## Consumer Citizens Online: Structure, Agency, and Gender in Online Participation

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An interesting shift occurs within educational settings when the formality of learning environments is relaxed and students are given "free time" on the Internet. Educational websites disappear, music comes on, and different people in the room become experts. The screens, the sounds, the way students interact with technology, and the interactions between them change as they immerse themselves in games, social networks and commercial sites of their own choosing. Students update their profiles on websites, changing their photos as well as their lists of favorite films, television shows, and music. They play games, search for cheats, and find out what other gamers are saying about particular games and gaming systems. They look for clothes, shopping around for the best deals and identifying outfits through which they can express an individual style.

One of the popular free-time activities I have observed in these situations is to play with online paperdolls on "dollmaker" sites. Particularly, though not exclusively, used by girls I observed aged eight to twelve, paperdoll sites contain clothes, hair, makeup, and accessories to drag and drop onto curvaceous cartoon-like figures. Wanting to look more closely at this shift between formal and free time, I ran a workshop in a school in London in which girls aged eleven to twelve designed their own dollmaker sites. One of the designs from the project is shown in Figure 1. The clothes, hair, earrings, and purse in this design are all stylized to match current trends. The outfit, with the display of midriff and peeking thigh, suggests a sexualized girl's body. However, the body itself (colored lurid turquoise) was completely ignored by the girls, treated like a mannequin, and left unchanged from the template provided.

On the surface, we could argue that the design reflects the influence of the fashion and beauty industries on girls. Given a space to design a body and clothing, this eleven-year-old produced an image that positions girls as sexual, as needing to be skinny, and as constant consumers of fashion and accessories. However, on the basis of the interviews and conversations I conducted with the girls, I was not willing to describe them as passive dupes of the beauty industries. Similarly, I was unwilling to see their other interactions during "free time" on the Internet as a matter of engagement in senseless violence, as video gaming is sometimes described, or as immersion in music which is manufactured and mind-numbingly dull, as some popular music is sometimes seen. Clearly, engagement on the Internet, even within the context of commercial culture, is not a passive activity. So how can we analyze online activities in ways which account for the power and influence of commercial industries, while at the same time recognizing how young people actively engage with the commodities these industries offer?

**Figure 1**
Dollmaker design.

This chapter examines identity within the context of online consumer cultures. The consumerism I am discussing may not take the form of overt advertising or marketing, as, for example, on a website such as Barbie.com. Instead, the chapter focuses on cultures which exist in more blurred areas of the kind described above, in which young people can be seen to be contributing to online media, through written text, images, and music. It is in this blurred area that I am seeking to explore the relationships between the *structures* of consumerism (and wider societal discourses) and the *agency* (the capacity to think and act freely) of the young consumer/producer. My focus, then, is on the tension which underlies many debates about young people's online activities, between seeing young people as acted upon by societal forces and seeing them as independent actors in their own right.

Popular debates about young people's online activities often focus on elements that are seen as harmful or problematic, as in the arguments about violence in games, or sexual images on social networking sites, for example. Yet these assertions have been criticized by some as being overly deterministic, as positioning young people as passive and ignoring the complexity of children's and young people's consumption of media. Instead, it is suggested that media, particularly new digital media, offer young people the chance to be powerful and to express their creativity as media producers. In this view, young people are doing important identity work—finding like-minded peers, exploring issues around gender, race, and sexuality; and defining themselves as experts within particular communities. However, there is a risk here of celebrating young people's interactions with media without taking a critical look at some of the inherent structures which are at play in young people's lives. More importantly, it can lead us to overlook particular values that young people are buying into through their engagements with digital media.

The aim of this chapter is to look past the structure–agency dichotomy implied in the arguments above, and to see how, as Anthony Giddens describes, human agency and social structure act through each other.[1] In drawing on work by Giddens and others, the chapter discusses identity in the context of broader debates about late modernity, specifically

considering how the agency offered to young people is structured by neoliberal discourses, for example, those of "individualization" and "responsibilization." It is through these discourses, I shall argue, that the modern "consumer citizen" is defined.

The chapter starts with a discussion of research on young people as consumers, tracing historical constructions as well as current debates about marketing to children online. The second section examines theories of identity, as described above, specifically looking at how these theories discuss consumerism, and then relating these ideas to an analysis of consumer activities online. The third section focuses specifically on research into girls' online activities, which provides an introduction to the final section—an analysis of girls' paperdoll activities online. The conclusion points to some of the implications of these ideas for research in the context of learning environments.

## Young People as Consumers

Children and young people are increasingly at the center of critical debates about consumer culture. Numerous popular publications claim that childhood is being commodified as a result of manipulative and deceitful marketing strategies.[2] In this view, children are victims of powerful commercial industries, and childhood, once a natural and free space, is seen as being destroyed by the influence of consumer culture. Debates here are combined with arguments about media effects: media are seen single-handedly to promote various "ill effects," such as increases in violence, sexual activity, obesity, stereotyped beliefs, and behavioral disorders, to name but a few.[3] On the other hand, there are those who argue that children and young people are wise and authoritative consumers who carefully select and use consumer items to meet their desires and needs. Children are seen here to be discriminating and active consumers, as is evidenced by the fact that so many new children's products fail to generate a profit.

These debates, which are polarized in popular critical literature on consumer culture, provide a useful springboard for discussing the relationship between consumerism and identity. Whilst there can be no doubt that marketing is a key factor in children's lives, we also need to recognize times when it is not effective. Even so, children do not choose products and express themselves freely and independently. We need to be careful not to over-celebrate the agency of individuals. Structures, in this case from consumer cultures, frame individual choice and action: external factors shape, form, and constrain people's choices, although they are far from being all-powerful.

