Clark, 2008; Kerr, 1991; Reis, 1987; Silverman, 2000, 2005). Sex-role stereotyping is evident as early as the pre-school years (Silverman, 2000) where girls are "expected to enjoy quieter games and activities and not to take risks" (Clark, 2008, p. 386). When they become teenagers, sex-role socialization places more emphasis on physical attractiveness at this age, which results in girls, including gifted girls, becoming more interested in their own attractiveness rather than their achievement (Silverman, 2005).

The stereotypes and expectations of gifted people are perpetuated by media misrepresentation (Cox, 2000; Vialle, 2007). Vialle (2007) analysed a selection of popular culture texts (television programmes, films, books) involving gifted protagonists and found giftedness had negative connotations. In her analysis of an episode of *The Simpsons*, gifted children were portrayed as precious and pretentious. In *Daria*, there were two images of gifted and talented girls – the dark-haired intellectual relishing her intelligence while sporting "big glasses and shapeless clothing" (Vialle, 2007, p. 8), and the one who hides her gifts in order to be popular by "being a social butterfly, wearing all the right clothes and 'hanging out' with the right crowd" (Vialle, 2007). Paule (2006, cited in Vialle, 2007) found "the terms for anybody who is gifted are largely negative: freak, geek, egghead, nerd, rain man, ghost world and brain" (p. 9). The types of activities negatively associated with gifted students included playing chess, enjoying mathematics and science subjects, and being a member of band. On the other hand, according to Vialle (2007), the 'right' activities for girls as portrayed in various popular culture shows and texts, included personal grooming, dating and going shopping.

Social media literature: Stalkbook and the rise of the micro-celebrity

Stalkbook is a colloquial term sometimes used to refer to the way Facebook can be used to view other users' profiles (usually those in their friend network) without their knowledge as to the extent of this viewing, almost in the same manner that a hunter stalks its prey. This leads to the

discussion of a new phenomenon related purely to the world we live in as social media users. This is the 'micro-celebrity,' described by Thompson (2007) as "the phenomenon of being extremely well known not to millions but to a small group – a thousand people, or maybe only a few dozen" (par. 3), which is a consequence of having a social networking site profile with a network of friends or followers. Teenagers who use social networking media have become micro-celebrities amongst their own networks and, as such, are negotiating their social lives online like publicists, with the same awareness as celebrities do knowing that paparazzi are watching their every move (Nussbaum, 2007; Thompson, 2007).

Findings and discussion

This micro-celebrity phenomenon has resulted in the normalization of "voyeuristic" Facebook viewing habits, which are also described as lurking and stalking. Alice believed that watching or being visually preyed on was just part of life:

It seems normal now that if you want to know about someone, you can go on their Facebook or you can go on their Twitter or their Tumblr to see what their personalities like. It seems so normal now for everyone to be a little bit privy into everyone else's life.

The idea that being watched online like a celebrity is a normal part of life supports Turkle's (2011) findings:

Teenagers seem to feel that things should be different but are reconciled to a new kind of life: the life they know celebrities live. ... So, you get used to the idea that if you are drunk ... someone will take a picture of you, probably using the camera in their phone. And once on that person's phone, the image will find its way to the Internet (p. 252).

For the participants in this study, their struggle was related to juggling self-expectations of online-offline authenticity, leadership role and school expectations, peer group and societal expectations, all on this public, digitally archived, online environment.

Three participants discussed having to be extra wary of what was posted online, which meant they had to be cautious of how they behaved due to school and leadership role expectations. Alice explained,

Because they go to my school and I'm a student leader, obviously I can't swear on Facebook. Yes, I swear. People swear. It's a bad habit ... but I do it. And I wouldn't swear on Facebook because you know people would look at it and be like, 'Student leader, swearing.' It's a big no-no, you know?

This also related to the photographs that were posted, similar to Turkle's example above. Alice, Bridie and Gina described having to make sure their photographs reflected the expectations of them as student leaders. Alice said, "Someone will be taking a photo. If ... I'm holding a glass of champagne, I'll put it down before they can take it, or I won't be in the photo or I'll hold it out of the way."

Bridie was also mindful of how she was portrayed in photographs in light of her role.