The focus on young people's consumer habits is not new. Since the "youth quake" of the 1950s, brought about partly by the baby boom and an increase in youth employment, markets in countries with developed economies have attempted to tap into the spending power of young people. This is reflected in the emergence in the 1950s of youth-oriented media, such as music, magazines, movies, and fashion. This trend continued through the 1960s and 1970s, with particular media such as music segmenting into specialist markets. Even with the "baby bust" of the 1980s (when the proportion of the population under age eighteen dropped) and the recessions running through the early 1980s and early 1990s, youth on the whole remained a lucrative market segment. However, the media industries in the 1980s and 1990s felt the impact of greater economic competition and deregulation of markets. Industries responded by increasing their efficiency through outsourcing and subcontracting, but also moving away from mass-market products. With greater flexibility, industries were able to develop new marketing techniques that could capitalize on niche markets. This set

the trend for "cool marketing" and the commercial exploitation of "youthful" styles and values.[4]

As outlined by Buckingham in the introduction to this volume, sociological research has argued that the category "youth" is a social and historical construct; yet at the same time, there has been research which examines how young people actively construct youth identities. Within studies of "youth subcultures," analyses have focused on how material objects are used as markers of identity, defining specific social groups and distinguishing them on the grounds of class, race, and gender as well as age.[5] Products from popular media are seen here as shared "symbolic resources," providing easily accessible markers of interest and identity amongst young people. As society becomes increasingly fragmented by age, so too does the growth in products available to specific age groups. For example, Cook describes how the children's clothing industry worked to define particular subcategories of the children's market, through developing the "toddler" and "teen girl" categories of clothing.[6] However, this is not to say that markets single-handedly *create* different categories of childhood. As Cook argues, "they provide, rather, indispensable and unavoidable means by which class specific, historically situated childhoods are made material and tangible."[7]

Ideas about the relationship between consumer items and identity apply equally well to online cultures. For example, social-networking sites which combine blogs, profiles, and photo- and video-sharing can be viewed as cultural resources which are used by young people as a way of performing and perhaps playing with their identity. These sites often contain references to consumer culture—for example, personal web pages often feature the author's favorite music that plays when a user accesses the page. Furthermore, commercial websites offer children and young people specific identities connected with the consumer culture. Websites targeted at tween girls, for example, reflect a particular market discourse that attempts to capitalize on the emergence of the category "tween."[8] Referring to the dual nature of the audience and marketing culture, Quart describes how consumer culture not only brands teens as subjects, but also positions teens as branded objects.[9] However, young people are not simply passive victims of this process; on the contrary, consumer culture increasingly positions them as active participants within it.

In 2006, U.S. teenagers had an estimated spending power of $153 billion.[10] It is not surprising that marketers are keen to capitalize on the new ways in which young people are using media to mark their identities. However, the process of researching and then capturing a market is not simple or straightforward. As "cool hunters" will testify, as soon as something is identified by marketers as "cool" within youth culture, the "opinion leaders" within the peer group are forced to move on.[11] On the web, the popularity of sites follows these "cool" trends, where Habbohotel was once a preferred site of young people, MySpace is currently the market leader, no doubt to be replaced over time as new ways of interacting online become available and popular.

It is also important to recognize that young people do not necessarily consume an item "straight off the shelf." For example, McRobbie discusses how with girls, personal style becomes a focus for display, particularly as they grow older and interact independently in more public spaces (away from shopping trips with mum, for example).[12] Furthermore, using the example of how girls use second-hand clothing, McRobbie argues that girls resist, rework, and recreate consumer trends. Several researchers in this field use Levi-Strauss's notion of "bricolage,"[13] also employed in the chapter by Weber and Mitchell in this volume to describe how young people draw on a variety of sources and then piece together, recontextualize, and transform cultural items to create a new self-image or identity. Home pages, for example,

are analyzed by Chandler and Roberts-Young in terms of "bricolage," referring to the processes involved in creating a page made up of references and images from various sources which have been appropriated and recontextualized.[14] In including, omitting, adapting, and arranging these references, the "bricoleur" is also constructing and performing an identity. Viewing consumption in these terms, we can see young people as active agents, appropriating consumer culture for their own uses.

Yet these markings of identity are not freely chosen. If we are to believe any of the numerous critiques of consumer culture, children (and their parents) are subject to increasingly devious marketing strategies that are serving to exploit children and work against their best interests.[15] This is ever more relevant when discussing online marketing. Online advertising is a booming market: Jupiter Research has forecast that the online advertising market will reach $18.8 billion by 2010.[16] Increasingly, immersive advertising in the form of e-cards, ring tones, wallpaper, contests, clubs, games, and quizzes is being used in everything from computer games to children's edutainment websites.[17] Compared with television, online advertising is seen by marketers as more effective in terms of cost, impact, and measurability. The interactive nature of many forms of online advertising assures marketers that children are engaging with a promotion, or at least more so than TV audiences who may not even be in the room when an ad is shown. According to Montgomery, advertisers are seeing the Internet as the best place to develop brand loyalty and regard online ads as an important part of "cradle to grave marketing."[18] As Montgomery points out, with 98 percent of children's websites permitting advertising and two-thirds depending on ads for revenue, website owners are relying on new advertising techniques to keep afloat. Interestingly, the rise of more immersive and less visible forms of advertising is also a result of legislation in the United States which dictates that websites are not allowed to sell directly to children.[19]

According to Montgomery, advertising has been "turned on its head" by the web, where once brands sponsored a website and now sites are brands unto themselves. The sale of YouTube to Google in October 2006 for $1.65 billion demonstrates this point; although Google already had a videosharing site, it did not have the audience that YouTube offered, and so YouTube was seen as a valuable brand identity that could be purchased. Neopets, a website which involves nurturing a pet and preparing it for contests, was an early adopter of immersive advertising.[20] Interactions on the site take place in a branded world (e.g., users can "eat" at McDonalds), and it is easiest to acquire points for the survival of one's pet through consuming interactive advertising. Seiter describes how viewing ads, completing surveys, and doing advertised price comparisons through Neopets give users far more "Neopoints" than training one's pet or winning contests.[21] Importantly, Seiter found that children had no awareness of the economics of the site, seeing it not as a commercial venture but as a lone individual's fun invention. According to Seiter, "the high level of involvement helped to dull [children's] awareness of the commercialism" (p. 100).

Discussions of consumer culture often play into a wider argument about the blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces. These issues are more prevalent as households with access to the Internet increase and, therefore, private domestic space increasingly becomes an extension of public space. Thus, in her work on UK children's online activities, Livingstone refers to debates about the commercialization of public space, and the blurring of the boundary between consumers and citizens.[22] She outlines a change in young people's media use, toward greater individualization. These issues have serious consequences for media regulators, as can be seen in countries such as Sweden and Greece, where radio and TV

advertising to children is banned or restricted. With an increase in private and individual media consumption, there is a need to look closely at how spaces of consumption are structured. For example, we might want to question the portrayal of the Internet as a completely open democratic space in which children navigate freely. Although the concept of "walled gardens" sometimes refers to safe spaces on the internet for children to "play," Livingstone describes how enclosed commercial sites constrain Internet use, by making it difficult to leave a site and not including links to outside sites. Montgomery also highlights the fact that commercial search engines, particularly those used by children and young people such as Yahooligans! and Disney's Internet Guide, most frequently lead users to commercial sites.[23] These arguments highlight the need not only to examine young people's active engagement online but also to understand the structures through which that engagement is taking place. Furthermore, these studies highlight the importance of Internet literacy in navigating the Internet, detecting commercial strategies, and recognizing consumer rights, for example.

To summarize this section, children and young people are increasingly being targeted by marketers, and they are interacting in ever-more sophisticated commodified spaces online. Although surrounded by these market structures, young people can be seen as "bricoleurs," appropriating and reshaping consumer culture as they define and perform their identities, and in some instances rejecting or simply ignoring marketing techniques and discourses. This is not to say that marketing structures are the only ones which need to be accounted for in an analysis of young people's media consumption: obviously there are important structural factors such as class, race, and gender which play key roles in consumer practices. However, my focus here is primarily on market structures and consumer practices, and their implications for identity formation. The next section looks more specifically at identity in relation to consumer culture, examining how social theories discuss the "self" as a consumer, and relating those theories to online consumerism.

### Consumerism and the Reflexive Self

As I have argued, modern consumers are faced with a plethora of objects and information through which identities can be defined and performed. Yet, as Appadurai suggests, consumer choice is also shaped and constructed through merchandising. Consumers may feel that they exercise power and agency, but as Appadurai argues: "These images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of merchandising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser."[24] Drawing on these ideas, Kenway and Bullen argue that marketing creates possible lifestyle choices which position consumers in terms of desire and belonging, as well as separation and distinction.[25] In other words, consumption can mark social status—defining oneself (or who one wishes to be) as well as defining those whom one is not (or wishes not to be).

One area for discussion raised by these ideas is consumers' awareness of their role in consumer culture. Are consumers consciously choosing products to mark their identities? Are there structures which make consumers think they are choosing freely, when actually the choices are limited? As Buckingham has described in the introduction to this volume, social theorists such as Foucault imply that individuality itself is socially constructed, and emphasize the structures which impact on people's choices. In line with Foucault's theory, consumerism can be seen as a "technology of the self"—a mechanism through which people present and "police" their identities in society. From this perspective, people are seen to regulate their behavior, expression, and view of themselves in accordance with the surrounding texts and practices—for example, advertising and make-over features which suggest how

clothes, cosmetics and various body treatments can transform the self through altering one's physical appearance. This view is complemented by Giddens's idea of the reflexive self—the idea that we are continuously working and reflecting on our identity—and the idea that we choose, develop and project a "lifestyle."[26] As Buckingham suggests, Giddens takes a less deterministic view than Foucault, stressing the agency of individuals and the flexibility of resources that people use to develop their lifestyles.

These factors are particularly apparent when looking at young people's interactions on-line. Young people have numerous ways of projecting lifestyle choices online—through the sites they choose to visit, their written messages and responses, their own home pages and interactions on social networking sites. Much of this public work is reflexive, that is, people are rethinking and recontextualizing their ideas, as is apparent in the changes young people make to their websites (updating music and photographs, for example). Further-more, as discussed earlier, we can see how this online "identity work" involves drawing on specific consumer cultures, for example, identifying oneself in terms of music choice or videogame preference and mastery. As Giddens writes, "Modernity opens up the project of the self, but under conditions strongly influenced by the standardizing effects of commodity capitalism."[27]

Rose draws on Giddens's ideas, arguing that modern neoliberal discourses offer new ways of understanding the self. Modern societies are governed, not by the overt exercise of power, but by inculcating subtle "norms of autonomy and self-realization," which appear to emphasize freedom, choice, and individuality.[28] Rose describes how citizenship is no longer about a relationship with government, but is about acts of "free but responsibilized choice."[29] In this new neoliberal discourse, it is up to the individual to self-monitor, make good choices and work toward self-improvement, or as Giddens writes, "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves."[30] These ideas also explain our relationships with consumer cultures, in what Griffin labels the "compulsory purchase narrative."[31] Although as consumers we are positioned as having the freedom to make choices, consumption is framed by a positive requirement to better ourselves through our purchases: it is difficult to choose not to consume at all.[32]

These ideas are part of a wider trend in modern liberal societies over the past fifty years or so, according to Giddens.[33] In modern societies, consumer cultures offer diverse models of lifestyle and of the self; consumers believe they enjoy choice, autonomy, and self-realization; and part of being a "consumer citizen" is reflecting on the available choices and questioning the models that are presented to us and what is being sold to us. In some sense, consumers are seen to regulate industry by demanding innovation and quality.[34] However, industries also regulate consumers by offering particular lifestyles: as individual and responsible consumers, we have an obligation to choose a particular style, based on the available commodities. Thus, industries both reflect the world (through consumer citizens' choices) and also shape the world through offering a limited range of choices. According to Giddens, the range of choices may be larger than those that were traditionally on offer, and we do not adapt one lifestyle; rather we construct a life story, or what Beck calls a "choice biography," by reflecting on choices and navigating through them.[35]

Consumer citizens are individuals; they consume as a way of marking their identity and form their identities in relation to what is on offer, but they also resist and create new consumer cultures. We can see many examples online of young people's resistance to main-stream consumer culture, from culture jamming products, such as mashups and ezines, to civic activism, to the growing interest in alternative lifestyles. However, Heath and Potter

warn us not to be unduly celebratory about these seemingly resistant and countercultural movements.[36] Instead of seeing modern society as enforcing conformity, these authors argue that capitalist society enforces individuality. Therefore, mainstream culture becomes about maintaining a distinct cultural identity, through manifesting an appearance of rebellion for example. Markets capitalize on this desire to be distinct: the proliferation of music genres in young people's online activities, for example, can be seen to reflect their attempts to conform to the need to present oneself as an individual. Although this argument might be accused of disqualifying young people's culture and agency, it does challenge the simplistic view of the so-called alternative culture as wholly resistant to the mainstream.