I also untagged myself from a lot of photos especially ones that maybe put me in a negative light either because I looked terrible or ... at a party and I am a student leader so I do need to filter ... the images that are shown of me ... If I'm in a photo and someone's horrendously drunk behind me, it's not a good look.

There was an underlying sentiment for three of the participants that being a student leader and being on Facebook were strongly interconnected, as described by Gina, "Facebook and student leadership, they definitely, definitely have a connection. Whatever you put on Facebook exposes you in a way that maybe being just at school doesn't." Alice explained that this required extra care in their online behaviour choices.

Because Facebook is so central to the role, then I've had to be extra careful in there. I think it means you have to be wary all the time ... and that's where the high profile role comes in. If I didn't have that, I wouldn't be as careful on the social networking. If there was no social networking, I wouldn't have to be as careful. ... If you take out one ... you don't have to keep up the image. ... I think combining the two you just have to be extra, extra careful with how people see you.

Whether through being a student leader or Facebook user or a combination of both, all the participants experienced some level of celebrity status and they therefore recognized that choices needed to be made regarding how to manage their image.

Like

Gifted literature: How perfect should I be for you to like me?

Another challenge experienced by some gifted and talented girls is low self-confidence or self-esteem as they "perceive themselves as less capable than they actually are" (Reis, 2002a, p. 2), which can be a result of their desire to be perfect. According to Kline and Short (1991) and Reis (2002a, 2002b), perfectionism is common among bright young females and can cause them to set high and unreasonable goals for themselves. They end up striving to achieve at higher levels, sometimes not succeeding, leading to the feeling of being an imposter (Kline & Short, 1991). Although others may recognise and acknowledge her gifts, the 'imposter' thinks she is just fooling

everyone, which then leads to low self-esteem and low self-confidence and she feels unable to take credit for her successes (Kerr, 1991; Kline & Short, 1991). The need to be perfect appears to apply to all areas of gifted and talented girls' lives (Clark, 2008; Reis, 2002b).

Too many talented females spend their lives trying to be perfect. In addition to investing considerable energy in trying to be the best athlete, the best dancer, the best scholar, the best friend, and the best daughter, young girls and women often feel that they must also be slender, beautiful, and popular (Reis, 2002b, p. 9).

Social media literature: What I like is who I am

Self-disclosure and self-presentation are common themes in social networking media literature. Self-disclosure is how much personal information people share about themselves as opposed to how much they keep private (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Rotenberg, 1995). Inextricably linked to self-disclosure is the concept of self-presentation, which refers to how people portray themselves and how they choose to construct their online identity (Hum et al., 2011). This online identity can be explicitly created through photos, status updates of thoughts and feelings, and identity markers about themselves (e.g. name, date of birth). It can also be developed subconsciously through items a user 'likes' or comments on, or simply by being linked through the other external websites and apps they access regularly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Buhrmester and Prager (1995) suggest that self-disclosure is an important element in teenage identity and relationship development and that having social input from others could solve teenagers' issues.

Lenhart and Madden (2007) stated, "the posting of content does not happen in a vacuum" (p. 39). Users know others will view their posts. "When tweens and teenagers write and post photos online, they are seeking to please/entertain/amuse their friends" (Sax, 2010, p. 38). Sax explained that perhaps what is disclosed was limited to only a few aspects of the person's true feelings and thoughts. Instead, a presentation of an alternative, more appealing self is portrayed.

Findings and discussion

Although the 'Like' button on Facebook may seem to be a simple tool, this study suggests its use has far greater reach than meets the eye. Users use this function to **like** posts that others have shared on their Facebook profile. This is of great importance to some of the participants as the number of likes a person has on their post or on their wall is also an indication of the popularity of that person's post, which then gets read as an indication of that person's popularity.

Imogen's perceptions reflect the importance of the **Like**: "In my generation, almost for something to exist, people have to know about it." She commented on how people are able to "like" a post and, in doing so, attribute value to it. "They just have to feel like someone has to like it for it to

have value or something.” This type of mentality prevents Gina from sharing more fully on Facebook as she states, “I never do status updates because what if they’re shit and I don’t get likes... I’ll only make a status if it’s a given that it’s going to get lots of likes.” In terms of gifted girls’ issues with self-confidence and perfectionism, the power of the ‘like’ shapes what the participants choose to share, which ties in to their need for affirmation and approval from their peers.