As discussed in the previous section, consumer cultures act both as the backdrop and the tool to many children and young people's online activities—through the sites they visit, their top search terms, the games they play, the music they download, not to mention the bricolage of consumer cultural items they display on their own web-authored spaces. Through these activities, one could argue that children and young people are carving out and reflecting on their distinct identities, marking who they are, who they would like to be, and also who they are not. Through civic participation sites, blogs, and other authored spaces, children and young people increasingly have a voice in cyberspace; however, we must ask who is listening and how that voice is being constructed. As Duncan and Leander describe in relation to their analysis of the website, gURL.com, "While the Web provides a space for writing activities that presents new opportunities for the construction of identity and the realization of agency, it also provides immediate and direct access to ideological influences that position online writers as consumers, as objects of consumption."[37]

From this perspective, we could argue that online cultures contain complex and contradictory possibilities, but that young people's agency is nevertheless framed within commodified spaces. Young people's voices online can also be seen as highly constrained and constructed through particular discourses. For example, in line with Rose's ideas about neoliberal discourses of individualism, we could argue that online spaces are framed by a kind of compulsory individuality, where the "freedom" to express oneself becomes a requirement, which then allows identities to be managed and regulated. On the other hand, we might want to question the determinism implied in such arguments and the way they tend to dismiss young people's culture. Furthermore, in analyzing young people's activities online, we need to consider other societal discourses which are impacting on the choices they make and the way these choices are discussed. The final section of this chapter, which discusses the dollmaker research introduced earlier, will provide an example of how this analysis might work specifically in relation to gender.

Summing up this section, we have seen that the relationship between structure and agency is taken into account in theories about consumerism and identity in quite different ways. Appadurai and Kenway and Bullen suggest that choice serves as a way of defining identity, although choice is structured by commercial mechanisms such as marketing. Foucault's theory of the "technology of the self" suggests that culture, and here we could include consumer culture, "polices" and structures our presentation of our selves. Likewise, Rose's work highlights the way choices are structured by neoliberal discourses of individualism and responsibility. On the other hand, Giddens's theory of the reflexive self accords less power to the structures of consumerism and places more emphasis on individual agency. In this theory, structures offer lifestyle choices that are then acted upon by consumers through a process of self-reflection. These theories therefore provide quite different ways of understanding the relationship between structure and agency—between the power of the individual to

reflect on and make choices, and the power of the structures through which those choices are made.

The next section looks at how these ideas can be applied to analyzing online identities, specifically in relation to girls. There are several reasons for choosing to look at girls' interactions in this context. There has been a substantial body of work on "cyberfeminism" and identity, looking at the Internet as a feminized space as well as a space for women and girls to pursue feminist politics. Less work, however, has been done on the commodification of these spaces or how they are structured by the neoliberal discourses discussed above.[38] In relation to girls and young women, a body of work exists around consumer practices, but again there has been less attention to online practices. However, the work that has been done highlights the importance of analyzing gender in relation to consumer culture, as markets become increasingly gendered, and girls in particular operate in an arena in which the consumption and production of the self are crucial aspects of becoming a woman.[39] This next section looks at research into girls' performance, definition, and in some cases exploration of identity as they engage in various online activities.

### Girls Online

One of the ways identity has been traditionally defined and constructed is through gender. A view of identity in which gender is seen as a matter of performance rather than a fixed state of being allows us to view consumer activities as part of the process of constructing one's gender identity.[40] Kacen describes how in consumer cultures, gender has been a particularly polarized field, with male producers and female consumers.[41] However, postmodernity has brought into question this polarized view of identity. Giving examples of how advertising has disrupted traditional representations of gender, Kacen argues that the future may offer "a utopian vision of a gendered paradise that is radically different from the existing social order."[42] She argues that online cultures offer particular challenges to a view of the world as "masculine" or "feminine," given the relative ease with which one can assume a range of masculine and feminine characteristics (though one would want to argue that assuming a different gender online is not straightforward or easy). Although many may not share Kacen's utopian vision, a significant body of literature focuses on the agency of girls as they explore their identity through online interactions.

Following on from landmark studies of women's media consumption, recent research on girls has included analyses of their consumption of magazines, computer games, and television, as well as their production of countercultural products such as zines.[43] Over the past decade, studies of girls' online production activities (ezines, webpages, blogs, discussion groups) have also been proliferating, with "gURLs" emerging as a term to describe connected young feminists.[44] Researchers have reported on a wide range of girls' online activities, from punk feminist sites drawing on the Riot Grrrl tradition to everyday extensions of school conversations through blogs and instant messaging.[45]

Although there has been less research on the commodification of girls' online culture, Shade's work has highlighted the need to consider this area. Shade focuses on "the tensions between . . . corporate strategies (the *feminization* of the Internet) and the use of the Internet by women for activism (*feminist* uses of the Internet)."[46] She discusses the site gURL.com, which started as a liberal feminist community presenting "a frank and feisty attitude toward dating, sex, and beauty" and was eventually bought up by the major media conglomerate, Hearst Publishing. Currently owned by iVillage, a subsidiary of NBC, the site maintains some of the original types of content: resources and advice on a large range of health and body

issues, various "shout outs" which encourage gURLs to express opinions; outlets for poetry, stories, and photos; and specific discussions about media, emotions, dating, spirituality, and politics. However, the site is also highly commodified, containing various marketing strategies including a shopping mall and surveys as well as numerous banner advertisements on each page. The advice in the fashion and beauty section is largely based on mainstream representations of female body improvement, a far cry from the original gURL content such as "The Boob Files," a collection of first-person essays on breasts.

The commodification of gURL.com is one example of how the Internet is being seen and used by marketers as a profitable space for capturing the female market. As marketers continue to pour money into purchasing branded websites as well as immersive forms of advertising, spaces such as gURL.com are becoming "feminized" in line with market perceptions and demands. As Shade describes, the process of feminization involves "the creation of popular content where women's consumption is privileged and encouraged, rather than production or critical analysis."[47]

Looking at girls' online identity work, many researchers have attempted to show how the quality of the virtual experience, the kind of interactivity, and development of community complement and extend the existing forms of social interaction. Turkle argues that online communities can offer a safe virtual space for people to try out and experiment with multiple identities, and through these interactions "make meaning of the self and the world."[48] Harris also describes the safety of the Internet, its public yet private status, as an important "border space" for girls' creative political and cultural activities. This border space allows for the meeting of like minds without the surveillance they might receive in traditional public spaces. Harris writes, "The border space within which this process works is significant in transforming young women's spheres into productive places of activity instead of passive consumption, and in providing some room for overregulated young women to be in the world without leaving their homes."[49] Stern's work in this volume, focusing on girls' home pages, also examines the possibilities of the Internet for girls' self-expression. In previous work, Stern argues that the Internet offers a wide audience, giving girls the chance to connect with others who are sharing their concerns; it allows girls to express themselves in a carefully controlled way, using text as well as image, sound, and links; and it offers an anonymous environment for girls to explore ideas which otherwise would be difficult or impossible to express.[50] Stern concludes, "In light of these possibilities, personal WWW home pages may do more than just provide girls with another place to speak; they may actually facilitate girls' self-disclosure."[51] In these arguments, the Internet is seen to be providing a new kind of space for girls, one which potentially impacts on their social, cultural, and emotional development.

One of the activities in these online border spaces is feminist activism, which is present in loose groupings of cybergurls, cybergirls, cybergrrrls, geekgirls, and so on. Shade lists several ezine sites which resemble earlier printed zines and guerrilla graphics produced by "second-wave" feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, addressing such topics as cultural imperialism, capitalism, gender roles, and consumer cultures.[52] Shade argues that these new cybergurls, possibly the elusive third-wave feminists, are using popular culture in new self-reflexive ways, critiquing through parody, for example. Harris also discusses DIY ethics that are being advocated online, as girls are encouraged to resist lifestyles that are marketed to them and instead reappropriate and produce their own forms of culture and community.[53] Other examples of online activism abound, and as Harris outlines, given the ever-increasing commodification of girlhood, "other ways need to be found for reflective, political young women to conceive

of girls as something other than consumer citizens."[54] There are many other online communities for girls which have been subjects of research, including wiccan, punk rock, and queer youth communities.[55] This research suggests that online environments are not just providing new kinds of spaces to support and extend girls' development, they are also providing particular cultures and communities which act as alternatives to the mainstream.

The studies outlined above show the powerful opportunities offered to girls online. However, such studies could be accused of overemphasizing individual agency and making too much of unrepresentative examples. In many of the accounts, the Internet seems to be offering girls an open space in which they can express themselves freely. Girls seem here to have an enormous power to resist particular ideologies, to construct new identities, and to form communities. There is little account of the structures, which operate on many different levels in these girls' lives.

There is concern amongst some feminists that this apparent celebration of girls' choice and agency leads to a neglect of structures, which continue to create inequitable power relations. Some complain of the "undoing of feminism" by a new generation of young women who, having grown up in a "postfeminist" society, no longer see a need for feminism.[56] According to some feminists, new forms of femininity include a "hyperculture of commercial sexuality," as well as a related silence and complicity with continuing forms of male oppression. These concerns also apply to girls' online activities, which frequently entail the presentation of themselves as highly sexualized and sexually active. Instead of seeing these girls as benefiting from the sexual revolution, which is allowing them to celebrate their sexual selves, we might want to ask whether these girls have simply dismissed feminism and the need to critique dominant cultures. In this respect, McRobbie argues that an overemphasis on agency in theories of modernity has led to a neglect of "the adverse consequences of new individualism."[57]

More broadly, various researchers have voiced concern over the way neoliberal ideas are acting to constrain women.[58] Within neoliberal discourses, girls' success in their personal life as well as their professional or educational career is seen to be due to personal choice and effort. This places girls who are "at-risk" as responsible for their position due to poor choices that they have made. Harris challenges "the idea that good choices, effort, and ambition alone are responsible for success that has come to separate the can-dos from the at-risks."[59] Griffin also reminds us that we need to consider gender in relation to inequalities based on ethnicity and socioeconomic status, particularly when considering consumer cultures.[60]

In this context, it is becoming increasingly important to examine how girls and young women are understanding and employing these new ideas about identity, particularly in relation to digital cultures, which are seen to offer new modes of consumption as well as new forms of empowerment. The final section of this chapter contains an analysis of girls' discussions of their online activities, with particular reference to their use of neoliberal ideas about individualism and responsibility. The conclusion goes on to consider the role of learning and education in the context of these discussions.

**Girls' Online Dress-Up**

To put some of these ideas into a specific context, this section focuses on the study referred to in the introduction of this chapter, in which twenty-six girls aged twelve to thirteen took part in workshops at a specialist ICT centre connected to a school in inner-city London. The girls recruited for the workshop were representative of the population of the school, which is ethnically diverse (about 75 percent of the pupils on roll are from minority ethnic

groups, the largest being African Caribbean followed by Bangladeshi). The students came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, although the majority were from families with limited economic resources. The girls explored and discussed fashion as presented online, and produced their own interactive fashion design webpages, making decisions about body shapes, types of clothing, and audience. As described in the introduction, the focus for this study stems from a very popular online activity—dressing up online fashion figures (known as dollmaker or paperdoll sites). These simple drag and drop activities are readily available online and were used by a large majority of the girls studied across three research sites. The curvaceous online dolls include hundreds of clothing items (including sexually provocative ones), as well as options for hair, eyes, and skin color.