The like button also provides users with a snapshot of a person’s online identity as it can indicate music, television show, celebrity, topic and book interests (to name a few socio-cultural forms), helping others build a picture of a Facebook user’s persona, as depicted by their ‘likes’. All of these simple clicks contribute to the micro-celebrity package being presented online, and it also extends to how participants portray themselves as leaders. Bridie reported, in her school, the staff member in charge of the student leadership team often spoke about image and brand. Of note is the use of the term, ‘brand,’ which is commonly used in a commercial sense, further reinforcing the idea that these participants are micro-celebrities, with a brand image that needs to be manufactured and maintained:

He often talks to us about our brand and our image. ... A challenge is to figure out what our whole leadership team’s brand and whole image is ... and also our personal image ... Because we have been named as leaders ... we are ... the cream of the crop, and we should be proud of that and ... showcase this. ... A person brand would be something that you would present to other people.

According to the participants, this meant they had to learn how to manage themselves in public. For some, this was simply the demand of being a role model in their school, but others reported on their public image or brand, in a similar manner to celebrities or public figures. This latter phenomenon is what takes the school leadership role in this day and age to a different level from student leadership in the past.

The implications are significant because not only are these talented girls required to be mindful of how they behave in the school environment, but they now have to be mindful of how they behave in their private spheres as photographs and comments could potentially find their way into the public eye via social networking media.

Conclusion

The essence of the phenomenon (gifted girls’ experience of Facebook) can be summed up by the word ‘tension’. Being a talented female student leader living in a social networking media-saturated world means having to live with, and having to manage, an underlying feeling of tension while using Facebook. Their responses showed Facebook was, on the one hand, a tool used positively for communication and information sharing. However, they also experienced anxieties, or tensions, around the accompanying negative attributes of their Facebook use.

The research found that the micro-celebrity experience was exacerbated by gifted girls' leadership roles in their schools and resulted in the tension of being real versus airbrushed. That is, having to manage the juggling act between carefully managing one's online image to appeal to the desired audience versus allowing an unedited, honest disclosure of one's true self online. The participants in this study had to manage their offline image (as gifted girls in high profile positions), an online identity (as regular users of Facebook), as well as the overlap between the two. The participants' desires to portray themselves as authentically as possible was made difficult because of their peer group belonging needs (Meet); the expectations of those watching them (Prey); and their internal desires to be all things to all people (Like).

Implications for Educators

This study suggests the importance of social media guidance for all teenagers, including gifted and talented school leaders. There are various ways schools can support their student leaders.

First, schools need to understand the importance of teaching their school student leaders about the risks and opportunities related to the use of social networking media. Principals and senior managers could put adequate support structures in place for student leaders regarding their exposure in social networking media. This could include mentoring for the role, which could cover topics such as: creating healthy personal boundaries when using social media; advising on the benefits and technicalities of privacy settings; discussions about their public role versus their private life; and utilizing formats such as future or scenario-based problem solving to discuss how online actions today could have an impact on the future both personally and societally. A pilot programme initiating young leaders into the student leadership roles could be established to discuss the benefits and risks of social media. It would be beneficial to start this during the intermediate and junior high school years as it will help them become mindful of their actions from an earlier age before user habits are engrained.

It is also important for schools to protect student leaders through the school policy process. For example, creating a school policy ensuring student leaders are under no obligation to accept friend requests from younger students. However, policy development should be in consultation with the student leaders themselves. It is important that gifted and talented girls in leadership positions be given a voice with regards to the mechanisms they believe should be in place, as these will ultimately will shape the way they interact with social media.

In general, schools must consider their whole-school approach to social media. It is important that this approach moves beyond a simple list of "Do's and Don'ts" about social media use to incorporating meaningful, context-based, student-driven discussions related to citizenship, empathy, identity and digital footprints. This could be achieved by incorporating concepts of critical media literacy into daily classroom programmes, and could culminate in students creating

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resources using the new media technologies of youth culture to address the issues related to social media deemed most pertinent by young people.

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