The main focus of my analysis here is on the meanings the girls are making from their interactions with online fashion, rather than how they are interacting online. As the study was conducted in a school setting, I also consider the role of learning and education in relation to girls' online identity work. My analysis uses poststructuralist theory to explore how particular societal texts and practices, construct (and restrict) possible identities. Drawing on Foucault's theories, poststructuralists use the term "discourse" to refer to conglomerations of practices which contain both ways of thinking and particular sets of power relationships.[61] Discourses are seen to produce "subject positions": for example, discourses of academic knowledge, authority, and childhood produce the positions of "teacher" and "pupil." Yet the theory also suggests that people are able to negotiate (to some degree), which subject positions to occupy (for example, within dominant discourses about gender, a girl can to some extent choose a "tomboy" or a "hyper-feminine" position or various positions in between). Furthermore, people shift their positions over time, and at any given moment people will hold multiple, sometimes contradictory positions. Hall describes how identity is not "who we are" but a process of becoming a never ending construction. In his words, "Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us."[62]

The analysis here looks at girls' construction of identity in relation to three themes: body image, the pleasures of doll play, and self-confidence. In the first theme, the girls position themselves as resistant to media discourses, although in doing so they demonstrate how expressions of agency are framed by other discourses on individualism and choice, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In the second theme, the girls' statements about playing with dolls and fashion reveal both the pleasures of such play as well as the meanings girls are making within particular consumer structures. Finally, girls' statements about confidence and self-esteem in connection with dress are analysed in terms of discourses around individualism and autonomy.

**Body Image and the Reflexive Self**   The workshops were relatively formal in structure, and involved a series of activities which the girls carried out either in small groups or individually. One of the activities involved designing and making a sales pitch for a fashion website. The girls discussed potential audiences for their site, and issues surrounding body shape emerged as part of those discussions. Most of the groups were careful to include clothes "for bigger people" as well as for "slim people." In conversations with the girls, they raised the topic of media effects, and we discussed how playing with fashion Web pages and dolls or reading magazines might affect how they feel about themselves. The issue of body dissatisfaction emerged in discussions of these questions, and the girls referred to adults and older teens as being anxious about their bodies, more so than themselves. This "third-person effect" (the belief that others are more affected by media than oneself) is well documented in media research.[63] The girls here indicated that it was other people who were affected by

Wolf's "beauty myth"—somehow the girls did not see themselves as being subject to these ideologies in the same way as older teens.[64] They could identify and resist "the tyranny of slenderness," while others could not:[65]

*VALERIE:*   Most teenagers, when they go on a diet, they starve themselves.

*DALIA:*   When they grow up, yeah, they could, like, worry about themselves, and they could do exercise or have a diet.

*NEYLAN:*   They might start thinking, 'Ah, maybe I should diet.' And they might do it too much. Or eat less fat and sugar.

*MACKENZIE:*   They'll want plastic surgery so they can be perfect 'cause they think they're not as pretty.

The girls here are showing an awareness of body dissatisfaction and a recognition that girls (or teenagers) compare themselves to an ideal image. On the one hand, the statements above appear politicized—the girls are resisting media influences, being self-reflexive and analyzing the "technologies of the self," which are produced, for example, through television shows which focus on body dissatisfaction (e.g., *Ten Years Younger*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Nip/Tuck*). On the other hand, as in the discussion of gender and citizenship earlier in the chapter, we can see these statements as instances of how girls themselves engage in the "project of the self," scrutinizing their interior lives, and importantly blaming individuals for their failure to maintain a healthy body.

   The girls also draw on particular educational discourses, positioning themselves as healthy individuals, in control of their self-image and specifically their eating. These discourses reflect the girls' position here as students in an interview in a school setting, although the girls are also positioning themselves in relation to their friends in the group. By adopting an "us-them" stance (it is teenagers and older women, not us, who are affected), the girls are positioning themselves as a cohesive group, not only as younger but also as less susceptible to "the tyranny of slenderness." This reflects what Thorne calls "border work," in which children construct particular groups as "other," especially along gender lines.[66] Furthermore, as a conversation amongst friends, the girls' statements can be seen as part of their collective construction of identity: as in the research by Kehily and Nayak, talk amongst girl friends provides a space in which normative forms of femininity are established and maintained.[67] By discussing problems of self-image and eating disorders amongst older girls and women, the girls form a group consensus about what constitutes their own healthy identity, in opposition to the unhealthy identities of others. Using the ideas from Giddens referred to earlier in this chapter, this discussion demonstrates how girls are navigating through complex structures which demand self-reflexivity, as we see here, and also individual effort.

   The girls' statements here suggest a degree of agency which is important to recognize— they are making judgments about societal discourses and seeing themselves as active and independent. They claim to have the power to resist the "tyranny of slenderness" which they detect in the unhealthy practices of older teens, positioning themselves as somehow less susceptible to such powerful structures. However, agency is implicitly defined here as a matter of individual responsibility and choice. It is individuals who "think they are not as pretty," it is the responsibility of the individual to "eat less fat and sugar," it is the choice of the individual to "starve themselves" or have plastic surgery. Therefore, we can see the girls' comments here as a demonstration of how "agency" is structured by neoliberal discourses of individualism and responsibility. More importantly, these structures work to conceal other societal structures, such as the role of social class, which exclude some people and privilege

others. There are many factors which determine how much fat and sugar one eats, including personal history, school meals, the cost and availability of particular types of food, and knowledge of food preparation; and individual choice may have less to do with what one eats than is implied in "free choice" rhetoric.

**Playing with the Truth—Dollmaker Pleasures**   In an attempt to engage the girls in a discussion about some of these ideas around media and body dissatisfaction, they were asked more directly if they felt that playing with fashion Web pages or fashion dolls or reading teen magazines affected how they felt about themselves. The girls had a variety of responses to this question, all centring on factors which affect the way media are read.

They argued that they did not compare themselves to images on dollmaker sites ("they're cartoons," explained Dalia) or to plastic dolls such as Barbie which are clearly not real. The girls were suggesting that *modality*—that is, the truth claims made by a text—affects how a text is read. As Dalia described, "like if you look at Bratz, they've got a really small body and like some big heads on it." The girls seemed perplexed that adults would consider to play with disproportionate plastic breasts as affecting them: one girl exclaimed, "my boobs are normal!" The girls' reflection on dolls' modality supports Driscoll's ideas about the "multiplicity of Barbie": "[Barbie] is woman/not-woman and human/not-human, a game that can seem to denaturalize gender despite the anxieties of interested parties."[68] The girls did not think adults would consider to play with fashion dolls or dollmaker websites as risky and instead would see it as they do, "only a game"—although one group did consider the possibility of becoming overly concerned with clothes, putting a financial strain on their families.

In the case of dollmaker sites and doll play, the girls indicated that the weak modality of the resources with which they were playing minimized the effects on, for example, body image. However, one group of girls indicated that body dissatisfaction might occur when looking at teen magazines:

*VALERIE:*   It's mostly when you start seeing idols or celebrities in particular that you want to turn yourself like that.

*GRACE:*   Ya, you wanna be like them.

*. . .*

*VALERIE:*   Unless they see an actual body, they won't try and make themselves like them.

Resources with strong modality, therefore, are seen to have a greater effect than those with weak modality. We can also see the girls' statements as further evidence of the shift away from a perceived need for an imposed code of conduct, media regulation in this case, and toward an approach whereby individuals are responsible for making choices and shaping their lives.[69] As self-reflexive individuals, the girls claim that they are able to analyze when media might have an effect on them, as demonstrated in their statements here. In neoliberal terms, one could conclude that these girls are demonstrating their ability to take responsibility and make ethical choices. However, we may also want to look at how, as Rose describes, "Consumption requires each individual to choose from among a variety of products in response to a repertoire of wants that may be shaped and legitimated by advertising and promotion but must be experienced and justified as personal desires."[70]

This raises questions about how girls talk about the pleasures they gain from their consumption of fashion dolls. It is clear from the girls' interactions with dollmaker sites that part

of the appeal is a pleasure in playing with fashion in a social context: they construct outfits together, they show each other their finished combinations, they try on outrageous clothes and "have a laugh." Dalia describes the pleasure in this play: "Like, you can make them weird or make them really nice like they're going to a party." This play is partly about fantasizing about their future bodies. Numeyra said, "I just like the hairstyles, and I just go, 'Oh, I wish I had long hair,' or something." When asked if dressing up on dollmaker sites would make the girls want to wear that sort of outfit, Jade said, "No, you would just think 'Oh, what would I look like if I wore that?'" Likewise, Davies and Thomas describe how girls experiment with online identities and avatars, fantasizing and performing different femininities.[71] As Thomas concludes, "they 'play' with the image and the text they use to present themselves in very particular ways to explore their fantasies of desire."[72] Similarly, Walkerdine looks at girls' fantasies as spaces in which girls play with and insert themselves into various discursive practices, and therefore fantasies "become discursive and material in the social world."[73]

Similarly, it could be argued that dollmaker images are offering spaces for play and fantasy. However, it is also important to consider Rose's suggestion that the pleasure is shaped by forms of advertising and promotion. Numeyra's desire to have long hair is not necessarily about the inherent properties of long hair, but about the social meanings associated with long hair, which are reflected and produced in advertisements, for example. Similarly, statements by the girls about modality provide a cautionary note to a celebratory stance in which "play" with images is seen as unproblematic. Images which center around "real" people perhaps are read more seriously than comic style graphic images. Here again, we may want to argue that girls are not affected by media images in a simplistic way, but we also need to avoid falling into the trap of saying they are not affected at all.

**Dressing for Success—Self-Esteem, Confidence, and Dress**   In all of the interviews, the girls raised the topic of confidence and self-esteem. Feeling comfortable with your dress, which was mentioned by many of the girls, was predominantly seen as a matter of individual choice and confidence, as Giovanna indicates: "Because if you just copy someone else and don't feel comfortable, you're not really yourself." When the girls in the current study were asked what was in their wardrobes at home and what clothes they would like to buy in the shops, several specifically mentioned being "embarrassed" by seeing thongs at the front of a shop, feeling that "wearing skirts that are too short . . . looks stupid," or indicating that provocative styles "are not for me." The girls would not feel comfortable in thongs and short skirts, due in part to the discursive practices which position them as needing to express individuality as well as innocence, but also due to the scrutiny and surveillance which comes with self-reflexivity. Therefore, although dressing comfortably implies a kind of free choice, we can see how that choice is limited as the girls scrutinize their dress in order to portray an image which is "appropriate" for their age, fits in with their peer culture, yet also expresses individuality.

Ashley and Giovanna connect confidence with eating disorders and dress, and individuality with the ability to resist peer pressure:

*GIOVANNA:*   Well, for me, to me I look at it . . . if you have good self-esteem then you shouldn't be worried. But then if you—

*ASHLEY:*   —If you don't, if you're not really happy with yourself, then you'll be one of those people who will force themselves to lose weight.

*GIOVANNA:*   But then again, um, that thing brings the person out of you. Because what you wear tells a lot about you, that you feel comfortable about yourself or if you, um, just want to fit in in a group, or . . . yeah.

These statements echo findings from Currie's study in which girls described how little influence magazine fashion had on their choice of what to wear, and instead how they strived for a look which was both an expression of individuality as well as a sign of their belonging to dominant peer cultures.[74] An interesting element in Ashley and Giovanna's discussion above is the contradiction between expressing one's individuality and maintaining one's belonging in a group. According to Giovanna, if you feel confident, then you are able to resist "just want[ing] to fit in in a group." All the groups of girls said that developing an individual style was important, and they also saw it as a benefit of creating fashion designs and playing on dollmaker websites. Part of the fun of playing with dollmaker is "to create your own image" and "to express what kind of clothes you like." The girls are drawing on a particular discourse in which the development of personal style is encouraged, for example, by teen magazines suggesting personalizing wardrobes by searching in second-hand clothing shops.[75] Although these girls use individuality as an argument to display their independence (from parents, crowds, or manipulative media), when asked where they would buy clothes if they were given £100, every girl named the same sports shop. The girls seemed comfortable with these apparent contradictions—on the one hand having an individual style, and on the other hand wearing very similar clothes from the same store. They argued that individual style can be expressed through sports clothes, for example, and different trainers (sport shoes) in particular are indicative of the "tribe" to which one belongs.[76] This is reminiscent of analyses of youth subcultures discussed earlier in this chapter, which show how material objects are used by young people as markers of identity. And, as Widdicombe and Wooffitt describe, there is a broader tension here around authenticity, between expressions of individuality and expressions of belonging to a particular subculture.[77]

   The discourses of autonomy and individualism are important to recognize here, particularly in the way they conflict with the need to be part of a group and the ways in which choices are controlled. The girls in the current study are reflecting "girl power" discourses—the power to buy what they like and express their identity through consumerism. As discussed earlier in this chapter, consumerism is part of the way citizenship is enacted in late modernity.[78] According to Harris, citizenship is also defined through self-discipline, high self-esteem, and confidence—all characteristics which the girls in this study are drawing on in their production of the self-reflexive subject. This emphasis on individual strategies and personal responsibility is part of the "technologies of the self" which are enacted in different ways in these girls' lives. For example, educational discourse frames bullying as connected to confidence—pupils are told that bullies pick on people's insecurities, and that acting confident will dissuade bullies. Being confident and comfortable with oneself is also a message in drug education—pupils are told that they need to be confident to follow what they think is right, to be themselves, and thereby to resist peer pressure to consume alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. Again, we need to consider how the construction of active citizens as self-disciplined, motivated, confident, and above all responsible for their own welfare may ignore social factors, placing particular groups of people in the category of "can-do" and others in the "at-risk" category.[79] Furthermore, we should look at how discourses of choice, which offer a space for pleasurable consumption, also contain ideas about girls who can navigate choices successfully, as responsible citizen consumers, and those who are seen to lack the discipline to make good choices.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that young people's online identities must be viewed not only in terms of active engagement, but also in relation to the structures which frame those activities. I have chosen to focus on consumer cultures online, in light of research which suggests that online environments are becoming increasingly commodified and children and young people are becoming targets of ever-more sophisticated marketing. By focusing on girls' online activities, we see the tensions within the research, with many examples of how online communities provide important spaces for girls' development, expression, and access to alternative cultures, yet also evidence that these spaces are not "free" and "open" environments.

There are several conclusions to be drawn from this chapter that point to further areas for research. First, the online dress-up study demonstrates the important and powerful educational opportunities online cultures can offer to teachers and students. The activities in which girls were producing and consuming online dolls offered a space to make sense of curvaceous online figures and to consider and discuss wider identity issues such as body image. Drawing on these cultures enables educators to engage with and help students consider the complexity of meanings, how those meanings are constructed, and specific issues such as consumer rights, which are part of the development of media literacy. Importantly, these educational discussions can happen in the context of texts and activities that are valuable to students, in which they have a positive identity as experts, and in a context in which various cultures, personalities, and values can be expressed. The questions we might want to ask here are about how to recognize online cultures in educational contexts without colonizing them; how to maintain a balance between producing, consuming, and analyzing media; and how to recognize the complexity of the issues rather than giving online media a generic simplistic treatment.

Within research itself, the discussions here raise a number of key questions, some of which are also relevant for young people to be engaged with. How is the responsible, motivated, confident young Internet user being constructed within academic discourse, government policies, and popular rhetoric? To what extent do the debates on such issues construct and divide young people into can-do or at-risk Internet users? When analyzing young people's online communication, to what extent do we see this as a matter of their freely expressing and exploring identity issues, and how far do we take account of the ways in which their responses are regulated? Finally, are ideologies of "consumer citizenship" being recognized, resisted, or reinforced by young people online? These questions arise when considering children and young people as both producers and consumers—producers of meaning with the agency to resist, redefine, and recontextualize; and consumers being positioned by cultural products and discourses. Analyzing these dual positions and how they work through each other is essential if we are to understand how young people are making meanings and identities through their online interactions.

## Notes

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6.  Daniel Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Chid Consumer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

7.  Cook, 2004, p. 144.

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16.  Cited in danah boyd, *Friendster Lost Steam. Is MySpace Just a Fad*? Apophenia Blog 21. March 2006. http://www.danah.org/papers/FriendsterMySpaceEssay.html (accessed November 16, 2006).

17.  Sara Grimes and Leslie Regan Shade, Neopian Economics of Play: Chidren's Cyberpets and Online Communities as Immersive Advertising in NeoPets.com. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 1, no. 2 (2000): 181–198; Grace Chung and Sara Grimes, Cool Hunting the Kids' Digital Playground: Datamining and the Privacy Debates in Children's Online Entertainment Sites. *Canadian Journal of Communication* 30, no. 4 (2005): 527–548.

18.  Katherine Montgomery, Children's Media Culture in the New Millennium: Mapping the Digital Landscape. *Children and Computer Technology* 10, no. 2 (2000): 145–167.

19.  The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA), established by the US Federal Trade Commission; and the US regulatory board, Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) place strict limits on advertisements to children online.

20.  Grimes and Shade, 2000.

21. Ellen Seiter, The Internet Playground, in *Toys, Games, and Media*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein, David Buckingham and Giles Brougere (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 93–108.

22. Sonia Livingstone, Children Online—Consumers or Citizens? *Cultures of Consumption Working Paper Series*. 2004. http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk/publications.html (accessed November 17, 2006).

23. Montgomery, 2000.

24. Appadurai, 1996, p. 42.

25. Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen, *Consuming Children: Education-Entertainment-Advertising* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001).

26. Giddens, 1991.

27. Giddens, 1991, p. 196.

28. Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. 2nd edition (Free Associations Books, 1999).

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32. Russell and Tyler outline how these ideas are particularly relevant for teenagers, because of the move away from the security of childhood toward a less certain adulthood, combined with the compulsory nature of individuality and connected consumerism. See Rachel Russell and Melissa Tyler, Branding and Bricolage: Gender, Consumption and Transition, *Childhood* 12, no. 2 (2005): 221–237.

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34. Rose, 1991.

35. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

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39. Anne Cronin, *Advertising and Consumer Citizenship: Gender, Images, and Rights* (London: Routledge, 2000); Quart, 2003; Russell and Tyler, 2005; Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

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47. Shade, 2002, p. 9.

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75.  McRobbie, 1991.

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78.  Harris, 2004.

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